

The Havoc of Choice

A novel

by

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The Havoc of Choice.

Synopsis

Kavata knows one thing to be true: when it comes to politics, there is no such thing as holy ground. So when she starts a family of her own, she does everything possible to distance herself from her unscrupulous father, and strives to raise her children as honestly and modestly as she possibly can.

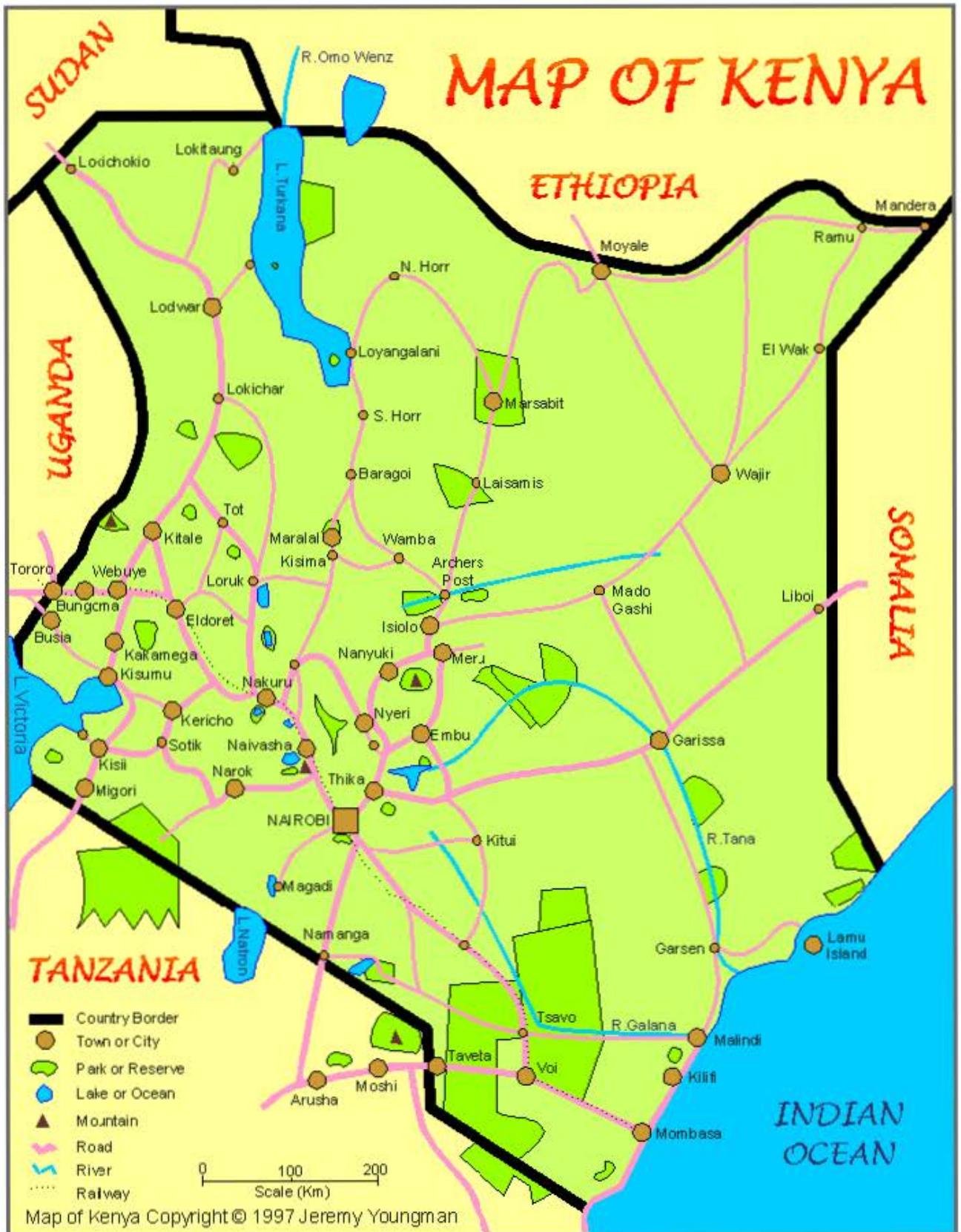
When her father, Honorable Muli, retires from government claiming that he would like to spend more time with his grandchildren, Kavata indulges him. She allows him to weasel his way back into her life hopeful that her children might have the relationship with her father that she never had. By the time she realizes what Honorable Muli is really up to, it is too late. He has already persuaded Ngugi, Kavata's husband, to contest the upcoming election for the same seat that he himself held for sixteen years.

It's election time and for a fleeting moment, Kenyans can once again taste sweet power as they make their choices at the polls. In the days leading to the election, Kavata is forced to make a different, more drastic kind of decision; one with repercussions much greater than she could have imagined.

The Havoc of Choice is a story about family, politics and journeying through a fractured country in a delicate time. Based on events around the historical election of 2007, the book follows the lives of Kavata and her family at a time when their country was going through one hundred days of violence, shortly after the poll results were announced.

We fail to trust that we knew ourselves to be possible from the very beginning.

-- Binyavanga Wainaina



Chapter One

Sunday Lunch

Kavata was having trouble focussing on the sermon that Sunday. She had to keep reminding herself that she was doing the right thing and each time she had a doubt, she would slide her fingers in to her handbag and feel the side-pocket, just to make sure that the envelope was still there. Her mind went over every detail and it was only then, when she was satisfied that she had seen to every aspect of her plan, that she forced herself to pay attention to Pastor Simon. She would need something to talk about over lunch.

‘Pastor Simon, that was such a powerful sermon; and so well researched. Thank you Pastor,’ Ngugi said.

The two men shook hands as their wives embraced.

‘Yes Pastor it was truly inspiring,’ Kavata kissed the air around Grace’s cheeks and complimented her on her lovely hat. They seemed to get larger each Sunday.

‘Ngugi! Kavata! Thank you, from your lips to the Lord’s ears.’ When the Pastor spoke he often chuckled as if he had cracked a joke that only he had heard.

‘Please join us for lunch today. We won’t accept no for an answer. Besides, it’s the least we can do after those wonderful words. Isn’t it darling?’ Kavata glanced over at Ngugi who met her gaze with a flash of irritation before turning back to the pastor with a warm smile. Kavata was well aware that he planned to go play golf later that afternoon, but this was a key part of her plan and sacrifices had to be made. She also knew that there was no way Ngugi was going to say no to Pastor Simon.

‘Yes, please come over.’ Ngugi didn’t miss a beat. ‘I want to hear how those plans for the new sanctuary in Westlands are going. I’ve been meaning to make an anonymous donation to that fund but have been too busy to go over the paperwork.’

Grace, who had a reputation for weaselling her way into church member’s homes for Sunday lunch, was more than pleased at the rare invitation. ‘That’s understandable. Things must be quite crazy at the moment. How is the campaign going? These are the final days aren’t they?’ She said, pretending that she was the only person in the country who wasn’t keeping up with the coming election on a minute to minute basis.

Kavata spotted her daughter Wanja leading her younger brother Amani towards them. She was grateful that Wanja still joined them for mass on Sunday. It was almost the only time she saw her since she had started university and discovered that she could have a life of her own.

‘We can talk about it at lunch.’ Ngugi reached into his pocket for the car keys. ‘The kids are out. We will make our way home and get things ready. See you in about half an hour?’

It was settled – the pastor and his wife would be joining the Ngugi’s for Sunday lunch. The most importance piece of Kavata’s plan was falling into place.

Nairobi was alive in all its Sunday glory. Families in their Sunday best rode in polished cars and gleaming *matatus*, making their way out of their respective sanctuaries. Children chattered loudly, eager to find out what wonderful treats their parents had planned for their afternoon. The sun always came out on Sunday – so the public swimming pools were often packed, as was Uhuru Park where families

went for boat rides in the artificial dam. Young professionals crawled out of their drunken stupors, put on their linen shorts and summer dresses and went out to festivals where they could see and be seen.

Hawkers who didn't care for the Sabbath stood at the traffic lights watching all these different groups of people, looking out for cars with children in them. Those are the cars they displayed their sugarcane, popsicles, cashew nuts and *mabuyu* to, sure that the hungry children in the cars would nag their parents to buy them a treat. The parents, who were usually as famished as their children, always gave in. The further away from the city centre you drove, the more expensive the treats were. The hawkers claimed that their wares were fresher because they were closer to the source, and the hungry buyers relented. It was a bullet-proof sales strategy. One of the hawkers pressed his wares against Ngugi's window but backed away as when Ngugi glared at him.

He was swollen with irritation and Kavata could feel it pushing against her in the space between their seats as he navigated through the traffic with Amani's high-pitched voice offering an animated recap of what he had learned at Sunday school.

He studied the picture of Jesus feeding the five thousand that he had been given in class, and wondered out loud how long it must have taken him to divide two fish and five loaves amongst all those people. Amani's declaration that his Sunday school teacher must have been lying to them broke the tense mood in the car, as they all broke into laughter.

'This lunch had better be a brief affair. I tee off at three,' Ngugi sulked and Kavata felt a tiny bit bad for him. She knew that he needed to let loose after the pressures of the last months, but he left her little choice. She reached out and patted him on the thigh. It was a distant yet familiar gesture that reminded them both how long it had been since they had had any kind of intimate contact.

She had grown to love their home in the Nyari especially the way the house emerged almost out of thin air as one took the sharp turn on to Red Hill Drive and continued up the road. Their neighbours' well-manicured live fences offered a lush green boulevard on each side of the road. Greenery had been rarity in Nairobi until Wangari Maathai made it trendy to plant trees around the city and with time, the air became a few degrees cooler. When the family arrived at their residence, the *askari*

sprinted to the gate and let them in, standing straight as an arrow and waving joyfully as they drove past him.

The air was light and lovely as was the conversation. Kavata served passion juice and chilled watermelon slices on the balcony and announced that lunch would be served in under an hour. She worked swiftly in the kitchen; taking brief moments to glance at her family and feeling her resolve weaken. But she had thought about this too long and hard to abandon ship now.

'I need to make a quick trip to the supermarket,' Kavata announced as she replenished the tray of fruit on the table next to her guests. Her voice quivered a tad. 'Please excuse me. I'll be back just now.'

'Oh, I hope we are not too much trouble Kavata. Don't let us inconvenience you too much,' Grace lodged a half-hearted protest.

'Not at all, I am happy to. I will be back in no time and then we can eat.'

'Then let me come with you,' the pastor's wife offered rising to her feet, sending Kavata into a mild panic. She was about to object when their husbands stepped in to say that it was better if Kavata went on her own.

'Grace, if the two of you go into that supermarket, it will be midnight before we see our meal,' the pastor said and the two men laughed.

Kavata swung her handbag onto her shoulder and made her way to the parking lot.

'*Twende!*' her voice shook as she barked the order at Thuo who sprung up off his seat. He folded the newspaper he was reading just in time to catch the car keys that Kavata tossed at him. She spotted Amani running after her and cursed under her breath. 'I'm just going to the supermarket for some tomato sauce. I'm coming back just now.' Kavata slammed the door shut before Amani could protest and the young boy retreated into the house on the verge of tears.

It was only when the car came to a halt at the entrance of the supermarket that Kavata realized that she had not told Thuo of their actual destination. She decided to go into the supermarket anyway. She had a few minutes to spare and was grateful for the time alone to think things through one last time. The supermarket aisles, filled with mothers selecting items for quick lunches, gave Kavata a good distraction from her overcrowded thoughts. Something about watching shoppers go on with

their normal lives, negotiating with their children over chocolate bars as their husbands decided which beers to spend their afternoon with, gave Kavata the emotional distance to carry on with her plan. She emerged a few moments later, tomato sauce in hand, got back into the car and instructed Thuo to take her to the airport.

‘Madam, are we going to the airport *now*? *Si una wageni nyumbani?*’

‘My visitors are none of your business Thuo – just drive!’ She immediately wished she could take her words back. She had always liked Thuo, even if her husband insisted that his reckless driving was the reason the car always needed repairs. He was trustworthy and at the moment, that was all she needed.

They arrived at the Jommo Kenyatta International Airport in record time. Kavata expected to see the long line of cars waiting to be checked by the police at the toll stations as was characteristic of the airport which was quickly becoming too small to handle the volumes of traffic that it received. The policemen at the checkpoint waved them through without stopping to search the car as they drove past the check point. *Must be a sign*, she thought.

Thuo filled the awkward silence with stories about his family. He was eager to discuss the upcoming election, now only days away, with her but he learned a few weeks ago that the election was her least favourite topic when she threatened to sack him for always bringing it up.

‘Aah, we are lucky today. There are not many cars.’ He eased the car into a parking spot right in front of the arrivals terminal. It was clear that he was eager to get Kavata back home to her guests.

‘Yes we are. Please move the car and park near departures.’ Kavata instructed. Thuo still wore a puzzled expression but asked no questions. Kavata took a deep breath, stepped out of the car and walked round to Thuo’s window.

‘So now, you will take the car back home. When *Mzee* asks you where I am, tell him that you took me to Mrs Agallo’s house, waited for me for a few minutes, before I asked you to go back home. Mrs Agallo will take me home later.’

‘*Ala!* Mama Wanja, *kwani kuna nini?*’ Thuo asked in a slight panic. Kavata knew that the only way she could protect the kind man was to lie to him.

‘I am expecting an important package for *Mzee*. It is a surprise so he mustn’t know I am here,’ she explained. ‘So please take the car back home and then you may

take the rest of the day off.' She pulled out the last of her local currency and handed it to him, resisting the urge to hold his hand a little longer as a gesture of gratitude.

'Madam, I can wait for you, I don't need my off day.' Thuo had always thought that Kavata was a horrible planner and often fought the urge to plan her logistics for her.

'Thuo, can you please just do as I say. Hurry back before *Mzee* starts calling. I will see you tomorrow.' Kavata spun around and marched towards the terminal hoping that her legs didn't look as wobbly as they felt. She sensed Thuo's gaze on her back. When she was at a safe distance, she looked back to check that he had left and then leaned against a wall and allowed herself to finally breathe.

The terminals were busier than Kavata had hoped. Vans filled with relatives who had travelled for hours to send their loved ones off dropped their passengers off at the terminals. Parking marshals patrolled the area looking for drivers who were hovering around, trying to avoid paying the exorbitant parking fees. Young couples engaged in teary embraces before the unconcerned security official asked them why they were crying as if someone was going off to war.

'You should be celebrating when they are going and crying when they come back,' the guard said as she shoved escorting family members out of the queue that was only meant for travellers.

Inside the terminal, Kavata got to the front of the line, pulled the envelope out of her bag and handed her ticket over. The uniformed woman at the counter didn't bother to look up from her screen.

'How many bags?'

'None.' The woman scanned the area around Kavata's feet and then looked up to Kavata with her pencilled in eyebrows raised.

'One-way trip to Atlanta, Georgia?' the woman was studying Kavata, trying to figure out if she really was who her passport said she was.

'Isn't that what my ticket says,' Kavata leaned forward so that she could read the woman's name tag, 'Yvonne?' She was suddenly exhausted; the farce she had put on all morning had left her drained. Kavata wasn't sure if Yvonne had suddenly recognised her or was just thrown off by her short response. Yvonne picked up the phone and whispered something about a VIP into the receiver, before she began to

strike the keys on her keyboard frantically. Any trace of the disinterested person who had been serving Kavata only seconds ago was gone and replaced by a humble version of the same woman.

'My sincere apologies for the delay Mrs Ngugi, your flight will be boarding from gate sixteen at 1500hrs. We have upgraded you to business class.' She pointed to a man who Kavata hadn't noticed standing next to her. 'Simon here will escort you through immigration and to the VIP lounge and will come and alert you when it is time to board. Thank you for choosing to fly Virgin and enjoy your trip.' Yvonne stood up, cupping her elbow in the palm of her hand as she handed Kavata her passport and boarding pass.

Kavata followed her guide to the front of the immigration line, ignoring the dirty looks from the disgruntled travellers who sneered at the preferential treatment she was receiving. She would have been happy to stand in line like everyone else, but she was desperate to be alone and was grateful that she was the only passenger in the lounge. She sat in a corner on one of the dated leather armchairs and pulled out her cellphone. Thuo would be home soon, so she expected Ngugi to call her at any moment. She scrolled through her phone book and dialled Anne's number, who answered the call on the first ring.

'Hi, I am at the airport now. I've checked in,' she felt the familiar sting of tears fighting to be free. They shared a loaded silence. Both women understood that this was Kavata's last opportunity to change her mind and go back home. They both secretly wished she would.

'Did everything go as ok?'

'Yes, just as planned. Thanks for everything. I will call you once I get there.' Then with fingers trembling Kavata opened the back of her phone, took out the SIM card and tossed it into the bin. She wouldn't need it anymore. As she waited for her boarding call the only thing she could think was that she had forgotten to ask Thuo to give her son the tomato sauce.

Kavata often tried to explain the complexities of growing up with a father like hers, each time failing not to sound like an ungrateful brat. The Honourable Mutinda Muli was the quite the politician in his day, the quintessential man of the people. He was charming, generous and outrageously corrupt. She was sure most, if not all, of his wealth has been acquired from fleecing Kenyans faster than they could say *serikali*. The house that Kavata and her family lived in, for instance, was a wedding gift from him paid for with hard earned tax-payers' shillings. But his constituents loved him and those who didn't, respected him. He was the longest serving Member of Parliament for Machakos constituency and this was a feat that he took great pride in. His tenure in office had turned him into a master crook – a corruption connoisseur.

Coming to terms with the fact that her father was a dishonest man had been somewhat of a journey for Kavata. As a little girl, she had a feeling that it was wrong for him to send her out to tell his visitors that he wasn't home while in fact, he was sitting in his study, dressed in his robe and slippers, reading the newspaper and counting all his money. She would watch the shock on his visitors' faces as he emerged hours later and sped off in his chauffeur driven car without so much as a glance in their direction. Her father had always praised her for her love of reading when he would eventually come out of his study. He had no idea that the only reason that Kavata stayed indoors was that she was too ashamed of his behaviour to go outside and face his visitors. She would long for them to leave so that she could go out and ride her bicycle, but they often stayed put only leaving when the sun was setting.

In primary school, this feeling grew into a strong hunch when her classmates would repeat what they had heard their parents say about Hon Muli to her. That he was deceptive and unjust and stood for everything that was wrong with Moi's government. She didn't quite know what those words meant at the time but they didn't sound flattering.

When Kavata was twelve years old, Hon Muli was involved in an elaborate scheme to redirect government funds that were intended to dig four hundred wells all over Machakos, one of the more arid areas just outside Nairobi. Wells were indeed dug – twenty five of them, spread out across the town. As soon as the digging of the wells was completed, he carefully selected a couple of young community

leaders and mobilizers and paid them well to organize elaborate events to open up the wells and declare the town an oasis. He ensured that the local newspapers were filled with photographs of women fetching water from the new wells and serving it to him to drink. The women smiled gleefully while pretending not to see the bottle of mineral water that he was actually drinking from. He commissioned journalists to do news articles about how much development he had brought to Machakos, complete with information on how the region would gain economically from its new source of water. And as a final precaution, he paid a land surveyor to fabricate a detailed report that claimed that there were only twenty five sites in the whole constituency that had water beneath the ground. This report recommended that additional water be channelled from Nairobi in order to ensure that every house in his ancestral homeland had running water. To achieve this, more money would be needed. To expel any doubt, Hon Muli commissioned a second report that said more or less the same thing, and siphoned the remaining funds, millions of shillings, into a series of offshore accounts.

A few months later when an inquiry was made into possible misuse of funds – Kavata's father spread propaganda that the opposition was after his people's newly acquired sources of water. Demonstrations broke out all over Machakos as people rose to blindly defend their MP. Only he could quell the unrest. He held a huge rally and addressed his constituents, asking them to remain calm and promising them that he would do everything in his power to protect all twenty-five of their precious wells. He ensured that the press clippings from these events were stored in giant photo albums, which he would sometimes send Kavata to fetch when people visited him, so he could show off how much good he had done while in power.

A few years later, Hon Muli was accused of mismanaging money that was intended to repair the roads. Earlier that same year he had renovated all the schools in the small town ensuring that broken desks were repaired, cracked windows replaced and walls painted. He provided the latest textbooks and materials that teachers needed for their lessons and authorized special bonuses of ten thousand shillings to be paid out to every teacher in the constituency. A lunch to which all head-teachers and administrative staff were invited was organized. So many goats and chicken were slaughtered for this event that for weeks after it, the only people who had meat in their fridges were those who smuggled it away from this event.

The invited guests were made to feel important and valued. Kavata was serving tea to her father's visitors a few days after this gathering when she overheard him refer to the head-teachers luncheon as a gathering of empty *debes*. This was just around the time that Kavata had enrolled in the university to study towards a degree in Education. For months after the luncheon, teachers, parents and school children sang Hon Muli's praises – so when questions were raised about the use of these funds; they gladly defended their minister as he obtained large tracts of land and properties all over the country with his new millions.

The penny dropped for Kavata the year before her father retired from public office. She was visiting her parents for the weekend when the phone rang. The disgruntled man on the other end of the line demanded to speak to Hon Muli. He wasn't home, Kavata had truthfully said, and asked him if he wanted to leave a message. The man mumbled something inaudible and said he would call back. And he did, every hour for the next six hours, each time getting more agitated when Kavata told him that Hon Muli had not yet returned. She eventually stopped answering the phone until her parents arrived home that evening. Before Kavata could inform the mysterious caller that her father was home, he launched in to a tirade of insults.

'You self important buffoons think you can just do what you like and take whatever you like. You make me sick. Tell that to Muli. Tell him he makes me sick. And if he doesn't call me back in two hours I will go to the newspapers – all of them, Nation, Standard, even the stinking tabloids and tell them that he impregnated my wife and he can come and collect his bastard son. Tell him that.' Kavata was holding the receiver to her ear long after the line went dead.

'Who was on the line?' her mother asked.

'Em it's a wrong number,' Kavata placed the receiver down and went to her room to think for a while. She really wanted to go to her father's room and repeat the words she had heard to his face, eager to tell him that he also made her sick, and he was a bastard man with a bastard son and then watch his face as her words slowly made their way to his brain.

Discovering that one's father had a mistress, or a child, or an entire second, third and fourth family was nothing shocking for anyone Kavata's age. Several of her friends had had experiences where they one day came home to the news that they

would be sharing their bedroom with a new sibling or two. It was almost a rite of passage. For all his faults, Kavata had been grateful that her father had never disrespected her mother and honoured their home, or so she had thought.

She decided to write him a note and hand it to him discreetly knowing that it would kill her mother to know that Kavata was aware of her father's betrayal. She packed her bag to go back to her campus hostel and then sat down to pen the letter, and then realized that she was being ridiculous. The man on the phone hadn't left a name, or a phone number, as if he expected Hon Muli to know who he was. She sat in her room hoping that the man would call one more time so that she might convince him to speak to her father and be free of her role in this mess. He didn't call back and Kavata decided to keep her mouth shut. She stayed at home that evening, chatting happily with her parents and savouring the calm before the imagined storm. In bed that night she lay awake wondering how old her stepbrother was and if the man on the phone now qualified as her stepdad.

The next morning, she left home before her parents woke up. She glanced at the newspaper headlines on the way to campus expecting to see her father's shame splayed across the front page but it wasn't there on that day or the day after that or the week after that. There was never any mention of her father's illegitimate child, but the damage had already been done. Kavata often replayed that phone conversation in her head, and whenever she did she was certain that her father's illegitimate son was as real as the pain in that mysterious man's voice.

Kavata could still remember how hopeful she felt the day that her mother called to tell her that her father was retiring from public office. She had completely distanced herself from her parents and was enjoying her nondescript life with her Ngugi and Wanja. She had wanted nothing to do with Hon Muli but her mother coerced Kavata to take her family to the rally where he would announce his retirement. She relented, telling herself that this would be the last time after all.

The whole family was all made to sit on the tented wooden platform next to Hon Muli. Thousands of people had gathered in the unyielding sun to hear him speak. The glare from thousands of shiny foreheads was matched only by the metal points

of umbrellas hovering over the crowd. When Hon Muli began to speak the crowd was rigid, waiting for an explanation for all the things that had been going wrong in the constituency. The announcement that he was resigning from politics was met with a myriad of responses. People called out to him to explain why he was resigning; others shouted that he was running off with all the money he had stolen from them. He allowed the uproar, standing silently for several minutes. He gazed out to the crowd, with a pained expression moulded onto his face like a father who was hurting because he had just discovered that his children viewed him as anything beneath a god.

When he called for calm, the crowd responded quickly. In a sombre voice explained that a true African man's first responsibility was to his family. He paused, and gazed out again into the crowd and then turned to face his family before he called them up to the podium and introduced them to the crowd. He took his time with the introductions, referring to them by their full names, giving details that no man his age usually remembered about his children, let alone grandchildren. He spoke slowly encouraging his constituents to connect with his family as if they were the justification for his plunder. When he introduced Wanja to the crowd, he added that she was named after his mother, who was rescued from the Kikuyus by his able father, a former chief of a neighbouring and friendly village. This was a lie but one he would get away with because his paternal grandmother and great-grandmother happened to share a name. When he got to Kavata, he simply and touched her swollen belly and the crowd went wild at the performance.

'I have served you, my people, for sixteen years and have done the best I can with the resources that the government has allocated us. Now I would like to spend whatever time I have left with my daughter as we wait for the birth of my grandson.' He chose to deliver this particular section of his address in Kikamba and his constituents loved it. Their reaction to him grew feral, singing and dancing and praising him for making the ultimate sacrifice for his family. Women applauded him the loudest and asked him to speak to their husbands so that they too could learn the value of sacrifice.

Every time Kavata thought back to this day, she still wondered about two things. The first was how her father had known that she would have a son, before she

herself had known. The second was how she could have been foolish enough to believe that her father would ever retire from politics.

Ngugi's choice to run for government had not shocked Kavata. She had seen it coming slow and sure the minute she let her father inch his way back into their lives after his retirement. She had given them both the benefit of doubt until envelopes branded confidential began to creep into her home, followed by long meetings with nameless strangers. When Kavata would ask him about his day Ngugi would just shrug his shoulders. By the time she began to panic, it was too late.

The day Ngugi told her of his decision, she searched his eyes for the charming, kind and unsure man, who had always looked over his shoulder for her to gently nudge him in the right direction, but he was gone. His replacement was a pawn who refused to look at her when he spoke and argued with her using words that reeked of her father.

Kavata's decision to leave Ngugi was as solid as the one she had made to love him several years ago when they had met at the Kenyatta University. The first time she noticed him on campus, she liked that his white collared shirt was pressed and that his ankles, exposed by a pair of navy cargo shorts, were well oiled. When she first heard him speak at a club meeting to discuss their upcoming charity project, she found the way he spoke endearing. He closed his eyes, as if he were imagining the words in his mind and only uttering them when he was satisfied that they would represent his sentiments perfectly. He looked her in the eye when he introduced himself to her, and when he said that he was pleased to meet her, it didn't sound like mere courtesy. She appreciated that when they became close friends, he didn't hide the fact that he wanted her opinion on everything, from what to have for lunch, to which firms he should send his project proposals to. He spoke about his family with genuine kindness and words that came from a warm place. When she eventually opened up about being her father's daughter, she was elated that she didn't have to reach deep to search for words that would carry her angst. Ngugi was fully aware of her father's greatly soiled legacy, but it didn't seem to matter to him as much as it did to her. Kavata now fully understood this, and allowed herself to love him for as

long as he deserved her affection. She couldn't imagine that he would do anything to render himself un-loveable to her.

When she was sure that she had to leave she began to plan. She made lists, changed her mind and changed it back dozens of times, and even prayed to a god with whom she had a fleeting relationship to guide her. She secretly read self help books that promised to teach her how to reconnect with her spouse and had stormed out of a married women's group when the first thing they told her was that the key to a happy marriage was submission. All her efforts only left her with the option that she had in the beginning.

Anne Agallo was the only person she told of her plans. Anne was a tall fiery character who spoke her mind and got bored easily so there was always some kind of activity or scandal following her around. The first thing Anne said to Kavata when they met was that they were in the twenty-first century – black women no longer wore Alice-bands in their hair and it was a cardinal sin to match one's belt with one's handbag and shoes. They were instant friends.

Anne gave Kavata's painfully coordinated wardrobe the street quality that came from shopping at second hand markets and walked her through her first pregnancy scare when things got serious with Ngugi. In return, Kavata helped Anne deal with the host of drama that followed her when her lovers' wives would come hunting for her on campus.

When Anne started dating one of her professor's, Kavata held her tongue until the time was right to tell her that she was going down a treacherous path. She held her sobbing friend when the professor broke the news that he could not see her anymore because news of their affair had leaked to the faculty dean and his job was on the line. Months later, when Anne told Kavata that her professor had chosen to quit his job and divorce his wife so that they could be together, the two friends wept as they packed Anne's life up for her move to Kampala where she would start her life with her man.

Over two decades later, Anne moved back to Nairobi just in time to catch the pieces of Kavata's marriage as they fell to the ground. It was as if she had never left and the two friends picked up where they left off. Kavata pulled strings to get Anne a job teaching English and Religious Studies at the St. Georges Primary School where

Kavata taught Home Science. They were sitting in Kavata's lab when she told Anne that she was leaving Ngugi.

'Haah! Is it someone else?' Anne clapped her hands in glee, and pulled her seat closer to Kavata anticipating a saucy story. She had often told Kavata that she needed to inject more action into her life, and was happy that her friend appeared to have listened to her. She was visibly disappointed with the version of the story Kavata told her, but could see that her dear friend was deeply hurting.

'Have you told him?'

'He doesn't hear me anymore.'

'Where will you go?'

'I don't know. I have family in South Africa and in London. In the US as well.'

'South Africa is too close and the UK is too expensive. Pick a warm state in the US and go there. The kids?'

'They come with me. I won't leave them here in this madness.' Anne shook her head.

'No, leave them out of this. This is not their battle to fight. In any case no embassy on the planet is going to grant you a visa to take your kids away, especially not those Americans.' Kavata started to protest but Anne was as right about that as she had been about several other things in the coming months. They would sit together at school in between lessons and over lunch breaks planning. In the evenings Anne would drive them to the house she shared with her beloved professor and they would continue with their plans. They looked into all possible ways they could get her a long term visa. Enrolling her in an exchange program seemed to be the best option and she was the perfect candidate as a trained teacher with several years of experience, who would be able to support herself financially for the duration of the program. When the application form asked if she was interested in getting placed as a full-time teacher once she completed the program, Kavata ticked the box that indicated 'yes'.

'Who knows? I can always change my mind later,' she'd said in response to the stunned look that Anne shot at her.

When Kavata received her acceptance from the Fulbright teachers' exchange program in Atlanta, she and Anne sat in silence, reading the twelve page document that Anne had received in the post that afternoon. The letter congratulated her and

stated that she had received a gleaming recommendation from an 'anonymous' and well known professor in Kenya. She was required to be in Atlanta no later than December 27th in order for her to benefit from three weeks of training before the program began. They recommended that she travel before Christmas to avoid the holiday rush and offered to subsidise her airline fares as compensation for being away from her family over Christmas (evidence that she celebrated Christmas was required). Anne went into the house and emerged a few moments later with a bottle of wine, two glasses and her laptop. She booked a visa appointment as Kavata sat dealing with the reality of what she was doing.

The horror stories that Kavata had heard about the consular section of the American embassy were true. She arrived at the embassy to find a queue of hopeful applicants snaking along United Nations Avenue in the viscous fog of the six am morning. The consulate only opened its doors at nine am, but the aim was to get through the gates before noon, otherwise one would be locked out and forced to wait for weeks before a new appointment was issued. Kavata took her place line behind an old man who was nervously flipping through his documents checking that he had everything he needed. This was his third attempt at getting a visa. Kavata listened to the chit chat around her and to the different reasons that the people had for wanting to go to America. When the lady behind her asked why she was travelling, her first thought was to say 'I'm teaching my husband a lesson,' but she instead said that she was going to teach.

"Teach what? Is there really anything we can teach Americans?" the lady responded adding that they would never grant her the visa.

They had, and the only thing left for Kavata to do now was leave. For the next few weeks Kavata was on autopilot. Ngugi had never shown signs that he would neglect their children in any way if she was no longer in the picture, but that was the old Ngugi and she didn't know what to expect from this new man. So she paid her children's fees in full for the coming year and made sure that Schola and Thuo would receive their salaries on the same day of each month via MPESA. With them around she was sure that Amani and Wanja would be fed and get to school. She opened up an account at the nearest supermarket, and left instructions for Wanja to

pick up whatever groceries were needed at home. Then, she and Anne drove to Kavata's lawyer and Anne held her hand as Kavata struggled to write down her will.

Chapter Two

Thuo Maliti

Thuo had a confident spring in his step as he made his way to work the following day. In just under a week his life would change forever. He had to hold himself back from breaking into song and dance as he walked. He even made love to his wife that morning despite the argument they had because she said that Ngugi could ever win the election.

‘Who is going to vote for a man without a wife? And what is wrong with her anyway. How can she refuse to stand with her husband during the campaign? If I were her I would be following him around like a second shadow,’ Cheptoo sneered as she spoke and Thuo hissed at her to shut up. He stood up to increase the volume on the TV. It was the last day of official election campaigns and the final opinion polls were being announced. He wasn’t interested in who would win the presidential race; that wouldn’t change anything for him. All he wanted to know was if Ngugi Mwangi was a shoo-in for the Member of Parliament seat. According to the pollsters, he wasn’t.

'You see!' Cheptoo said and he shot her a glance that sent her to the kitchen. These were just predictions – according to him Ngugi was a definite winner

Each time he walked past a campaign poster that bore the smiling and reassuring face of his employer, his mood soared a little higher. He pictured himself wearing a nice grey suit and tie, driving a minister around as he had done several years ago when he had had his short stint working for Kavata's father during his final term in office. It just so happened that Ngugi and Kavata were in need of a driver, so Thuo had accepted the job despite the slight pay cut. His sacrifice was finally paying off. He said a quick prayer of gratitude as walked round the bend that led to Ngugi's residence.

'What did you do?' Schola who was waiting for him at the gate hissed the moment she saw his slender figure approaching the house with a strand of grass hanging loosely from his lips. She shoved him behind a bush outside the residence gates. It took Thuo a moment to wrangle himself out of the older woman's firm grasp.

'Ah! *Ni nini wewe?*'

'There are police in there with *Mzee*,' she swiped the strand of grass out of his mouth and used it to point towards the house. 'Mama Wanja is not home since yesterday and they are saying it's you who took her. What happened? *Mama ako wapi?*'

'I don't know where she is!' Thuo's voice was raised and he checked himself. Although Schola wasn't old enough to be his mother, he always treated her with the same level of respect. She had worked for the Ngugis for much longer than he had, and it was mostly because of her that Thuo still had a job. Schola had witnessed several workers pass through the home but hadn't endorsed most of them. She had guided him during his first months of working there and regarded him as a son. She often defended him whenever he would slip up and would convince their employees, particularly Ngugi, to give him a second chance. This was something Thuo never took for granted despite the occasional disagreements they would have when Schola insisted on telling him how to do his job. Thuo was sure that she, of all people, would be able to see right through him if he attempted to lie to her. But he had given Kavata his word that he would not mention her whereabouts to anyone

and that included Schola. He knew that once she was finished with whatever it was that she was planning for Ngugi, she would be back home with an explanation.

'I took her to Mrs Agallo's house and brought the car back then went for my off day,' he explained in Kiswahili. It was easier to tell a convincing lie in a local language. The look on her face said that he had failed to convince her. He tried again. 'They came home from church with visitors. I took her to *Nakumatt* then to Agallo's. She told me to bring the car back and go home. If she didn't come back then I don't know.' The concern on his face was genuine, and Schola could see that. He started to walk towards the house when Schola held him back, grabbing the tail of his shirt and yanking it so hard that the button above his belly button popped out and rolled away on the warm tarmac as if it was escaping the impending doom.

'Thuo, I hope you are speaking the truth because I have heard *Mzee* talking to the police and he is saying that you are to blame. I hope you have not put yourself in problems. I will not be able to fish you out of this one Thuo.'

'Why would I come back here today if I had done something wrong?' he said before he spun around and walked through the gates

Schola followed him, watching him closely as he walked through the open gates. The sight of the Peugeot 504 with the government issued number plates justified Schola's panic. He struggled to find use for his feet as he contemplated his situation. Schola walked past him.

'*Mzee* told me to call him when you arrive,' it felt as if she was betraying him.

Schola paused for a moment outside the living room to eavesdrop on the conversation. The man who she had earlier recognised as the Officer Commanding Station, of the Nyari police station was instructing Ngugi to remain calm when Thuo arrived. The OCS was a short and stout man with a huge bellowing voice, and a thick accent that made him mix up his L's and R's. He referred to Ngugi as *Mheshimiwa* even if he had not gotten into office yet.

Schola adjusted her blouse and straightened her skirt before she walked into the room. Two men sat opposite the OCS with their feet awkwardly placed to conceal the holes in their socks. The room was heavy with the stench of feet and bad breath and she wondered how the policemen could smell so bad so early in the morning. She usually got upset when guests failed to remove their shoes before they stepped

on to the plush beige carpet, but today she wished that they had kept their shoes on. It would take days to scrub that smell off the carpet.

'Samahani Mzee, Thuo ameingia.'

Ngugi stood up before Schola finished speaking.

'And you, where were you yesterday?' Schola was staring so intently at the black toe nail protruding from one of the officer's sock that she didn't realize that the OCS was speaking to her. 'Mama, I am talking to you. *Ulikuwa wapi jana?*'

'Leave her alone, she does not work on the weekends.' Ngugi was halfway out of the door.

'But Mheshimiwa, we must leave no stone unturned.'

'Don't waste time with her while the person you should be questioning is outside.' With that the three men leapt up, struggling to put on their shoes and walk at the same time.

Thuo was on his feet when the four men met him outside.

'Habari Mzee,' he joined his hands at his front and bowed his head ever so slightly. 'Has there been a problem?' Thuo turned towards the police car and then to the men behind Ngugi.

'Yes, Thuo we have a big problem,' Ngugi's voice was hostile and tired. The OCS issued a silent instruction to one of his men who walked towards the gate before stepping forward to address Thuo.

'Yes kijana. Habari yako.' Thuo nodded silently. He did not appreciate the OCS referring to him as a boy. He was a father of two.

'We have a small problem that we need you to help us resolve,' the OCS continued leaning his weight against the bonnet of the police car. 'But first, *jina?*'

'Joseph Maliti Thuo,' his gaze shifted from his interrogators' faces to the tyre of the car that seemed precariously close to bursting under the weight of the OCS.

'Where do you live?'

'Kangemi.'

'Are you married?'

'Yes.'

'Na watoto?'

'Two boys.'

‘Inspector, how is any of this important?’ Ngugi snapped before the OCS was able to ask his next question.

‘Mr Mwangi, we talked about this. Please allow us to do our jobs to the full extent of the law. We must know what kind of person we are dealing with.’ The OCS responded. Thuo took this opportunity to look behind him, curious about where the other policeman had been sent to. He spotted him closing the gate and standing guard.

‘Thuo, where were you yesterday?’

‘I was here.’

‘The whole day?’

‘No. I was here in the morning, and then I went home in the afternoon.’

‘Did you see Mrs Mwangi when you were here?’

‘Yes. I drove her.’

‘Where did you take her?’

Thuo reiterated the explanation he had just given to Schola and to Ngugi the previous day when he had brought the car back. Ngugi had already spoken to Mrs Agallo who had offered him a similar explanation as Thuo, adding that Kavata had decided to take a taxi as they had both had too much wine and Kavata didn’t want her friend driving her home even if there was only a short distance between their homes.

‘Where did you go when you left here?’ The OCS continued with his questioning.

‘I went home.’

‘Were you at home alone?’

‘Yes, but my wife came home from church after a few minutes.’

The OCS pulled Ngugi aside. Thuo stood rooted, watching the two men talking in hushed tones. He thought about the last time he had been interrogated in a similar manner, eighteen years ago.

Thuo was born in Molo and had lived there until his family was forced to flee due to conflict around the Mau forest. He was ten years old at the time and still had a vivid memory of the day that they fled. His father had been planning their departure for weeks but his mother, a staunch Christian, would hear nothing of it.

‘This is our home,’ she would say, ‘and it is covered in the blood of Jesus.’

Thuo remembered his father scowling at her asking her what blood would do for them in the face of machetes and *runyus*. They heard stories of people who had escaped from the north and ended up in Molo looking for temporary shelter before the conflict caught up with them again. Still Thuo's mother refused to leave. She would kneel down in a corner praying for hours until her legs were numb and the bottom of her feet turned blue from poor circulation. Then she would spend the rest of the day singing so loudly and joyfully that passersby would often stop by to ask how anyone could be so joyful when they were surrounded by death.

The tension that night was so dense that it was hard to breathe. Thuo's mother had been the first to hear the screams. She got up and knelt by her bed to pray. By the time Thuo's father woke up the air was heavy with the smell of people's lives going up in flames. Thuo was frozen as he lay under the covers waiting for the death he had heard his father predicting for them because they were still there. The door to his tiny bedroom flew open as his father burst in with instructions.

'Get dressed, put on your shoes and wait. I will come and get you.' There was fear in his voice.

Thuo did as he was told and stood by the door, looking across the corridor into his parents' bedroom where his father was trying to lift his wife off her knees. Thuo's mother remained completely tranquil, with a gentle smile on her lips. She didn't put up any kind of a fight but for some reason, Thuo's father was completely unable to lift her. It was as if she was bolted to the ground. There were tears in his eyes as he begged her to go with them. The glow from their neighbour's house burning lit up the room, casting an ominous radiance on his mother's face. There was a loud continuous bang on the door. Thuo ran out of his room and picked up the polythene bags and sacks that had been sitting by the door for weeks in preparation for this moment. He called out for his father as he climbed out of a small window at the back of the house and began to run, afraid to look back in case his parents weren't there. He hadn't been running very long when he felt the bags he was carrying being snatched from his grip. He turned around, expecting to find death, but there was his father looking down at Thuo with immeasurable sadness, as he led him to safety.

They arrived in Nakuru a week later and began their temporary life in an abandoned tin shack on the edge of the Lake Nakuru National Park, in the area that

marked the border of the park and the Airstrip. The shack was concealed by tall blades of grass that had been growing around it for years. Inside, the corners of the shack had become a habitat for all kinds of hibernating creatures; the large holes in the roof had ensured that the ground was moist enough for weeds to thrive. The windowless walls had kept the shack moist during the rainy season and blistering in the dry season. It was the most decent place they had found to sleep in a week, so they did what they could to make it their home using large polythene bags and other items they had found in the garbage bins outside the airstrip.

Thuo's father would sometimes leave him at home and walk to Nakuru town to work odd jobs. He would hurry home relieved to find that they had not been discovered squatting on government property. Living at the edge of the National Park also meant that they were in danger of being attacked by wild animals. So they learned the airstrip routines and studied the patterns of the different animals in the park, ensuring that they kept no food in their shack when they spotted animal droppings close by. Months later when Thuo's father found work, the pair was optimistic that life would change.

Earning commissions from the small petrol station outside Nakuru town didn't bring Thuo's father enough money to afford a better home. He would often take Thuo to work with him and on the days that he didn't, Thuo would spend his days indoors, reading old newspapers and magazines, and reminiscing about his short-lived school days. In the afternoons, when the house got too hot to bear, he ventured out to the airstrip and sat hidden in the tall grass for hours and wait for a small aircrafts to take off or land. He watched the people in the little tower beaming signals to each other and sending messages on their radios. He studied the drivers of the small cranes moving quickly from plane to plane. He watched as the small planes taxied into the hanger for maintenance and refuelling. The pilots were the most fascinating to him in their neat crisp white shirts. He wondered if the bands in their blazers were made from real gold. Sometimes he would imagine that he was a pilot and walk around the airstrip like he had seen them do. Exuding confidence and commanding respect with their structured hats sitting atop their heads like halos.

'Unafanya nini hapa?' Two policemen grabbed him one afternoon as he sat in his bower daydreaming. The president was due to land at the airstrip the following day so the Airports Authority had deployed extra security to patrol the airstrip. Thuo

had noticed an unusual amount of activity but it hadn't occurred to him to keep away, he had just been happy having more to observe.

'I was just looking,' he felt a sudden, urgent pressure in his bladder.

'How did you enter the strip you rat?'

The heat of the slap on his cheek and that of his urine on his inner thighs was simultaneous. Drops of urine tricked onto the policeman's boot causing him to kick Thuo who landed on an anthill in a clumsy heap, and scampered onto his feet in a bid to run away. The policemen took what seemed like two giant footsteps and caught up with Thuo, lifting his small body off the ground as if he was a paper-weight. They asked him the same question again, but Thuo remained silent unsure whether he should speak the truth or save their home. He made a final attempt to slither out of the security guard's grip but this only angered the guards more. He raised his head and looked towards his home.

'Oh, so you are the one who lives in that *mabati* house, stealing from the *serikali* eh?" They led him towards the airstrip.

'What is your name?' asked a kinder looking man sat on the other side of a desk in a large airy office.

'Joseph Thuo Maliti.' Thuo was still terrified but he couldn't hide his glee at being so close to a real life pilot.

'How old are you?'

'Fourteen.' The man seemed shocked by Thuo's age; he looked much younger.

'Who do you live with?'

Silence. Thuo still hoped that he would be able to protect his father.

'*Kijana*, speak! Who do you live with?' The room vibrated as the man spoke.

'My father is in town.' Thuo surrendered and tears flooded his eyes. He was then taken to another room and told to wait for his father.

What seemed to Thuo like days later, his father came to get him. He was relieved to see that his son was well, but this was short-lived as he grabbed him by the arm and roughly led him out of the building. Thuo's father had explained the circumstances that had led them to Nakuru and begged for them to be allowed to stay for a few nights; just until he could find them a place to go. They had not caused anyone any harm; they had nowhere else to go. He begged and pleaded and grovelled like a man who had nothing, yet stood to lose everything.

Later that evening, Thuo and his father were escorted off the airstrip. They walked covered in darkness and engulfed in the silence that now defined their relationship. Thuo's father, who was a few meters ahead of Thuo, stopped suddenly and waited for his son to catch up with him before he spoke.

'We have no home now because of your foolishness.' The weight of this accusation hit Thuo harder than those blows he had received from the policemen. It was even heavier because his father had addressed him in Kikuyu, which Thuo had not heard him speak since the night they left Molo. Since you think you are big enough to disobey me you can go your own way.' Thuo's father dropped the bag he was carrying that contained their only possessions. He paused for a brief moment before he walked away from his son.

Thuo stood rooted and silent. He wanted to pick the bag off the ground and run after his father but his feet wouldn't let him. He ached to call out and tell him that he was wrong, that it wasn't his fault that they had been kicked out of a home they hadn't had in years, but his voice, like the rest of his insides, was tied up in a terrified and uncertain knot. So he stood there in silence, accepting his fate as his mother had years ago, and watched his father disappear.

Thuo had resigned himself to the fact that people like him did not have a decision about the course their lives took. Such privilege was reserved for the wealthy who could afford the price tag that accompanied choice. So he lived his life as a reaction to the blows that he was dealt. This is why he didn't put up a fight when the policemen stuffed him into the back of the Peugeot after Ngugi and the OCS had decided to detain him.

He had always regarded the Ngugi's as family. He had brought his wife and children to meet them. When his wife gave birth to their second child, Kavata visited them at the local hospital and discreetly paid the hospital bill. His youngest daughter was a year younger than Amani, so Kavata and Thuo had often joked that they would arrange for them to be married when the time came.

As he sat in the back of the police car, sandwiched between the two policemen, it occurred to him that while Kavata regarded him as family, her husband didn't. To Ngugi, Thuo was merely an employee charged with the responsibility of making their lives a little more comfortable. He couldn't justify why he concealed the truth

about where he had taken Kavata, more so now she was apparently missing and he was facing arrest and she might be in danger. Still he made the decision to stick with his story as she had asked him to. He asked the policeman on his right if he could call his wife before they got to the station. When he agreed, Thuo reached for his phone and dialled Kavata's number instead. He ignored the logic that screamed at him that this was a waste of a privilege and was unsure of what he would do or say if she picked up. The policeman overheard the automated message informing Thuo that the number he had dialled was switched off. He began to dial his wife's number when the policeman on his left snatched the phone from him.

'*Wewe*, you are allowed only one call. It is not our problem if the number is *mteja*.' The policeman slid Thuo's phone into his jacket pocket.

At the Nyari Police Station, Thuo was asked to sit on a bench at the reception that was directly opposite the holding cell. The policeman who had confiscated his phone went into a back room and re-emerged with handcuffs. He stood over Thuo and asked him to remove his shoes and belt and then slapped one cuff onto Thuo's wrist and the other to the metal leg of the bench that he sat on.

'You can sit there and decide if you are going to talk and if you don't we will throw you in there with your friends.' He pointed the large metal door behind the desk where the booking officer sat.

The truth was, however, that the holding cell was full to capacity. Most policemen opted out of their duties on Fridays so it was impossible to get any kind of police paperwork signed. So those arrested anytime after Thursday afternoon inevitably spent the weekend behind bars. They were agitated, impatient, and eager to be released. For this reason, Monday was the busiest day for most police stations in Nairobi, and the day on which the fewest arrests were made. The queue of people waiting to bail out their errant husbands and rascal friends stretched out beyond the station doors.

From where Thuo sat leaning against the wall furthest away from the holding cell, he could smell the overwhelming stench of unwashed bodies that came from the cell. He wondered how the policeman who was right outside the cell was able to stop himself from vomiting.

The door to the cell was made of solid metal with no bars or glass through which one could look into or out of the cell. There was a small peep hole on the door, the

size of a twenty shilling coin. From outside the cell all one could see was an eyeball gazing back at them. Thuo stared at the cell door so long that he could tell when a different person was looking through the peephole by the varying degrees of whiteness of their eyeballs. The eyeballs changed so frequently that Thuo imagined that there must have been some kind of system where the prisoners stood in a line with the front of the bodies pressed against the door, stepping sideways in order to take turns to see if someone had come for them.

Whenever a woman walked into the station, the prisoner at the peephole began to bang on the door as a signal to his fellow inmates who started to whistle and call out '*Supuu! Sista smart! Msupa!*' This went on for an amount of time that varied based on how beautiful the woman was. It is only when some of the women got scared and ran away that the booking officer would hit the door with his baton to silence them. Thuo could tell that the booking officer also enjoyed this shared ritual and every time the chanting started he looked down the line to see which woman had caused it and then wait until the very last minute before he reassured the terrified woman that she was safe.

Several hours after Thuo had been cuffed to the bench, the booking officer stood by the cell door and began to call out the names of the prisoners who would be released, asking them to stand in the order that their names were called. When he was done, four other policemen joined him and stood behind the door, in case the captives whose names had not been called decided to push the door open and try to escape. The booking officer opened the cell door and let them out one by one, ensuring that they had signed their discharge forms before they were free to go. Thuo watched the men as they walked out in to the bright mid morning sun, testing himself to see if he could recognise them by their eyeballs.

There were only four prisoners left in the cell by the time the exercise was over and even they could only be held for another forty-eight hours before they had to be released or handed over to the courts. Police stations all over the country were short staffed because officers had been deployed to the various polling stations in preparation for the election. Most stations would only have two or three officers on site on the polling day, so they were encouraged to minimize arrests over the course of the week.

Thuo's buttocks were numb and his wrist was sore from the handcuffs. The OCS had walked past him several times, but not once had he acknowledged Thuo who was sitting stoic and silent, certain that the less trouble he caused the sooner he would be out of there. He began to panic and the gravity of his situation dawned on him. The fact that he was still here meant that Kavata had not returned home to clear up this mess. As the minutes passed his worry grew, and when he saw the OCS leaving the station for his lunch break, he decided to speak up.

'Sir, excuse me Bwana OCS. Please I beg you to release me. I have done nothing wrong,' the OCS looked at Thuo as if he was surprised to see him sitting there and for a moment Thuo was certain that the OCS didn't recognise him.

'*Kuna wangapi kwa cell?*' The OCS asked the booking officer who was preparing to leave for the day. The booking officer confirmed that there were four men in the cell. The OCS walked up to Thuo and stood over him so close that Thuo had to look down to avoid staring into the man's belly which flowed over his belt like the top of a mushroom.

'You know technology has made it very easy for us to catch criminals. Sometimes it's good to know who you are dealing with young man.' The OCS pulled out his fancy cell phone and flashed the screen at Thuo. Thuo was not sure what he was supposed to be looking at but he had a sudden urge to urinate. 'Mr. Ngugi checked the mileage on the trip you made yesterday with his wife. You travelled thirty six kilometres, but Mrs Agallo's house is only six kilometers away from Ngugi's house.' The booking officer who was listening in on the conversation sniggered and called Thuo a fool. The OCS took a step back to he could study Thuo who's hands were trembling so much that the metal around his handcuffed wrist vibrated against the bench. The OCS instructed the booking officer to lock Thuo up and then made his exit.

Nothing that Thuo had heard from people who had spent time inside police holding cells would have equipped him for this encounter. He had tried to prepare himself mentally for the worst during those hours he spent handcuffed to the bench but even that had been futile. Since the police station was located in the heart of an affluent suburb, and for this reason it was better maintained than most in the country. The sign board at the police station gate was painted once a year and the base of the sign, like the path into the station was decorated with white washed

rocks that were so brilliant that it hurt the eye to look at them on a bright day. The live bougainvillea fence and all the bushes in the compound were kept symmetrically trimmed at all times. Members of the Nyari Residents' Association visited the station twice a year to review the needs of the station and a few weeks later they would return, armed with reluctant spouses and unhappy children to paint the walls and sand the floors – this was their way of giving back to the people who had ensured that their bubble was kept afloat. So on his imagined scale, Thuo ranked the station pretty highly and assumed that the cell would be as well maintained as the rest of the station. He was wrong.

The room had no windows the only source of light once the door was shut was a single bulb, whose glow was inhibited by a brown substance that had caked on its surface over time. Along the dark walls of the cells were benches, similar to the one he had sat on outside, only these ones served as beds as well. The walls were filled with drawings, of naked women and violent crimes where the victims were policemen. Some of the images were drawn in impeccable detail next to statements and declarations in various languages – none of which was English – all done in the only materials that were abundant in the room: faeces and blood. The only sections of the wall that were bare were those that had been eroded by constantly being urinated on. Thuo stood against the door, afraid to touch anything. The four men who were in there with him didn't bother to look up when the door slammed behind him. When he vomited over and over again, the men laughed, saying that it was just a matter of time before his body got used to the smell.

And he did. When there was nothing left inside him to heave, when he no longer sweated because of the lack of fresh air, when his tear ducts dried up, he realized that his body had sunk onto the slimy floor and he could finally breathe without gagging.

A familiar voice stirred Thuo from his semi conscious state a few hours later. It was Cheptoo, shouting at the booking officer. He got up from the sticky floor, and peered through the peephole and spotted her. She'd never looked more beautiful or more livid. He imagined that Schola had told her what had happened. Her hands were akimbo and she was growling, demanding to be told why her husband was being held. The station was fairly empty from what Thuo could see but the few who

were milling about were watching Cheptoo with great amusement. The booking officer didn't stand a chance. At first he tried to calm her down explaining that only the OCS could answer her questions and that he was away attending to election issues.

'What are you here doing if you can't answer my questions?' she yelled in broken English when the policeman tried to calm her down in Swahili. Eventually he just ignored her, and turned his attention to the newspaper he was reading. She grabbed the newspaper from his desk and flung it away. When she realized that the officer was the same tribe as she was, she lowered her voice, leaned in towards him, and tried to coax him into releasing her husband. When this failed her fury grew and her demands to see her husband were renewed.

'Open this big book of yours and tell me what my husband has done. Joseph Thuo Maliti.' When he did nothing she reached over the counter for the book but the policeman grabbed hold of her hand and shoved it back at her. Thuo slammed his fist against the metal door at the sight of the policeman touching his wife – even if it was basically in self-defence. The sound startled both Cheptoo and the policeman who didn't bother stopping her from going round his desk to the cell.

'Thuo, come out let's go home. *Hawa wajinga* they do not know what they are doing.' Cheptoo tugged at the door handle and then began to scope the area for keys to the cell.

'Stop shouting, you are only making things worse.' Thuo said into the peephole. He stepped away from the cell door, ashamed that his wife had to deal with this situation. He searched his brain for an explanation for give her but came up short. 'Go home, this is all a misunderstanding. I will call *Mzee* and he will sort this out. You just go home and make the arrangements to travel home tomorrow. I will be home by the evening.'

'Thuo, what will *Mzee* do for you? Schola says he is the one who told them to lock you up.' Cheptoo spoke into the tiny hole. 'Just tell them the truth and they will let you go. Where is Mama Wanja? Where did you take her?' Thuo grew defensive as he always did when Kavata came up and immediately felt stupid for it.

Something that was being aired on the radio caught Cheptoo's attention and she stepped back to the booking officer's desk, grabbed the small portable radio off his

desk and turned up the volume, placing the radio next to the peephole so that Thuo could listen as well.

The news bulletin started with reports of preparations for elections all over the country before it zoned in on Machakos constituency, where Ngugi was running for Member of Parliament. The bulletin reported that Ngugi's wife had gone missing the previous day. The voice of the OCS went on next and he reported that they already had a key suspect in custody.

'We are doing everything we can to ensure that Mrs Ngugi is returned home in good time to participate in this election which is very important to this family. We are questioning a major suspect and looking into all leads.'

'Can you hear Thuo? Are you listening? They are calling you a suspect like you are some kind of criminal! Why won't you talk?' Cheptoo began to cry, her reticent sobs growing by the second until she was wailing, begging for no one in particular to explain to her why this was happening. Thuo tried to calm her down from the other side of the door but this only served to sadden her more.

'*Wewe* mama, this is a place of work! Control yourself. You are not the first to have her husband locked up! Go home and stop embarrassing yourself.' The booking officer spoke as if he had reached into his drawer and pulled out a new set of balls. Cheptoo, shocked at his renewed authority tried one last time to get the policeman to release Thuo, if only for a few minutes so she may see that he was alright. Thuo was a little bit relieved when the officer refused. He didn't want her to see him in this state, and couldn't bear to face her. He repeated his instructions to her, asking her to go home and prepare to travel as they had intended to. He whispered that she should go look under their mattress for some money in a brown envelope, use some of it to buy a mobile phone, and keep whatever was left for any emergency. She had been asking for a new one since hers one she had fell into a pit latrine months ago. It was the least he could do for her and she seemed happy with the compromise. He promised to be in touch with her as soon as he was released.

'Don't worry Chep, all will be well.' Thuo called out as she gathered her things off the floor to leave. He hoped she couldn't hear the insincerity in his voice.

That small portable radio became Thuo's only source of information over the course of the next few days. He would press his ear against the tiny hole on the door at the

top of every hour and listen for every morsel of precious information. When he heard confirmations that Kavata had indeed been at the airport on Sunday and had gotten on a flight that day, he was certain that he would soon be released. He asked the booking officer when he would be set free and was told that only the OCS could make that decision. However, he had already travelled to his home town to cast his vote.

On the day before the election, there was no mention of Kavata's disappearance on the news. There were however a few vox pops from the members of the public commenting on Kavata's disappearance. Some people thought that it was ridiculous that this matter had been given such attention: 'People go missing everyday – but when a politician's wife gets on a plane without telling her husband, suddenly that makes the news?'

'What kind of woman would leave her husband at such a time? There must have been something else going on there. It's all very fishy.'

'Me, I cannot vote for a man who doesn't have a wife. How will he manage a constituency if he can't control his wife?' an elderly woman said in Kikuyu causing a roar of laughter that was carried on national radio. That clip had been played over and over again. Ngugi had become the national laughing-stock.

The station was a ghost town on Election Day. Thuo's cell mates were long gone and he and the booking officer had formed a slight friendship ever since. The booking officer sympathised with him when Thuo eventually decided to explain exactly what happened on the day of Kavata's disappearance. There was no use keeping it to himself anymore since he was already getting punished for his bad decisions. The booking officer, whose name was Kiprop, accused him of having an affair with Kavata. Surely that was the only reason why he would go to such lengths to protect her.

'*Heh*, these big women can put you in a box,' Kiprop was laughing at Thuo now and prodding him to divulge details of their clandestine affair. Thuo didn't confirm the affair, nor did he deny it. He was pleased that Kiprop would think that a woman like Kavata would take interest in him. They continued chatting throughout the day, exchanging life stories and commentary on the voting that was now in full swing. When Kiprop was certain that there was bound to be no one else coming to the

station, he let Thuo out of the cell for some fresh air and warned him that if Thuo tried to escape, he would shoot him and let the police dogs have at him for supper.

Thuo was surprised to learn that the man who had successfully kept him behind bars for four days was only twenty-one years old. He possessed the jaded authority of a man who had witnessed years of crime and corruption.

'It's because of the things they make you do when you are training at the National Youth Service.' Kiprop's accent was heavy with his mother tongue. 'They treat you like you are worthless, like you are worse than a leper. Then after two years, they give you a uniform and tell you that you are the authorities of the land and send you out to the world. It doesn't stop when you get a job. You will always be expected to bribe someone so that you can get a posting in a good police station, or so you can join the traffic department. I was lucky to get this posting; at least this station is quiet, but I had really wanted to get into the traffic department. Most people make four times their salaries on the roads. The things I had to do to get this job...' Kiprop stopped speaking. His mind appeared to have left the room and gone to a wounding place. Thuo watched his expression closely, grateful that they had made an unexpected connection, but uncomfortable with the intimacy of the story that he was telling. They sat in silence, with the continuous drone of the portable radio filling the room with news of polling stations closing all over the nation, and messages from election observers congratulating Kenyans for turning up to cast their votes in such record numbers and doing so peacefully.

It was done. The election that Thuo had anticipated would change his life was over and he had not voted. For the first time since he had been brought to the station, Thuo felt something that he could recognise. The feeling built up inside him, swelling like a *mandazi* dipped in hot oil. The events of the past four days flew through his mind and the lack of answers and explanations made the anger that was growing inside him to course through his veins quicker than he could stop it. His gaze was fixed on the Kenya Police logo that was painted onto the front of Kiprop's gdesk. '*Utumishi Kwa Wote*' he read the slogan, which declared service to all, over and over again, each time becoming more aware of how untrue those words were. With muscles tensed and fists clenched, unable to contain his anger any longer, Thuo leapt out of his seat and made to connect his balled fist with the offending logo. The metal links around his left wrist clang loudly, reminding Thuo that he was

cuffed to the bench on which he sat. His wrist snapped. Thuo fell to his knees; the handcuffs held him back and the rage he felt seconds ago was rapidly replaced by excruciating pain.

'Now you, what are you trying to do? I do you a favour and then you want to attack me?' Kiprop, his friend, was now gone and replaced by the man that the NYS had trained him to become. He ridiculed Thuo as he writhed on the ground. His wrist was getting swollen so fast it would soon become constricted by the cuffs. Kiprop waited for Thuo to calm down before he walked over and slapped a new set of cuffs on to Thuo's right arm and then dropped a poorly stocked first aid kit by his feet and went back to his seat, turning up the volume on the radio.

'Hurry up so that you can go back inside.' All signs of their brief friendship were gone.

Thuo slept through the night and most of the morning and woke up to increased activity at the station. The throbbing pain in his wrist had subsided and he sat up to tighten the bandage around his wrist. The cell door opened and a man in rubber gloves, gumboots, carrying two large buckets of water, a shovel and a stiff bristled brush was let into the cell. The putrid smell of the cell was woken up as the waste was piled into one of the buckets. When he was done scooping he poured the second bucket of water on the ground and left the broom behind for Thuo to clean more thoroughly if he was so inclined. The cell smelt worse than it had before it had been cleaned. Thuo felt his stomach preparing to turn itself inside out.

He got on his feet, and spoke to Kiprop through the peephole, requesting that he have a word with the OCS. Thuo had no way of knowing if Kiprop had passed on his message or not. The OCS never came to speak to him nor was he let out to seek audience with him at his office. Instead, hours later, the door was cracked slightly and Kiprop handed his phone and told him he had three minutes to use it. His airtime was depleted and his call log full of numbers he didn't dial. Kiprop arranged for him to buy some more and he called Cheptoo. He was happy to hear her voice. She reported that she had travelled well, and that the children were enjoying spending time in Nakuru. Although she hated him at the moment, she had voted for Ngugi because she knew it is what Thuo would have wanted. Thuo lied that he was going to be released soon, that he was just waiting to sign some paperwork before

he could go home. She offered to cut her trip short so that she could meet him but Thuo insisted that she and the children remain upcountry until the New Year as they had planned. He would join them in a few days, once he was rested.

The next day, Thuo was joined in the cell by a man who was caught trying to vandalise an ATM machine at a nearby petrol station after beating the security guard who was stationed there to a pulp. His name was Pato, and he was drunk out of his senses and barely conscious when he was thrown onto the cell floor. When he woke up inside the cell a few hours later, he began to scream and shout, claiming that the devil had taken over his body, and begging that a pastor be called to cleanse him. Thuo, who had initially found the man's antics hilarious, quickly grew tired of them and warned him to shut up before he unleashed demons of his own on him. Kiprop's shift was over and had been replaced by a large policewoman who spoke loudly, and preferred to keep the radio off. She ran the police station as if it was a dormitory and she was the matron. She instructed people to be silent when they got in to the station, and told them not to stand too close to her because they smelled. Thuo's wrist was throbbing but when he asked for some water to drink and a painkiller, she complained that he was being too demanding. She brought him a five litre bottle of water and six painkillers, and told not to bother him any longer. He downed over half the bottle in a few gulps, offered his cellmate some, and when he declined, he decided to take a modest bath with the rest of the water and instantly felt better than he had in days. A couple of hours later the policewoman on duty hit the door with her *rungu*, a symbol that she wanted to speak to one of them. Thuo remained seated certain that it wasn't him she was interested in and signalled to his cellmate to heed the call.

'*Ndio afande,*' Pato said meekly into the peephole.

'What is your name?'

'Patrick Moi.'

'No, it not you I was calling. Call the other one.' Pato shrunk away from the door leaving Thuo to take his place.

'What's your name?'

'Joseph Thuo Maliti.' There was silence on the other side of the door as the woman flipped through the pages of the thick book looking for Thuo's name.

'When were you brought in?' She asked when she couldn't find his name in the register.

'On Monday. *Asubuhi*.' Thuo was now curious. He realized that this was the first time he had been asked to provide his full names and ID number, which he imagined should have happened before he was locked up. He wondered if it was at all possible that his name was not on the register and what that meant for him. The woman flipped through the pages in the opposite direction.

'Are you sure you don't have other names? Give me your names as they appear on your ID.'

'Joseph Thuo Maliti.' She started again at the bottom of the page and checked each name carefully, using a wooden ruler to guide her up the page.

'Who was on duty when you were brought in?'

'Kiprop.' The policewoman spun in her seat and looked Thuo straight in the one eye.

'You are calling him Kiprop as if you are the one who birthed him? Can you have some respect for officers!'

'Sorry sorry madam. I was brought in by *Bwana* OCS and two other *afandes* but it is *Bwana* Kiprop who was sitting where you are sitting madam.' The policewoman looked through the massive log one last time before slamming it shut and reached for a newspaper. Thuo watched her, waiting for her to provide some indication of what was wrong, if anything.

'Em, madam, is there a problem?'

'Who has said there that there is a problem? Stop looking for trouble.' Her voice vibrated through the room and Thuo stepped back from the door. He was sure that all was not well, and was almost certain that his name was not on the register. What he couldn't figure out is what that meant for him.

The rest of the day went on without incident. At six pm, Kiprop strolled back into the station to take his shift, energised from a day off. Thuo was able to confirm his suspicion when he overheard the policewoman ask about Thuo. They spoke in their shared mother tongue and Thuo from his position just next to the peephole could only make out the mention of the OCS. Whatever Kiprop said didn't seem to satisfy the policewoman's curiosity, but her shift was over and his was not her problem.

Before long Kiprop was back in his seat, and the familiar sound of the static-filled transmission was back in the air.

'*Ala*, they've locked you up without any charges?' Pato lay on his back on the bench opposite him. He understood the conversation that had eluded Thuo.

'Is that what they said?' He felt a familiar rage building up inside him only this time coupled with hopeless frustration.

'Yes! You didn't hear? Oh, you are a Kikuyu. Pato raised his head slightly; lifting the arm that was shielding his eyes to look at Thuo and then replaced it and lay back down. 'You don't look like one.'

'What did they say?' Thuo was wanted to shake the information out of this strange man.

'They said that when the OCS brought you in but they couldn't charge you so he told that Kiprop guy to lock you up until he decided what to do with you. But then the OCS got caught up in the election and only returned to the station yesterday. So Kiprop didn't write your name in the register. He is waiting to hear what his *mkubwa* says...' Pato was amused as he spoke. Thuo was stunned.

'*Ati* how long have you been here?' Pato was now sitting up

'From Monday.' Pato shot up to his feet and looked at Thuo in disbelief.

'*Ati* Monday! *Haiya- kwani wewe ni mjinga aje?* So you didn't vote? You were in here the whole time?' Pato was laughing hard, mocking Thuo for a stupidity that Thuo didn't know he possessed. It took Thuo every speck of restraint to keep himself from showering his cell mate with curses and blows.

'*Kwani* this is your first time inside?' When Thuo nodded in response and Pato looked at him as if having never being on the wrong side of the law was an indication that he was a lesser man.

'You don't know the *katiba*? Don't you know that they are not allowed to hold you during elections? You should have asked for bond. You would have been released and because there were no charges you would have been a free man. No court – nothing! But you stayed here, heh! You are really a fool.'

Thuo could not process the information that he was receiving in animated bursts. Pato was looking at Thuo as if he was the one who was insane. 'Let me tell you about this police system. You have to know the tricks of it. I was in Gigiri Police the Friday before the election, but we were released on bond – only a thousand *bob* – and given

court dates for next year. But, the courts will be too busy dealing with rigging cases after the election that they won't want to think about our cases. So me, I am not going. You can get away with anything in this country over elections – even lusting over your *mkubwa's* wife.' Pato paused and watched to see if he had struck a nerve, but Thuo was stunned into silence. It is only later when Thuo re-capped the conversation that he realized that his cell mate must have heard from Kiprop that he was apparently having an affair with a big man's wife.

'If you are ever arrested you must act like you are a mad man, or say that you are very sick, vomit and shit everywhere and make noise. Say you are dying or that you are possessed by demons. They don't like noisemakers, so they get rid of them quickly. The quiet ones, like you, you can rot here forever. Hehe! Monday! *Yaani* you missed the election. Heh! It was a hot one.' Pato continued rambling about the election but Thuo's mind was still processing the things he had said.

Thuo stood up and began to call out for Kiprop, banging frantically on the door. Kiprop yelled at him to shut up.

'They are announcing the results!' Kiprop turned the radio to its highest volume and placed it on the corner of his desk closest to the cell. A few of the other officers at the station also gathered around the desk. Thuo was swept up in the anticipation that engulfed the room, as if the outcome of this election would in some way change his current situation.

The chairman of the electoral commission was speaking frantically, his voice weighty with nerves. There had been delays in releasing the results. The radio station reporter described the atmosphere as tense, but he didn't have to. It was clear even inside Thuo's cell that the nation was no longer at ease. When the chairman announced the name of the winning presidential candidate, there was a silence that lasted a few moments as Kenyans, who were mostly surprised by the results, processed the news. Then, an explosion of reactions.

The sound of the uproar at the election centre, which was carried through Kiprop's radio, was drowned out by the shouting and screaming inside the police station. Inside the holding cell, Thuo and Pato fought for a turn at the peep hole so they could catch a glimpse of the activity. They began bang to on the door frustrated to be left out and desperate contribute to the synchronised noise that engulfed the nation. The harder they slammed their fists against the metal door, the louder the

chanting and shouting became. People ran out of their houses at the police quarters and filled up the station. Some of them were dancing and distributing beers and others were wailing. Eventually Pato and Thuo's consistent banging on the cell door provided a rhythm to the song that the winners sang, elevating their jubilation to another level. The losers sat huddled close together at the station door, frozen in disbelief. One man held Kiprop's radio against his ear, certain that a mistake had been made and that it would soon be rectified so that they could be the ones celebrating.

Moments later a frenzied journalist reported that all roads led to State House where the incumbent president would be sworn in immediately. There were allegations of rigging and rumours about a coup. This news spurred the losers to raise their voices, demanding that the celebrating was stopped because the winners were liars and thieves. Tribal stereotypes that had been momentarily forgotten were now used as ammunition. The Kikuyu mafia had once again used their cunning and manipulative ways to win the election. A line had been crossed and men who had worked alongside each other for years were blinded by a murderous rage and could not stand each other.

Inside the cell, the two men stopped banging and listened as chaos brewed and seeped into the cell through the tiny hole that until this point had been a welcome connection to the world outside. Thuo stepped away from the door and sat down on the bench, and when he looked up, he found his cell mate hovering over him.

'There's no way you people could have won the election. *Ni ukweli...* you have stolen it...' He spoke in intervals as if in his mind, anger was slowly arranging the information for him. Thuo was not looking forward to having to defend himself against his cell mate if he decided to mirror what was happening outside the cell. The palms of his hands were twitchy and hot from banging against the metal door, but he rolled them in to fists.

'Lakini you were sitting here during elections so at least I know you didn't vote for that thief!' Pato laughed and the cell was cut off from the widespread fracas.

A distorted message coming in through the dispatch radio went unnoticed for several minutes before Kiprop disengaged himself from the brawling, stood on his desk and blew his whistle continuously until the room quieted down. All attention shifted to a message coming in from the Central Police Station.

'Switch off that radio!' Kiprop shouted and a young boy scurried under a bench to retrieve the radio that had been disposed off. No one noticed him sneak out the door with it. After a few minutes of trying to decipher the static filled message, Kiprop pulled out his cellphone and phoned the Central Station – the landline hadn't been operational for months, but he would apply for a refund for his airtime. The phone call only lasted a few seconds, but the message was loud and clear.

Pockets of violence, magnified versions of what had just happened in the police station, had broken out all over the country. Kiprop had been instructed to get every available police officer ready for dispatch. As soon as he made the announcement he expected his colleagues to spring into action, but they didn't. They had not heard the panicked urgency in the voice of the officer at Central. For them, the report of violence only further justified their anger and so the arguing and fighting continued. Kiprop, a junior officer, could do nothing to stop it. It is only when the OCS' car swept into the station and he jumped out faster than anyone had ever seen him move, that the police men scurried out of the station reception to prepare for dispatch.

The OCS spoke quickly, pacing up and down the station, taking no notice of the furniture that was now spewed all over the place. There were four trucks on the way to the station to collect those who were ready for dispatch. He wanted every single male officer, armed and ready for battle. Female officers who had been on the force for over a year would also be dispatched. The rest would be distributed across Nairobi to stand guard at police stations and hold down the forts. The words 'Kenya is burning!' punctuated the OCS' sentences as he continued to issue instructions to anyone who was close enough to receive them.

Thuo's heart raced as soon as he heard the OCS' voice. Taking heed of his cellmate's advice, he went to the door in one swift move.

'*Bwana OCS! Bwana OCS!*' he shouted and slammed his hand on the door repeatedly with his cellmate egging him on, more for entertainment than for encouragement. The OCS registered not a flicker of recognition for Thuo's calls. He continued to pace around the station, talking into his cellphone and walkie-talkie almost simultaneously as police men flitted past him in a frenzied state.

Thuo kept at it, using his injured hand to bang on the door when the other one was tired. When the first police truck arrived to collect the policemen, the OCS

practically threw anyone in uniform inside it regardless of how prepared they were. With each truck that came and went, the station grew quieter and a calmer and Thuo found that the silence only made him more anxious that he would once again be forgotten. So he kept hammering at that metal door long after his voice had given in and his cell-mate had found something else to entertain himself with.

An hour later he still refused to be silent. His body was exhausted resting fully on the cool metal door, his hand was the only part of his body that was still working and every bit of his energy was channelled into hitting the door consistently.

The cell door swung open suddenly and an unprepared Thuo fell to the ground in a clumsy mound, landing heavily on his already injured hand. It took a while for his eyes to adjust to the light but they did just in time to catch a glimpse of the OCS' boot just before it struck him in the ribs.

'Are you mad!' the OCS roared and lifted his foot to kick Thuo again. 'Do you think I have time for criminals when I have to protect the country from hooligans like you?' Another kick missed his groin by inches and Thuo was just about to start begging for forgiveness when he felt himself being dragged back into the cell.

'*Pole Bwana OCS. Pole.*' Pato interceded on his behalf. 'This one has been in here too long; he doesn't know what's going on. Just forgive him.' For the first time Thuo heard terror in his cellmates voice.

'Who are you?' the OCS' round form filled the entire door frame blocking out all the light from the reception. Thuo fought his way through the pain in his thighs and his ribs and wrist. He stood up and faced the OCS ignoring Pato's quiet warnings to stay down.

'Bwana OCS, my name is Joseph Maliti Thuo.' He watched the recognition spread on the OCS' face. There was no doubt that up until that moment, he had completely forgotten about Thuo and the fact that he had been locked up by his orders for a week. Thuo kept his gaze, loaded with questions and demanding explanations, on the OCS.

'Bwana OCS, I just want...' before Thuo could complete his sentence the OCS stepped back into the reception, slammed the cell door shut, and threw the keys on to the desk which was now being manned by the same policewoman who had a few hours ago questioned Thuo's confinement. She had watched the entire episode in silent disbelief and a few minutes later, when she was sure that the OCS was tucked

away in his office. She gave Thuo more water and asked if they had had something to eat.

Chapter Three

Wanja Ngugi

Wanja was elated the day her parents told her that her father had a decent job at the National Housing Council. It was a happy time for the entire family. Ngugi was working on a project that he had fantasized about since he and Kavata were students of the post-colonial revolution at the Kenyatta University. There was suddenly more money available to hire drivers and go on long holidays outside the country. For Wanja, the new job meant that she and Amani could now be moved to British system schools, which she was especially thrilled about because she could finally perm her hair and wear trousers to school so that she no longer had to worry about boys dropping mirrors at her feet so they could peek at her panties. Kavata was so grateful to her father for giving Ngugi the opportunity that she began to tolerate him. Wanja's grandparents visited more often, and these visits seldom ended in tears.

Wanja had watched her father worked tirelessly on the NHC project; he spent days on the construction sites and nights going over the hundreds of applications

from people living in Kibera who were hoping to be granted a home. Hon Muli suggested that Ngugi leave the allocation of units to the ministry of housing, and focus on the aspects of the project that he was more interested in. Kavata, who was unaccustomed to the number of hours that her husband was spending at work, agreed with her father so Ngugi obliged. He handed over the administrative aspects of the project to the ministry and dealt with what he loved. He spent more time at home in the evenings, happily chatting about his work with Wanja and showing her drawings and plans couldn't make sense of, but found fascinating non the less.

The houses were built quickly and efficiently and Ngugi even ensured that they didn't have that dull and depressing aura that was characteristic of government houses. On the day the houses were opened, his face was on the cover of every newspaper in the country. The same journalists, who had written about Hon Muli years ago, now profiled Ngugi in ways that showed that the apple had fallen right beneath its tree. The president called him a solution to post colonial problems, and encouraged young men to seek education so they could follow in his footsteps. This achievement was the highlight of Ngugi's short-lived career but it was only a matter of time before someone looked into how the houses were actually being allocated.

The Daily Nation published a three-page exposé on the housing project a few months after the first phase of the housing project had been finished and allocated. The article included a complete list of all the people who had been given homes which was too sensational to be true, only it was. More than half of the houses went to Hon Muli, his buddies, employees of the ministry of housing, and other well-connected officials who could raise enough money to pay someone to look the other way. None of the people who got the houses actually lived in them though; it would have been stupid for them to do so. Instead, they rented the houses out to the very people they were intended for. Hon Muli had been allocated twelve houses, but they were all registered under the names of close friends and relatives. Wanja was skimming over the article when she saw her name printed in the newspaper for the very first time.

It didn't end there. Those few people who were rightfully allocated homes were unable to maintain the houses. Rent for these houses was subsidised by the council, so that the tenants were only required to pay what they had previously been paying for their *mabati* houses. However, the cost of electricity and running water, garbage

collection and security was too heavy a burden. Tenants began to sublet rooms and corners of their houses to other people so that a house that was meant for four people was housing up to twelve. Some opted to move back into their former homes and rent out their government houses at massive profits.

Ngugi was completely flattened and Wanja shared his devastation. He was enraged that his father in law had been the main man behind this elaborate scheme to steal from a noble project. Even if Ngugi had known nothing of it, it was his name that was being dragged through the barely settled red dirt. No amount of explanations or PR could distract the public outrage that surrounded the entire project. A few days after all had been revealed Ngugi drove to Hon Muli's house in fury to confront him about it.

'*Haiya*, didn't you keep a few houses for yourself?' Hon Muli thought Ngugi's outburst was amusing. 'I thought you had put a few houses in Kavata's name. The children should also have gotten a few. Ngugi, it's our time to eat *bwana*, you can't sleep on your ears like that. But I think Mama Kavata organized some for the children, but next time you need to be *chonjo*.'

There was never a next time. The construction of the next phases of housing was suspended indefinitely and Ngugi soon found himself without a job. What followed was a period of worry and vagueness. White bread in place of the nicer whole-wheat one, with the roasted sesame seeds baked into it that Wanja had grown used to. Freshly squeezed fruit juice was replaced with concentrate which Amani loved because it stained his tongue with chemicals. Laughter was only heard at home when Amani would run around the house, inebriated by the sugary water. The bourgeois lifestyle that she had grown accustomed to was dangling on the single delicate strand of a spider's web.

It wasn't long before Hon Muli swooped in with his next big idea and by this time, the idea of long term unemployment had rattled Ngugi into listening to whatever he had to say. The way Hon Muli saw it, the people of Machakos thought of him as the best MP they had ever had. They would accept anyone he ordained to run for his former seat in parliament.

'Kenyan's are a people plagued with chronic amnesia. You think they even remember what the NHC is? My son, I'll help you with everything, if we put together

a good team we can easily win this election,' Hon Muli spoke with so much excitement that afternoon during one of his rare visits to their home.

'I don't think I could spend all my days with politicians, they are such a messy group of people,' Ngugi said only realising the weight of his proclamation after it had flown out his mouth and punched Hon Muli in the face.

'Yes, I think he would be better suited as an architect, we will find another project to work on, and if we don't then we will create one.' Kavata jumped in to fill the dense silence and stroked Ngugi's arm. Wanja nodded frantically but no one took note of her agreement. She was no stranger to the role her grandfather had played in her father's current situation, and though she wouldn't say it, she was sure that they would all be better off without Hon Muli's meddling.

He said little else that afternoon, despite their efforts to repair the damage that Ngugi's words had caused; he just sat there brooding like a stubborn toddler.

Later that evening the two men spoke privately. Wanja assumed that Ngugi was apologising for his earlier statement, but when she went out to bid her grandparents goodbye, she could see that the seed had already been planted. She marvelled at how her father, whom she had idolised all her life, could be so stupid as to allow himself to once again become Hon Muli's puppet.

Their home turned into a verbal war zone when her father told her mother that he had agreed to run for Member of Parliament. It was weeks of arguments in the morning, tears in the evening, and cold shoulders in the moments between. While Ngugi was on the battlefield at home, Hon Muli was doing everything he could to convince him that failure to run for the election would be the biggest disservice to himself and his country.

The day that Wanja received her admission papers into University, her grandfather popped in unannounced to take Ngugi on an impromptu road trip. When he heard the news of her admission, he insisted that Wanja to join them as well so they could celebrate on the way home. She sat in the front next to their driver Thuo whom she had grown fond of ever since he had taught her how to cheat her way through her driver's test.

Hon Muli must have sent word ahead that he was visiting because by the time they arrived at his house in Machakos, there were hoards of people waiting to meet

him. It was as if the entire town had dropped everything to catch a glance of the great Muli. Even the young jaded men couldn't feign disinterest for long once they arrived. When Thuo finally got the car as close as he could to Hon Muli's house, it took the three of them over an hour to walk from the car to the front steps of the house. With each step, there was someone to greet, a child to bless and a mother who claimed that she had named her child after Wanja. By the time they entered the house, Wanja had eaten more sweet bananas and drank more cups of porridge than her lean body could accommodate. Hon Muli got to the house several minutes after Wanja and Ngugi, then turned around to face the crowd.

A microphone materialised almost out of thin air. It was connected to a bullhorn rigged to the roof of a vehicle that was parked behind the crowd. He greeted the crowd, saying that this was just a simple visit to introduce Ngugi to the people who would he hoped would vote for him in eighteen months to come. For the rest of the afternoon, the three of them basked in the unconditional reverence accorded to them by Ngugi's new constituents. Wanja found the women the most interesting to listen to. They praised him to his face, and then turned around to share their doubts about him.

'Now, am I going to call him my leader or my child?'

'Does he even have a son? He doesn't have a son.'

'And his wife? Where is she?'

'Muli should just run again – he is the one we know.'

When it was time to leave, women ran into their houses and emerged with plantain, potatoes, maize and beans, and presented them to Ngugi as a symbol of respect and loyalty for their new leader.

The ride back home was filled with excited chatter and all talk of celebrating Wanja's university admission was forgotten. Like the village women, Wanja was unconvinced that her father could win an election. He simply lacked the seedy greed that she had seen and despised in her grandfather. Wanja always had a penchant for politics and she knew that Hon Muli had better chances of clinging to power if he grabbed one of those village women who had ploughed them with plantain, put her in a suit and gave her a microphone and convinced her that she was a politician.

'Wanja, and what do you think? Does your dad have a chance at winning this thing?' The question drew her out of deep thought. She considered every possible

answer certain that this would probably be the only time that her opinion would be sought. Ngugi had never understood where she stood on his decision to run for office, but he was aware of her interest in politics. Hon Muli, on the other hand, just didn't know how to relate to her. She was at that awkward age where she was too old to sit in his lap and worship him and too young to be of any significance because she hadn't borne a child.

She shifted slightly in her seat so she could see their faces as she spoke.

'I heard some people saying that dad is too inexperienced to be an MP.' It wasn't what she had hoped to say, but courage slipped away at the very last moment.

'You can't listen to what the uneducated say.' Hon Muli spoke a little too soon.

'I think dad should sit out this election, and maybe run for the next one.' Wanja tried to squeeze in knowing that she had already lost her moment. Thuo was the first to show surprise at her statement, offering her a whispered warning.

'I think that ...'

'Doesn't matter what she thinks, she's always agreed with her mother anyway.' Ngugi snapped at no one in particular then continued his conversation with Hon Muli.

Wanja noticed something change in her father that day. He was excited again. It was different to the one that she vaguely remembered from the days when he was ensconced in building homes and changing lives. It was a louder, more defensive passion, like the one she had seen inhabit her grandfather anytime he was under scrutiny. That was also the day that her relationship with her father began to fade.

Had her father been the man he used to be, Wanja would have been able to tell him to listen to Kavata the first time she threatened to leave him if he went on with his election bid. Instead, Ngugi chose to listen to Hon Muli who insisted that Kavata would eventually come around.

'Kavata is just like her mother. They like shiny things and wide wardrobes. All will be forgotten once you have a new office for them to redecorate.' Hon Muli would say but he couldn't have been further from the truth.

Ngugi not only stopped listening to Kavata, he stopped seeing her as well. So it was impossible for him to notice when she'd spend hours on the internet doing her research and applying for teacher exchange programs all over the world. He

wouldn't notice that her passport was missing from the neat pile that sat in the top shelf of their bedroom safe. Nor did he take note of the sum of money that was missing from their joint account when she paid her airfare.

Kavata never told Wanja of her plans – not verbally at least. A few days before she left, Thuo and Wanja went to pick her up at the school she insisted on teaching at because it made her feel useful, although Wanja was convinced she kept her job to spite her father. She climbed into the back seat next to her daughter and placed her handbag on the seat between them. She was quite distracted but that was nothing new. Wanja was watching her twirl her wedding band around her finger when her eyes fell upon an airline ticket, peeking out of her open bag. She must have reacted subliminally, because Kavata's eyes drifted away from the car window and followed Wanja's gaze. When Kavata realized that Wanja had seen the ticket, she looked her in the eye for a moment and then turned her attention back to the passing traffic, leaving the exposed ticket to answer Wanja's questions before she could ask them.

Wanja wasn't sure when it occurred to her father that his wife had made good on her threats to leave him but someone had to take the fall and poor Thuo would never have seen it coming. She knew it wouldn't be long before the police realized that mother's disappearance was the result of a domestic squabble, so the morning after Kavata's so-called disappearance, Wanja decided to carry on with her day as planned. There was no point in her wasting precious campaign time on a false family crisis or sulking around pretending to ask questions to which she already had the answers. While Ngugi was busy with the police, she went in to Amani's room to check that he was still sleeping. She then asked Schola to keep him busy during the day and lied that she was going to campus, ignoring the housekeeper's baffled expression as she slipped out of the house, to spend the day with her fellow closet politicians.

The Orange Democratic Movement campaign headquarters were housed in a bright orange building in Kilimani. ODM made sure that people were constantly reminded of their surrounding once they walked through the gates that were manned by a

guard dressed in an orange uniform. Inside the building, the only thing that was not orange was the brilliant white walls fitted with several screens which continuously broadcast campaign speeches of all the ODM candidates. Each of them was programmed to switch to the news channels at news hours. Framed campaign posters took up empty spaces between the screens. Save for the solid black desks, all furniture in the office bore the same orange shade.

Wanja walked into the headquarters that morning a few minutes after the final Steadman poll had predicted that, in a few days, ODM would win the election. The mood was celebratory as the campaign team members congratulated themselves on their virtual win.

‘This is only a poll – the work only ends when we’ve been inaugurated,’ the campaign chairman announced, sending everyone back to work.

Wanja had worked there for several weeks but still found it odd that her colleagues spoke about the presidency as though they would all be president the minute their candidate won. No one seemed to realize that they would remain nameless faceless workers after the campaign was over.

She settled down at her desk, paying attention to the thick stack of papers that contained the list of approved tweets and Facebook posts for the week. The words VOTE, PEACE, ISSUES, CHANGE and ODM jumped out at her as she skimmed the pages, but her mind was elsewhere. The reality of the situation at home sunk in as she drove her mother’s car to work and she wondered if her job at ODM was any less of a betrayal than her mother’s sudden departure. She glanced at her cellphone and talked herself out of the calling home to find out if perhaps she was mistaken and Kavata had returned.

‘How did your dad react to the poll results? Has he decided to cut his losses yet?’ Tom asked from his desk a few feet away from Wanja. They always had a good time poking fun at the fact that Wanja had chosen to volunteer for her father’s opposition. The foundation of their friendship was hours and hours spent trying to imagine what he would do if he ever found out, but today, she just wasn’t in the mood.

‘He has bigger shit to deal with today; I don’t think he has seen the polls.’ She slipped her earphones on and hoped that Tom would get the message.

Wanja was volunteering for her university's illegal arm of her father's party, the Party of National Unity, when she met Tom. She had heard rumours of underground gatherings and had toyed with the idea of recruiting herself as a volunteer. When Ngugi announced his bid for the Machakos seat, she was sure that it was just a matter of time before PNU reached out to her. Her invitation to join came by means of a Facebook message which, when she accepted, was followed by message with directions to a series of hidden rooms at the back of Fifi's, the bar located just outside the campus.

The United States International University was a secular institution that had somehow managed to thrive in a fiercely religious country. Students were encouraged to shed their religious and political affiliations when they walked through the elaborate campus gates. The owner of Fifi's was a slippery middle-aged man who had built the bar after he discovered that students were gathering on his land to throw parties. When the need arose, he quickly constructed meeting rooms and encouraged students to hire them for activities that were banned on campus. So at any given point, some students would be at the bar in the front engaging in drunken debauchery, whilst others a few meters away would be engaged in fiery Christian Union sessions. The rooms were completely booked out by student politic groups for the duration of the election.

The Kenya People's Party had the first room along the corridor. The sound of fevered praise and worship could be heard coming from the other side of the thin wooden walls. The Christian Union members had all been recruited as volunteers for KPP, which was led by a popular local pastor. During these meetings, the recruits would spend hours in prayer, after which they would sit and talk about the campaign strategies that God had revealed to them. These were the strategies that got implemented.

Next door the National Rainbow Coalition volunteers posted a guard outside their meeting room and hung a thick black curtain over the small window. The room was always eerily silent, rumour had it that the party members only communicated with each other via email, even when they were in the same room.

ODM had the largest space, set up as elaborately as their head offices with the welcome addition of a snack table, well-stocked with roasted goat, potato wedges,

kachumbari and more soft drinks and beers than the people in the room knew what to do with.

The PNU room, which was plain and functional, became Wanja's second home, and whatever time wasn't spent there was spent at home engrossed in a different aspect of the election.

Wanja's home provided the venue for a series of fundraising dinners, parties and church visits. Her mother's refusal to participate in the campaign extended to these events, so Wanja and Mrs Muli were always forced to host the campaign events. When the guests began to arrive, Mrs Muli would whisper to her the detailed story they would use that day to explain Kavata's absence. When she was certain Wanja had got it right she would shuffle over to Ngugi and share the same message with him. There was a new story each time.

Hon Muli was present for all of these events, grabbing every opportunity to tell anyone who would listen, that he was the driving force behind Ngugi's political career. Wanja's newly voiced interest in the election angered her mother and puzzled her father, so she had learned to keep it to herself but once in a while, during these events, she would get caught up in a conversation that she couldn't resist.

She was handing out envelopes for people to slip their donations into Ngugi's campaign when she encountered Tom. He was in a small group of slightly younger guests – marketing experts and PhD students who were discussing the recent election in Ethiopia. She stood with them long after she had collected a total of one million shillings in unconcealed cheques from three members of this group.

'It is so refreshing to hear a conversation that isn't about this election.' Wanja said when she began to receive curious looks from the group.

'There's really nothing left to say about this election, ODM are winning it - *bas*,' the Ogilvy marketing account manager studied her face for a reaction and was surprised when she nodded her head in agreement. Tom, who stood next to him, gently nudged him in the ribs with his elbow, a warning to watch what he said around her. Wanja flipped through the cheques in her hand and retrieved the one he had just handed her.

'What's this for then?' She held up a cheque for four hundred and fifty thousand shillings.

‘A little something to cushion to blow,’ they shared a silent laugh. She and Tom exchanged numbers that day, and the following week they met for coffee at the university campus.

‘You should stop wasting your time with these Barbie politics. There’s real money to be made.’ Tom never hid the fact that he worked for the opposition and he was happy to reveal that he and his colleagues had been sent to the fundraiser to scope out how much support Ngugi had garnered. All those cheques they had presented would eventually bounce. Wanja knew that she should have been angry at his confession but she was intrigued. This was the backstabbing and trickery that her father’s issue-based campaign would always lose to.

‘It’s just another job – that’s the way you must think about it. We’ll give you a contract for the remaining duration of the campaign, you will earn at least a hundred thousand after taxes, and *when* we win, you can decide if you want to stay on. The position will probably still be available – since we’re going digital and all.’

It was a difficult offer to refuse. In addition to the generous salary, she was provided with an entertainment and fuel allowance and was required to attend at least three party events a week. Research – they called it. At first no one at her office acknowledged that she was her father’s child and she began to anticipate the sexual advances that would follow her inexplicable recruitment. Then the requests to confirm things about her father’s campaign began to trickle in from senior campaign members.

‘It’s just a job.’ Tom said when she looked over at him the first time the head of public relations asked her to confirm that her father would be attending certain events. The requests became more frequent, sometimes even from Tom who would email his requests to her despite the fact that he sat right next to her. He would end his message with the words that now served as her mantra. It was just a job, and one she was getting good at.

Wanja carried on with her work that morning with her earphones tucked into her ears as she listened to a series of NGO commissioned music. Any musician who was worth their name had been approached, by one civil society organization or another, to record a jingle that advocated for peaceful elections. A few of them were good, but most of them lacked the particular charm that the musician was known for because the songs were written with a price tag in mind. She was so caught up in

the generic lyrics that she was completely oblivious to the fact that the attention of the entire office was directed at her. Sally, who ran the campaign rumour mill, tapped her on the shoulder and she looked up to a sea of faces staring at her. She had no idea how long Sally had been standing by her desk.

‘We’ve just received word that your mother has been reported missing.’ Wanja had always sensed some hostility from Sally, which Tom had confirmed when he had mentioned that she was threatened by Wanja’s presence at the office. So she always made an effort to stay out of Sally’s way to avoid drama.

‘No, she’s not, I’m sure she’ll show up eventually.’ It wasn’t the answer that Sally had anticipated, so she didn’t move – her overwhelming perfume kept Wanja on the cusp of a sneeze. Had anyone else asked she probably would have told them the truth but Sally’s plastic concern irked her. Tom was watching them, amused.

‘Oouuw daahling- you must be so worried. Where did she go? I do hope she shows up soon.’ Sally sat down on the edge of Wanja’s desk so that she was staring directly into her toned mid-region through her skin-tight pencil skirt. ‘No wonder you look so...’ Sally’s acrylic nails adjusted Wanja’s shirt collar, ‘...stressed today. When was the last time you saw her?’ Wanja looked over at Tom, her eyes pleading for him to step in, but he seemed just as eager to hear what she had to say. Just as Wanja decided to surrender and tell all, her phone rang and she bolted out of the office to take the call. It was her aunt Wairimu, she had heard the news and tried to reach Ngugi on his cell.

‘Are you ok?’ she asked.

‘Yes, just busy finishing up some work.’

‘And your father?’

‘I’m not sure. He was busy with the cops when I left this morning.’

‘Left? *Kwani*, where are you? Isn’t the university closed for the year?’ It was the first time anyone had questioned Wanja about her whereabouts since she had started working at ODM. She had prepared for this moment so often in the past, but now, she struggled to remember what it was that she had planned to say.

‘We’ve closed but I still have some work to hand in so I’m using the library.’ Wairimu did not sound convinced, but she let the matter go, and asked her niece to return home as soon as she was finished. It wasn’t good to leave Amani alone while all this was happening.

Sally was waiting for her at the door when Wanja walked back into the office. The rest of the office was glued to the screen where a reporter was standing outside a house that seemed vaguely familiar. 'PNU CANDIDATE NGUGI MWANGI'S WIFE REPORTED MISSING' the caption at the bottom of the screen screamed out for attention.

'Wanja, can you please tell us what you know – this could be really useful to us.' Sally's plastic nails were digging into Wanja's arm and she wanted to slap her hand off. Instead she dialled the landline number at home which rang engaged each time she tried it. She eventually tried Schola's phone and when it rang unanswered, she could picture it on the kitchen counter where it sat connected to the charger all day while Schola went about her chores. Just as she was about to hang up and go home, Schola picked up.

The OCS had left with Thuo and come back as soon journalists arrived at the house. He was speaking to them now. As Schola reported this Wanja looked up to the screen recognising her house behind the OCS as he confirmed the rumour. He added that they already had one suspect in custody.

'What do I say when *Mzee* asks me where you are?' There was distress in Schola's voice .

'I'll be back in the afternoon.' Wanja hung up and turned her attention to Sally who hadn't stopped berating her with questions. 'Where had she gone? For how long? What airline did she fly? Was it a planned trip or had she actually left him?' Wanja shrugged her shoulders in response to all of them and each time Sally's weave-bearing head would twitch as if her brain was short circuiting. After what seemed to her like ages, Wanja could almost see the pieces fit together as Sally bolted to her desk to phone journalists. An hour later, journalists could confirm from a source very close to the family that Mrs Kavata Muli-Ngugi had left the country without her family's knowledge. Tom sat staring at Wanja for moments after the news broke, his gaze a mixture of worry, shock and sheer amusement.

'You can take the rest of the day off you know. Surely you have earned it.' Wanja was touched by his misplaced concern but she plugged her earphones back into her ears and let the sounds of civil society woo her as she worked.

The entire house rattled when Ngugi stormed out the following evening, slamming the door behind him. On the floor, pieces of Wanja's voter's card lay, staring back at her.

'If you are not going to vote in Machakos, you are not going to vote at all.' He had said as he snatched the voter's card out of her hand and ripped through its protective plastic laminate. It was the first time she had witnessed such a visceral reaction from him. Before she could protest, Ngugi had hoisted his suitcase off the ground and left.

Wanja stood there reeling, and then, the sound of his car door shutting and the engine roaring to life awoke the sudden urge for her to have the final word. How dare he? What gave him the right to imagine that he would take away her democratic right? She resolved to tell him just how wrong he was as effervescent rage coursed through her. With her chest heaving, she swung the front door open and prepared to shout loud enough to be heard over the revving engine, but she was a moment too late. Ngugi sped off, his car tyres releasing pellets of loose gravel which attacked her shins like hundreds of tiny bullets, causing her to hop from one foot to the other trying to avoid them. She caught his eye in the rear view mirror as he drove through the gate. Wanja could swear that he was laughing at her.

She resented the familiar feeling of tension at the back of her throat and scolded herself for wanting to cry as she walked back into the house. She had the place to herself and relief washed over her as she locked the door, sank into the floor and allowed the walls she had erected to protect her from the reality of the past few weeks to fall away. She gave in to the waves of sobs and they took over for long enough to allow darkness to creep into the house through the undrawn curtains. She wandered through the silent house, locking windows and shutting doors, trying to make the house smaller before settling down to lick her wounds, which now felt like several safari ants biting down at the exact same time. A bottle of red wine from her mother's collection tended to the wounds she couldn't reach and released all traces of her earlier misery to the place where bad memories go.

Soon her father had, in her foggy mind, reclaimed his former position as clueless father and fumbling politician. The news re-capped the opinion polls from earlier in the week, which predicted his loss, causing her to giggle as she wafted over to the spot on the corridor floor where her torn voter's card still lay. She collected the

pieces, determined to glue, tape, iron or do whatever it took to put them back together and play her role in driving his political aspirations as far away as he'd driven her mother.

Wanja was awake before the birds on Election Day and tuned into the news, listening to check that it was safe to vote at her polling station. She had heard and read all the tips about how to avoid being the cause of unrest at the polling stations which included not wearing garments that showed an obvious affiliation to any party. Voters had been encouraged to be patriotic in the way they dressed. The colours of the flag, or the flag itself were encouraged or white clothes to spread the message of peace. These tips had been aired repeatedly in the weeks preceding the election and Wanja had acquired the perfect voting outfit. She was sure that there would be nowhere to park if she drove to the polling station so she decided to take a *matatu*. The *Matatu Owners' Association* had announced that they would offer free services to those who were going to the polling stations. This decision did not sit well with the drivers and *makangas*, who worked on a daily commission, so most of them kept off the roads. Those who did work made no effort to collect passengers and whizzed past silently. The streets were deserted, void of the street vendors, maize roasters or vegetable sellers that served as landmarks. After an hour of trying to flag down *matatus* gone rogue, she decided to walk to the polling station.

As she stood in line for hours waiting to vote, she sent several prayers to the heavens that she would be served by a male voting official. She was sure that she would be able to play the damsel in distress as she explained why her voter's card was in its current state. She fingered the card in her back pocket, wishing that when she pulled it out it would be sans sellotape and magically restored. Her supplications went unheard when the voice that shouted 'Next,' signalling that it was her turn to get her voter status verified, was that of a woman. She had practised her story over and over again on the other officials who checked her card while she was in line to confirm that she was standing in the correct line. Each of them had assured her that her tattered voter's card was still valid and they had seen some cards that were in much worse condition. This was the final test, but as she approached the woman at the verification desk, she knew she had been thwarted.

She sneered as Wanja handed over her documents, holding the voter's card with the tips of her fingernails as if it was dripping with some invisible and contagious

virus. The voting official raised her head to look up at Wanja, pausing momentarily to snigger at her white patriotic t-shirt that bore the image of a huge tick, beneath the declaration that she had voted.

‘Are you sure?’ she muttered under her breath.

‘Sorry?’

‘*Ulifanya nini na card yako?*’ she showed the card to her colleague who glanced at Wanja and laughed before she called for the next voter. Wanja said a final prayer for good measure.

‘Our house girl washed it by mistake?’ Wanja mustered in her most respectful tone.

‘Oh, so it’s also her job to look after your property, eh? And was she washing it with a stone?’ Wanja wished she had told her the truth. Voters giggled as they walked past her to the ballot boxes and she could no longer remember why she had been so intent on voting.

‘I have registered to vote, if you just check the register, you will find my name.’ Wanja whispered. The room was dank and smelt like a government office despite the fact that all of the windows in the converted primary school classroom had no glass in the window panes.

‘And how will I find your name if I can’t read your voters card?’ It was now clear to Wanja that this woman was being difficult simply because for a few hours, she had been given a tiny bit of power.

‘Justine Wanja Ngugi. It’s there. On my ID card.’ Wanja’s black polished fingernail trembled as she pointed to her name, printed boldly on the intact ID card. The voting official flicked her hand away and Wanja let out a surprised yelp.

‘Madam, you do not tell me how to do my job,’ her voice raised an octave higher drawing the attention of everyone on the room, including the armed policemen at the door. The stocks of their rifles hit each other as they turned around and a few people jumped backwards afraid that the guns would go off.

‘The ID is used to verify the voter’s card, and the voter’s card verifies the register. If I can not verify your voter’s card, you will not vote *sawa?*’ Wanja wanted to scream at the woman, slap her power drunk mouth and then explain to her in detail how much she had been through to vote at this polling station. How long the walk to the station had been and how many hours she had stood in the sun while the

woman was seated in that smelly room nurturing her distended ego. Then Wanja would explain to her who she was and how easy it would be to get her released from her duties. Instead, Wanja firmly and politely requested her documents back. The voting official shook her head, eager to derive her day's laughs from Wanja as she signalled for her supervisor. The younger man who seemed terrified of her went towards them and asked Wanja to stand aside while they deliberated.

'Justine Wanja Ngugi.' the supervisor called out loudly into the room even though Wanja was standing two feet away from him. The voting official sat back, arms folded across her chest and stifling a triumphant grin as her supervisor addressed Wanja. 'I am afraid we cannot verify your registration due to the poor nature of your voter's card. You should have visited the IEBC office to request a replacement card when this once was defaced.'

'Yes but –'

'Also,' his demeanour changed and he suddenly seemed to be towering over Wanja, 'Be knowing that your voter's registration card is property of the government, and defacing government property is a criminal offense punishable by law. You are now required to leave the polling station. If you do not leave at your own individual will, you will be escorted out by an officer from the Kenya Police.' He gestured towards the two policemen who looked desperate for a chance to exercise authority. 'If you have any questions you can refer to the election guidelines or visit the IEBC offices with your query after a period of less than fourteen days after the election.' The supervisor completed his recitation and stood tall, proud of his work.

Wanja didn't dare speak, lest he unleash the wrath of the over eager cops on her. She simply held out her hand. The supervisor, confusing her request for her documents for camaraderie, took her hand in his sweaty palms.

'No, I want my ID back.' She removed her hand from his moist grip, and wiped it on her jeans hoping to offend the supervisor. He handed both documents back to her and she bolted out of the room tossing her useless voter's card behind her as she approached the door in a final dramatic gesture.

'*Ai. Madam – eish!*' the supervisor called behind her, and she ignored him as she took the final steps towards the door, satisfied with the flair of her performance.

'Can you come back here? *Askari, hebu shika huyo.*' She had forgotten about the policemen in her moment of mini protest. The two men stepped in front of her.

'Madam wacha siasa mingi,' the younger-looking of the two policemen said as his colleague looked on smiling and gestured for her to do as she was told. She turned around, with her head held high and her insides trembling. All activity in the room halted.

'What?' She had intended for the words to come out sounding more hostile than they did.

'Pick it up.' She hadn't noticed how tall the supervisor was. She didn't move.

'Msichana, kwani hujamskia. Are you deaf? You are interrupting with our work.' The voting official said. Wanja looked at the distance between them and wondered if she could cover it in one swift stride and slap the woman across her face.

'Wanjaaa, chukua cardi yakooo.' Her colleague added barely managing to keep a straight face.

She bent down and picked up the card, and turned around, and walked out without saying anything for fear that her rapid heartbeat would travel to her lips and betray her apparent composure.

She swept past scores of people outside the primary school gates, acknowledging each other, showing off their inked fingers and joyfully taking pictures to send to friends as proof of a concluded obligation.

Wanja got home in half the time it took her to walk to the polling station because she was half walking and half sprinting in a frenzied rage, spewing out all the things that she should have said. She made mental lists of all the people she was going to speak to ensure that that voting officer was never allowed in to public service. She regretted now that she had not taken down her name, but that was ok. Once she revealed what she had just been through, the electoral commission would be breaking down doors to find the voting official and punish her for her foolishness. She hurled insults at her and made more mental lists of all the journalists she would call and share her ordeal with.

As she locked the gate behind her, the absurdity of her situation hit her and enraged her more. Inside the house, she tore at the offending card, ripping away the tape she had so carefully placed the night before, but this did nothing to quell her ravenous fury. She collected the now smaller pieces of paper and placed them on the electric plates of the kitchen stove, watching gleefully as the plastic gave in to the hot surface, spreading itself further on the surface before the pieces of paper

went up in tiny flames. She spent the next few minutes trying to rid the house of the murderous smoke that now engulfed it due to her lack of foresight.

As much as Wanja had enjoyed the solitude of being home alone, she had grown weary of the sound of her own footsteps moving through the house. The TV was filled with news of people voting all over the country, proudly flashing their purple pinkies in front of the cameras. Reporters spoke of record turnouts and prevailing peace at polling stations nationally. The picture switched to images of candidates casting their votes at their respective stations. Completely unexpectedly, the image of her grandparents voting at the Machakos Primary School filled the screen. Hon Muli smiled large and proud as he slipped the folded piece of pink paper in to the ballot box. He paused for effect, looking into the camera before he released his vote. Everything about him was a performance. Mrs Muli, an image of misplaced grace, cast her vote after him. She seemed startled by the applause that followed after she dropped her vote into the black box. Once they were done, they strode away hand in hand, acknowledging the presence of Hon Muli's former constituents. This was the first time Wanja had seen her grandparents hold hands – or acknowledge each other physically. Ngugi followed closely behind them, and when he cast his vote the reporter, an obvious supporter, got momentarily caught up in the frenzy of the moment. Ngugi mimicked his father-in-law, pausing briefly for pictures before he released the pink ballot paper, failing to mimic Hon Muli's flair. The crowd showered him with their support, and he acknowledged each one of them with a sincerity that had to be real. Wanja wondered when he had become so good at this. She spotted familiar faces on the screen, relatives who had travelled to Machakos so that Ngugi would have their vote and residents of Machakos who had offered them something to eat during that first visit a year and a half ago.

In that moment, she began to understand the extent to which her father must have felt betrayed by her. She thought about all the milestones that he had guided her through, although none of them were nearly as significant as this one was to him. Guilt descended on her like a million boulders and she felt the unfamiliar and confounding urge to call him and apologise weeping into the phone. But to say anything at this point would be pointless so she lifted herself off the sofa and made her way to the kitchen in search of some more wine. She stopped at the kitchen

stove and stared at her voter's card, now a congealing mass on the cooling surface, and realized that she had been very foolish.

'Can I please stay at Aunty Wairimu's until Sunday? Please Jaja?' Amani did little to hide the fact that he thought Wanja was horrid company when she called her aunt's house the next day to tell him that she would be picking him up shortly. Her attempts to lure him back home with bottomless tubs of ice-cream and endless TV hours were futile. In retrospect she agreed it was best if he stayed there, where he could distract himself from the huge hole that now existed where their mother used to be.

'Ok, you can stay until Monday. Let me speak to Aunt Wairimu,' She could hear Amani and her cousins cheering as the phone switched hands to the only one of her father's siblings that they had any kind of a relationship with. The rest of them still lived in Nyeri, and Wanja only got to see them when they travelled upcountry for funerals. There was some unexplained tension between them all that had something to do with Ngugi having married up and forgotten his people.

Aunty Wairimu's voice was deep with disapproval. She had just arrived back from Machakos and was shocked that Wanja had chosen not to support her father. She spoke about the overwhelming support that they received when they all arrived at the polling station with this cousin and that uncle having travelled in from far away to support Ngugi.

'You know your uncle doesn't approve of Ngugi's bid either, but he came with us and gave your father his vote. If he could swallow his pride, who are you to hold on to yours?' She was right, and Wanja could do nothing but utter a misdirected apology and ask if she needed her to pick Amani up on Monday morning.

'No need to – we will bring him.' The line went dead before Wanja could respond and once again she was left to deal with the ramifications of her actions. She scrolled through her phone book, looking for signs of friends who were likely to be in Nairobi and keen to meet. The only time that the city got emptier than it did over Christmas was during an election, when the city was inhabited solely by vagabonds and foreign journalists.

Tom answered his phone on the first ring and she could tell by his cheerful tone that she had found the company that she needed. He shouted into the phone, his

ambience burst with the merriment and conversation that she craved. To her surprise, he was at the ODM headquarters which seemed strange at first but made perfect sense once she arrived hours later with huge bags of ice and an assortment of beers and spirits that she had taken too long selecting.

All the senior campaign team members had travelled out of town to vote with various candidates; the only staff members left at the Nairobi office were the analysts and media liaisons, who were required to be at work every minute until the results were announced. That didn't stop them from having a few beer-bearing friends over while they did so. To cushion the blow of being forced to work over an election holiday, which was the mother of all holidays, the marketing department had arranged for the nearest Nandos to deliver grilled chicken, chips and beverages to the headquarters as often as needed. Simon, the human resources assistant and Masese, the security guard, devised a plan to ensure that there were always at least three times as many people recorded to be working than there actually were. The result was a steady and surplus supply of grilled chicken. Masese was obviously paid well for his efforts, as were Nandos' delivery guys and taxi drivers who chauffeured girlfriends, wives and other females to the party headquarters.

Wanja was beginning to understand the popular belief that only fools remained poor in an election year. Since politicians stole for four of the five years between the polls, the election year was the people's opportunity to earn as much as they could back. There was money in the air and everybody knew it. All anyone had to do was put themselves in a position to reach out and grab as much as they could.

Tom rushed towards Wanja grinning widely as soon as she walked in.

'Wanja *karibu karibu*. Did you bring ice? So glad you are here! The drinks are outside, help yourself. There are lots of options. Go crazy. Feel at home. *Karibu*.' His breath smelled of cigarettes and whatever elixir had turned him in to a kinder version of himself. She smiled and handed over the ice and scanned the room.

There were at least a hundred people in the space that on a regular day sat thirty. Tom and whoever had helped him set up the office had cleared the tops of workstations so that no sensitive information was left available to prying eyes. Computer monitors were disconnected and stowed away, only those that were needed were left in place. The TV screens were left switched on, tuned to the local and international news channels. Out on the small lawn, a sound system was set up

right next to the bar. Wanja made her way through the crowd, stopping often for a slurred conversation with an incarnation of a workmate or someone who looked vaguely familiar. She took large frequent sips from her glass, eager to catch up with everyone else.

She had been at the party about an hour when Tom suddenly turned the music down, whistled loudly and rushed back into the office. In an instant, the swiftest change took place. Omondi, one of the media analysts, stopped pouring himself a precious golden drink. Simon excused himself from the dark-skinned girl who was perched on his lap. Sally hang up the animated phone call she was having in the corner and everyone she recognised as a workmate made a bee-line towards the office. Wanja was filled with dread at the thought of having to go back home if this party was shut down prematurely. No one else seemed as worried as she was and carried on with their conversations in lower tones without the blaring music to compete with.

She followed her colleagues to the office. It was a while before she was able to collect her jaw off the ground. Her colleagues were completely transformed. The shouting, laughing, eating and drinking men and women now sat at their desks and were working with such diligence that one would think it was a Monday morning and Raila Odinga was about to walk in at any moment and demand a status report. They watched the news on the six TV screens, all tuned to a different channel, while they pounded away at their computers. Sheets of papers exchanged hands, a signature here and an endorsement there. Just like that the open plan office had been converted back in to the productive political space that it was intended to be. Tom spotted Wanja watching them with her mouth hanging open and called her over to join him at his desk.

‘Do you want to make some money while you are here?’ He asked with his eyes still glued to his screen. ‘I have budget to pay someone to do the posts. We thought you would be in Machakos with your dad so I was supposed to find an intern for the week. Since you’re here, *si* you can do it? Will pay you ten thousand a day, and another twelve thousand if you work through the night.’ His affection from moments ago was gone. She could only nod in response, as she tried to remember how many drinks she had had. She felt too drunk for the job.

‘Good, you can start now. We need two Facebook posts and fifteen tweets every hour.’ Tom handed her a familiar looking document, and pointed her to her desk, under which her computer monitor was safely tucked.

She sat down and pleaded with her brain to wake up and make sense of the task she had agreed to do. By the time she had finished setting up the computer, the ten minute interval in the party was over and Tom and the rest of the team were transformed back into careless frolickers. Glasses reconnected with their owners’ lips like long lost lovers and Simon’s dark-skinned girl was re-installed onto his lap. All the while, Wanja sat struggling to decipher the tiny print on the too bright sheet of paper. After an hour of sitting in the deserted room alone, with guests staring curiously at her as they made their way across the office to the toilet, she was done. She stood up, eager to connect with the newcomers who had joined the party while she was working. She had her hand on the balcony door when Tom turned the music down again and whistled for his workmates to get to work.

And so it went every hour on the hour. Each time the local media reported the number of votes counted from different polling stations, Simon would collate those numbers and verify them via telephone with the different ODM agents at each of the polling stations throughout the nation. If the tally was accurate, he would hand them over to Sally and her team. Each of them would record them in four separate logs after which Tom would compile a brief news story which would be shared with another team at the ODM election centre before it went to Wanja to be chopped up into short neat posts. The entire process – except Wanja’s bit, was over before the actual news bulletin ended, and the team would be free to do as they pleased for the next fifty minutes. Everyone had devised their own system to get their part done in the shortest time possible and by the third or fourth hour Wanja had mastered her task and managed to get it done in less than ten minutes as well. They were a well-lubricated conveyor belt and it was exhilarating. They worked all through the night – joking, drinking and tweeting as different waves of people passed through the office.

The day broke and sunlight melted away the night’s enchantment. Pockets of dazed people emerged from different corners of the office in search of food, water, car keys or friends to drive them home. As soon as the team was done with the

seven am update, Tom pulled a thick wad of cash from his desk and walked around paying everyone, before he stuffed the remaining cash into this wallet.

‘Do I need to sign anything?’ Wanja’s voice was hoarse and stale alcohol oozed from her pores. Tom shook his head and asked if she needed to go home before the next shift started. She was grateful for the offer and rushed home to shower and pack a spare set of clothes.

When she returned to the office two hours later, all signs of the previous night’s debauchery were gone. The office was fresh and clean; the alcohol bottles were gone and replaced with bottles of water and fresh coffee. Tom sat working at his desk, with a fresh face and clean shirt. She could not tell if he had left at all, but she doubted it. A few moments later, the rest of the team arrived and swiftly settled into their routine. In between news bulletins, each of them would walk over to the nearest couch or flat surface and take fifty minute naps.

‘You know your dad is losing this election, right? Most of the numbers from Machakos are in – there’s no way he can make a comeback.’ Simon joined Wanja on the couch at the reception later that afternoon after they had all pieced together enough minutes of sleep to spare some time on small talk. Wanja could have done with some more sleep but these were probably the first words Simon had ever spoken to her so she indulged him.

She realized that, in as much as she had been absorbed in the election, she had completely forgotten to keep track of her father’s progress. She looked at the huge black board at the back of the room where Sally’s team entered all of the results in chalk before they took a photograph of them. Ngugi was trailing by over twenty thousand votes, with over eighty percent of the votes counted. She glanced at her phone, hoping for a sign that her parents had tried to get hold of her, but there was none.

‘Yeah, it looks that way,’ she glanced back at the blackboard. ‘ODM looks like its winning this whole thing.’

Simon shifted himself and sat a little closer to her.

‘Let me ask you, how did you end up working here – what did you tell your dad?’ It seemed like a question he had been waiting for the perfect moment to ask.

‘He doesn’t know.’

'Ai, how now? Where do you tell him you are going?' Wanja explained to him that there had never been an opportunity for her father to question her whereabouts and this seemed to shock Simon even more.

'You guys must live in one of those mansions. The one's where you only get to see each other when you sit down to mandatory supper. Oh – no, I hear the rich call it dinner.' She was shocked by his assumption, but mostly by the fact that he didn't seem to think that it was in any way offensive. She started to correct him, but stopped herself realising that there was nothing she could say that would change his mind about her. Thankfully it was time to get back to work. Simon had joined Sally on Wanja's list of people to stay away from.

The vote counting was progressing as well as could be expected and there was a collective sigh of relief that the voting process had been humdrum. It was still too early to call but there were clear signs that ODM had a very good chance of winning the presidency. This was as good a reason as ever to celebrate, albeit prematurely. People began to call their friends who were slowly trickling back into city, and eager to connect and share election stories from upcountry. The bottles, in the plastic bags they were ferried in, clinked against each other as guests walked through the office and to the balcony to replace the drinks on the make-shift bar. By four pm, the second day of the office vote counting party was well underway. People showed up wearing the colours of the party they were supporting even if they were in enemy territory. This helped to enhance the already electric atmosphere. Each time Sally wrote a new result on the board, the crowd of predominantly ODM supporters went wild. Drinking games were formulated out of the exercise; chairs were cleared to make way for a dance floor in the middle of the balcony. Tinsel was peeled off the Christmas tree and worn around the waists of girls who made it their business to go around ensuring that no one's glass was left to run empty. When Nandos called to inform Tom that they had spent the budget allocated by the marketing department, he reached in to his bottomless pocket and threw money at the problem.

With each passing hour, the mood grew more frenzied. The ODM candidate was winning. This was clear to everyone, but calls to wait until the final result was announced were heeded publicly but ignored privately. They ate, drank, danced and celebrated their victory. The party went on all through the night, and in the morning

there were still people at the office glued to the screen, afraid the announcement would be made in the time it took to get home from the headquarters. Ninety seven percent of the votes had been counted. The margin was too large to fill by any means possible.

At midday the next day, only two polling stations had not reported their votes to Tom and his team so they were unable to update the tally and determine if they had indeed won. Sally and Tom were on the phone frantically trying to reach the agents at the stations but their phones were constantly engaged. The media was on standby and they had no choice but to wait. The hot midday sun, coupled with hangovers and lack of sleep, made the situation worse. The sooner they announced the winner the sooner everyone would be able to take a break from celebrating and rest.

At four pm, they were certain that something was wrong. Results had been streaming in without the slightest glitch the past two days and suddenly there was no communication coming from the polling stations or from the election centre. In the absence of news, rumours of rigging, assassinated politicians and vote tampering spread and what had been a wonderful and almost historic election began to appear massively flawed.

Wairimu called to check on Wanja.

'I don't like what I am hearing; a friend of your uncle's just told him that the army are on standby. Are you at home?' Wanja lied that she was and had every intention of leaving as soon as she hung up, but she didn't want to miss that moment when they won the election. She went into the toilet and phoned Ngugi to find out if perhaps he had changed his travel plans and would be returning home sooner than anticipated but he didn't answer. Her phone beeped later with a message from him: 'Can't talk right now. Sorting out a huge mess. Lots of rigging all over the place. It's disgusting.'

When the chairman of the electoral commission took position to announce the results, he looked as if he was approaching a guillotine. He was sweating profusely and his hands trembled as he put on his glasses and struggled to calm the crowd that had been waiting for almost an entire day to have their president declared.

Worry filled the faces of those who stood around Wanja. The house girls and *shambaboy*s from the neighbouring houses who had no access to televisions converged in the room.

‘These *masaperes* had better not have stolen this election, or they will see,’ someone behind her said, making her suddenly aware that she was a minority in the room. She looked around for the formerly visible opposition supporters but couldn’t find any. She considered leaving for a second time.

There was no happiness, no hi-fives or congratulatory messages. Dancers in colourful sisal skirts didn’t show up out of thin air to punctuate this moment with their swashes of colour. Nor did the heavens open up to spread awesome cheer in honour of this great democratic moment. Instead, as soon as the announcement was made, computers and desks flew into the air – their punishment for getting in the way of fits of erupting emotions.

‘Fuck this shit!’ Tom kicked the CPU of his computer, causing the screen to fly out of its position as he swept the contents of his desk onto the floor. Those who could not find something to vent their frustrations at sat with their heads in their hands. It was the crying that shocked Wanja the most. Sally and her team sat in the corner closest to their prized blackboard releasing painful sobs that came from a place of real hurt. Whenever she wasn’t weeping, Sally was searching for words to voice her pain only finding the word ‘No,’ which she repeated for as long as it took for the tears to come back. They wept for a precious loss, as if the thing they had lost was a living, speaking, loved one. The pain of losing this election, or having it stolen from them, seemed unbearable and Wanja was ashamed that she didn’t feel it.

Wanja took her seat at her desk, unsure of what to do. It was mandatory that they release the report to the election centre, regardless of what it was, but no-one else was in the position to do so. Tom’s phone was ringing from under his desk where it had landed strangely intact after his rampage. She went after it on all fours and picked up while still under the desk, only realising moments later how ridiculous she must have looked, though no one else seemed to notice. The man on the line, one of the agents that they had been trying to get a hold of, was speaking urgently. She was struggling to hear what he was saying, but here he was, refusing to confirm that the poll results that had just been announced were correct. She

scanned the room for Tom; this was not something she could or wanted to deal with. The agent was screaming numbers into the phone and she asked him to wait while she looked for Tom, and a piece of paper to write down what he was saying.

‘Who is this?’

‘It’s Wanja – just wait one minute I need to find a pen?’

‘There’s no time to wait – these people are lying. They’ve stolen the election. Stop the announcement...’

‘Yes, wait wait, I need a pen – ’

‘Where is Odenyo? I want to speak to him, get him on the line now.’

She spotted Tom standing by the bar at the balcony, pouring some whisky into a Styrofoam cup. She asked the agent to hold on while she called him.

‘No, I can’t wait – these guys are looking for us and taking our phones so that we don’t say what’s going on. Take this message or find someone who can! The only thing *you* people know how to do is steal!’ She dropped the phone and rushed to get Tom. While he and the agent spoke, she sat at her desk re-playing the conversation in her head, trying to figure out if she could recognise the voice of the person she had been speaking to. When Tom hung up she asked him who had been on the other side of the line. He responded without looking at her, and began to rearrange his desk. It was no one she knew, but that didn’t ease the weight of his accusation.

Sally walked up to them, looking completely defeated. ‘Do we have the numbers?’

‘Yes, but they are different from the ones they just announced. They are quite useless.’ Tom’s voice was distant. He showed Sally the results he had just received.

‘No, we should release the results as we have received them. Let those thieves come and tell us otherwise.’ Sally looked in Wanja’s direction for a split second and then looked away, realising what she had insinuated. Wanja considered leaving again, and this time she reached out for her bag. Sally called the rest of the team together and for the last time, they sat together, as they had every hour for the past two and a half days, and compiled their individual reports.

Then the gunshots started.

At first, Wanja was certain that they were hearing fireworks being set off by those who were celebrating the outcome of the election. Although they had been

banned a few years ago, it was easy to get one's hands of a few packets without a license. Then Masese ran into the office and barred the doors and everyone realized that things were thick.

The chaos at the election centre was nothing compared to what had erupted outside. Images of armed policemen shooting at protesters a few meters away from them invaded the TV screens. The newly elected president would be sworn in during an emergency ceremony to ensure that the army didn't take over as it was rumoured to be doing. They all stared at the screens in disbelief, sounds from the battlefield outside reaching them a few seconds before they were transmitted to their screens as the war outside drew closer and closer. Masese and Tom walked around the office, methodically closing windows, turning off lights and locking doors with the calmness of people who had been trained for such an eventuality. Tom walked over to his desk and retrieved what Wanja assumed was the last of the office's petty cash and stuffed it into the back of his trousers. The screens showed ODM supporters making their way to the headquarters, in a show of solidarity, and to personally deliver a message to their candidate that they would stand behind him until the presidency was rightfully restored to him. The police tried to get ahead of them by launching tear gas and rubber bullets to keep the protestors away from the residential area that they were approaching.

'Move your cars to the back now!' Tom shouted as he jumped down from the desk he was stepping on so he could look through the only open window in the office. He ran out and those with cars followed him to the front parking lot, where they could hear the violence as clearly as they could smell it. Screams, sirens and gunshots pierced through the anxious neighbourhood. The brief milliseconds of silence in between gunshots were over-laden with hope that the last gunshot heard would be the final one. They kept coming, one after the other, random and regular like a clock losing time. Each new gunshot was more startling than the last one, and left one completely unprepared for the next one.

Tom navigated all the cars through the narrow passage that led to the balcony and they parked them in tightly. Wanja sat in the car, trying to figure out if she should leave before the protestors made it to the headquarters. As if reading her mind, Tom hit the roof of her car and yelled at her to get moving. She eased the car

in to the last of the spaces in the tiny yard – that way she could be the first to leave. Then they waited.

The commentary from the different news stations became bothersome as they remained silently huddled in the dark office, listening to the chanting and shouting that seemed to grow louder and more stubborn with each shot that was fired. The protestors held fort outside the gates. Whenever the shouting would subside, they would break into song. They sang dirges that Wanja didn't recognise, but a few of the people in the room who did sang along in hushed tones. In these moments of song, loss hung in the room as heavy as it had when the results were first announced and she got the sense that a subtle connection was being made through the metal gates and stone walls that were shielding them from the protestors. And then as suddenly as it had stopped, the shooting and rioting, teargas and shouting started all over again.

When the protestors were convinced that there was no sign of any ODM candidates in the building, they moved on, leaving their sadness behind. The headquarters remained frozen in silence, everyone unwilling to be the one to break the silence too soon. Masese rose to switch on a muted television and sat back down on a crate of untouched beers. Those sitting close to the other screens followed suit and soon they were watching different sections of the country go up in flames. An image of a road close to Wairimu's house stirred Wanja to her feet and in search of her phone. There were several calls from numbers that she didn't recognise. She grabbed her bag from under her desk, and looked towards Tom, whose gaze was already fixed on her.

'You should probably wait it out,' he called behind her after she waved in his general direction.

'It could get worse. I need to be at home. I'll use *panya* routes.' Tom followed her out to the car and handed her the last of her payment. It was an absurd gesture at the time, but his message was loud and clear. It was after all just a job.

'Let her go. She will be safe in their mansion.' Simon said to the last of Wanja's workmates who still insisted that she wait a few hours before leaving. One or two people took advantage of her departure to gather their things and leave as well. The workers from the neighbouring houses sprinted toward their homes when Masese peeked out of the gates before opening them fully. He flagged Wanja down before

she drove out and instructed her on which routes to use and which ones to avoid, despite the fact that he didn't know which way she was headed.

It took at least an hour for her to navigate her way out of the maze created by roads rendered impassable by debris and police roadblocks. The policemen seemed clueless, unable to respond to the myriad of questions that frantic travellers posed every time they were redirected to yet another dead end. Each alternative route took Wanja farther and farther away from the highway that she needed to be on in order to get home. The radio stations were no help, with their warnings for people to stay home peppered with calm broadcasts from the inauguration ceremony at State House. It was getting dark and she was getting desperate. She decided to take the longest route possible home, past State House, assuming that it would be secure. This would mean driving parallel to Ngong Road, the busy street outside Kibera where the violence had apparently erupted first. *Things would have moved on by now*, she said to herself as she drove past burning tyres on the side of the road. The unknown number lit up her phone screen and for a moment, she imagined that it would be some miraculous guide. She was considering pulling over to pick up the call when her headlights fell on a group of protestors running towards her, chanting, shouting, breaking into cars parked on the side of the road with *pangas* and *rungus*. Her right hand reached for the door handle so that she could flee on foot. But it was not quicker than her left hand, which swung the car into reverse gear as her foot instinctively floored the gas pedal, reversing the car on to the very Ngong Road that she had been warned to avoid. She looked ahead as she turned on to the road and sped down hoping for the best.

The amount of damage that had been done, in what felt like a few minutes, was implausible. Cars deserted, plumes of dark smoke leisurely rising to meet the already thick air. Shops sat naked, with their display windows shattered and mannequins stripped. Wanja averted her eyes from the lumps on the road that looked like bodies, telling herself that they were sacks of vegetables that had not quite made it to their markets, and that the liquid oozing from them wasn't blood. Near the city morgue, the police had opened up the roadblocks to one way traffic into the city and were quickly ushering motorists through. On the other lane, police and army trucks brimming with troops sped past to different areas of the city. She

caught the panicked looks on the faces of the policemen as they were dispatched to meet their unknown fates and assured herself that that was what bravery looked like. She wondered if this is what war looked like but chased the thought out of her mind as soon as it was formed. This wasn't war. It was just violence. Violent unrest which appeared a little more war like, because her irrational hesitation to leave when she should have, had placed her right in the middle of it.

'Go to your homes and stay there!' A policeman shouted as cars sped past the roadblock. Her phone was still ringing. Her hand was still trembling when she reached for it so she placed it back on the steering wheel. All the roads that led on to the highway were heavily policed so she began to calm down as she approached the suburbs closer to home, ignoring her relentless phone. She turned towards the Museum Hill roundabout and just before she joined Limuru Road, she heard the news seconds before she saw it.

'Avoid Limuru Road, Ngara and Parklands areas.' Students from the University of Nairobi's law campus had joined in the violence.

Cars behind her screeched to a halt and made rushed U-turns. She rolled up her windows but her eyes had already begun to sting from wisps of tear gas that had negotiated their way into the car. She drove back towards the highway, this time turning towards Westlands, leaving the sounds of gunshots behind her and using only her instinct as a guide.

The roads on this side of town were as deserted as they had been on Election Day. It was as if those who lived here had had some prior warning to pack up their lives and stay indoors. The sky seemed a little brighter, as the sun retreated happily into the horizon, proud to have done its job well. She rolled down the car window and was overwhelmed by the refreshing sensation the cool air brought to her eyes. Past the Westgate mall, a few hawkers still sat, huddled around portable radios. When a car drove past they would rush to show their wares, overpriced puppies, pet rabbits, lampshades and flowers in bloom, to the potential buyers before they huddled back around the news. Wanja had seen the hawkers countless times. On good days she would roll down her windows and share a brief chat with them as they tried to pass the stray puppies they were selling off as pure breeds. Other times she simply kept her eyes on the road and acted like they were invisible. Today, they

seemed alien. It was as if they were performing a strange trade dance that didn't belong in the place her world had just become.

The security lights flickered on with the last of the sun's rays and Wanja noticed that the serenity of the suburbs had caused her to slow down. It seemed impossible that just moments ago, she had witnessed such severe carnage. She considered driving back towards the city just to confirm that her hangover wasn't playing mind games with her. The voice on the radio was telling her that her country was at war, but this couldn't be what war looked like.

She reached into her bag for a tissue to dry her teary eyes and her fingers encountered the money scattered all over her bag. She was overcome with the urge to spend it all immediately. She made a sudden turn into the Indian run mini-mart that her mother had been shopping at since she was a little girl. The old man who greeted customers and handed out shopping baskets as they walked in was missing.

'We had to send him home early because of all the mess in town,' the shopkeeper explained, sensing Wanja's hesitation to enter the store without the usual welcome.

'Shop fast and go home. That's what they are saying,' the shopkeeper's wife pointed to the small TV set at the back of the shop that broadcasted images from a place that seemed too far away for Wanja to have come from there. She filled her basket with useless snacks and things that she knew Amani would enjoy when he came home the next day.

She walked out of the brightly lit store, to the now all too familiar sound of shouting and chanting. For a fractured second, she was relieved to not be surrounded by the sterile silence of the mini-mart.

'Don't worry, you can go home. They've been celebrating since the results were announced,' the intuitive shopkeeper said. Taking up the entire road was a mass of people as large as what Wanja imagined the ODM supporters outside the headquarters had been. They were violating the eerie suburban silence with their joyous singing and gyrating. Tree branches and palm leaves danced in midair. Children hoisted on men's shoulders giggled and clapped their hands in excitement. Paths were created for oncoming traffic, and some motorists were even moved to the point of pulling over and joining in the festivities.

Wanja stood transfixed, watching and waiting for the crowd to pass so that she could travel the few remaining meters to her house. The shopkeeper's wife emerged

from her shop and danced next to her. Her husband who had taken over her position at the till watched her with a gentle smile. Twenty minutes later, the crowd was still snaking back and Wanja had grown weary of the ludicrousness of it all. She got back into the car and drove right through the crowd, feigning joy and happiness as she went through unsure of what might happen if the crowd sensed the slightest hesitation.

The crowd insisted that she roll down her window so they could really celebrate together, and Wanja obliged as soon as her bag full of money was tucked under her seat. Children who spotted her shopping bags as she inched through the crowd, asked her to share what she had with them. At long last, with empty shopping bags, she turned onto the road that would lead her home.

Chapter Four

Ngugi Mwangi

'Ngugi, what is this madness? Why didn't you tell me Kavata was leaving?' Hon Muli had let himself into his daughter's house a few hours after the OCS had left with Thuo and launched into a frenzied interrogation. His reaction to seeing Ngugi seated on the lavender sofa in his living room was mixed. He was shocked that a grown man could be so distraught over a lovers' quarrel, and pitied because he realized that after all those years of marriage, Ngugi had no idea just how stubborn Kavata could be. Ngugi looked up at his father-in-law. Ngugi had not spoken to anyone since the policemen had left. His cellphone had been ringing incessantly for hours and when the phone battery eventually gave in, the landline took over. He had dismissed Schola's questions about what he wanted to eat for breakfast, and brushed away Amani's series of gentle questions about where his mother was and if she was going to be back in time for an event he had taken to calling the Christmas election. Ngugi

just needed a little more time? to make sense of what had happened and Hon Muli was the last person he wanted to speak to.

Ngugi looked him in the eye then shifted his gaze to Mrs Muli who sat perched on the edge of the cushion next to him, rubbing her hands together, and bobbing back and forth like a pendulum. She looked as worried as he felt, but there was none of that concern on her husband's face. All that lay there was accusation and lots of irritation.

'Excuse me, let me arrange for some tea. Or would you rather coffee?' Ngugi stood up before they could respond and made for the kitchen. He had only taken a few steps when Wanja walked into the room to greet her grandparents. She bent down and placed three neat kisses on each of their cheeks and then acknowledged Ngugi's presence with a deliberate glance in his direction. Ngugi studied his daughter. She looked much like her mother, now more than ever. He wondered why she was fully dressed to leave the house.

'Jaja, make us some tea.' Mrs Muli instructed and beckoned Ngugi to sit down as Wanja robbed him of his chance to escape.

'Ngugi, please tell us what is going on. Do you know where she is?' Ngugi opened his mouth to re-iterate the account that he had just shared with the OCS, but stopped himself when he realized that the OCS had probably called Hon Muli immediately after he had left. How else would they have known that Kavata was missing?

'No, I don't know where she is,' was all he said as he began to think of another way to rid himself of this unwanted company. 'I need to use the bathroom, I'll be right back.' Ngugi stood up.

'What do you mean you don't know where she is? Kavata wouldn't just leave like that. She must have said something. Have you called her cousins in Atlanta?' He sat back down. Ngugi was puzzled by Hon Muli's cross-examination. There was obviously something he didn't know. He shook his head.

Mrs Muli reached out to him and patted his arm gently, aware that Ngugi had no idea what her husband was getting at, and that her husband had no idea that Ngugi was clueless. Wanja re-emerged from the kitchen balancing a tea pot and two cups on a wobbly tray. She resented that she was forced to play this role because Mrs Muli had always insisted that the house maids should never serve her husband.

Ngugi excused himself again and went to the safe in his bedroom where their passports and other important documents were stored. He didn't need to check which one was missing. He was glad that no one followed the sound of the heavy safe door slamming shut, else they would have discovered him sitting on the floor with his head in his hands. The only thing that angered him more than Kavata's sudden disappearance was that her parents had been the first to figure out that she had not gone missing or been kidnapped. Ngugi sat for several minutes, trying to figure out how he was going to tell them that Kavata's passport was missing without letting on that he had just found out. When he could delay it no longer, he freshened up and went back into the living room.

He hadn't heard the additional guests arrive but there they were, Pastor Simon and his wife sitting in his house drinking his tea and nibbling on his ginger nut biscuits. They were huddled with Mrs Muli speaking in low tones so as not to disturb the loud telephone conversation that Hon Muli was having with someone that Ngugi was sure was the OCS. 'Keep him there until I tell you otherwise.' Beads of sweat betrayed Hon Muli's calm demeanour.

'Brother Ngugi, we heard it on the news and came right away. This is such a tragedy. We are praying against the evil deeds of the devil.' Pastor Simon rose up to greet him and Ngugi could already sense a prayer coming on, but all he and Mrs Muli could register was the mention of news. Mrs Muli scanned the room for the remote to switch the television on just as Ngugi dashed to the coffee table next to Hon Muli where the TV remote sat and flipped past Amani's Disney channels to find one that indeed carried news of Kavata's disappearance. They all stared at the screen in shock.

'NTV have better coverage of it.' The pastor's wife offered and Ngugi smiled for the first time at the irony that while he was running for office, it was his marriage that interested the press. Schola lingered awkwardly at the door, her eyes glued to the screen as she tried to catch Ngugi's attention to inform him that there were men with camera's asking to be let into the compound. Hon Muli was back on his phone barking orders at various people on the other end. Mrs Muli was trying her best to look concerned for the benefit of the story that she knew her husband intended to

stick to, though Ngugi could see that nothing about what was happening surprised her.

‘Ngugi, can we talk outside.’ Hon Muli didn’t wait for him to respond before he led him to the balcony. Ngugi followed him to the last space in the house in which he had looked at his wife and wondered how had he failed to see this coming. He thought he smelt a hint of her perfume and felt a tugging in his chest.

‘Have a seat.’ Hon Muli spoke gently and pulled his chair closer to Ngugi. ‘I can see that you are in shock about what is happening. *Pole* – these things can be difficult. I will not interfere with the matters of your marriage, but I will tell you one thing.’ There was a kindness in Hon Muli’s eyes that Ngugi had never seen, but Ngugi was even more shocked that Hon Muli could speak Kikuyu so well.

‘Mama Kavata has talked to her niece in Atlanta – so we know that she has indeed done what we think she has. I don’t know if she had spoken to you about her plans or not, but that is not my concern. We can only pray that she arrives well, and comes to her senses quickly enough.’ As Hon Muli spoke, Ngugi replayed different arguments that he and Kavata had had. All that stood out now with each new memory were the threats and warnings Kavata had given him that this day would come.

‘But here we are now, and we must finish what we started and work with what we have. They don’t always understand why we do things the way we do. Mama Kavata was also very angry about the politics when I first started, but now she cannot imagine a life without it. There are many people counting on you to win this election, so do not let Kavata’s childish ways distract you.’ Ngugi simply nodded, uncomfortable with the candid nature of this conversation, but grateful that Hon Muli did not view him as the villain. He continued speaking, going over the details of what needed to be done next, pausing often to shout into his phone whenever it was warranted.

In order for Kavata’s disappearance not to hurt the campaign, they would need to make it look like this had been part of the plan. They would release a statement that a relative in America was very ill and Kavata had travelled to support her family during this difficult time. Jane, Hon Muli’s former secretary whom he had called in to run certain aspects of the campaign, arrived at the house moments later with volunteers and began to draft the press release. Shortly, when the media claimed

that a family member had confirmed that Kavata had left her husband, every phone that was in the house rang simultaneously, Schola's included. Jane and her team used this opportunity to dispel the rumour and issue a rebuttal. It was less scandalous news to report so within the hour the droves of journalists who were camped outside the residence gates simmered away while the bustle inside the house grew steadily as the campaign team got back to work.

Ngugi found a moment to extract himself from the last minute campaigning to sneak away and phone his only sister. Growing up, Wairimu had been the glue that had held the Mwangi home together. She was everyone's little piece of heaven. She cooked for her father, took her mother to church, stood up for her other brother, Dennis. When they were older, she would introduce Ngugi to her single girlfriends. Without her, their home would have fallen apart.

Wairimu often said that he would never be able to become his own man if he married a woman like Kavata.

'It's never a good idea for a man to marry up bro – it doesn't matter how good the sex is,' she often said but Ngugi had gone ahead and married Kavata. Wairimu had shown up at the wedding and smiled as was expected, and delivered her speech about how happy she was to finally have a sister. She ignored the anger she felt that her parents had had to bend over backwards to meet the ludicrous dowry demands that the Muli's had set for Kavata's hand in marriage.

When it was her turn to get married, Ngugi offered his complete support, financially and otherwise. He put down large sums of his money to pay for the wedding that Wairimu had often described to him when they were growing up. This was Ngugi's way of trying to bridge the rift that had formed between them in their adult life. Ngugi's generous offer was met with hostility from Jommo, Wairimu's husband. Ngugi insisted that his offer was not meant to emasculate him in any way – a statement which only angered his future brother-in-law further. At the end of a heated argument, Ngugi was banned from attending the wedding. Wairimu, who possessed the spirit of a fighter that Ngugi had always loved and recognised in Kavata, declared that she would not be getting married without Ngugi present to walk her down the aisle in place of their late father. In the end, Jommo paid for a modest wedding, and Wairimu had her brother at her side as she walked down the

corridor outside the attorney general's office. Ngugi left as soon as they were pronounced husband and wife, and they hadn't talked until she had her first child eighteen months later.

'You must have done something to really piss her off,' hearing Wairimu's voice lifted Ngugi's spirits straightaway. He laughed so hard and loud that Schola came out to check if he was finally losing his mind.

'Yeah, apparently she really doesn't want to be married to a politician.' It was Wairimu's turn to laugh.

'No surprises there, I'm sure you can't blame her being Muli's protégé and all.' Ngugi remained silent. The tugging in his chest returned and this time he gave into it fully, letting it lead him further away from the hive that was his house so he could seek counsel from the only person he hoped would know what he should do. Wairimu remained silent; her brother's pain reached past the strain of the last couple of years and she felt genuine empathy for him.

'Do you think she will come back?' She asked moments later.

'I don't know.'

'Did she take the kids?'

'No.' Another brief silence.

'She's quite the woman, that one.' Wairimu could hear her brother smile.

'I'm sure she'd come back if she heard you say that.'

'What do you need?'

'Amani, can he stay with you for the next few days? The house has been converted into campaign central. The church is here holding prayers for Kavata's imaginary sick relative.' Despite their tensions, Wairimu and Ngugi had made sure that their children were friends.

'And Wanja?'

'I'm not sure where she is. She seems happier left alone. But she will travel with me to Machaa.' Wairimu had half hoped that Kavata's stunt would be successful, but it was clear that nothing was going to keep Ngugi away from this election.

'I have to do this, Wairimu. I have a responsibility.' She wondered to whom he had this responsibility – but she didn't ask.

'I will call to check on her, she must be quite shocked as well.'

'Thanks,' he hesitated.

'Anything else?'

'Yes - one more thing. The experts think it will help greatly to have family around in Machaa when we go down to vote. Do you think you can make it?' It was a lot to ask, and he could feel the resistance even over the line. Wairimu paused before she responded.

'But we are already registered here in Thome.'

'Muli says he can fix that.'

Wairimu laughed.

'Oh, so he is the expert? It's amazing how many jars that ape has his fingers in.'

'You don't have to.'

'No, don't worry. We'll be there. I'll speak to Jommo now.' Ngugi had not expected her to bring her husband. That was surely too much to ask.

'You don't have to bring him. I know he would rather eat lice.'

'No, don't worry. He's in the doghouse at the moment; he will do whatever I ask.' Ngugi didn't ask why her husband was in trouble, and Wairimu didn't reveal that after many years of suspicion, she had confirmed that he had been keeping a *mpango ya kando*. She had collected evidence and confronted him about it a few nights ago after packing a few of his things in to a suitcase. He had cried at her feet and begged her to let him stay. She agreed, but was now sick with worry that she may have contracted a disease.

'So will we need to re-register when we get to Machaa?' Wairimu decided to push her worry aside. It was refreshing to be able to help fix her brother's problems since she was utterly hopeless when it came to her own,

'No need to. Muli can fix it so that your cards don't get checked.' They both laughed.

'In that case we might as well go to *shags* and bus in the relatives.' Ngugi didn't mention that there was already a plan in place to do just that, in addition to four bus loads from the church.

'Will you have Thuo bring Amani over today? I can arrange for Penina to stay while we are away and watch them all.' Ngugi was wracked with guilt at the mention of Thuo's name and remembered Hon Muli's instructions to the OCS to have him kept in custody until further notice. He looked over at the tree that Thuo

often sat under in his free time. His stool was still in place with a dated newspaper held down by a stone. Ngugi decided that he would pass by the police station on the way back from Wairimu's and get him released.

'No, I'll bring him myself. Thuo's not here.'

The two spoke for a moment longer before one of the volunteers was sent out to reel Ngugi back in. They planned to continue their conversation later when he dropped Amani off. As soon as he walked back into the house, all the good that had been achieved by his conversation was replaced by anxious madness. Each and every flat surface of his previously orderly living room was covered in a paperwork that was being spat out by printers that had been networked to each other in no time. Jane and her minions whispered away efficiently as more and more faces that Ngugi vaguely recognised walked in to the room carrying boxes and files and laptops and printers which all served to make Ngugi a little wearier now that this whole operation was taking place in his home.

'It's just for today and tomorrow,' the omnipresent Hon Muli said from behind him noticing the worried look on his face.

'It is best that you work from home. You do not want to appear unmoved by Mrs Ngugi's ailing cousin,' Jane added as she brought some paperwork for Hon Muli to sign, approvals for outside furniture to be brought in to accommodate the prayers and well wishers who were expected to visit Ngugi before his departure for Machakos the following day. It didn't sit well with Ngugi that Hon Muli controlled a large chunk of the campaign finances. Ngugi had been meaning to bring it up for a while, and now it seemed too late in the day to do so.

'Sir, we are all ready for the recording now,' a young man wearing a t-shirt with Ngugi's face on it said to him just as he was about to go in search of Amani.

'What are we recording?' He didn't try to pretend that he knew what was happening. The volunteer handed him a piece of paper with a brief speech addressing Kavata's disappearance that was to be recorded and sent out to the media. The volunteer led him to the front of the house where a podium had been set up for him to stand behind as he addressed his invisible audience. The message was straightforward. He was continuing with the campaign despite the sudden need for Kavata to travel because he had a responsibility to the people of Machakos to fully contest the election, while his wife attended to the family emergency. He thanked

his supporters for their prayers and looked forward to seeing them at the polls in Machakos.

Ngugi hadn't seen his son all day and when he sought him out, he had expected to find the little boy curled up on his bed, saddened by his mother's absence. Instead he found Amani milling about among the campaign staff, clutching his own makeshift clipboard to his chest acting like he was as busy and important as everyone else in the room. The staff humoured him, partly because they didn't want to offend Ngugi but mostly because Amani provided a brief and refreshing break from what was otherwise a completely draining atmosphere. Clipped to his board was a sheet of stickers with different coloured smiling faces, which he awarded to those who correctly answered his pertinent question.

His Spiderman sneakers squeaked on the wooden floors and he scurried around the room on his skinny legs spreading joy. He had taken to wearing caps on his head to protect his thick unmanageable hair from Kavata who often threatened to shave it while he slept. Today, the cap of choice was one that had Ngugi's face printed on the front of it, and he was wearing it so low that he had to tilt his head all the way back to look people in the eyes.

'Will you vote for my daddy to be president?' Amani asked before he affixed a luminous poster on whichever part of their body he saw fit as a reward for a correct answer. By the time Ngugi came back to the room to fetch him, everyone was walking around with stickers on their foreheads and cheeks. When Amani had run out of people, he rewarded the computers, phones, paperwork and pretty much anything he could reach for doing good work to ensure that his daddy would be president. Ngugi watched his son briefly forgetting his troubles.

In the car, as they rode to Wairimu's house, Amani was full of encouragement for his father. He told him not to worry about his sick Auntie in America. His mom was very good at taking care of sick people and everything would be fine since she had gone to America to care for her. Ngugi listened in sheer admiration as Amani explained, in surprising detail, all the things he should do when he was president, which included throwing all the teachers who punished children in prison and making sure that schools only served chips and sausage for lunch. It didn't take them long to navigate their way to Wairimu's house in pre-holiday traffic and when

they arrived, Ngugi wished that he could sit in the car with his son a little while longer and listen to his innocent wisdom. He struggled to remember when last he had spent time with Amani; he didn't know when his son had grown into such a perceptive boy. Another memory popped into his mind, he and Kavata were having an argument about the election and she was saying something about raising the children that he couldn't hear. Amani leapt out of the car as soon as it came to a halt outside Wairimu's door. With his clipboard in hand, he continued his sticker rampage but it was quickly forgotten once he was amongst his age mates and their video games.

That night, when he had finally relinquished the use of his home, Ngugi walked around his bedroom searching for signs that Kavata hadn't actually left. A note explaining her actions or perhaps a sign that she wasn't actually where Hon Muli claimed she was. Throughout the day he had intended to call the relative in Atlanta to confirm what he had been told, but shame and anger had stopped him. Now it felt too late to make the call. He picked at her things, everything was just the way it had been the previous morning before they left for church. He ruffled through her underwear drawer, aching for her in a way he thought he had forgotten. When he heard her car drive in just before ten pm, he thought for a moment that his nightmare was over, and then he remembered that Wanja had taken the car earlier in the day. He debated over whether or not to go and speak to his estranged daughter but he discarded that thought when he recalled the resentment in her eyes when she had greeted him that morning. He sat on the bed, staring into the open chest of drawers hoping that a message from his wife would jump out at him. When he could ponder no longer, lack of sleep the previous night, and the fatigue from the day's activities took over and gifted him with sleep.

His dreams took him back to the day of their cultural wedding. Ngugi had snuck to the back of the house where he knew Kavata was being kept in seclusion before the formalities began. She was waiting for him by the open window when he got there. When they had shared a forbidden embrace though the burglar proofed window, Kavata launched into a series of rants about how her father had taken over the entire event as if it was he that was getting married. Hon Muli had promised

Kavata that he would keep things simple so as not to burden Ngugi's parents with the costs of an event that they didn't need to bear. But the minute the plans began at their home earlier that morning, Kavata could tell that he had broken his word. The house was a flurry of preparations for the Mwangi's visit. Extra hands had been hired to scrub every nook and crevice in the house. Gallons of *kaluvu* and *muratina* had been provided even if most people preferred beer and whisky to the traditional brews. Tents had been erected on the lawn and draped in a bright festive fabric which was nothing close to what Kavata had selected as the theme of her wedding. Plastic chairs, at least six hundred of them, had been arranged in the tents and covered with the same fabric. It was clear that the ceremony had nothing to do with Kavata, or Ngugi for that matter. It irked her that her parents were only traditional when it suited them and in this case it did. Kavata's impending nuptials provided the perfect avenue for them to assert their privileged position.

'I can't wait to get out of here so he can stay away from my life and stop controlling everything.' Kavata's bottom lip trembled as she spoke about how she would stop at nothing to have her way when it was time for her white wedding. Ngugi could only notice how stunning she looked as she sat perched on the window ledge in the traditional regalia that she wore so awkwardly.

Kavata scarcely knew any of the people who were gathered at her home for the event, including the six girls who stormed into the room startling Kavata and causing Ngugi to jump into a nearby bush. He sat there in the thicket for a short while, listening to them prepare for what would be the highlight of the ceremony; a ritual that was meant to test Ngugi's knowledge of the woman he claimed to love.

It was the duty of the bride's aunties to make it as hard as possible for the groom to pick the correct woman. Earlier in the day, Kavata's aunties had ransacked her bedroom for her perfume and shoes and accessories that Ngugi might recognise. Then they dressed each of the six girls in Kavata's clothes in order to throw him off. This was their way of showing the bride and her parents how sad they were to be losing a daughter. Shortly after Ngugi rejoined the ceremony, Kavata and her cousins emerged with every inch of their bodies covered in *khangas* so that their identities were completely concealed.

The groom had three chances to pick the correct woman. Ngugi failed to pick Kavata out of the line up on his first try. The girls were sent away and the men

deliberated on the amount of money Ngugi and his family would be fined. Once the fine was paid, the girls were called out again, only this time they had swapped clothes making it even more difficult for Ngugi to find Kavata. He began to realize the weight of this exercise. He walked past the girls studying each of them closely, rejecting the ones who were the wrong height, whose hips were too wide or breasts were too small. When he had narrowed it down to three girls, he called on two of his friends to help him. All this time Kavata stood in the line up, with her head lowered, while trying to send Ngugi subliminal messages. Ngugi's friends were not much help so he picked one of the girls purely by intuition. The gathering of over six hundred guests went completely silent, they too reckoning the importance of this moment. Ngugi felt more tested than he ever had been, and the thought of letting Kavata down a second time was unbearable. So when the girl he picked shook off the ladies who were unveiling her, and threw her hands around him, he was filled with unimaginable relief and was certain that he wanted to spend the rest of his days with Kavata silently guiding him through life. The air was filled with jubilation and the guests began to congratulate the new couple. Whether or not they decided to have a church wedding, in the eyes of their parents and relatives, Ngugi and Kavata were married.

Ngugi stepped out of his house the following morning and was sure that he was still asleep. Outside, his back yard had been set up just as it had been in the day of his and Kavata's cultural wedding. The only difference was that he presently harboured feelings of anger and abandonment towards the woman he would have taken a bullet for over two decades ago. He chuckled and smiled to himself, marvelling at the way his subconscious worked. Before he lifted his weary head off his pillow that morning, he had spent some time wondering why he had dreamt about that particular event. He had imagined that the universe or his subconscious was trying to relay some message from Kavata that she could not deliver herself. Little did he know that it was just his subconscious showing him what was happening behind his back as he slept.

Hon Muli spotted him and rushed towards him. Ngugi fought the urge to run in the opposite direction.

‘Ngugi, I was just about to send someone to wake you. This is not the time to be sleeping past nine o’clock.’ His demeanour didn’t match his tone. He was smiling, but Ngugi could tell that he was about to get a lecture. Hon Muli led him past the hoard of well-wishers who were sipping tea and porridge as they waited to speak to him.

‘There are a few people who need to speak to you now. I may have forgotten to mention this to you yesterday.’ They walked towards a smaller tent which was set up at the farthest end of the yard with the sides of the tent released so that it was completely secluded from everything else. Hon Muli entered the tent first, followed by Ngugi who stopped dead in his tracks the minute he saw the men, about a dozen of them, who sat waiting for him. Men that Ngugi had grown up watching on the news and reading about in the newspapers were now gathered at his house. They were seated on those precarious plastic chairs that often bent and snapped under too much weight. Ngugi tried to keep his anger concealed. This was not the kind of thing that one simply forgot to mention. He glared at Hon Muli.

‘Here is the man of the hour,’ Hon Muli announced, slightly nervous. ‘Now, I know you have all been waiting for some minutes so I will get right to it.’ He turned to Ngugi who was still standing awkwardly at the tent’s mouth.

‘Ngugi, I doubt there is anyone here that you do not know, but for the sake of formalities, I will introduce them. I am sure some of them have forgotten each other.’ Hon Muli laughed loudly, expecting his fellow retired politicians to join him. They didn’t.

‘You know Okwanyo, former energy minister. Then there is Mukimbia who took over when Okwanyo was sacked.’ A few of the men laughed at Hon Muli’s brazenness.

‘Wewe Muli, I was not sacked.’ Okwanyo said defensively. ‘I was given a premature golden handshake.’ The men now began to loosen up. Hon Muli continued.

‘Then there’s the Honourable C.K Mibei from – was it public works or water?’

‘Wewe Muli, there was no water ministry in our day. It looks like you are getting old quickly, eh. I was in public works *bwana*.’ Mibei realized too late that Hon Muli was only teasing him.

The introductions continued, the former ministers for foreign affairs, resource management, finance and education were present, as were the former speaker and attorney general. Ngugi surprised himself by how much he knew about most of them. How long, they had been office and the scandals they were best known for. He hadn't followed politics avidly during his campus years, when the men before him now were in office, but even with his partial interest, some things had stuck.

'*Heh*, Muli can we get started. Ole Kataro has to get back to the nursing home,' the former resource minister said, sending the entire group laughing for the next few minutes.

'*Haya, tuendele*,' Hon Muli said and the focus shifted to Ngugi who was nervously watching the legs of those plastic chairs wobble as the men laughed. 'The reason for this auspicious and propitious gathering of old friends and former colleagues, is no one else but you. As I have been guiding you through your campaign over the past few months I have had the feeling that I am not well equipped enough to offer you all the instruction you need in order to tackle this great, very great task which you have before you. So I called upon those who have been there before you to help you with a few tips, to ensure that you do your job well, and do not shame us. We are your political fathers. Your council of elders as you initiate yourself into politics. And even after today, I am sure everyone here would be happy for you to knock on their door for some advice. Whether you will be knocking on the gate to a farm, or the door to a nursing home is another story.' The men laughed as memories of their forgotten camaraderie were recalled.

'*Na kweli* Muli has never stopped talking a lot; he has so many stories one would think he swallowed my wife.' The former minister for pan-African affairs interrupted Hon Muli before he shared his wise words, which encouraged Ngugi to treat his constituency like his home. 'Run that place with a solid hand, don't let anyone else come in and take over your house.'

The foreign affairs minister added that he must be careful of the people working for him, as they were always the source of the most trouble. 'Don't trust anyone until they have given you a reason to.'

'Especially nowadays with that bookface thing that has become such a nuisance. Everybody thinks they can do our jobs because the internet has told them so. Things

were much easier in our day when Moi was throwing people in Nyayo House for running their mouths carelessly.' Mibei added.

'*Heh*, be careful Mibei. You know, just because Moi is not in that chair doesn't mean he's not still signing cheques and issuing death warrants. *Chunga* those dungeons are still there.' Kataro said a little too quickly. He was the only one of them who had been detained by the former regime.

'And your family, you must decide now if you are going to involve them, completely or not at all. This business of telling the media where your wife was is pure rubbish. Those fools will begin to think that you owe them an explanation every time you leave the room,' added the longest serving education minister.

'On the matter of wives, never be caught with your trousers down. If you decide to keep a *ndogo ndogo*, pick one from the university. Make sure you pay them well enough to keep quiet. But you shouldn't keep one for too long. They usually become more demanding the older they get.' The air was momentarily sucked out of the tent as the former attorney general placed his foot firmly into his mouth. Mikimbia who was sitting next to him whispered that Ngugi was married to Hon Muli's daughter. He was apologetic at first – 'Ooh, I didn't know,' and then dismissive – 'but I was called here to provide advice. Is it not the reality of being a leader? Even if he doesn't go to them, they will come to him. You just wait.'

And so it went for the better part of the morning. Ngugi's personal council of elders only stopped imparting words of wisdom to him when the midday sun became too hot and a few of them began to doze off. Ngugi escorted each of them to their cars, one by one, as Muli kept the ones who were less eager to leave occupied as they reminisced about their days in government.

Ngugi then turned his attention to the men and women who had been waiting for him. Most of them simply wanted to wish him well. Others had additional advice for him varying from things as simple as which route would get him to Machakos fastest, to what his first issue of business should be once he got into office. The majority of them just wanted to chat, and were only there for the free food and drink. After enduring more endless chatter than he had time for, Ngugi excused himself from the tent, claiming that he had an urgent matter to attend to. He searched the house for Hon Muli and when he was sure that he was nowhere in the

vicinity, he grabbed the first volunteer he could find and firmly asked him to ensure that all the idlers in the backyard were asked to leave.

Pastor Simon insisted on holding a prayer service for Ngugi and his entourage before they travelled to Machakos that evening. Ngugi was reluctant to go but he was not about to cross the man who had mobilised half his congregation to fund his campaign and the other half to travel with him as prayer warriors. Once in Machakos, they would be encouraged to vote for him as well. As he sat waiting for Wanja to arrive so they could leave for the service together before they proceeded to Machakos, he took advantage of the quiet time to take stock of the events of the day. He thought back to the meeting that Hon Muli had organized, realising that many of the men whom he had met had contributed large sums to his campaign. He wondered what kind of return on investment Hon Muli had promised them. Hon Muli's circle of friends and Pastor Simon's church had been his biggest funders. He had God and old money behind him, there was no way he could lose.

The sound of Wanja driving through the gates stirred Ngugi from his thoughts. He met her at the door as she walked in.

'You are late. Didn't you get my message?' Wanja jumped, startled by the unexpected confrontation. She checked her phone and mumbled a lie that she hadn't received it. She had deleted the message as a precaution earlier on. 'Are you ready to go?'

'Go where?' Wanja had been anticipating this moment for weeks, and decided that feigning ignorance would be her safest bet. She watched the irritation grow on her father's face and waited for it to reach his lips.

'Wanja don't waste anymore time. There are prayers beginning at the church in twenty minutes, and then we will depart for Machakos immediately afterwards. You can meet us at the church since it looks like you are not ready to travel. I have to leave now.' Ngugi reached for the small suitcase that was sitting by the door. Wanja stepped aside to let him pass.

'Make sure you lock all the windows and doors.' Ngugi added, his hand reached for the door.

'I can come for the prayers but I'm staying to here to vote.' Ngugi froze. Even with his back turned she could see him trying to process what he had just heard. He turned around slowly, his suitcase still in hand.

'What?'

'I registered to vote in Westlands.' Ngugi searched his daughter's face, hoping for a sign that she was pulling his leg, but there was none of that. She avoided his gaze, looking awkwardly at the floor, at his suitcase, and at the wall behind him. He continued to look for the little girl who only a few years ago, would gladly walk on broken glass to please her father. When she did eventually meet his gaze, there was frost in her eyes.

'Why?' he struggled to keep his tone of voice.

'Because I decided to vote here where I can monitor the progress of the people I have voted for and their delivery of their campaign promises.' The words flowed just as she had practiced.

'Why?'

Wanja rolled her eyes, 'Because it's my right as a voter – ' the suitcase that Ngugi was using to steady himself was abandoned when he launched forward at his daughter, raised his arm, and swung it to slap her. Wanja jumped back, flattening herself against the wall quickly enough for the tips of Ngugi's fingers to graze the side of her chin. Ngugi stared at her, puzzled, his nostrils flared. He closed his eyes and waited for calm to reclaim his senses and tried to remember the last time he had disciplined any of his children. When he opened his eyes Wanja was still standing there, looking at him, as if he was a panther about to pounce at her again. Then, as if remembering that she was no longer a little girl, her manner changed. She stood tall and looked him in the eye demanding that he acknowledge what he had just done. Ngugi was sure that her claims of voting elsewhere were just another way to widen the rift between them, or her way of saying that she held him responsible for Kavata's departure. In his eyes, Wanja was a grown woman in many ways, but in moments like this it was evident just how much more growing up she had to do.

'Where is your voter's card?' Ngugi voice was strained, barely audible. She didn't speak.

'I want to see your voter's card. Now.'

Wanja still remained silent but her eyes glanced towards her handbag which she had abandoned in her flight to escape Ngugi's slap. Ngugi followed her gaze and lifted the *ankara* tote bag off the ground and handed it to her. She retrieved her wallet and pulled out the small card and handed it to him.

Wanja was speaking the truth. Her voter's card had been issued months ago in Westlands. All the while she had been sitting with him, attending his campaign events, and showing feigned interest in his campaign knowing that her vote would be going to someone else. To Ngugi, this was a betrayal a thousand times worse than Kavata's who had always been clear about her allegiance. A dozen thoughts ran through his mind at the same time, and he struggled to select one that would speak to everything that he was feeling. He raised his eyes to look at his daughter. There she stood, defiant. Arms across her chest, her eyes saying, 'so now, what are you going to do?'

He ripped the card into several little pieces, lifted his suitcase off the ground and stormed out of the house.

According to Ngugi, church had always been more of a social obligation than a need. Growing up, his mother had insisted that they attend Sunday service as a family and for a long time they obliged. When his father stopped joining them, Ngugi didn't see why he had to either. Kavata thankfully shared his views, so it was only when the election came up that he began to attend service at the Nyari Baptist Church. Within weeks he had been completely inculcated in the ways of the church. He would arrive a few minutes early so that he had time to share brief words with his fellow congregants, mumble through the words of the hymns he didn't know, and listen to the sermon keenly waiting for the voice of the Lord to descend upon him. When that didn't happen he left the church feeling that he had at least fulfilled his social obligation.

As he drove to the church that evening, still reeling from his encounter with Wanja, he was a lot more desperate for any kind of spiritual nourishment. He ached for one of those signs people often spoke of that showed them that they were going down the right path. He struggled to understand why all the people he needed support from had failed him. A part of him wanted to go back home and beat Wanja

over and over again until she found sense. But another part of him couldn't believe that he had tried to hit her the one time.

He parked at his usual spot, next to the pastor's, and stayed in the car. He decided to wait for the singing to start before he went in. He felt too fragile to interact with anyone. It was hard to believe that Kavata had left only a day ago. He expected that his life should have changed more drastically, yet it seemed to have adjusted itself and moved on almost immediately. It was as if he had a body double acting and speaking and living for him as he sat at the back of his mind watching life unfold and struggling to catch up with the events. He thought back to his encounter with Wanja, and to the numerous arguments he and Kavata had had about his election and questioned if perhaps he was making a big mistake by carrying on with his plans. Someone suddenly knocked on his window and he turned around to see Amani, his little hands frantically waving at him through the rolled up window.

He had mentioned the service to Wairimu, but only in passing, knowing that it would take a miracle to get her to step into a church.

'We figured you will need all the prayers you can get.' Wairimu said in response to Ngugi's questioning gaze. Jommo stood a small distance away from them, looking uncomfortable and unhappy to be there. Ngugi thanked him and he nodded in response. Ngugi and Amani walked into the church hand in hand. What he had imagined would have been a small intimate service was far from that. The church was filled to capacity, and they had waited for him to arrive before they stood up to cheer as he made his way to the front row of seats. Pastor Simon stood on the dais smiling down at Ngugi as they took their seats next to Hon and Mrs Muli. Behind him, a series of good luck messages beamed from a huge screen.

'Let us pray,' Pastor said into the microphone and the congregation fell silent. That set the pace for a two-hour service during which people referred to Ngugi as the God-ordained leader, the chosen one, and the one who would lift Kenya out of her delicate state into a prosperity that would shock her neighbours. Ngugi listened intently, wondering if they were actually referring to him and eventually accepting the expectations that had obviously been set for him. He didn't receive the divine intervention that he was hoping for, but this was all the encouragement that he needed. Regardless of the doubts his wife and daughter had placed in his mind, it

was unlikely that a church full of Christians would be wrong. He was doing the right thing.

After the service he bid Amani, whose hand he had held all evening, farewell and cautioned him against giving Wairimu's housekeeper a hard time while they were away. An hour after the service had ended, Ngugi's entourage of over five hundred were ushered into six City Hoppas, four Budget luxury buses, and eight Toyota Prados. They drove out of the church gates in a convoy as the youth in the buses sang and cheered for most of the two-hour journey. Ngugi sat in one of the Prados with Hon Muli who chatted excitedly for some of the way, but grew tired of Ngugi responding with distant hmm's and aah's. He eventually fell asleep, snoring away for the rest of the journey.

It was then that the nerves set in for Ngugi. He was actually doing this. He was launching himself into a life where we would always be open to harsh public scrutiny. Him, a middle aged man with an enchanting son, a difficult daughter and an errant wife, who had grown up in Nakuru dreaming about building skyscrapers, was going to become an MP. Then, perhaps someday, president. He turned back to look at the string of cars behind him. Their half beams shone through the back window as assurance that they were there, following him and watching him. He felt hugely responsible for the people in those cars. What if there was some kind of accident on the roads. He felt the sudden urge to jump out of the car and flag the cars down and then have a word with the drivers to warn them against reckless driving. But sense prevailed and he found something else to occupy his mind, as they snaked closer and closer to the place where his former life would end, and a new one would begin.

On the night before the election, Ngugi sat in the living room of Hon Muli's five bedroom house, drinking whisky with Hon Muli. Jommo sat with them. He had never met Hon Muli or Mrs Muli for that matter and his expression bore an awkward combination of awe and discomfort. In the kitchen Wairimu and Mrs Muli chatted away like old friends as they put together a simple meal for their men. There was no radio or television switched on. It would have been pointless to do so as nothing would be heard over the fervent prayer and worship that was taking place outside, where the church members had decided to hold a *kesha* for election victory.

‘We will join from inside the house,’ Hon Muli said to Ngugi’s relief when the *kesha* coordinator knocked on the door to ask them to join in. ‘Our old bones cannot withstand the wind’s teeth.’

The election was undoubtedly on everyone’s mind, but everything that needed to be done had been done. They sat in an awkward silence. The election was the only thing that they had in common and unless they were discussing it, there was nothing to talk about. Jommo gave short anecdotes about his business but his simple talk only seemed to irritate Hon Muli.

‘What if we lose?’ Ngugi asked the question that was on everyone’s mind.

‘That’s impossible. My instinct tells me we will win and it has never failed me.’ Hon Muli’s leg twitched as he spoke.

‘If we lose, then we accept that it wasn’t the Lord’s will and then we move on. But until that happens remain faithful that the victory belongs to us.’ Mrs Muli seldom weighed in on conversations of this nature, but when she did her gentle words were peppered with scripture.

‘The only way we can lose is if they do some *magendo*, we need to make sure that our agents are alert throughout the counting process.’ Hon Muli picked up his phone to call Jane to ensure they had enough agents at all the polling stations.

After a few more drawn out silences everybody retired to bed, in preparation for a long day ahead. None of them thought that they would be able to get any sleep, not with the singing and praying going on a few meters away. But eventually, when the town shut down and the night was still, the sound of voices worshipping served as a lullaby.

Ngugi knew that he wasn’t expected to stand in line for hours waiting to vote like he had done in every other election before this one. Nor did he expect that the process of his casting his vote would be such a production. While polling stations across the country opened at six am that morning, voting at Machakos Primary could not commence until Ngugi had cast his vote. The result was that people who had been standing in line outside the school gates could not be let in until he arrived.

Ngugi, who had slept restfully through the night, was woken up at ten am when Hon Muli banged on his door to let him know that he was holding everything up.

By the time they arrived at the polling station, just after eleven am, voting officials had had no choice but to begin voting in all the rooms except the one that had been reserved for the dignitaries. The thousands of people whose surnames also began with the letter M, and were therefore supposed to vote in the same room as him, were told that the electoral commission had not yet delivered the register with their names on it. They waited disgruntled in the hot sun and red dust. Journalists had grown weary of waiting for him and had gone to cover the opposition's vote at Muthini Primary School. When Hon Muli heard this, he insisted that he and Ngugi would not be voting until the media was present.

Ngugi drove past the two kilometre long queue of voters who were only waiting in line because of him. Most of them greeted him cheerily but he could not make eye contact with any of them, afraid that he might reveal that he was to blame for their inconvenience.

'You mustn't appear nervous; people pick up on that and will mistake it for doubt.' Hon Muli had never sounded more on edge.

'Let me and mama vote first, then you can go followed by Wairimu and anyone else after that. Make sure you look straight into the cameras as you cast the vote. There are still people who have not made up their mind; seeing you on television might convince them to vote for you. Say as little as possible to anyone who isn't on the team, we don't want to be accused of campaigning. It would be a shame to get disqualified at this late stage.' He rambled on and on. Ngugi ached to tell him to calm down and shut up. This was not his first time voting; of all the tasks ahead of him this would surely be the simplest.

They walked into the polling room and Ngugi totally understood the cause for all of Hon Muli's anxiety. This wasn't just about casting a vote, it was a grand performance. The room itself didn't bear the same dirty walls and potholed floors that he was sure all the other classrooms in the school had. It reeked of fresh paint. An out of place maroon carpet lined the path from the door to the ballot box. From the lack of dusty footprints on it, it was clear that no one had been allowed to walk on it until Ngugi's entourage arrived. At least a dozen cameras stood facing the ballot boxes. The glare from the additional camera lights made the already warm room unbearable. The generator to which they were connected purred dutifully outside the open windows.

The energy in the room changed completely as soon as they walked in. Everybody swung into roles that they had no doubt rehearsed over and over again. Cameras flicked on and newscasters announced to their viewers that Ngugi had arrived. There was no ceremony or fanfare about it, not with hoards of people looking on in patient resentment. Hon Muli cast his vote first, taking his time to relish every moment and momentarily forgetting that he was not the star of the show. Long after the cameras stopped flashing, he still stood there with his arm suspended above the ballot box with a silly grin on his face, waiting to release it. Mrs Muli intervened, tapping his arm discreetly as she walked past him to the polling booth, signalling that his moment in the limelight was over. Mrs Muli ignored all performance as she cast her vote.

When Ngugi took his position at the polling booth, the room buzzed with excitement. Cameras went off frantically and reporters competed to be heard over the ambient noise. Now that he had voted, Ngugi was looking forward to some much needed downtime.

He had no interest in watching the results trickle in so Ngugi spent the next two days driving around Machakos, familiarising himself with the constituency that could soon become his responsibility. He felt strangely calm about the election results so each time he went back to the house and was lauded with lists of things that he needed to do, he would glance at the screen for an update on where things were and then retreat to his bedroom. Wairimu and Jommo had left soon after they had cast their votes, eager to get back to their children. Before she left, Wairimu asked if Ngugi had heard anything from Kavata, he shook his head, remembering that Thuo was probably still sitting at the police station.

He got on the phone promptly and tried to reach the OCS. When this failed, he phoned the police station but was informed that they had no record of anyone called Thuo. He asked Hon Muli, if he had arranged for his release, his response was that Ngugi need not worry about such insignificant things. He had a victory speech that he needed to review. Ngugi continued to try to reach the OCS, and called the station again, this time asking the officer on the other line to look into the cell and check if there was a man who fit Thuo's description. The man on the other end said that because he was alone at the station, he was not allowed to open the cell without

reinforcements. He promised to call Ngugi back once he could check. Ngugi gave his full names to the disinterested officer on the line, hoping that he would recognise the name and be motivated to act. This didn't happen so Ngugi, who was still not accustomed to using the 'do you know who I am?' decided to try other methods.

He tried Thuo's cellphone, praying that the man whom he had greatly wronged would pick up, or that the phone would at least ring. He had no such luck. Schola had not seen or heard from him since he had been arrested but she had spoken to Cheptoo who had been to visit him at the station two days ago. She had since travelled home, but said that Thuo had been certain that he would be released. Schola was comforted that Ngugi was proving that he wasn't the monster she was beginning to think he was, and promised to check back with Thuo's wife. When she called him back an hour later, she reported that his family had still not heard from him. The worry in her voice was carried over the line and met with Ngugi's full regret. When he phoned the station again, this time channelling his best important person voice, the same officer from before, responded to him in a similar self-important tone and informed him that in keeping with the law, all petty offenders had been released on the eve of the election; the person he spoke of was not in custody.

Ngugi told himself that all was well. Surely someone had seen the press release about Kavata and been able to link the events to Thuo. He told himself that Thuo had probably gone off the grid for a few days to deal with his ordeal in his own way. He must have found a way to talk himself out of custody – he would show up eventually. However, even as Ngugi gave himself an undeserved pep talk, a part of him knew that Thuo had never been one to talk himself out of anything. Whenever Ngugi had confronted him about finished shock absorbers or tyres that were too quickly worn out, Thuo would simply apologise and accept the responsibility, even if he was not to blame. He convinced Thuo was well but didn't believe it one bit.

Ngugi spent his Saturday morning at the local market eating fresh pineapple and roasted cassavas and talking to farmers and vendors.

'*Mkubwa usijali*, there is still time to bounce back,' was the greeting he received from those who recognised him. Most of them were shocked to see him frolicking unaccompanied in the public sphere. To them it was a sign that he had lost hope and

was reacquainting himself with life as a civilian. He had snuck out of Hon Muli's house early in the morning and had not had a chance to look at the results that had come in overnight. When he had last checked, ODM, his opponents, had been winning, but only by a small margin, but there was still a day or so in which he could catch up. His phone had been vibrating endlessly since he'd arrived at the market. He didn't need to check it to see that it was Hon Muli calling to express disdain at Ngugi's refusal to watch numbers growing.

Those who didn't offer Ngugi encouragement as he walked passed them laughed as soon as his back was turned, exchanging comments in Kikamba assuming that he didn't speak the language.

'We can give him a stall here in the market since he will need a job after the election. Then he can sell those dreams of his to his supporters.'

'Where are all his people now? They must be at ODM begging for jobs.' More laughter.

'Muli is at home crying because he sent a boy to do his job – he should have just run again.'

He strolled past the different wares displayed on sacks laid on the ground or on carts, pretending to examine the produce as he peeled his ears to the words that floated around behind him. Ngugi stayed at the market long after he had enough of sun and fresh fruit. The market commentary was informing him better than any opinion poll could. It wasn't the news that he was losing the election that intrigued him; it was the reasons why that he was interested in. The words 'cooking' and 'rigging' and 'stealing' were hot on the lips of anyone who called themselves his supporter. To the rest, he never stood a chance. Debates and heated arguments broke out as soon as people thought he was out of earshot. He was spreading discordance like a plume of dark smoke wafting behind him. Soon the apprehension that was spreading all over the country enveloped the Marikiti market as well.

When he finally decided to leave and walked to his car, it was surrounded by a crowd of about a dozen men, standing protectively around it. Two of them rushed to him as soon as they spotted him.

'*Mheshimiwa*, you truly don't know this place. We had to stand guard and watch over your car. We thought there was a driver inside, but there's no one.' Ngugi dismissed the young men as idlers posing as parking attendants so that they could

get a tip. Then he spotted a similar sized group of men standing a few meters away watching them suspiciously.

‘There are some people in this market who are not as happy to see you as we are. If it wasn’t for us, your car would be ashes by now.’ Ngugi saw real fear in the man’s eyes as he spoke. He didn’t imagine that Machakos was the kind of place where he had to worry about his car getting stolen, but he quickly realized that this had nothing to do with his vehicle. It was about him. If there were allegations of rigging being made, they were probably coming from his camp and not the winning one. There were obviously lots of people who didn’t appreciate being called thieves. He glanced in the direction of his unfriendly audience and then to his car. Several hate messages had already been written into the film of dust that coated its dark blue body. Dominant among them was a warning for him to flee: *Kijana rudi nyumbani* along side more mischievous ones like *please wash me*.

Ngugi didn’t reveal the panic that was coursing through him. He walked around his car, greeting the men who had been standing guard and using the opportunity to check for deflated tyres or any other damage. When he was inside the car, he pulled out four thousand shillings and gave it to one of the men who had spoken to him, instructing him loudly to split it among all the people who had helped him keep guard. As he drove off he watched the other men encircle their man like flies to a carcass. He abandoned his earlier plan to go to Ikuuni bar for a quick midday beer, and rushed to Hon Muli’s house.

Hon Muli was nowhere to be seen when he scanned the house a few moments later. In his place a sea of worried faces met him the minute he climbed out of the car. He didn’t know any of them but that didn’t stop them from rushing to him and sharing their opinions with him as he made his way to the threshold. He didn’t waste his time with niceties as he shuffled past them.

Mrs Muli appeared shocked to see him. She was sitting at the dining table with Jane who was speaking frantically into her phone. ‘What are you doing here? Didn’t you get our messages?’

Ngugi turned to Jane who had hung up her call. ‘What’s the final tally?’ Jane handed him a sheet of paper and informed him that over ninety percent of the votes had been counted.

‘The last results came in five hours ago, but there has been a delay since then. They must be faking the numbers. The same thing happened in 1997. There were delays in the results for many days then suddenly fake results were announced.’ Ngugi listened to Jane keenly. He had always viewed her as Hon Muli’s longest serving minion, but he now realized that she was his most important asset. She had witnessed and worked on three elections in over 20 years of service to Hon Muli and that made her Ngugi’s most valuable resource.

‘Where is *Mzee* now?’

‘At the county office. He has gone to look for the agents we have been unable to reach.’ Jane didn’t think that it was wise for Hon Muli to be at the county offices but she would not say so with his wife in the room. Mrs Muli sensed it as well and asked if Ngugi had had any breakfast before he had left, and rose to prepare him some before he responded.

Jane didn’t hold back. She was aware that Hon Muli was using the election as a final crutch to power, but his short temper would do no good at the election centre. He was not an election candidate and he had no business being there. He had only gone because of Ngugi’s passive attitude to the whole thing. She shot him an accusing look and Ngugi suddenly felt like he was being scolded. There was no doubt that the rumours of rigging must have been born in this very house. It was a small town and even if he had been out of office for over fifteen years, people still viewed everything Hon Muli said as the gospel truth. Jane suggested that she and Ngugi drive down to the election centre and get an idea of what was going on. She saw the hesitation in his eye and added that she would tell him what to do.

Ngugi rushed to his room to change out of his *akalas* and linen trousers. His phone vibrated in his pocket as he unfastened his belt and he imagined it would be Hon Muli but was pleased to find Wanja’s name displayed on his screen and he made a mental note to call her when he was a little less rushed.

As predicted, Hon Muli was working up a storm when Jane and Ngugi arrived at the county offices. Access to election centres was limited to candidates and their agents. He qualified as neither but he would hear none of it. He was standing outside the doors screaming at the policemen at the gates to let him through. The volunteers who had accompanied him had tried to fix the situation in vain. Now they just stood

watching gloomily as the crowd of spectators grew and Hon Muli became more invisible to the policemen.

Jane led the way and displayed her tag identifying herself as an agent, before she fished into her handbag and handed Ngugi a similar card that granted him access to the building. Before she walked through the gates, she pulled Hon Muli aside and explained to him that there was a crisis at the house that needed his immediate attention. Ngugi was puzzled. He wondered why Jane hadn't mentioned a crisis earlier on when he might have helped. Then he figured out what she was doing and smiled at her spontaneous genius. She spoke in a loud whisper, ensuring that anyone who had witnessed Hon Muli making a fool of himself could hear the conversation. She was redeeming his reputation, proving to her audience that Hon Muli was still as important and as relevant as he imagined himself to be and giving him the opportunity to escape with his dignity. Ngugi couldn't tell if Hon Muli could see through Jane's act or not, but it didn't matter. He nodded his head with vigour, asking vague questions about the imagined crisis before he dashed toward his waiting vehicle shouting instructions to Jane over his shoulder and calling for his entourage to hurry up and get into the cars.

The scene inside the county office was an elevated version of the one at Marikiti market. Tension hung in the air like a giant catapult stretched to the limit and on the brink of releasing havoc. Every conversation was a shouting match, as if the person who could shout the loudest would be declared the winner of the election. Fistfights broke out simultaneously in different corners of the room over Form 34's and rogue agents. Policemen quickly extracted those who were fighting from the room; some of the evictees were Ngugi's competitors. However, for every person who was escorted out, three louder, angrier individuals were let in.

Ngugi stood at the door taking it all in for a moment. An NTV reporter spotted him and rushed towards him, beckoning her cameraman to follow. Other reporters followed suit and suddenly there were microphones, voice recorders and cellphones floating around him.

'What do you make of these allegations of rigging?'

'Do you think your opponents have stolen the election?'

'Can you confirm reports that you were attacked at a local market today?'

'What were you doing at the market on the eve of the election announcement?'

‘What are your plans if you lose the election?’

Ngugi looked around desperately for Jane, and spotted her amongst the shouting chaos. He had never given any kind of address without Hon Muli feeding him information before and he searched his memory for something relevant to say.

‘*Mheshimiwa* Mwangi, are you confident that this has been a free and fair election?’ the question from a faceless journalist turned his attention to the large electronic screen that was the room’s main attraction. He spotted his name, sitting third on the list of candidates. He had imagined that he had been in second place all along but part of him was relieved that he was not at the bottom of the list. Another part of him was ashamedly happy that he wasn’t at the top.

‘All I can say is that I am here to offer the electoral commission my support as they execute this very delicate task. This is not the right time to air our grievances about the process. We must give them the space to do their jobs, and then proceed to the courts if we are dissatisfied with the result.’ Ngugi gave himself a mental pat on the back. That’s what Obama would have said, he thought to himself.

‘Will you be filing a complaint when you lose the election?’ another voice asked. Ngugi’s inner voice shouted a loud resounding no.

‘*If* we lose the election, and *if* there is reason to go to court, then we will do so.’ There was a collective moment of stunned silence amongst the reporters when Ngugi graciously thanked them for a job well done, after which he excused himself, stating that he was going to find his running mates and encourage them to spend the rest of the day taking in the beautiful sights in Machakos. He quickly stepped away before anyone else had the chance to ask another question and walked away smiling. He realized something special had just happened. He had found his voice in the midst of untold chaos and he liked the sound of it. For the first time running for Member of Parliament seemed like something he could enjoy doing if he did it himself. As he made his way towards Jane, he recalled a comment Wanja had made months ago when she said that he should run in five years time. She was right. He pulled out his phone and sent her a text message.

Jane was in the middle of a friendly conversation with an election official when Ngugi joined them. He was older than Ngugi, but was in good shape. The man looked displaced in the midst of all the chaos, like he would be better suited on the other

side of a church confessional. She introduced him to Ngugi as Mr. Musyoka, one of the returning officers.

‘So you are the one who brought our friend Jane out of retirement?’ He and Jane had the chemistry of old friends who had seen lots together. She laughed and touched his arm gently and Ngugi felt like he was intruding.

‘Yes, and I didn’t come back to work on a losing campaign. What’s going on? Are they cooking?’ Jane asked and Musyoka looked around cautiously before he spoke, his gaze finally resting on Ngugi, as if to ask if it was safe to be honest around him. When Jane nodded, he revealed all.

‘There’s always rigging. There’s no election since ‘92 that has not been rigged, you know that.’ Jane nodded in agreement and Ngugi fought to keep a straight face. ‘But this time greed has made them stupid and careless.’

Musyoka went on to reveal that weeks before the election, over ninety returning officers had been paid off and relieved of their duties. The story the public had been given was that they had hired the officers well before voter registration had been completed. When they eventually tallied up the number of registered voters, they realized that they had hired too many officers, hence the sacking. What the public didn’t know was that a new group of officers were hired three weeks before the polling day to replace those who had been let go. The people who had been hired had come out of nowhere, with no training or regard for the protocol that the other officers had to go through before their appointment. That was how the politicians ensured that they had people on the inside.

‘The reason we can’t release any more results is because each and every one of these new officers have disappeared with the results from their polling stations. They left their polling stations with the official results but they have not made it to Nairobi and no announcement can be made until the chairman has seen the original copies of all Form 34s and verifies it with the number he had received electronically. We have had to send police to trace missing agents. One of them was found in her house. Her son was drawing on the Form 34s with crayons! Imagine that!’

Ngugi had hundreds of questions to ask but refrained from doing so, sensing that Musyoka was not eager to address him. He hoped that Jane would subliminally hear him.

‘That’s crazy, but surely it’s only a matter of time before someone finds out. They can’t keep people waiting for ever.’ Jane kept her voice low.

‘That is why I am saying that they have been careless this time. At least Moi and the rest knew how to cover their tracks.’ A brief laugh escaped from Musyoka’s lips as he said this – his expression was loaded with nostalgia and regret.

‘Who exactly are ‘they’?’ Ngugi couldn’t help but ask. Musyoka and Jane glanced knowingly at each other.

‘Look, Mr Mwangi what you said is right,’ Musyoka gestured at a nearby screen which was broadcasting Ngugi’s short interview from a few minutes ago. Nothing could be heard above the chaos in the room but the words ‘N. MWANGI: I WILL GO TO COURT IF NEED BE,’ were displayed across the screen. ‘The only thing to do is remain calm and wait and see what happens and then go to court later. I wish your fellow politicians had the same sense as you. I am told that in some areas, people are already threatening to kill their neighbours if the wrong man is announced winner. Kenya is heading to a very dangerous place. If things continue the way they are going...’ Musyoka paused and thought for a while, as if the seriousness of the situation was only just becoming real for him as well. ‘I hope your passports are in order.’ Musyoka excused himself, and advised them to go back to their base and watch things unfold.

Neither Jane nor Ngugi repeated what they had heard to anyone else when they got back to Hon Muli’s house that evening. They fed Hon Muli and the eager ears around him an unrehearsed yet coordinated report of how they had filed complaints with the relevant parties and done everything they could to ensure that their grievances about the election had been heard and recorded. There was nothing more they could do but wait. When she was sure that Hon Muli was content, Jane asked that she and her team be excused, as they had not slept in three days. She would continue to monitor the results from her hotel in town and would inform them of any developments. Mrs Muli was quick to grant them permission to leave. It would mean that the house would be silent enough for her and her husband to get some rest as well.

Jane lay awake for several hours that night. Her mind refused her rest until she had come up with a solution to a situation that could finish her for good. If the

slightest investigation was made into those mysterious appointments of returning officers, her name would undoubtedly come up. Musyoka was right, she had been careless.

Hon Muli's retirement had not been kind to Jane. She had remained in civil service for ten years after he left, but none of the ministers she had worked for were as foolish and trusting as Hon Muli. Once Transparently International had placed Kenya on its corruption radar it had become harder to award government tenders to companies that she owned. Employing ghost workers became impossible because job openings now had to be posted on the new websites that every ministry was mandated to have. Politics had lost its lustre and she realized with sadness that it was no longer her time to eat. So she grabbed what she still could and handed in her resignation. She arranged for a hearty retirement package and bid civil service farewell.

A year after she resigned she opened up a large shop in the city centre where she sold women's clothes that had been imported from Dubai and Turkey. Her business was doing very well and it had her travelling abroad every three months to replenish stocks.

Then her husband discovered that Jane had been having an affair, and that their second born son was not his child. She denied it, swearing upon her dead parent's grave that it was a lie. People were just jealous of her success and were trying to intimidate her, but he refused to believe her. He pulled the boy out of school, saying he would not be responsible for a bastard child and Jane rose to defend her son. She cut her husband down to size. He was also a retired civil service but unlike her, he lacked any kind of business acumen. Anything he tried flopped and landed him in massive debt. She was the breadwinner and did not hesitate to remind her husband at every opportunity.

Her husband fought back. He threatened to reveal that the great Hon Muli had been having a long-term affair with this glorified secretary. He had somehow managed to obtain a test that confirmed that Hon Muli was the boy's father. Jane threw herself at her husband's feet; she begged and pleaded for his mercy.

Jane was not ashamed of her affair with Hon Muli. In fact, she was convinced that Hon Muli turning a blind eye to all her corrupt dealings was his way of ensuring that

she acquired whatever she needed and never confirmed a suspicion that she knew he had. Jane and her band of middle aged women friends had derived great pleasure from chastising women who got caught cheating on their husbands. Having an affair was frowned upon but, as a woman of a certain age, getting caught was a cardinal sin for which there was no retribution.

'I am a kind man; I cannot make a young boy suffer because his mother is a prostitute,' Jane's husband said one night after spending hours throwing her around the house like a sack of potatoes. His mercy had a price. He demanded a divorce and everything she owned. The properties that she had been keeping from him, her shares in small businesses and all the money he knew she had been stashing away for years. He left her the house that they lived in and her business, but with no money to run it, she was forced to close it within months.

Six gruelling years later, she had rejoiced when she heard that her husband had had a heart attack while driving his girlfriend, a former customer of hers, to Mombasa for holiday. He had swerved and caused a massive collision with an oncoming bus. He died on the spot. His girlfriend had survived but she was too traumatised to explain why his penis was completely chopped off in the accident. She quickly got over her trauma when his lawyers informed her that he had left everything he owned to her.

When Hon Muli told her to find a way to make sure that Ngugi won the election, Jane saw an opportunity to make some quick money. Hon Muli had never questioned her methods and Ngugi had his head too far up in the clouds to realize that he was simply a puppet. So she phoned around and was pleased to discover that she still had some friends in high places. She found out about the plan for the returning officers a week before they were to be sacked and asked to be included in the deal. It was an expensive affair, she would need to contribute to the fund that would pay the sacked officers well enough to keep their mouths shut, not to mention the costs hiring the new ones and making sure that key people at the commission would also be quiet. Thirty million was the magic number. She drafted an inflated budget for forty million shillings and thought that Hon Muli would have a heart attack when she presented it to him. He was looking at her the way she imagined he would if he knew that she had borne his son.

Once Hon Muli recovered, he asked her to call all his former fellow politicians to his house for a meeting. She didn't ask for details and she did as she was told. A week after this meeting, each of his friends had sent their drivers to deliver envelopes full of money to Hon Muli, fully trusting that they would get it back three-fold once Ngugi was in office. They had insisted that they meet the young candidate before the election and Hon Muli had happily obliged.

Jane had paid for thirty officials to be planted into the electoral commission, but Musyoka said that there were over ninety of them. That could only mean the same deal that was offered to her was offered to several others. She had been very careless.

Musyoka was right, the only way out was to leave the country. She made the decision to call her old travel agent in the morning, and then, she slept like a foetus.

By the time the sun was rolling over the hilly horizon the next morning, it was no secret that hell was about to break loose and everyone wanted out. Ngugi woke up at dawn and sat on the veranda, watching as tension grew and worry spread on the faces of those who walked past Hon Muli's house. No announcement had been made yet, but he didn't anticipate one would be made anytime soon. The radio relayed news of a disorganized electoral commission. Journalists had been camped at the commission headquarters all night anticipating news and they were agitated. They demanded news from the stressed out, but nonetheless pompous chairman of the commission who maintained he was not going to announce results that he didn't have. Rumours of disappearing agents were confirmed by the commissioner who said that they were trying to locate them. Each time the commissioner spoke, the party agents and journalists in the room grew more irritated and they carried this frustration through the airwaves to the rest of the country.

Jane reported to work as usual but avoided Ngugi's gaze as she walked past him on the veranda and into the house. Ngugi was certain that she could answer the questions that had kept him awake all night, but he also knew that he didn't want to hear the truth.

Jane and her team were packing up when Ngugi went back into the house. Printers were going back into the boxes that ferried them here. Reams of papers were stuffed into bags and boxes. Mrs Muli was walking around the house packing

away anything of value. Hon Muli pulled him into a corner and told him they would be leaving in a few hours. Ngugi was shocked. This was the exact opposite of what they should have been doing, but it was completely like Hon Muli to abandon ship at the slightest sign of trouble. 'We've organized a helicopter to pick us up at the Stadium at two pm. I think we should be able to leave without any trouble. From what I hear it is not a good idea to take the roads. There is space for four on the aircraft, so pack your things.'

Ngugi didn't need to ask if Jane would be the fourth person on the aircraft. 'We can't all leave. It will send the wrong message. You can go ahead, I will come tomorrow.'

Mrs Muli was the first to object. 'Ngugi let's go. It is best that you are in Nairobi for the announcement. What of the children?'

'Wairimu has Amani and she will make sure Wanja is fine until I get there. It is just one more night. We can't all leave.' He was certain that he was doing the right thing and though he would never admit it, so was Hon Muli. There was no more discussion on the matter. An hour later, Jane put her team on the bus back to Nairobi, and then accompanied the Mulis to the stadium.

Ngugi was sitting on the sofa monitoring the news when he was startled by a bang on the door and the sound of several voices shouting. He remained seated for a moment, expecting someone else to answer before he remembered that there was no one else in the house with him. The shouting grew louder as he approached the threshold and peeked through the stained glass. Dread settled down in the pit of his stomach as he opened the door to find over thirty agitated men and women staring back at him. The uproar heightened when the mob saw him, but a man who Ngugi assumed was their leader asked them to be silent and they shushed one another.

'*Habari, niwasaidie aje?*' Ngugi kept his voice as calm as he could muster. The mob leader stood up straight, and spoke in English, making it clear that this was not a friendly conversation. He looked past Ngugi into the house searching for something, but Ngugi blocked his view. He stepped out of the house but kept his hand on the door handle.

'*Mheshimiwa Mwangi, we are here to see to Muli.*' His eyes kept darting past Ngugi into the house.

'Bwana Muli hayuko. Can I help you?' No sooner had the words come from his mouth than the crowd flared up again. Hon Muli's departure was nothing close to discreet. There was nothing discreet about a helicopter in Machakos, more so at a time like this when everyone was looking for any reason to panic.

'But let me assure you that we are still waiting to see what happens with the votes. I am here until the end.' Ngugi said.

'We want our money!' Someone from the back shouted and the mob leader shot a warning gaze to the back of the crowd and they once again fell silent.

'Mr. Mwangi, whether you win or lose is not our concern at this time. Hon Muli hired us to do a job and we have done it. Now he has ran away and left us without talking to us about the work.' Ngugi let out a sigh of relief. This was something he could easily fix. Now that he looked at the faces in the crowd, he recognised some of them he had seen at rallies and events over the past few months. They had handed out t-shirts and done the on-ground logistics. Surely Jane would have made arrangements to pay them

'Oh, that is what you want,' he smiled as he spoke, reassuring them that this was something that he could take care of. He asked the leader for his name and asked the crowd to give him a few minutes while he called Jane to enquire. The crowd agreed and calmed down, satisfied that they were on the path to a successful mission. Ngugi discreetly locked the door behind him and scanned the room for a folder or an envelope, any sign that Jane had the foresight that he sincerely hoped she did. When he could see no signs of money left behind to pay the angry mob outside, he rang Hon Muli but his phone was switched off, as was Jane's. He continued to search in the most unlikely places. Mrs Muli's wardrobe, the kitchen cabinets, under on the bookshelf with volumes of books from the 1940s but it was clear that he wasn't going to find anything. He could hear the crowd growing impatient and rushed outside with a paper and pen before he lost the delicate calm that he had just managed to establish.

He explained to the crowd that his assistant had to rush to Nairobi owing to a family emergency and that she had forgotten to leave instructions for payment. The crowd did not like this, but Ngugi pleaded for calm and asked them to leave their invoices behind and come back in a few hours. He would have sorted it out by then.

His side eye caught a glimpse of buses parking outside the gates. They were some of the ones that had been in his convoy.

'Invoices? Why did no one ask for *invoices* when we were busy working. Those are just delay tactics. Pay us now!' a short woman who stood next to the mob leader shouted and the crowd agreed.

'Then how will I know how much you are owed?' Ngugi tried to reason as people alighted from the buses and joined the crowd. He wished now more than ever that he had left with Hon Muli.

'Muli knows – ask Muli!' was the response.

'Listen to me now, I have heard you. But let me ask you something. When you were giving away T-shirts during the rallies, whose face did you see printed on the front of those shirts?'

'Yours!' came the unanimous response

'And when you were out there telling people to vote, who were you telling them to vote for?'

'You!'

'And when you went to vote on Thursday who did you vote for?'

'You.' This question was answered hesitantly, and some people laughed nervously.

'Yes, so were you working for my campaign or Muli's?'

'Yours!' the crowd began to see where he was going with this.

'Yes, so it my job to pay you, but we need to help each other.' Ngugi walked into the house, leaving the door ajar so that the peeping toms could have their fill. He came back with several sheets of paper and a few pens and asked the mob leader and his female assistant to go and write down the names and ID numbers of all the people who were owed money, as well as how much they were owed and what for. Those would serve as the invoices. He promised payment before the sun went down.

He almost dropped to his knees in relief when the last of the crowd was off his doorstep and he closed the door behind him. He cursed Jane and Muli for leaving him in this position and not having the sense to switch on their phones hours after they had landed from the twenty-minute flight to Nairobi. He had managed to calm down when there was another knock on the door. He lifted himself off the ground

and opened the door to one of the *kesha* coordinators who was wringing his hands. A few more familiar faces stood behind him watching.

‘Sorry to disturb you sir, after those guys have just been here. It’s just that the bus drivers won’t leave until they have been paid.’

‘Shit.’ The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them and the young Christian shrunk away from Ngugi as if the words would taint him. ‘Sorry, it’s been a long week.’

‘No problem, the devil always tries to attack us when we are weakest.’ Ngugi envied his simple thinking.

‘How many?’

‘How many devils?’ he looked at Ngugi as if he was from another planet.

‘How may buses?’

‘Oh, sorry. Four. Four buses.’

‘And the rest, I’m sure we came in with more buses than that.’

‘Yes, the rest left in the morning. We stayed behind so we could worship with the locals.’ Ngugi asked if the bus drivers had invoices, and was relieved that they did. Now that he thought about it Ngugi had had no use for his own money while campaigning, but he was glad that he carried around a wallet more out of habit than necessity. He personally explained to the drivers that he was going into town to withdraw money to pay them, and that he would be back in a few minutes.

He drove to the main street in town where all banks had ATMS and parked on the deserted street. The first three machines were out of service, no doubt because they were out of money. There was a war coming, and people were taking precautions. He tried a few more, frustrated when they wouldn’t let him draw past his daily limit. There was no chance of any banks being open on the last Sunday of the year, especially during an election. He drove around the entire town, pausing at every ATM to try one bankcard or the other. He stopped trying when one of his cards got swallowed by the machine and resorted to looking for MPESA agents who could deposit money onto his mobile.

He got back two hours later than he expected, with two hundred thousand shillings in his pocket and a string of curses on his lips. There were several people milling about the house when he arrived. He tried Jane’s phone once again before he

got out of the car. She picked up and apologised in earnest when he explained the position that she had left him in

'I have the money with me, *pole sana*, we left in such a hurry I completely forgot.' Ngugi was unconvinced. 'I don't think there's anything I can do. Things are bad here. Everything is closed. I have some money on my MPESA; I will send that for now.' She hung up before Ngugi could put in another word. He suspected that this was the last time he would hear from her.

As instructed, the mob leader and his assistant delivered a list of his debtors. His eyes almost rolled to the back of their sockets when he looked at the list. There had been no more than thirty people at his door earlier that day. But the sheet of paper he held now held the names of a hundred and twenty seven people claiming they were owed a minimum of four thousand shillings each. He asked for the *kesha* coordinator to follow him into the house and paid him the money owed for the buses. Ngugi insisted that the buses leave immediately and asked that everyone was dropped at the church as soon as they got to Nairobi. He gave the coordinator his number and told him to call him in case of any trouble, although it was more likely that Ngugi would be the one needing a helping hand.

When the buses were well on their way, he invited the mob leader and his assistant into the house and sat with them at the table.

'I see the number of people owed has grown.' Ngugi studied the list. The list was so long that some lines had two names written in then. He smiled gently.

'You asked for an invoice, we gave you an invoice. We have done the work. We must be paid.' The fiery assistant crossed her short arms across her chest.

'That's true; you must get paid for your hard work. But as you know, today is Sunday and the banks are closed and there is no way I can get my hands on such money at this time. I have just tried to but all I could raise was this.' He pulled out a hundred thousand shillings and placed it on the table on top of the list and asked them to consider it a down payment. He would get them the rest before he left Machakos. His visitors' eyes lit up when they saw the money. Ngugi asked that they decide how the money would be distributed amongst the people on the list. He suggested that they pay everyone who was owed a small amount first. He would hold on to the list once the payments were made so he could keep track of what was

still owed. The group leader was about to agree to the proposal when his colleague jumped in.

‘We didn’t do the work in bits. We didn’t ask for a down payment before we started the work. Stop these stories of yours. If you didn’t have money then how did you pay for Muli’s helicopter to help him run away? We know you paid the bus drivers to get your people out of here. Was the work they did more important than ours? *Wacha siasa. Lipa pesa.*’ Ngugi regretted his assumption that having her in the room would help solve the issues amicably. After long negotiations, and the crowd outside growing more impatient, they agreed to categorise the massive list in to those who needed to be paid in full and most urgently. They also agreed that they would be back the next morning for the rest of the money. The mob leader and his deputy agreed to leave with each of their followers when they left.

He settled down just before sunset and in time to catch the ECK’s announcement of the presidential results. He navigated through the static filled reception searching for the face of the ECK chairman. Most channels were still airing news that he knew like the back of his hand. The tension had reached boiling point when someone threw a plastic water bottle at the ECK chairman and the police had been called in to clear the room. No results could be announced in such an environment. Media and party agents were asked to cool off outside the building for an hour after which they would be called back in for the final announcement.

While this was happening, another smaller room was set up for the announcement to be made. KBC, the national broadcaster, was the only media house present in the room with the chairman as well as a few foreign election observers. In that quiet orderly room, the commissioner announced the winner of the presidential election, and then he was escorted into a waiting car and shipped off to safety.

Ngugi wasn’t sure if he had won the election or not. No one had called to congratulate him so he wondered if they were calling Hon Muli instead. He was certain that the provincial results had been announced already but they had no doubt been overshadowed by the chaos that was spreading through the country. He checked that his cellphone was on. He flipped through channels hoping to catch the provincial results but all he found were scenes of unrest outside the commission headquarters, scenes of final preparations for a hurried inauguration and reports of

violence and looting in Nairobi, Kisumu, and the Rift Valley. He rushed upstairs for his laptop, but Jane and her team must have carried all the internet modems with them. So he sat patiently and resigned himself to the fact that if he had won, people would be calling to congratulate him.

He was finally able to actually pay attention to what was going on in the country. A president had been sworn in but only a third of the country claimed him, the other third rejected him, violently. And the rest were either fleeing from the resulting uproar, or watching intently, hoping that this argument didn't disrupt their lives too much. Every hour another area was added to the list where violence had erupted: Kibera, Narok, Naivasha, Molo, Limuru, Mlolongo. The fighting seemed to be creeping closer towards him. Unable to reach Wanja, he called Wairimu and insisted that she go and check on her but Wairimu assured him that she had spoken to her when the violence had begun and that she was safe and at home.

'She's probably just sleeping off a hangover,' Wairimu said hoping to lighten the mood but her voice was heavy with fret. 'You should make your way back, it could get worse and you don't want to get stuck in the *bundus*.'

'Yes, I will be back tomorrow... I have a few things to take care of first.' The small talk tired them and they promised to speak in the morning.

Ngugi sat in the dark room for several hours before deciding not to ignore the voice in his head that was telling him that things might get very ugly. He panicked. It was usually the thing that Kavata did best, forecasting doom so that she could prepare for it. So he channelled his wife and went up and threw all his things into his suitcase and put it in the boot of one of the cars that Hon Muli had left behind in his flight. Keeping watch for curious eyes, he got into the car and drove it a few meters away from the house; parking it at a distance he was sure he could run to if the need arose. He locked the car, and walked back to the house; he switched on the security lights and sat in the fluorescent glow of the television.

At three am the next morning, a media blackout began. Images of killing, burning and looting were wiped off the screen and replaced with music videos, reruns of Spanish soap-operas and Cartoon Network. Ngugi's eyes hurt from gazing into the white light so he finally turned off the television and settled down to get a few hours sleep. This media blackout saved his life. Had the TV been on, he would never been able to hear the hushed voices on the other side of his wall. Nor would he have seen

the amber glow of torches hovering outside the window. He froze, his hand reached out for his phone, which he had had the good sense to leave plugged into the charger. He checked that his car keys were in his pocket and tip toed into the kitchen moments before the living room window was smashed and the thugs climbed into the house declaring that they had come for their money.

Ngugi recognised one of the voices but his fear made him uncertain. The man with the familiar voice led the rest up the stairs to where they imagined Ngugi was sleeping, and did so with the surety of someone who had been in the house before. Ngugi slipped out of the back door in the kitchen just as the men were breaking down the door to Hon Muli's bedroom upstairs

Ngugi ran into the darkness as fast as his unfit limbs could carry him. Save for the shouting and banging that was coming from his house, the rest of Machakos was still, bracing itself for the worst. He could hear the crash of glass breaking as he started the engine and drove off. By the time the thugs had realized that Ngugi was not in the house he was turning on to the main highway that led to Nairobi. The smaller Machakos grew in his rear-view mirror, the more unsteady his arms became, and soon Ngugi was trembling so hard that he could no longer drive. He pulled over to the side of the road just outside Athi River and jumped out of the car, and bent over to release the tension and fear that was threatening to choke him. When he was done, he sat on a rock at the side of the road and wept for all of his losses.

Chapter Five

Kavata Ngugi

Kavata's cousin Mutheu picked her up from the airport in Atlanta. They had never met before and as soon as the pleasantries were over, Mutheu informed Kavata that she and her family had made plans to escape the cold winter and spend Christmas with her husband's family in Florida. She offered Kavata a half-hearted invitation to join them, which was declined to Mutheu's unconcealed relief. When she woke up late the next morning, they had left her a list of instructions and things that needed attention around the house, and a phone number that she could reach them on, but only for emergencies.

'Not sure what you eat, but there's some mac 'n cheese in the cupboard and burger patties in the freezer,' the note said in closing and Kavata felt like she was one of those relatives who had been sent for from home, so they could come and work for her relatives in America. She would begin to look for a place of her own immediately.

Over the next few days, Kavata followed each minute of the election via the internet, switching between different live news streams and refreshing her browser frequently to catch every single detail. When the results began to trickle in, it occurred to her that for all her planning and foresight, Kavata never once imagined that Ngugi would lose the election. She had followed his campaign closely, hoping for signs of loopholes that would crush his chances of winning and relinquish her from the nightmare of having to leave, but there never was any. Now, as she sat studying the numbers, it dawned on her that Ngugi's loss changed everything. She had the sudden urge to go back home and undo everything but there was a blaring voice in her head that told her that her home might no longer be with Ngugi.

When Mutheu and her family returned from their trip, Mutheu still greeted Kavata with suspicion in her eye. Kavata hadn't told her much about the reason for her visit when she had called her out of the blue two months ago and asked her if she could stay with her for a few days. Mutheu had been hesitant at first, but eventually agreed. Their parents had been close before Kavata's father went into politics and decided that he no longer needed to interact with his siblings. Kavata owed her an explanation, and this was as good a time as any to give it.

'I enrolled in the Fulbright teacher exchange program and got accepted,' she explained after Mutheu had introduced her to her husband and two children, who were completely uninterested in her. 'It was all very sudden, but I was very lucky to get in, it is a great opportunity.'

'How long are you here?' Mutheu still looked unconvinced. These questions seemed harder to answer now that Ngugi's path to politics was dangerously close to a dead end.

'One year, with a possible extension.' It was best to stick to the script. 'I've started looking for a place to live so I should be out of your hair soon.'

'I didn't know what expect. First you call me out of the blue, and then I get a call from Auntie Martha asking if you have been in touch with me, then the next thing I know you are standing at the airport with no luggage. It seems to me that there is a lot more going on than you are letting on.' Kavata wished that Mutheu would lower her voice so that her husband and children were not part of the conversation, but she realized that she would get no such courtesy from her indifferent cousin.

She looked down at the sleeves of the large grey sweatshirt she had bought from an outlet store the one time that she had ventured out of the house since she had arrived. She tried to remember when she had last worn a sweatshirt and missed her life. She took a deep breath, sent her tears away and told Mutheu everything.

'I didn't even know you were married,' was all Mutheu said after Kavata had been speaking continuously for about forty minutes. There was no sympathy or understanding in her eyes, instead the same look Kavata had grown tired of getting when she spoke about her father.

'Do you and... what's his name again?'

'Ngugi.' Tears crept back to her eyes when she said his name. Losing the election would kill him.

'Do you have kids?'

'Yes, Wanja is twenty-four. Amani is ten.'

'You left a ten-year-old behind? That's madness.' Mutheu's eyes grew in disbelief. Kavata couldn't blink fast enough to stop the tears.

'So, when is the election?' Mutheu asked and Kavata longed to be back in her silent dark room in front of the old humming computer.

'It already happened. Last Thursday. They should be announcing the results any time now.' Kavata's tears subsided.

'Then, what happens if Ngugi loses? Shouldn't you have waited until after the election to leave?' Kavata could do it no more. She hated her cousin with her perfectly logical questions and the patronising manner with which she was treating her, despite the fact that Kavata was at least half a decade older than her. She was about to explain that the program required her to be in Atlanta by a certain date, but that logic didn't hold anymore since she had not reported to the program offices yet. Kavata had emailed the exchange program the day she arrived and lied that she was stuck in London due to bad weather.

'Let me go check on the results online,' she was up and out of the room in a flash. Behind her, Mutheu warned her against using up too much internet and Kavata chuckled, wondering what she would say had she known that Kavata had been online every minute since she'd come into their lives.

She didn't leave her bedroom again that day and remained glued to the computer screen long after the house had quieted down and everyone had retired for the

night. The results had been announced with the chaos and disorganisation that she had grown accustomed to, but something seemed different this time around. She couldn't quite figure it out. There were unconfirmed reports that Kibaki was getting sworn in but no one explained why this was happening so soon. Reports of violence were not unheard of during elections, but the ones she was reading about now felt more severe. After a while there seemed to be no new information online and she was dying to speak to someone at home to find out what was going on. She didn't have a phone line yet, and was certain that Mutheu would wake up the minute she so much as suspected that Kavata was using her landline. She sent Anne an email, although she hadn't responded to the first one she had sent, to let her know that she had arrived well, and then she waited.

For several hours all she received were short bursts of information from websites that required her to open accounts in order to access them. She recognised the names of some of them; Wanja had often mentioned that she had seen this on Facebook or heard that on Twitter. So, unable to sleep in the wee hours of the morning, when the lack of mainstream news had driven her crazy, she opened an account and figured out how to use it.

Hours later, when the house was coming alive, Kavata had still not been to sleep but she had gathered enough information to know that things back home were beyond bleak. Cell-phone pictures of people protesting, looting and killing, taken from inside cars and from bedroom windows cropped up on her timelines every few seconds. They seemed to get more gruesome each time she refreshed her page. Foreign media was carrying reports of a war going on in Kenya and Kavata couldn't watch any longer. She was already downstairs when Mutheu emerged from her bedroom and, eager to share what she had discovered, shared the news of what was going on in Kenya.

'That is why I left that place. Everything is so backward and primitive. They have no idea how a democracy works. It is no wonder that Obama wants nothing to do with that place.' Kavata wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her and tell her that it was possible that everybody she knew back home was in danger, but Mutheu wouldn't care. She had severed any ties she had to Kenya a long time ago and Kavata pitied her. She excused herself and went out to buy a sim card.

She had not realized how much she needed to be out of the toxic environment at Mutheu's house until she stepped into the shopping mall. As soon as she had bought a SIM card, she called Wanja, Ngugi, Anne, and then the landline. When none of them answered, she prayed it was because of the time difference, or that they were still angry with her. She decided to stroll around the mall for a while longer, stopping every few minutes to phone home again. When she walked past the food court, her belly reminded her that she had neglected it for the past few days. The meal options Mutheu had left her had been unappealing so she had survived on a nibble here and there. She was ravenous. The girl at Wendy's asked her if she wanted to supersize her meal for an extra two dollars. *Why not*, she thought, and as she ploughed through her large meal she understood why relatives who moved to America always came back the size of a small house. She remained seated on the red plastic benches long after she could eat no more, staring at her cellphone and watching people milling about still buzzing with the Christmas spirit. She spotted a man seated a few tables away from her. He was having a spirited conversation on the phone. Something about the way he spoke, his gestures and demeanour were familiar. Whatever he was hearing was obviously shocking because every so often the words 'Oh my God' would escape from his lips as he cupped the back of his head in his palm and shook his head.

Kavata's watched the familiar stranger for a while before she decided to get closer to him. Her instinct was right. His dialogue was peppered with expressions from home. She hovered around his table, but he was so engrossed in his conversation that he didn't realize she was there until she tapped him on the shoulder

'I'm off duty,' he said, his handset still connected to his ear. Kavata only now noticed his security guard uniform. She took a napkin off a nearby table and tapped him on the shoulder again.

'I am off duty Ma'am. Please go to the information desk for help,' he snapped and pointed into the distance. Kavata shot him an apologetic look, at the same time wondering how he was able to put on his American accent so swiftly. There had been no trace of the accent when she'd been eavesdropping. She gestured to him that she needed to use his pen and he dislodged the ball-point from his shirt pocket and handed it to her.

'No there's just some *mathe* here asking for a pen. *Endelea*.' He said as Kavata turned away to scribble on the napkin.

'Sorry, I just wanted to find out what's going on in Kenya. Will wait.' Kavata held the napkin up for him to read and waited for him to object to her pulling out a chair to join him. He continued his conversation and she was happy to listen in, piecing together as much information as she could. It was a long phone call, and she was beginning to feel self-conscious, sitting there idly checking her phone hoping someone would call her back. She looked back for her abandoned meal but it had been taken away. She asked him if he would like a drink and he scribbled 'diet coke' onto the napkin. She walked to the counter, worried that he would run away, but he was still there when she got back and was thankfully winding up the call. He promised to send his caller some money and hung up.

'Thanks,' he took a long swig from his drink.

'I'm sorry to interrupt you. I have just been struggling to get any news from home, and it sounds like you know more than I do.' Kavata only then realized how rude she must have seemed but she was desperate.

'I'm Lawrence, by the way.' He reached over to greet her.

'Kavata. So what's going on back home?'

'It's shocking. Things have gone to the dogs. How much do you know?' His accent was back.

'Almost nothing, I was following the results, and then I read that Kibaki had been sworn in and then something about a coup.' Lawrence nodded.

'That's the long and short. My family lives in Nakuru. I was talking to my brother. They have been begging me to send them money for airfares to come here for the past few weeks now. They somehow managed to organize the visas and everything. I don't even know how they pulled that off without a letter from me or anything. I've been telling them to stay calm and hope for the best. Things over there have been tense for a while; rumours about things getting ugly if Raila doesn't win have been flying all over the place. And they have – things are thick.

Literally minutes after the winner was announced, thugs went to my home and told my family that they had a ten minute head start to flee. My mother thought they were just being emotional and acting out. Then a family friend phoned her, from their house less than a kilometre up the road from us. They said the same group of

men had been at their house and they hadn't listened. When they came back, as promised, and found them in the house, they chopped up the father – to set an example.' Lawrence paused as the enormity of the words he'd just spoken coursed through him. When it had passed, he seemed disoriented and looked around for a while before resting his gaze on Kavata. She reached across the table to steady his trembling hand. Tears returned to her eyes.

'This is unbelievable. How can this be happening in? In Kenya?'

Lawrence carried on speaking as if he hadn't heard her.

'Then, they carried pieces of his body around town shouting warnings that those who didn't leave would end up the same way. My mother's friend begged my family to leave.'

'Did they leave? Are they okay?' Kavata glanced at her phone desperate for it to give her a sign that her people back home were well.

'They did, they just got into the car and drove. They left everything behind. My brother had the sense to carry their passports and whatever cash he had in the house. They only got as far as Limuru. They are staying with relatives there. My dad is a retired policeman, he insisted on going back to save the woman who warned them to leave. He's been gone for two days now, he's alive and he calls home often. He says our house is a skeleton. They took everything, even the curtain hooks. He's been called back into the force to help. He says he has never seen such brutal mercilessness in all his days. He's calling it some kind of demon possession.' Lawrence smiled gently at his father's simple logic. The napkin that they had used to communicate was soaked with Kavata's tears for Lawrence's family. She got more tissues and the two of them sat and talked for hours.

Lawrence didn't have the heart to tell his family that he didn't have the money to get them all out of the country. He complained about the perception people had at home that money was abundant in America. Every few months, a new cost was shoved his way: a sibling's tuition, his parent's health insurance, a niece's school trip to Rwanda, text books, shoes, birthday presents. Each time he said that he couldn't afford it, his mother simply said that he was in America now, and God would provide for him. As if those in Kenya were not provided for as well. Eventually, even if he didn't have health insurance of his own, and hadn't been on holiday once since he had moved to America, he stopped complaining, and picked up an extra shift at

one of his three jobs every time the phone rang and Kenyan country code was displayed on the screen. He had just paid for his family to holiday in Malindi and the cost of the trip had broken his back and he just could not afford it.

'It will be alright, the government will do something,' Kavata regretted the words as soon as she heard them. Lawrence's response was visceral.

'The government? Ha! Who do you think is behind all of this? Who do you think is paying those guys to kill? This has very little to do with who won or didn't win. These kids are killing because someone is paying them more money than they have ever seen, to weed out all the *kiuks* in their villages and towns and slums. And it's just a matter of time before they start to fight back, and killing is not something that *kiuks* are unaccustomed to doing. They've been at it since the days of Mau Mau. The thing is, those guys, the ones that came to our home, I know them. I know their names, I went to school with them, we cheated off each other during exams and played football together. I fooled around with their sisters, and stole their parents' cars when they were away. Until a few weeks ago, they treated my siblings like their own. Do you actually want me to believe that they would carry my father's head on the end of a *panga* because of an election? That's fucking bullshit!' His voice had grown louder as he spoke and the restaurant manager walked over to them to tell them that they making his other customers uncomfortable, even if the only other person at the restaurant was sitting at the corner furthest away from them.

'So, what do we do? Do we just sit and wait?' The things she was hearing still felt too brutal to be happening in Kenya. They sounded like exaggerated tales from a place that was vaguely familiar. But, she had seen the tweets, and heard the news and could feel the pain of the man that sat before her.

'I guess so. Unless you have tons of money to get your family out of the country, there's nothing left to do but wait.' Kavata thought about the thick envelope of money that was sitting at the bottom of her handbag. She asked a few more questions about Lawrence's family; if they had family or friends anywhere else outside of Kenya and if they could go there instead. He answered her questions with his mind elsewhere, searching for other solutions.

It was his turn to ask the questions when he realized that he knew nothing about Kavata. She gave him fragments of the truth, slipping in slices of the story that she

and Anne had scripted for her new life. Lawrence seemed unimpressed with her, and she was relieved.

They chatted on for long enough for Kavata to get hungry again and for Lawrence to temporarily forget his problems. He shifted languages to Kiswahili often, grateful to have someone that he could share language with at a time when he was desperate to connect with home. Kavata indulged him, even though she was uncomfortable that it would reveal how badly out of practice her Swahili was. He was a charming man, much younger than Kavata but with an old soul. They realized that the short winter day was ending when the Wendy's staff began to pile chairs onto the tables and a voice on the intercom announced that the mall was closing in half an hour.

When Lawrence offered to drive Kavata the short distance to Mutheu's house, she made the decision that if it came to it, she would give him the money he needed to get his family to safety. She didn't tell him so just yet, partly because she hoped he wouldn't need the money. She insisted that they exchange numbers and she made him promise that he would keep her posted on how his family was doing.

Kavata could see someone peeking through the windows as she walked up the steps to the house. When she let herself in, she was touched that Mutheu seemed slightly concerned about where she had been.

'I bumped into an old friend at the mall and we sat chatting for hours,' she offered before Mutheu could ask. To her surprise, the TV in the family room was tuned to a CNN report of the violence, and Kavata knew that things must have gotten much worse for them to have gotten Mutheu's precious attention.

'It's all over the news. It is hell over there,' Zack, Mutheu's husband, said as Kavata lowered herself onto the sofa next to him. 'Mo spoke to her family earlier in the day, they are safe. There has been a media blackout for a few hours, so no one's really sure how bad things are on the ground,' he showed more concern than Mutheu who was peeling sweet potatoes on the kitchen counter. Kavata knew that she should offer to help with dinner, but she had already eaten so the television was much more appealing.

'Mom says it's not so bad in the suburbs. The violence is only in the slums, but you can trust the Western media to make it look like we are all savages. That's CNN

for you.' Mutheu offered from the kitchen and the irony of her statement put a smile on Kavata's face. There were a hundred things she wanted to say in response, but only asked if Mutheu's parents had spoken to hers.

'I don't think so. Those guys don't speak anymore, do they?' Tragedies had a way of bringing people together but Kavata knew it would take a lot more than a national crisis to get her father to reconcile with his siblings.

'I haven't heard from them, it's a little worrying.' Kavata said more to herself than to anyone else. The images on the screen matched the ones that Lawrence described. The places she saw on the screen were familiar and she began to think about the people she knew who had lived and worked in the buildings that now lay torched and naked. If only she could speak with them and find out if they were alright.

'Wanja, its mom, please pick up.' She sent different versions of the same text message to everyone that she had been trying to reach and almost burst into song when her cellphone beeped a few minutes later with a response. It was Anne. She promised to phone Kavata in a few minutes.

Kavata went up to her room, began pacing across the carpeted floor. She had been fighting the instinct to hop on a plane and go back home from the minute it was clear Ngugi had lost the election, but the decision seemed rushed, and she had wanted to think about it and plan it with the same diligence that she had done for her exit trip. With each news update, and as the numbers of those rumoured to be dead continued to grow, she realized that there wasn't much time for her to make the decision. While going back felt like the most practical thing to do, nothing made less sense to her.

She jumped when the phone rang, and said a silent prayer of thanks as she picked up.

'My God Anne, where have you been? Are you ok?'

'I'm sure you've heard the news?' She sounded like she had been without sleep for several days. 'I'm sure it will blow over in a few days but, Kavi, it is a mess. So many of George's students have gotten caught up in the chaos and been locked up. So many have died. He's just stopped taking calls now.'

'Have you spoken to Ngugi or my kids?'

'No I can try them now. I just got home from the supermarket; I've been there for six hours, trying to shop. Everyone is panicking and stocking up in case it lasts much longer. Now we are hearing there might be a fuel shortage.'

'Please go check on my family Anne. I can't reach them. I don't know where they are.' Kavata was crying.

'Calm down Kavi, they are probably just dealing with the shock of everything. The violence hasn't spread to our side of town. I will go there as soon as I hang up and call you back. George is making plans for us to go to Uganda for a few days if this doesn't end soon, but I will check on them before we leave.' Anne wondered if this was the right time to break the news to Kavata or if she should wait until she had a more solid confirmation.

'Thuo was arrested after you left,' it wasn't what she'd intended to share but it was a start.

'Oh no. No.' Kavata remembered his brief protest at her trip to the airport. 'Why would they do that, didn't he tell them where I was?'

'I don't have all the details, I called the police station that he was being held at but they didn't have him so I assume he's been released.' Kavata gave Thuo's number to Anne and asked her to please check on him as well.

'Kavi,'

'Yes,'

'He lost the election. Ngugi didn't win.' Anne had been just as surprised as Kavata at the result.

'I know. It's funny how we didn't see this coming.' She told Anne about her cousin's suggestion that she should have waited until the results were out to leave him.

'Kavi, that's not all.' Anne's tone turned grave, Kavata stopped breathing.

'What is it Anne?' Lawrence popped into her mind, she wondered if he would drive her to the airport.

'Nothing has been confirmed yet, but there rumours that the house which Ngugi and your parents were staying was raided on Sunday night. Your parents' weren't there, they had already left for Nairobi, but Ngugi insisted on staying until the announcement.'

The violence was no longer a distant thing. It was knocking at her door demanding to be let in to Kavata's life. She lowered herself onto her bed.

'Kavi, are you there?'

'How bad was it?' her voice was barely audible. She had to repeat the question a few times for Anne to hear her over the delayed connection.

'They torched the house completely. That's all I know.' A work colleague had been in Machakos and had phoned Anne when he couldn't get a hold of Kavata.

'It makes no sense, Kavi, there's been no other violence in Machakos yet. It looks like a random break in that went sour. We have to believe that he is well...' Anne realized that she was rambling on to fill the loaded silence.

'Kavi, are you there?'

'Yes. Please find my children and let me know when you do. I will book a flight tomorrow. I'm coming back.'

She went back to the family room after her conversation with Anne. With her mind made up, the only thing left to do was wait for morning. Zack was still glued to the screen watching the tallies of those who were dying in Kenya rise like water up a thirsty straw. His concern for his wife's home was sweet, and Kavata wondered how such a gentle and caring man had remained married to her evil cousin for so long.

'I'm going back,' Kavata said when Zack handed her a cup of hot chocolate moments after she had joined him in front of the television. He didn't try to conceal his shock.

'Things look pretty uninviting over there. What good would it do for you to go back? He shifted to face her and she noticed for the first time how handsome was.

'None, probably. But at least I'll be there.' Zack was still puzzled.

'Don't you want to give it a few days? Someone reported that the airports have been shut down.' Kavata's rationale for needing to be back home wasn't completely clear to her until this moment. If things at home were as bad as everyone said they were, then Kenya would never be the same. She had to see it to believe it. She wanted to be there, with her family the moment their country changed.

'I doubt that it's as bad as we're being made to imagine it is, but if it is, then I have to be there with my family.'

Zack motioned at the screen with the remote control, flipping through all the channels that were carrying news from Kenya.

'I don't think all these guys are making this stuff up.' He said, and they sat together in silence for a while before Zack spoke again.

'Do you need anything? Do you have money?'

Kavata smiled and nodded. 'Thank you, Zack. You are kind. Do you have a small bag to spare?' Suddenly she didn't want to wait until morning. Zack offered her a ride to the airport whenever she was ready.

The last thing Kavata imagined she would be doing exactly a week after she had left her family was leaving her new family. Mutheu seemed more surprised that Zack had agreed to drive Kavata to the airport without running it by her, than she was with the news that Kavata had decided to go back. She eyed her husband's bag that sat by the door.

'Very well then, it was good meeting you. Travel safe.' She turned to Zack, who was lingering by the front door. 'Don't stay out too late darling. We have lots to do for the party tomorrow.' She spun on her heels and shuffled back up the stairs to bed. Kavata was sure she would never see her again, and that brought her great relief.

At the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, the lady at the counter took an unusually long time to book Kavata's flight to Kenya. She was young and nervous and looked like this was her first day on the job. She kept apologising for the delay as Kavata stood by patiently as those behind her grumbled at the delay.

'I'm sorry ma'am the system won't let me book your flight. Would you like to fly to another destination?' Kavata gave her a tight lipped smile and shook her head.

'Maybe you could call someone to help you? These computers can be such a nuisance sometimes.' The woman was relieved at her suggestion and pushed a button on the side of her desk that summoned a supervisor who arrived within moments. The young woman walked her supervisor through everything she'd done up to the point where she was unable to proceed.

'Candice, what error number shows up on the screen?' the supervisor spoke to her as if she were a slow child and shot Kavata an apologetic look.

'Error number 406.' Candice responded.

'And what does that error mean?' Candice searched her memory for the answer and when she couldn't find one she looked desperately at her supervisor as the complaints from the travellers behind Kavata grew louder.

'Well check the handbook darlin' these folks have flights to catch.' Kavata was sure the supervisor didn't know either. Candice flipped through a small thick book and her face lit up as soon as she found the answer. Her supervisor walked over to the next counter and opened it up so she could serve the disgruntled people behind Kavata.

'I'm sorry miss, we are unable to book the final leg of your journey due to...' she referred to the handbook again. '... temporary closure of airport at destination for security reasons.' She beamed with self-pride. Kavata had to insist that she try again, and Candice obliged but got the same result.

'Can you tell how long the airport will be closed?' Kavata asked, aware that she was asking too much from the sweet clueless girl. 'Can't I land in another airport in Mombasa or something? I really need to get to Nairobi.' Even as she said it she knew that it was a long shot.

'I'm sorry ma'am; I do not have any of that information on the system yet. What you could do, is book your flight to London. Things might have changed by the time you get there.' Kavata agreed and reached into her bag to pay for the flight and as she did so, she realized that she had forgotten to tell Lawrence that she was leaving. She phoned him as she waited to board the flight. He was shocked at the sudden decision and once she explained her reasons, he wished he too could go home.

Kavata offered him the money he needed, and at first he didn't believe her, insisting that it was more money than anyone should loan to a person that they had just met. Kavata insisted, saying that she would get in touch with Lawrence's brother as soon as she was back in Nairobi. She gave him the phone number and address to her house in case things got worse in Limuru and his family needed a place to stay and swore to be in touch as soon as she got home. Lawrence still seemed unconvinced by the time their call ended but Kavata didn't blame him. Nothing about her actions over the past few days was logical.

She phoned Ngugi and Wanja, her entire being aching for one of them to answer. When they didn't, worry and anger began to wash over her again. Anne had not been in touch since they had spoken the night before so she found comfort in the

fact that she would be home soon and everything would explain itself. Moments before she boarded the flight, Wairimu popped into her mind and she immediately scrolled through her contacts searching for her sister-in-law's number, scolding herself for not thinking of this sooner. It would not be unusual for Amani to be at her house if Ngugi had travelled.

Wairimu picked up on the second ring. Kavata had never been happier to speak to her, and she promised herself that once all of this was over, she would make an effort to renew their relationship. Wairimu seemed calm, too calm and Kavata began to doubt that she had the right person.

'Kavata?' She didn't conceal her shock at receiving the call. Kavata had explained that she had been trying to reach everyone at home for the past two days.

'Where are you?' Wairimu asked. Her calmness was unsettling to Kavata

'I am at the airport on the way back.' Kavata watched the boarding line grow shorter and shorter.

'Which airport?'

'Wairimu, I can't speak for long. I just need to find out if everyone is ok. Things on the news look horrible and I can't reach anyone from home. Have you heard from Ngugi? Is he safe? Do you know where my kids are?'

Wairimu reported that she had talked to Wanja as well as Ngugi the previous day. He had a few things to wrap up before he went back to Nairobi. Kavata understood why she was being so calm. When Wairimu asked her if she would like to speak to Amani, Kavata glanced at the rapidly moving boarding queue and said yes.

Amani was overjoyed that she was coming back and asked if she had brought him lots of gifts from America. He asked why she had lied to him that she was going to the supermarket; didn't she know that people who lied went to hell? Her son's voice gifted her with a beautiful sense of unexpected peace. When all she had been seeing and hearing from home was unrecognizable chaos, Amani had assured her that some pieces of home had remained untainted by the anarchy.

When Wairimu got back on the line, Kavata shared the news that she had received from Anne. As she suspected, Wairimu had not heard anything and was immediately plunged into worry. Everyone other than Kavata had boarded the plane and the stewards were looking at her curiously. She walked towards the boarding gate, as she tried to calm Wairimu down, explaining that she didn't know

anything further. Wairimu would ask around, and see what she could find out. Kavata insisted that Wairimu and her family go to the house and stay with Wanja. It was a much safer part of town anyway. They promised to touch base when Kavata got to London and once again she thought about Amani and how normal he had sounded moments ago. She was certain that Wairimu had done everything she could to distract him.

‘Thanks for everything Wairimu.’ Kavata said as they hung up, meaning it from the core of her heart.

Chapter Six
Monday, 31st December 2007

The sound of cars zooming past woke Ngugi up with a start. It took him a little while to figure out where he was, but within seconds, memories of his close shave with death flooded his mind as he lay in the reclined car seat. He didn't recall getting back into the car or falling asleep but he was glad he had. As the morning sun rolled over the hills in Machakos, he felt brave and invincible and considered going back to face the cowards who attacked him, just so they knew that he wasn't intimidated by them.

Then he remembered what was happening around the country. He had more urgent matters and needed to get home as soon as he could. His cellphone felt warm as if it had been in continuous use for hours. The screen displayed over forty two missed calls, more than half of which were from an undisclosed number. He went through the call log, Wairimu, Wanja and Hon Muli had tried to reach him as well as some colleagues who he was sure were calling to gloat about him losing the election. He had several text messages as well, but before he could get to them, the phone beeped three times and the screen went blank. Ngugi could see his charger plugged into the wall at the house in Machakos.

He stepped out of the car and bathed in the cool air and light warmth. Despite all that had happened, he felt good. The long cry and deep sleep had been good for him and now he was filled with a strange euphoria. He stretched out and took several deep breathes. He retrieved a clean shirt from his bag and changed out of his vomit-stained shirt. He was only an hour or so away from Nairobi and he had better chances of an uneventful trip back home if he continued his journey immediately. He assumed that those who had been fighting the previous night would have taken a break to rest.

He hadn't been driving very long when he got to a make-shift road block at Mlolongo. Cars were parked on the side of the road, some of them torched and some stripped completely with parts of them being used to feed a hungry fire that looked like it had been burning through the night. On the left side of the road, a massive truck had been derailed and used to block the weighbridge. A few cars were being let through the road block, but only after rigorous interrogation. Because the road was straight, the men at the roadblock saw Ngugi at the same time that he saw them. There was no other way to get in to Nairobi. This must have been why the men had picked this spot. Ngugi decided to take his chances.

The men at the roadblock waved sticks and *rungus* and branches in the air like they were welcoming Ngugi into their home. It comforted him to see that they had no real weapons. One of the road signs from the weighbridge that read NO TRUCKS BEYOND THIS POINT had been plucked off its pole and altered to read NO LUOS BEYOND THIS POINT. Ngugi felt relief, then instant guilt. He rolled down his window as he approached the road block and tried to remain calm as the young men surrounded his car.

'Is there a problem?' Ngugi channelled his thickest Kikuyu accent. The tension around the car dissolved almost instantly, although everyone stayed in place.

'No, not at all. We have no problems with people like you.' One of the men said in Kikuyu. 'You look like one of us, but you know some people are like chameleons. Can we see your ID?' Ngugi reached into his wallet and pulled out his ID catching a glimpse of his voter's card as he did so. The election seemed like it had been so long ago.

'Ngugi Mwangi, yes. No problem.' The man paused and recognition spread across his face.

'Aah, *Mheshimiwa*, it is you. You know we are not used to seeing big men driving themselves. Or did they already take away your cars?' One of the other men said something from the behind the car, sparking a brief conversation around him. Ngugi could only hear bits of the conversation through the closed windows, but he could tell that they were talking about the previous night's incident at Hon Muli's house.

'*Mheshimiwa*, I hear you should be a dead man by now. *Pole sana*, you know some people don't use their heads. You see, they are not like us; us we are peaceful people. We cannot harm our own people. We are only angry because last night they started calling us thieves and went around killing our people because they lost the election. That's why we have taken it upon ourselves to guard Nairobi so that no more of them come here. They should go back to the lake and stay there.' He pointed towards the 'No Luos' sign as he spoke and leaned further and further into the car so that his face was now only a few inches away from Ngugi's, who couldn't lean any further into his seat without offending the man. Then another car approached the road block and the men's attention was diverted as they went after their new victim. The man who had been speaking to Ngugi steered him towards a concealed opening at the weighbridge. He walked next to the car all the while carrying on with his explanations about why he and his gang were better than the men who raided Hon Muli's home. When Ngugi was safely through the roadblock, the man asked him for some money for soda and when Ngugi handed him two hundred shillings he shook his hand happily and wished him journey mercies.

From his rearview mirror, Ngugi could see the passenger in the car behind him being dragged out their car. There were three men and a woman who, judging from their beachwear, had just come from Mombasa. The driver was arguing with one of the men who hit him the face and he fell to the ground. Ngugi hit the brakes, his car screeched to a noisy halt and some of the men turned back. Four of the men ran towards Ngugi shouting at him to keep driving or else they would finish what the men in Machakos had started. He drove away as the innocent travellers were being forced to run in the direction they had come from, as the men ransacked the car and then set it ablaze. It had happened so quickly and methodically as if they had performed the same routine several times before. They worked with the same familiarity as the men who had broken into Hon Muli's house and Ngugi wondered if perhaps it was the same group of people. How else would they have heard so

quickly of what had happened? He had escaped with his life twice and it dawned on him that his return home would not be as straightforward as he imagined it would be.

He had better luck with the ATMs in Mlolongo. It seemed that news of the violence had not affected the sleepy transit town in the way that it had Machakos. A few bars were still open with drunken residents staggering out of them, hissing in the mild morning sunlight like vampires. Mlolongo was celebrating Kibaki's victory, completely unaware of what was going on a few kilometres on either side of the highway that cut through the town.

Ngugi stopped at the only petrol station that showed any sign of life. The woman at the pump was sleepy and uninterested in Ngugi's enquiries about if she had heard anything from Nairobi.

'*Watu wanauwawa,*' was all she said as if widespread massacres were the most usual thing to talk about. When Ngugi realized that he would get no more from her, he asked if there was a television or radio somewhere he could utilise for a few minutes. She pointed to the poorly stocked convenience shop, and instructed him to move his car away from the pump if he wasn't going to buy petrol. She continued with her nap while perched on an empty soda crate. The shop she directed him to was closed, despite the OPEN 24HRS sign that hung proudly on the door. He looked around the station for more signs of life and when he could find none, he walked over to the resting pump attendant and asked what time the shop was open. She didn't respond. Instead, with her eyes half shut, she pulled out her phone and dialled a number and put the cellphone back in her pocket. Seconds later, the door to the shop swung open and another man, looking just as disgruntled, walked back into the shop.

Ngugi walked around picking up a few expired refreshments, then went to the till and asked if the television behind him could be switched on. He paid for his refreshments with his eyes on the screen.

A female television anchor was interviewing the Commissioner of Police about the unrest. The man sat in studio in his elaborately decorated uniform. He was sweating so much one would think he was made of butter. He assured Kenyans that everything was under control and that policemen had been dispatched to all parts of

the country to maintain order. His words were contrasted by scenes from the streets where the violence had carried on through the night. In some parts of the country, groups had been organized to retaliate and it looked like the bloodbath was far from over. The journalist asked him to explain the images, tilting her head to the side as if she was trying to flirt the truth out of him. Things looked far from under control, but the commissioner simply asked the media to be responsible in what they exposed the public to. She kept at it, asking him questions that he couldn't answer. His eyes darted around like a caged animal. Eventually he ripped the microphone off his lapel and said he had better things to do as the journalist continued to shout questions at him and the camera followed him off the set.

Ngugi asked the shop keeper to change the channel, but he was ignored. He finally gave up and walked out. He heard the television go off as he stepped out of the shop and by the time he was back in his car, the door to the shop was also closed.

He had hoped to avoid driving blindly into trouble, but with no phone or car radio to guide him, Ngugi had no idea what to expect with each kilometre that he got closer to the city. So when he began to see stones and debris spewed on the side of the road as he approached the large airport interchange, he had to think fast. The roads were not as busy as they should have been at that time of the morning, but there was still a fair amount of traffic coming from the airport, going towards the city and to Mlolongo. Ngugi and others who had gotten through the Mlolongo road block after him waved oncoming cars down and warned them about what lay ahead. No cars were being allowed to get to or from the airport, halting operations at the airport. Cars were slowing down to a stop as they approached the road block as they tried to figure out what to do.

Ngugi got back into his car and against the better judgement of those who had stopped with him; he drove towards the road block. The chants of NO RAILA NO PEACE got clearer and louder as he approached the roaring vigilantes. Suddenly, he turned off the road, floored the gas and headed east before anyone had time to figure out what he was up to. Behind him, those who had been standing by watching him, jumped into their cars and followed suit. He drove over the uneven dirt terrain, raising crazy dust behind him as loose rocks hit the bottom of the car with loud knocking sounds. When the car got stuck in a shallow ditch, he reversed and quickly

manoeuvred his way out of it, making his way steadily towards the road. It was only when his choking car was safely on the tarmac that he turned back to see if the protestors were chasing them. They had taken no interest in his escape. Nor did they seem to care that several cars were following him. In fact, some of them seemed amused that they had caused such fear. They were there to seal off the airport and had succeeded in doing so. Nevertheless, Ngugi wanted to be nowhere close to them if or when they changed their mind, so he floored the gas pedal and continued east towards Embakasi.

You didn't need to see the carnage to know that the people who lived in Embakasi were reeling from the events of a rough and unforgiving night. It was in the air, the smell of gasoline, smoke and the sound of shock as people emerged from their hiding places to assess the state of things. Embakasi was still. It was as if everyone was afraid to speak, or move or breathe in case the violence might sense that there was still life there and come back.

Ngugi had not been back to Embakasi since his teenage years when his father had moved the family away from the city. He had heard that the place had changed drastically, but this was not what he expected.

The Chinese moved in build to the famous Eastern bypass that would finally make it easier for Embakasi residents to connect with the rest of Nairobi. This meant that they had to uproot the existing roads. All of them. So, for months that turned into years, dust replaced the air in Embakasi as cars, *matatus* and pedestrians tried to make their way across the gullies that the construction created. Frustrated tractors and mustard coloured caterpillars manoeuvred their way through people's lives trying to build them roads. This coupled with the burning and looting and sporadic killing of the previous night made Ngugi's old home look like it had been through decades of war.

When he could proceed no further by car, he parked, got out of the car and walked in the direction of his old neighbourhood. He walked past the caterpillars which were plastered with muddy footprints. It was clear that people had tried to steal them, but when they couldn't, they settled for siphoning the petrol out of the fuel tanks. Black hose pipes sat dripping remnants of fuel from the tanks onto the injured soil.

Ngugi walked around for hours taking it all in, as if what he was seeing would make sense to him if he stayed there a little longer. He walked past his old primary school. It stood untouched; there was nothing valuable to loot from a school. He continued towards Donholm, closer to where he used to live and things looked more like he remembered. When he got to his old home, he hesitated for a while before he picked up a stone and hit against the metal bars of the gate a few times. There were signs of life in the house but no one came to the gate and he made his way back to his car.

There was a little more life when he got back to the spot where his car was parked. A small group of people were huddled outside a TV repair shop watching the news. The same anchor he had watched a few hours ago was now reporting increasing death-tolls, in Kibera, Ngong, Umoja, Eastleigh and Kasarani. Ngugi panicked. Kasarani was not far from where Wairimu lived and those were all the places he needed to drive through to get home without driving through the city centre.

He spotted a few police men who had escorted the Chinese contractors who had come to assess the damage suffered to their equipment. He rushed towards them.

'Habari zenu, my name is Ngugi Mwangi,' he was tempted to add honourable to his name but decided against it at the last moment. He waited for some kind of acknowledgement, but the policeman seemed tired and distracted. Ngugi explained his situation. That he was coming from Machakos trying to get north of the city. The policeman laughed.

'My friend, the only way to get across Nairobi right now is inside a body bag. You should have just stayed in Machakos, but now you can't go there because there is trouble at Mlolongo and Athi River.' He wasn't saying anything Ngugi didn't already know and he thought back to the police commissioner's statement that everything was under control.

'Is there no way to go across? I need to get to my family.' The policeman asked where Ngugi lived and snickered as soon as he responded.

'There's nothing to worry about, the suburbs are safe so your family must be ok. My advice to you is to stay here for a day or two. There are a lot of youth taking advantage of the situation so they can steal and loot. That is what happened here. They're coming from neighbouring areas to loot. Since they have been here, they

won't come back. So stay here. Then when they get tired you can take your chances. That's the best thing to do.'

Ngugi did exactly that. He found a boarding house in Donholm and checked in for the day. The eager to please receptionist loaned him a battery charger and Ngugi spoke to Wairimu. She sobbed uncontrollably when she heard him on the other line, and when she was able to speak again she insulted him for giving them all such a fright. When Wairimu mentioned that she had heard news of the attack from Kavata, Ngugi's heart skipped a beat. Was she back? Had he been mistaken all along?

'She phoned from Atlanta, she's on her way back. She is sick with worry. She's been following everything.' Wairimu placed extra emphasis on that last word and Ngugi understood that it meant that his wife had heard of his lost bid. However, all he could think about was that she was on her way back home.

'How are things over there?' Ngugi was reminded of his sister's fleeting safety, and that his son was there with her.

'Dicey. Kavata insisted that we go to your house, but it has been too risky to leave. It's better to travel in the night. Jommo is out getting petrol now so we will try tonight.' It struck them both how much they had to plan a drive that usually took them fifteen minutes.

'Where are you now?' Wairimu realized it should have been her first question.

'In Donholm, at a B&B. I've been through two roadblocks already. They were not interesting. I bumped into a policeman who said it's best to stay here for a day or so. I will see what things are like later.'

Moments later, Ngugi was on the phone with Wanja who was just as happy to hear from him. She was at home and safe and confirmed that things were just as quiet as the policeman had reported. In fact, they were border line boring, she said.

'Your mother is coming home,'

'I heard, she sent me a text message,'

'Ok then, Aunt Wairimu will bring Amani home tomorrow. They might stay a few days until things calm down.'

'Ok.' Wanja was back to being aloof and Ngugi wondered how she could remain so unchanged in light of everything that was happening. When he thought back to what he had been through, he was glad that some things remained the same.

Schola was born in Kisumu and lived there for most of her life. She was the first born in a family of six all of whom were now married and lived in different parts of the country. The years when she should have been courting and getting married were spent caring for her mother after her father had passed away from an unknown disease. When her mother fell ill a few years after her dad died, it became clear what had killed them both, but nobody spoke of it.

She started working when she was very young to support her siblings, and as soon as they found their feet, she continued to work because it was all she knew. With nobody to support but herself, she opened up a small business in Kisumu and hired a young college graduate to run it while she was away in Nairobi working for the Mwangi's. Her business did very well, and in a few years she was able to buy herself a small house in Kisumu which she stayed in during her monthly visits. She had often considered quitting her housekeeping job, but the Mwangis had always been good to her, and had treated her like family. Being away from Kisumu also distracted her from the pain and humiliation of being an unmarried woman in her fifties.

Schola had arrived on Christmas morning. She saw the large X painted on the stone wall of her one bedroom house from a distance and approached it with caution. Dread rooted itself in the core of her gut and refused to leave.

She had seen the marks made on houses two times in the past but never on her house. The first time was when the new roads minister had launched a national road expansion project. The first thing he had done was issue everyone who had built structures on road reserves with directives to demolish them within a year. Houses that encroached on road reserves were marked. A year later, there was public outcry when those who refused to move found their homes and businesses flattened.

The second time she had seen the markings was during the constitutional referendum. People in Kisumu were still bitter that their candidate had not won the

2002 election, so the referendum was their next best bet at an ODM win. Kisumu supported the Orange constitution, but there were a few people who had openly declared their support for PNU's Banana constitution. These people had been warned that if they voted for the Banana constitution, and it won, they would be forced to leave Kisumu, and their properties would be given to those who were more deserving. Their houses were marked. Fortunately, the Orange constitution had won the referendum, and all threats were forgotten. So when Schola saw the familiar mark on her house, she knew that it was because she was a target, but she could not understand why.

Just before she got to her house, she turned the corner and walked a few meters to her shop to check if it had also been tainted. It hadn't. Helen, her employee, greeted her cordially and came around the counter to relieve her of her luggage. She then retrieved a ledger from behind the counter and gave it to Schola.

'No I'll come and look at the books later. I just wanted to see if all was well.' Schola said wondering how to pose the question that was lingering in her mind. 'How has everything been around here?' Schola asked in their shared mother tongue.

'Fine mama, everything is good.' Helen said.

'And at home, is your family well?'

'Yes, mama they are all well.' Schola realized that she would have to get to the point with this one. Helen lived two houses away from Schola, she would have seen the mark on her house as soon as it was made.

'Helen, have you seen the mark that has been put on my house?'

'Yes, I saw it.' Helen was avoiding her gaze.

'Do you know who made it?'

'No mama, we just woke up one morning and some houses had been marked. I don't know why.'

'When did you see it first?'

'It was last week on Friday.'

'And why didn't you call me?' Helen hesitated to answer.

'Because I didn't think it was anything big enough to call you about.' She was right. If Helen had called her about a harmless looking mark drawn on her house

she would probably have ignored it. 'Is there a problem, mama?' Her concern was genuine.

'No,' Schola prayed that she was right about that.

She had spent the days leading up to the election trying to get a sense of what was going on in her hometown. The election was on everybody's mind and there was a general sense of certainty that the country would finally be led by Jaramogi's descendant. It didn't take long for her to figure out that the houses and businesses that had been marked were those that belonged to Kikuyus, but it didn't explain why hers had been one of them. It must have been some kind of grave mistake so she made an effort to make it clear that she was an ODM supporter, even if she had learned long ago that her life would not be affected by whoever was in power. She wore her Raila and ODM t-shirts when she went to the market, and agreed to hand out ODM fliers to customers who visited her shop.

On voting day, she cast her ballot happily and like everyone else she went home to wait. But every time she got home, the glaring X hung ominously over her head and made her feel like she was sleeping under the blade of a guillotine. Unable to sleep that election night, she sprung out of bed and armed herself with bleach and soap and hot water and whatever else she could find in her house that would dissolve the oil based nuisance. She should have felt much better when the mark was gone, but the dull feeling in her stomach refused to go away.

When the fighting started three days later, Schola sat in her house quietly listening through the thin walls to her neighbours' reactions to the news of their defeat. She too was angry but more than that she was afraid. The marked houses would now be targeted for the violence, and even if she had erased it, there was no telling if they would remember that she should have been attacked. She sat silently in the dark, listening to each and every painful, frustrated scream that soared through the air. Kisumu was not a small city, but somehow, sitting there in her dimly lit house with her eyes fixed on the door, she was certain that she could hear each emotion as it erupted.

When the gunshots and explosions started, the screaming became louder and she grew more nervous. She sat frozen, assuring herself that she would be safe, this was her home and she had done nothing wrong, and she had a right to be there. In the

morning, things quieted down as the violence swept past them. She lay down on her bed, grateful to be able to rest her sore back and get some sleep.

She heard a loud bang just as she was fading away and dismissed it for more gunfire. But these gun shots were louder and more urgent than the previous ones. They were also much closer; it was almost as if they were right outside her door. Someone was banging furiously at her door.

Schola was not going to open the door and welcome her attackers into her home. If they wanted her out they would have to carry her out themselves. She sat up in her bed, calmly waiting for them to break the door down, while hoping that they went away. The banging was relentless, and after a while she thought she heard a voice that she recognised. She got up off her bed and walked towards the door and the voice became clearer. It wasn't a gang of goons at her door, it was Helen.

She was in a state, there was blood on her clothes, and she was crying and shaking and she fell into Schola's arms the minute she swung the door open. Schola locked the door behind them and led Helen to the sofa. She tried to calm Helen down and searched her body for a source of the blood.

'Mama you must go. Go away. Run. They came looking for you in the shop. Go, run away now.' Helen spoke in between sobs, but she was barely audible.

'Wait, wait Helen. What happened? Did they hurt you?' Helen shook her head and explained her blood-stained clothes.

Helen was at Schola's shop the previous night because they didn't have a TV at her parents' house and she wanted to watch the news. Musa, the building's security guard was there as well. When the shooting started, they were both afraid to go outside, so they locked the doors and decided to stay there until things subsided. At around midnight several men, about fifteen or twenty of them, broke into the shop. Musa tried to stop them, they hit him on the head and then drove a *panga* through his stomach. Helen was hiding behind the counter, and she screamed when she saw him tumble to the ground. They dragged her out of her hiding place and put her on the ground next to the dying man. She didn't know what to do to save him. She wanted to cover the wound in his stomach to stop the bleeding but she was afraid to touch the blood. The men laughed as they watched her fumbling and crying. Then they asked her where the shop owner was.

She lied that Schola was in Nairobi, and told them that she was a good Luo woman. They already knew this. They said that although she was Luo, she had chosen to work for a wealthy Kikuyu in Nairobi, so her business had been funded by Kikuyu money. They were there to chase her away and claim the business. Helen sat still as the men looted the shop, stealing everything they could fit into their pockets and sacks and onto the wooden cart that was parked outside. Life ebbed out of her friend who was still on the floor next to her, groaning and calling for his wife and children as he died.

‘They killed Musa for nothing! They took everything.’ Helen broke down once again. This time Schola didn’t try to calm her down. Now she understood why her house had been marked. The men said that they would be back, that they knew that Schola was in Kisumu and they would be back to find her. Had she left the mark on her door they would have done so already.

‘Where is Musa? His body?’ Schola asked.

Helen wailed at the mention of the man’s name. She left him in the shop. She didn’t know what else to do so she had stayed there all night, and came to find Schola as soon as the sun came up.

Schola heated some water for Helen to take a bath and gave her some clean clothes. She was unable to eat or sleep so the two women sat together for a few hours. Every few minutes, Helen would ask Schola why she was not getting ready to run away. Schola never responded, she didn’t know to say. Where would she go? This was her home. She thought about Thuo and Cheptoo. Maybe she could go there. But she had no way of knowing if they were in Nairobi or if Thuo was still in jail. Panic and worry coursed through her, but for the sake of Helen whose warning had potentially saved her life, she remained calm.

That afternoon, Schola encouraged Helen to go home to her parents so that she could go take care of the man rotting in her shop. The violence had moved on to a different part of the city and after explaining what had happened to a sympathetic neighbour, Schola was able to convince him to drive Helen home in his taxi. She walked the short distance to her shop and stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of it. The flimsy door hung open on its only remaining hinge and there was a trail of blood leading out of the door like a bleeding body had been dragged out of the shop. She prayed that wasn’t the case but when she stepped into the shop; Musa’s body

was nowhere to be found. She raced around the shop, searching behind boxes, around corners and under collapsed shelves but there was no body. There was only the thick metallic smell of the pool of blood that was congealing on her Formica tiles. She let out a frustrated yell and leaned against the counter unable to understand who would steal a dead body.

She nearly collapsed when the man who owned the shop next to her greeted her from the doorway. He had heard everything from his house above the shops and had called the police but they never came. He had informed Musa's wife that her husband had been killed and the distraught woman came to the shop just minutes after Helen had left. She insisted on taking her husband home and wouldn't accept anyone's help. She'd struggled to lift him on her own, so she ended up dragging him out the door. Thankfully Musa's brother arrived and helped her. He would be cremated later in the day.

Schola's neighbour looked around the shop and offered his sympathies before he walked into his untouched shop. Helen's continuous pleas for Schola to leave Kisumu came back into her mind. As she looked around the business that she had spent several years building, she lost all desire to live in a place that had rejected her. She didn't know where she would go, but she was going to leave. She looked around the shop for things that she would take with her but found nothing. She forced the broken door shut and locked it, and then she walked away.

When she got home, she packed a few things and went to speak to her neighbour. He was a Kisii man and, although his house had not been marked, he was also afraid of being targeted. He was making arrangements to go to Kisii that night and although it was the longest possible route to Nairobi it was her only option since buses were not running. He would drive her for a fee, and they agreed to leave at midnight.

The violence had subsided in most parts of the country as the year drew to a close that night. Murderers, thieves and protestors took some time off to rest, take stock of how much they had stolen, and cash in their body counts for payment from the wealthy men who had bought their consciences. With wallets full of blood money, they went out on to the streets that they now claimed, to welcome a year that would be like no other. They had tasted power and it was good, and for them

things could never be the same. Those who had suffered took advantage of the silence to dry their eyes and go out searching for bodies to bury, envious that their departed ones had found a strange and sudden peace. Those who could fled to safety, and those unable to do so could only hope that the worst was over.

Schola locked up her house and climbed into her neighbour's old Toyota. She hoped that she would find her home as she had left it if she ever came back. And if she didn't she asked for the strength to build a new one elsewhere.

Ngugi paid his bill and walked past the half-hearted celebrations that were going on in the dining hall of the bed and breakfast he had spent the day in. The receptionist encouraged him to stay and jump the year with them, but nothing would have depressed him more. There had been no mention of any violence on the news for several hours now, and he chose to believe that that was a good sign. He thought about Kavata as he got behind the wheel and took the long route home.

Wairimu insisted that they have a small New Years Eve Party at their home with her family before they headed to Ngugi's house. Amani and her children were glad to have something to break the depressing mood in the air despite Wairimu's efforts to keep them distracted. Jommo agreed that it would probably be safer to leave after all the hullabaloo of midnight and the New Year had died. At three am, she watched as her husband carried the sleeping children into car and packed a few essentials into the trunk. She hoped that the worst was over and she would somehow find it in herself to move past the shock of a series of betrayals.

Kavata got off the plane in London a few minutes after midnight. The complimentary glass of champagne that the airline stewards had distributed had left her light-headed and a little giddy. But the smile on her face had nothing to do with the champagne. Though she had only been away a week, it felt like months, but she was finally going home.

Chapter Seven
Tuesday, January 1 2008

It didn't matter that Jommo checked every news channel for updates on the violence before he packed his family into his car to head out to Ngugi's house. Or that Wairimu phoned and texted everyone she knew who lived in the distance between the two houses and asked them to peek outside the window and check that all was clear. Or that the two of them discussed every possible route they could take in case there was chaos on the road. They would never have been able to avoid the huge mob that was heading straight for them as they sat in their car, less than a kilometre away from their home.

'Shit,' Jommo slammed the brakes, put the car in reverse and drove right in to the car that he hadn't seen behind them. The force of the impact was so intense that Amani, who was standing in the foot-well in between his cousins, was flung into the gap between the two front seats. He was stunned silent for a while as he lay wedged between the front seats, and then he let out a shrill cry. His cousins pulled him back on to the seat, and Wairimu looked back to check that he wasn't hurt then

instructed him to sit down and strap on his seatbelt. She tried to conceal the slight tremble in her voice. Amani wouldn't hear it, his cries grew louder. His cousins began to yell at him to shut up.

Jommo cursed again as he tried to manoeuvre his way around the crowd which had now closed in on them and only grew more frenzied the more he tried to escape. Wairimu was saying something to him but he couldn't hear her over Amani's cries, his children arguing, and the mad mob outside.

'Uncle Jommo – let's go back to your house. I'm scared,' Amani said in between sobs and being shushed by his cousins whose eyes were also filled with terror.

'Amani, be silent and sit back,' Wairimu said before she turned to her husband. At home, she had tried to avoid watching news of the violence while the children were in the room but at some point it became impossible to hide the truth of what was happening in the country from them.

'Uncle Jommo – please take us back to your house,' Amani pleaded again.

'Lock the doors,' Jommo shouted as the crowd came round to his side of the car and demanded that he roll down the window. Wairimu was now shouting over the commotion, saying something about weapons, but Jommo wasn't paying any attention to her as he inched the car further into the dense crowd. Most of them were on the right side of the car and were jostling and rocking it wildly. Wairimu looked out of her window and noticed the wide ditch that the tilting car was threatening to tip over into. All three children in the back seat were screaming and crying. Amani squeezed his eyes shut.

'Jommo, stop!' Wairimu shouted so loud that some of the men outside the car heard her and echoed her. They started calling Jommo by name and telling him to listen to his wise wife and stop the car.

'They don't have any weapons, Jommo, they're celebrating. Stop and let them pass!' Jommo studied the crowd for the first time, feeling like a fool. Wairimu was right. There were no weapons in the air, only branches, tinsel and PNU banners. The crowd was only getting worked up because Jommo's refusal to stop and celebrate with them must have meant that he was for the opposition. He looked through the rear-view mirror at the car behind them. Their windows were rolled down and although there was terror on their faces, the people inside the car were waving and cheering with the crowd.

Jommo rolled down his window. Amani screamed and told his uncles not to open the window. Wairimu started to apologise to the crowd for the misunderstanding, explaining that their children were afraid, and they were eager to get them home. A man bent down and looked into the back of the car to speak to the children. Amani screamed again and jumped out of his seat causing a fresh burst of shouting from his cousins. Jommo turned to look behind just in time to see Amani climbing over his cousin, unlocking the door and bolting out of the car.

'Amani, stop!' Wairimu shouted her voice loaded with anger and worry. Jommo reached backward to try and grab him but his seatbelt restricted him. It was too late. Amani was already out of the car and tumbling head first into the concrete ditch.

The last thing Wairimu saw before she forced her door open was her nephew head landing heavily on the concrete.

'Jesus! Amani!' She screamed as Jommo tried to pry his door open against the clueless crowd. The man he had been speaking to had seen everything and was trying to get the crowd to move, without much success. Jommo barked at his kids to stay in the car and lock the doors before he climbed over to the passenger side of the car and followed Wairimu out through her door.

Wairimu tumbled down the slope and landed feet first into the ditch, all the while listening desperately for Amani's cries. She was struggling to lift Amani's still body out of the narrow space. Jommo got to them and lifted him out. Wairimu shrieked when she saw how much of Amani's blood, which was gushing out of the cut on the top of his head, had collected in the ditch. She kept calling his name, urging him to respond, as Jommo climbed out of the ditch and struggled up the slope towards the car. He shouted at his eldest son to jump in the front seat and stepped aside for Wairimu to get into the back and placed the still bleeding boy onto his wife's lap. He pushed the now apologetic crowd aside violently as he made his way to the driver's seat. Most of the crowd had dispersed, and those who were still on the road scurried away to safety as Jommo sped off to the Aga Khan Hospital.

Jail cells all over the country were filling up fast. The priority for the police was quashing the violence, so the police stations were inadequately manned and were getting dangerously close to becoming a crisis of their own.

The Kenya Defence Forces stepped in to help. They took to the streets to relieve an exhausted police force, and instructed that the holding cells be emptied out as soon as possible. With them in charge, they were sure that the violence would be under control before the end of the day as they would need space for all the people that they would be arresting.

That morning, the door to the cell that Thuo had been sitting in for a week swung open and Thuo and his cell mate Pato were informed that they were getting moved to the prison in Rongai. Thuo began to protest, but Pato hit him on the back of the head, and warned him to be quiet. Kiprop, who Thuo hadn't seen or heard from since the night the election ended, was back at the station. Thuo searched his eyes for clues to what was happening, but the man's eyes were dark and exhausted as if they needed to be emptied of all the things they had seen. Kiprop led Thuo and Patrick to the back of the waiting police cruiser and sat opposite them. He had a gun with him, and he pointed it towards them as the truck sputtered to life.

'If you try anything I will shoot,' he said and Thuo had no doubt that he meant it. Then he rested his head and closed his eyes. The floor was sticky with blood and littered with discarded items of clothing. The tinny smell was overwhelming but it was nothing compared to what Thuo had lived with while in the cell. He took in the fresh air, happy to be out of the cell and reluctant to think about the fate that was waiting for him on the other end of this journey.

Kiprop was fast asleep by the time the cruiser arrived at the next police station to pick up more prisoners. They stopped at a few more stations on the way and in no time, there were several men tightly stacked into the back of the truck like beer bottles in a crate. When Pato was certain that Kiprop couldn't hear him, he whispered to Thuo and convinced him to make his escape.

'They didn't enter you onto the log, so no one is going to know if you make it to Rongai or not. You should run.' The idea had not crossed Thuo's mind at all. He glanced over at Kiprop, who was still sleeping soundly despite the increased activity around him.

‘What are you thinking about? If only I was you, I would have been at home by now ploughing my wife. *Heh*, I’ve surely never met a fool like you.’ It was exactly what Thuo needed to hear to make his decision. The worst that could happen was that he would get caught and thrown back onto the truck. Pato was still goading him to make a run for it, and even though Thuo knew that his cellmate was as usual looking for something to amuse himself with he was convinced he could do it.

He didn’t know how much farther they had to go before they got to the prison, but the farther they were the better. There was hardly any traffic on the roads so they were travelling at a reasonably high speed, slowing down only to make turns. Every time they slowed down a little, Thuo would prepare to jump only to change his mind at the very last second. He was either afraid that the car behind them would run him over, or worse, alert Kiprop of his attempted escape. Or that the terrain on the side of the road didn’t have enough vegetation for him to hide behind once he got off. One time he closed his eyes and decided to do it but his body just would not move.

Pato was growing impatient with him and Thuo was now irritating himself. Pato had just begun to give him a lecture about taking control of one’s own destiny, when they slowed down to turn off the main road on to the muram road that led to the prison. Thuo shot up off his seat, swung his legs over the door and finally jumped off the moving vehicle. He felt Pato shove him off the cruiser, his final encouragement before he shifted over to take Thuo’s seat and pulled one other man down to take his place so the driver wouldn’t notice Thuo missing if he looked back through his side mirror.

Thuo’s left foot landed on a sharp stone and pierced through his shoe. The pain caused him to lose balance and fall on his knees. He yelped but then checked himself and quickly got up and ran to the side of the road. As he ran away, he listened for the sound of Kiprop shouting at him or that of the cruiser screeching to a halt. He braced himself for a bullet to pierce through his back. When none of this happened, he kept running anyway, only slowing to look back when he was certain that the police cruiser hadn’t stopped. From this distance, he could see Kiprop still fast asleep with his mouth hanging open absorbing the raised red dust. Some of the prisoners were looking back at Thuo, their faces expressionless. And there was Pato,

grinning widely with both his thumbs held out in congratulations. He waved back at Pato, turned around and continued running.

Thuo only stopped when his lungs cried out for dear mercy and his starved body threatened to collapse if he pushed it any further. The putrid stench from the police cell still followed him around despite the fact that he was miles away from it. When he rested on a heap of abandoned tyres on the roadside, he realized the horrible smell was coming from his body. He had not bathed in the days spent wading in a shallow pond of human waste. The odour of his body in the clean warm air was nauseating. The bottom of his trousers were caked in the foul mess and his shirt was so stained and stiff with sweat and tears, that it looked as if it had been dipped in brown starch.

Thuo immediately became aware of his appearance. All his belongings, his phone, wallet, belt and shoelaces had not been returned to him, so the only way he would get home would be at the mercy of good Samaritans whom he hoped would give him a lift. There was no way anyone would give him a second glance looking the way he did. He scanned his surroundings, spotted a petrol station and cajoled his aching feet to carry him a few more meters to it. To his delight, he found a black hose pipe coiled around the air pressure pump at the station's entrance. He staggered towards it, anticipating the relief of cool water gliding down his parched throat and dehydrated body. He uncoiled the hosepipe and reached for the tap and was deflated when his fingers encountered the small padlock that secured the tap. He looked around for someone to unlock it, realising only now that the station was closed. He walked around the abandoned establishment, looking for a second unlocked tap somewhere. When he couldn't find one, he resigned himself to drinking the water from the large plastic drum that sat in between the petrol pumps. The sensation in his throat as the soap burned his tongue confirmed that he was drinking the water used to clean windshields. He washed his face, and dipped his shirt in the bucket and cleaned it the best he could before he used the wet shirt to mop his torso. He wrung the water off his shirt and put it back on, the January sun would dry it in no time. He was about to do the same thing with his trousers when a guard emerged from the back of the station. He was zipping up his pants like he had just come from the toilet.

'Wewe! Unafanya nini? Does this look like your bathroom?' The guard picked an empty can from a nearby bin and hurled it at Thuo who was already running out of the station. His wet shirt clung to his body and the breeze as he ran was refreshing. He tried not to think about the shame he just felt at being treated like a stray cat.

At another gas station a few kilometres down the road, he decided to try a different approach. This one was open and there was a long line of cars waiting for fuel, the drivers all looked worried as they waited for their turn at the pump. Thuo had been one of those drivers before so he could tell that there was a fuel shortage looming. He approached one of the attendants and explained that he had gotten caught up in the unrest and was trying to get back home. He just needed some water to drink and clean his face. The busy attendant barely looked at Thuo as he directed him to a room behind the convenience shop where there was a toilet and shower that he could use. Thuo locked himself in the small dark stall, removed his shoes and stood fully clothed in the tepid water. He relished the spray of the water as it washed away layers of dirt and he could finally feel his skin again. He felt human again. The anguish of the past few days slithered down the drain with his dirty bath water.

Thuo thanked the attendant and continued his trek towards Nairobi, the weight of his drenched clothes slowed him down and his wet feet slid around in his shoes. He had momentarily forgotten that he was a fugitive, and that if Kiprop had gotten to the prison and reported him missing, the police would be out looking for him at any moment. The image of the sleeping policeman popped into his mind and though he doubted this would happen, he took precautions anyway. He kept himself concealed behind bushes and shrubs when he could, and ran across the sections of the roadsides that were bare.

It took him over two hours to get to the junction at the highway that led to the city. With clean dry clothes, he was less conspicuous. He stood among a crowd of people waiting for buses or *matatus* which arrived infrequently and were often packed beyond capacity. A newspaper vendor was shouting at the waiting passengers to buy the paper for forty shillings, or read it for ten, and see the warzone that the country had become. Thuo stood behind a man who had rented the newspaper and looked over his shoulder as he flipped through the pages in disbelief.

The front page of the paper bore the headline- WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED. It was the paper's response to a government directive that banned all media reports of the post election violence, which was now being referred to as PEV. After that, pages upon pages of dead bodies, burnt homes and looted properties. Policemen were firing bullets and tear gas canisters at groups of unarmed protestors in one series of photos. In another, armed protestors were chasing policemen and women and children were being trampled on by frenzied crowds.

A lorry stopped at the bus stop and everyone began to push and shove so they could climb onboard. Thuo hesitated to get on, he didn't know where it was going and nobody around him seemed to know or care. Women lifted their children up for strangers to hoist them onboard before they struggled to lift themselves on to the back of the four tonne truck.

Thuo's body was on the moving vehicle but his mind was busy etching the images he had just seen into his memory. He had tried not to worry himself with thoughts of his family but now didn't know if he was hoping for them to be in Nairobi or Nakuru. He thought about Ngugi and Kavata and their children and wondered if they had kept up with the news in their fortunate part of the world. From where he stood, he could see most of the city. It looked calm. Too calm to be the place where the pictures he had just seen had been taken. However, dense smoke rose into the air above one section of the city not too far away from them. It spread to the blue skies above the rest of the city and Thuo almost wished that he could blow it away and make it stick to its territory. He looked towards Kangemi and willed this truck to head in that direction, but it didn't. In fact, it was heading north, towards the thick black smoke.

Thuo's fellow passengers began to shout at the driver to stop and let them off since he was driving further into Kibera towards the gunshots and into the thick smoke which turned out to be teargas. He kept on driving, insisting that he knew where he was going and that nobody had forced them to get on to the truck. He drove like a madman, driving on pavements and speeding down the wrong side of the road. Thuo wondered how the driver was able to keep his eyes open. Every time Thuo tried, the sting of the toxic gas would force them back shut. Then he realized when he saw them heading straight for an electricity pole that the driver couldn't see either and braced himself for the impact.

The sound of the impact and the alarmed screams from the passengers were mistaken for some kind of an attack by the police who were a few meters away. They responded with more tear gas and opened fire into the thick haze. People began to climb over each other to get off the vehicle that had moments ago been their chariot to safety. Thuo held on to the side rails for dear life as people pushed past him. The driver had tumbled out of the vehicle and was running away when a bullet hit him in the back sending him soaring a few feet into the air, before he plunged into the ground. Thuo forced his eyes open and looked in the direction that the gunfire was coming from. He saw the police heading cautiously in his direction. Their gas masks made them look like terrorist aliens shooting at any and everything that moved. Thuo knew he would never make it off that truck alive, so he climbed over the side and clambered into the front through the passenger window. Once he was inside, he folded himself into the tiniest ball he could manage, hid in the footwell, and waited.

The police were close and their gunshots even closer. Thuo kept his eyes shut; he didn't want to see his death coming. The people on the truck were now shouting at the police to stop shooting, they had children with them. They had no weapons. The shooting didn't stop even if Thuo was sure the police could hear the innocent cries. He heard heavy footsteps approach to confirm that there were unarmed people in the truck. The person with the heavy footsteps called for the shooting to stop, and then barked at them to get up and disappear. Thuo didn't move, he wished he had stayed at the back and was afraid that he would end up like the driver. He stayed where he was; eyes squeezed shut until he was sure that the police were gone when he heard a fresh round of gun fire in the distance. With his eyes still shut, he opened the door and ran towards the tin shacks.

He knew he was on the wrong side of Kibera when every house he walked past had a poster of Raila on the door. It was common knowledge that the slum was zoned based on tribal and political allegiance. Those who were caught on the wrong side never lived to tell the story. He abandoned his initial plan to find a friendly spot to hide out until his eyes were functional, that would lead to a certain death. He had no clue where the Kikuyu side of Kibera was, but he didn't think he would find out any time soon. He turned around and walked back towards the truck that brought him here.

The tear gas had wafted away, revealing several bodies scattered like large rag dolls all over the place. It was a million times worse than the images that he had seen in the newspaper which was still folded into the jacket pocket of the man who Thuo had stood behind at the bus stop. He was dead, on the side of the road. His left shoe was missing and his leg looked like it was broken. Thuo had initially planned to drive the truck out of Kibera, but there were dead bodies in the back. He abandoned that plan as well and walked in the direction the police had come from, reminding himself over and over again not to run because here, running could get you killed.

Cheptoo had made every effort to make Nakuru feel like home. She had taught herself the language so that she could teach it to her children so that they were not made fun of by their peers when they visited their father's home. When she went to the market the women would gossip about her in Kikuyu, expecting her not to understand what they were saying. She enjoyed the shocked expressions on their faces when she responded to them in their language. It had always been easier when Thuo was there with her. Nobody whispered behind her back, and if they did, he would be quick to put them in their place. There had been a lot more whispering and warnings this time around and she had been desperate for her husband to come home. When she could take it no more, she locked up her house and went to stay with Thuo's aunt. She was more than happy to accommodate Cheptoo and her children, but it was clear that she was also worried about her nephew's non-Kikuyu wife.

There were all manner of rumours about things going on in Nakuru. The lake was filled with bodies of Luos and Kalenjins. Men were being forced to drop their pants and prove that they had been circumcised and if they hadn't been, then gangs would hold them down and perform forced circumcisions. Men who fought the circumcisions had their entire penises chopped off and stuffed into their mouths as the crowd taunted them for being both uncircumcised and homosexuals. When they eventually bled to death, their bodies were thrown into the lake. Kalenjin women

were spared death. Instead they were ripped away from their homes and taken to the homes of Kikuyu men, where they were tied to beds and raped repeatedly for days until semen oozed freely out of them and collected in pools around their bruised buttocks.

The only reason Cheptoo was hesitant to leave Nakuru was because she was waiting for Thuo. But Thuo would be of no use to her if she was dead. Thuo's aunt pleaded with her to leave her children behind. They had Kikuyu names and would be much safer with her in Nakuru than on the road with Cheptoo. She had often said that she wished they had looked more like her; now she was grateful that they took after their father. They cried painfully when she left the house in the dead of the night and rode the army truck that was ferrying non-Kikuyus to Eldoret, praying the entire time that they would be safe.

The ride to Eldoret was uneventful, she was surrounded by gloom and suffering. Some people cried during the entire journey. Men clutched their bandaged arms, heads and crotches as they slept; the pain of their injuries too severe to endure while awake.

The driver stopped when they were in Eldoret and asked those who could to stand up and lift the canvas sides of the truck so that they were able to get some fresh air. They were safe now. Cheptoo was now able to see the people she had travelled with more clearly. They looked more distraught in the light of day, but were happy to have escaped Nakuru with their lives and whatever was left of their dignities. They continued towards the camp that had been set up for the internally displaced at the Eldoret show grounds. The streets were heavily policed and felt safer, and Cheptoo could finally stop holding her breath.

The truck came to an abrupt stop in front of a well-known Anglican church. The road had been blocked and several people in the truck began to worry that their safety had been short-lived. A tall man holding a rifle walked up to the driver and calmly asked him to wait a few minutes. They were performing a cleansing ritual and several people had gathered to watch. He was a Kalenjin man, and Cheptoo, who could hear the conversation, was pleased to hear her language being spoken so openly, after days of being of being afraid to speak out. The man asked the driver who the people at the back of the truck were. The driver explained that they were

Kalenjins who were fleeing Nakuru, and went into a few details of what was going on there.

The man came to the back and apologised to them for their misfortune. He called out to a few of his colleagues to bring them food and water. Cheptoo watched as men in plain clothes, also holding guns, went into a small store and emerged with sodas, water, biscuits and corn chips and placed them on the floor of the truck for them to devour. People came alive as they grabbed as much as they could. Cheptoo handed snacks to the men who were unable to move because of their injuries. She was horribly thirsty, but something about these men didn't feel right and she was uncomfortable accepting food from them.

There was some commotion in the distance, but Cheptoo had been unable to tell where it was coming from until she stood up to distribute the snacks. She could see the church clearly. There were thousands of people gathered around it. The men at the front of the crowd were nailing the doors of the church shut. There were people inside the church, screaming and crying and waving their hands out of the church windows begging to be let out.

A man climbed out of a window at the back of the church, and was stunned at the size of the crowd. He ran around like a headless chicken, looking for a gap in the throng of people through which he could escape, but nobody would let him through. They just pointed and laughed at him, a few of them kicking him and pushing him back towards the church. The men who seemed to be in charge walked around dousing the church in a fluid Cheptoo couldn't quite see. She assumed that it was holy water since this was a cleansing ritual but she couldn't understand why they would be cleansing a church.

The man who had escaped was exhausted by now, and badly injured, but he fought on. When he could walk no more, he crawled around on the ground heading back into the crowd and each time he was kicked back towards the church. He was no longer amusing to watch, so two men carried him towards the church and bound his wrists to a wooden pole. They doused him in the same liquid they had used on the church and set him on fire.

Cheptoo began to scream.

She rushed to the side of the truck and jumped out and ran towards the church, and struggled to get through the crowd. Behind her, the men who had fed them

warned her to stay away, but they didn't bother to run after her. When she realized that she would never get through the dense crowd in time, she turned back, ran up to the driver and begged him to do something. He was a soldier, they would listen to him. He simply shrugged his shoulders and asked her how she could want to spare their lives when these were the same people who were throwing her people into Lake Nakuru. She went back and fought her way through the thick crowd, her shouts for people to stop watching and do something earned her a few jabs and punches from invisible fists and elbows. She had almost made her way through the crowd when the church went up in flames. The crowd leaned back away from the flames and Cheptoo forged forward. The screams from the church were loud and guttural and Cheptoo had to cover her ears for fear that her head would explode.

The crowd spat her out in front of the church just as the man who had been tied to the church gave in to the flames. She rushed to the men who were responsible for this and begged them to stop, pulling on their shirts as she screamed at them. A heavy blow sent her flying so close to the church that she could feel the heat of the flames licking her body and smell the porky scent of burning flesh. She had started gathering soil with her bare hands and throwing it towards the church, trying to put out the flames when someone grabbed her by her braids and dragged her away from the church.

'We will throw you in there if you do not stop this stupidity,' said the man who had her by hair. She didn't move anymore. She watched as the ravenous flames devoured the man's body, only relenting when he was reduced to a charred skeleton. She listened as the screaming and banging inside the church was replaced by coughing and garbled choking. She looked around her for a sign that this was just a bad dream. The faces around her were blank. Some people shook their heads; others were filled with satisfied hate. There was no sympathy, nobody tried to help, and nobody spoke a word. They simply stared at the burning church, with the flames glinting in their eyes making them look like they had all been possessed by an evil spirit.

The crowd began to thin out when the only sounds coming from the church were those of sizzling wood and the building collapsing. The men responsible walked away proudly, their weapons slung over their shoulders like farmers coming home from a day of digging the earth. Cheptoo's eyeballs felt like there was a film of dust

over them, protecting her from seeing anything further. She shut them for a moment, and when she opened them again, there were only a handful of people around the smoking church. The truck that had brought her here from Nakuru was nowhere in sight. Her entire body ached, there was blood oozing from the gash on the side of her face and her clothes were so badly torn that all her underwear was visible.

She was sitting in the shade under a tree, eyes still glued to the church, when the Red Cross vans arrived at the scene. At first, the medics just stood and stared. Some of them broke down into tears while others bent over to vomit in the bushes. They stood around talking and staring. There was no need to hurry, it was clear that there was no one inside the church that they could save. One of them spotted Cheptoo and rushed towards her with a medical kit. At first Cheptoo wouldn't let the medic touch her. She hurled rocks at him when he tried to. Eventually the young man stood a few meters and tried to speak to her.

'Did you see what happened here?'

Cheptoo nodded.

'Were you inside the church?'

Cheptoo shook her head.

'Are you in pain?'

Cheptoo nodded.

'Will you let me look at your wound?'

Cheptoo shook her head. The wound on her face was not the source of her pain, but the words she needed to explain this escaped her. Instead a fresh wave of tears filled her eyes and she did nothing to stop them. She hoped that they would erase what she had seen. The medic sat with her until more people came to help them move the bodies to the morgue. Firemen arrived and reluctantly sprayed the church with water so that the medics could go inside. They pried the doors open and then drove away.

The medic tried again, for as long as Cheptoo was alive and injured, she was more of a priority than the dead bodies in the charcoal grave.

'I want to help.' Cheptoo finally responded and the man nearly fell over when she explained that she wanted to assist in retrieving the bodies. He tried to deter her, telling her she didn't have the training to deal with this kind of work. Cheptoo

explained that she was almost killed earlier on for trying to help the people in the church. She had failed to help them then, so she would help them now.

‘You don’t need to be taught how to carry a dead body,’ she added as she struggled to get on her feet.

The medic helped her up and insisted that he was not letting her anywhere near the building until he had examined her. Cheptoo agreed. She didn’t feel a thing as the medic cleaned the deep cut and stitched her flesh back together. Nor did she feel shame when she removed her clothes so he could examine the bruises on her arms, thighs, and chest. There were many small cuts on her breasts and buttocks, like someone had driven their fingernails into her. She sat still as these smaller cuts were tended to and painkillers were injected into her. A female medic brought her a spare uniform to wear before the team allowed her to join them. The truth was that they were a small and inexperienced team; they needed all the help they could get.

Watching them lift the man’s remains off the church steps was difficult for Cheptoo. He had been handcuffed to the church, so it took a while longer to saw through the wood so they could release him. He was the only person whom she had actually seen alive. She clearly remembered what his face looked like as he ran around the crowd, fighting for his life. It was as if he had accepted death already, but wouldn’t give his aggressors the benefit of knowing so. He had been strong, and full of life, but now he was simply a charred mass. So insignificant that it only took one person to lift him and put him in the body bag.

Cheptoo’s task was to give each of the bodies an identity before they were loaded on to the vans and taken to the morgues. She struggled to get started. How was she supposed to give names to people she had never known? The line of carcasses in body bags was growing steadily as the medics pulled them out of the church. The medic who had treated her came to find out what was taking so long.

‘Don’t think about it too hard. Just give them any name, or number.’ Cheptoo recoiled at the idea. These were people, not numbers, but she had to get the job done. Eventually she settled on Kiambaa Church #1, Kiambaa Church #2 and so on. She tied their name tag onto the burnt toes that the medics had left out of the zipped bag and then zipped the body bag shut.

There was no way of knowing how many people were in the church before it was set alight and none of the Red Cross team had known what to expect when they

arrived at the scene. It was clear that they didn't have enough body bags and they had to wait for others to be brought to them. The church massacre had caused a fresh outbreak of violence in Eldoret, so there was no telling how long it would be until more bags got delivered to them. Most of the victims were children, so they decided that they would fit two small bodies in one bag. Eventually, they had no choice but to transport the rapidly decomposing bodies on the back of a pickup, covered in linen sheets.

The team of ten volunteers looked at the church in complete disbelief as the last of the victims' bodies were taken to the morgue hours later. Cheptoo had counted twenty eight bodies, fifteen of whom had been children. The volunteers milled about the scene, collecting used gloves and pieces of flesh that had fallen off the victims as they were being moved. When they were eventually ready to leave, Cheptoo was left standing outside the vans. It occurred to her that she had nowhere to go. One of the volunteers saw her and stopped the van, when Cheptoo explained how she had gotten to Eldoret, the volunteer asked her to travel back to the Red Cross office with them.

They drove away from the church in silence. Cheptoo looked back and noticed for the first time that there had been a small crowd gathered around the church. She wondered how long they had been there, and if those people had been part of the same crowd that stood by watching that morning. She was suddenly able to feel again. In a flash, the pain in her body became real, as did the intense hate she felt for those thousands of people who had stood by and watched twenty eight innocent people die.

Kavata shouted at the man at the information desk at the Heathrow Airport who told her that no airline was flying into Kenya. When she was done with him she walked from airline to airline, stood in every line and tried to book a flight to Kenya, with no success. It was only then that she accepted defeat. Her feet were swollen and her lower back ached from standing so long. She looked up at the information screen that she had been studying for hours and looked for a flight that would get her as close to home as possible. A flight was departing for Uganda in an hour, from

a terminal at the other end of the massive airport. Kavata hobbled across and got there just in time. She purchased her ticket and made her way to the boarding gate only realising when she was safely fastened into her aisle seat that the flight had a six hour layover in Dubai.

She was the first one off the aircraft in Kampala. She got the same story there as well; the regional flights to Kenya had been cancelled. She exchanged some of her dollars for local currency at an inflated forex bureau and noticed that the violence had already had a negative effect on the Kenyan shilling. She had mentally prepared herself to travel the rest of the journey by bus so she slid into the ladies room and changed out of her church outfit into the sweat suit that she had bought in Atlanta. She was way too overdressed for the tropical January weather, but she was not eager to stand out in her expensive suit.

The taxi driver who drove her to the bus station almost pulled over when Kavata told him she was heading to Kenya.

‘My sister, have you not heard what is going on over there. I cannot take you there with a clean heart my sister. Just stay here. Things are peaceful here.’ He insisted on buying her a newspaper so that she could see just how bleak things had become. Kenya was all over the front page of the Daily Monitor. Kavata thanked him for the paper and politely asked him to proceed with the trip. At the bus station, the driver gave it one last try as he parked next to the Akamba bus terminal. It was deserted.

‘You see my sister, the buses will not travel empty. It is suicide. Just stay sister.’ He reminded Kavata of Thuo and this only fed her resolve to go home. She paid the man and made her way to the ticket office.

The next bus to Nairobi was due to leave that evening. However, the bus would only leave if it was more than half full. The last bus that went to Nairobi had been stuck there unable to come back for three days. It wasn’t worth the risk to go there. Kavata thought fast. The man behind the counter did not seem interested in negotiating with her. When she told him that she was there to book tickets for thirty people, he finally looked up from his newspaper and gave her his attention. He counted out the tickets and as soon as she had paid for them, he flicked the sign over on his desk to indicate that bookings for the route were now open.

No one asked any questions when it was time to leave and none of Kavata's fellow passengers had arrived. The conductor simply asked her if they should depart and she nodded eager to be on her way.

There was only one other passenger on the bus, an elderly man who ignored the fifty nine empty seats in the bus and chose to sit right next to Kavata. She froze when he secured his seat belt and looked at the conductor, her eyes pleading with him to step in. The conductor simply smiled at her and settled down into his seat next to the door. Just when she was about to ask the man to move, the conductor rose up and brought them each a complimentary bottle of water. As he did so, he asked the man if he would rather not sit elsewhere. The old man refused, saying that he was sitting in the chair that he had paid for, and showed the conductor his ticket. He was right, and the conductor could do nothing about it. Kavata undid her seatbelt and asked her fellow passenger to let her pass by him. The old man's gaze remained fixed forward. When he didn't respond the second time she asked, she squeezed herself through the small space between his knees and the seat in front of him. He grumbled and sucked his teeth, and complained that she had stepped on his toes when she hadn't. Once free, Kavata made her way to the front of the bus and sat down right next to the driver. She had a much better view of the road from here, and even if she was at risk of being thrown out of the window in the case of an accident, this was the only single seat on the bus.

There were no passengers to collect at the bus stops between Kampala and the Kenyan border so the bus flew past the stops, shaving minutes off the fourteen hour journey. Since the border officials had not expected anyone to be crossing into Kenya, they had closed the border and gone to sleep. Kavata didn't understand why they couldn't just cross the slouching metal fence with the sections of paint missing from the Kenyan flag. The bus driver hooted continuously as all the time they had saved was lost waiting for the border to open. Two hours later, the bus driver pointed towards one of the guest houses and told Kavata she would have to spend the rest of the night there and cross the border when it opened in the morning. The bus would go back to Kampala.

Kavata would have none of that. She asked the conductor to accompany her as they went in search of whoever was in charge. He refused at first but the fifty dollar bribe helped to convince him.

She had never physically crossed a border, but Kavata had always imagined the country borders were fortresses with huge metal gates and tall manned towers, metal detectors, sniffer dogs and underground tunnels. However, the border at Busia was far from that. The immigration office was a small dilapidated structure with a tin roof and wooden door. Behind it were the quarters where the immigration officials 'rested' in between shifts. The conductor pointed towards the door she needed to knock on and scurried back to the bus, promising that they wouldn't leave her there.

When the immigration officer emerged from the dark room, Kavata understood why her companion had fled. The man was a giant. Everything about him was intimidating. The palm of his hands looked like they could flatten a small village when he held them out and asked why he was being woken up. His voice sounded like a thousand empty water drums tumbling down a steep tarmac hill. Kavata stuttered before she found her voice.

'We need to cross the border.' She felt silly for being intimidated by him. She was probably older than him.

'The border is closed.'

'Isn't this a twenty four hour border?' Her voice had not betrayed her again. The man studied her as best as he could in the dark and asked how she had gotten there.

'By bus, and we have been waiting for two hours. *Tafadhali* let us through now.'

'Where are you going?'

'To Nairobi.' The man laughed

'You think anyone can get to Nairobi.' He laughed harder as he went in to the dark room and emerged with a flashlight and a set of keys and led the way to the immigration office.

When he looked towards the bus and noticed that there were only two passengers on it, he sent insults into the air at being woken up to check two passports. He turned around and in a few giant steps he was at the flimsy gate, swinging it open and motioning for the bus to go through. Kavata rushed back towards the bus, her sleepy feet resisting her rapid movements. Within seconds, she was back in Kenya.

An hour later, Kavata was stirred from her sleep by an urgent tapping on her shoulder. Her first instinct was to check for her bag, and when she confirmed that it was still safely on her lap, she assessed her surroundings. The bus had come to a stop in front of a road block that had been erected using tyres, stones, metal sheets, thorns and pieces of wood. The road block stretched out far across the sides of the road and it was clear that whoever had erected it didn't want anything or anyone slipping through. It was high enough for people to be standing completely concealed on the other side of it.

'Tuko wapi?' Kavata hoped that they were closer to Nairobi than she imagined.

'Webuye, just outside the town.' The driver was already putting the bus into gear so that he could reverse and turn back.

'Is there another way around it?'

'No, we are going back. We've told you no one was coming to Kenya now see. When we get through this one, there will be many others on the way. I don't want to die today.'

Kavata began to panic. She begged the driver to stop for a moment so that she could think but he just laughed and brushed her off. This was not the time for thinking. When she asked if there was anywhere she could find a taxi or rent a car, the conductor walked to the front of the bus and asked her why she was so desperate to get back to Nairobi. They seemed unconvinced by the simple reason that she was rushing back to family. The conductor and driver deliberated in Luhya for several minutes, during which the elderly man had joined in on the conversation happy to be part of something that excluded the woman who had refused to sit next to him.

The driver had been given strict instructions to turn around the minute there was any sign of trouble on the road. However, he was willing to help Kavata. He made a quick phone call, after which he reported that a cargo train from Malaba had left as scheduled at midnight. It would be passing through Webuye in about an hour and would go all the way to Mombasa through Nairobi. It was common for passengers to use the train; the conductor had used it several times to get home. Although it was illegal, the bribe you would pay if you got caught was still cheaper than any bus ticket. The thought rattled Kavata. Before now, she had hardly travelled by bus let alone aboard a cargo train.

'It's the only way madam,' the driver sensed her hesitation. 'Or I can take you back to Uganda and you can wait for the roads to be opened, but the way things are looking that could be in months.'

'Is it safe?' she asked. She looked down at her throbbing feet. The conductor lowered his voice and leaned in to Kavata as if there were more people in the bus who could hear them.

'To be honest madam, these are very tricky days we are having. In fact it is very unsafe for a Kikuyu like you to be over here. But if you just keep to yourself, and not talk to anyone you will be fine. Just keep your mouth closed.' Kavata made to correct the man and tell him that she was actually a Kamba but it made no difference since all the documents she carried bore Ngugi's name.

'Another thing. We are risking our jobs by taking you to the station. These buses have trackers so if we get caught it will be very expensive.' Kavata had expected this.

'How much?' she became aware of her dwindling finances.

'Four thousand shillings.' The old passenger protested and the conductor corrected himself. 'Five thousand.'

Kavata insisted that she would only pay them once the train arrived in Webuye and the conductor had gotten her on to the train. Once the deal was struck, they drove back towards the border, and turned off on to a *panya* route that led them to the station.

She would never have been able to navigate her way through the chaos that was the Webuye train station. The train only stopped for three minutes and in that time passengers had to lift themselves on to the train that was designed to carry trucks and cars and construction materials. The bus conductor had already warned her that she would need to be quick. She put her bag on her back and made sure that she had their payment in her hand when the train arrived. It was made more problematic by the fact that the youth had taken over the train and imposed their own system. The empty cargo cars towards the back of the trains were reserved for Luos. The next few ones after that one was for Luhya's. All other tribes were free to find space on the other cars that were laden with cargo. The young men warned that those who were found in the wrong sections would be thrown off the moving train. Kavata and the conductor had to sprint to the 'others' car and when they got to it,

the conductor grabbed Kavata by the hips and hoisted her onto the train. She landed heavily on her bum just as the train began to move. The conductor ran alongside holding out his hand for this payment. Kavata was just able to put the money in his hand before he tripped and fell down the slight slope on the side of the tracks. Kavata panicked for a while before she saw the man shoot up off the ground and wave her goodbye after he had counted the dollars and stuffed them deep into this pocket.

Kavata swung her legs off the side of the train and looked around for the first time. There weren't very many people on the train with her, which was no surprise. There wasn't very much room for passengers in the midst of the red building bricks that had been tightly packed into the car. Those who could climbed up to the top of the stacks and sat on them. Those were the most comfortable seats in the house if you were able to withstand the wind that attacked you as the train tittered on. Everyone else was forced to make do with the narrow floor space that the cargo allowed. Most of the available space was taken so Kavata could only scoot back and rest her back against the bricks. Her bag provided some cushion against the hard surface.

Her throbbing feet begged for her attention. They had almost doubled in size since she'd gotten off the plane in London and looked like they would explode at the slightest prod. It suddenly occurred to her how far she had travelled. She had gotten a few curious glances from her fellow travellers, it was clear she didn't belong here. The privilege that she had unconsciously carried around on her sleeve now clung to her tighter than her Aldo shoes to her swollen feet.

Kavata looked around her again and felt responsible for the unspoken turmoil that those around her had been through because of people like her and Ngugi and her father. She deserved to suffer like everybody else had. She wanted to suffer more. Thoughts such as these filled her mind at the train approached Eldoret.

Wanja had been standing in line at the supermarket for hours trying to pay for her groceries. She had never seen the shelves so empty and was irritated that the alcohol section was completely empty by the time she got there. There were more people in the supermarket than there were products on the shelves.

For the first time since she turned eighteen she had spent new year's eve at home alone – and it had been depressing. Her grandparents had dropped in shortly to check on her and tell her that they were planning a short trip. Her grandmother slipped her a few thousand shillings to buy groceries, so the next morning she woke up and drove from supermarket to supermarket finding barer shelves and longer queues in each one. In the end she had settled for whatever she could find at the Sarit Centre and busied herself with Twitter as she stood in line.

She remembered that Amani and Aunt Wairimu's family were due to visit when her phone rang and her uncle's name was displayed on the screen. She cursed at the thought of having to leave her place in the queue because they had arrived at her home and she wasn't there. She crossed her fingers and answered the call. She heard crying in the background.

'Wanja, it's Uncle Jommo. There's been an accident. You need to come to the hospital. The Aga Khan. Come as soon as you can.' She didn't completely understand the words she was hearing, but her uncle simply repeated what he had said and asked her to drive safely. As she abandoned her shopping trolley and headed towards the store exit, the shoppers around her descended on her groceries like hawks.

She grazed the car bumper on a potted plant as she drove into the hospital parking lot. She climbed out of the car and sprinted towards the emergency entrance, being careful not to step on the drops of blood at the entrance to the hospital. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the bright light at the emergency room reception, and when she did she noticed how many people there were with bloody clothes sitting around waiting. She scanned the room for signs of her uncle and instead spotted her two cousins huddled together crying. She rushed towards them. They cried harder when they saw her and she asked them what had happened. She wanted to slap them and get them to talk as she tried to make sense of what had happened. Her uncle had called her and her cousins were here. So something must have happened to Amani or Wairimu. She sat next to the eldest of

her cousins and asked him what had happened, her voice a few notches away from shouting.

The boy narrated the story starting from the time when they had their new year's eve party, and Wanja listened edging him on to the point where Amani or Aunt Wairimu, or worse, both of them, had been injured. She began to look around for her uncle as her cousin rambled on about a crowd, and Amani being thrown to the front of the car. *Oh god, it's him* she thought as her brother's name brought her attention back to what her cousin was saying. She was slightly relieved when he didn't mention Amani getting hurt, but when he got to the part where her brother ran out of the car into the crowd, she knew it was him. She heard the words 'he was bleeding from the head' and 'I think he is dead,' and then she shot up from her chair and began to shout her brother's name as she ran through the emergency room.

She hadn't gotten very far when a nurse took hold of her.

'Where is he?' She screamed and startled the doctors and nurses in the already hectic emergency room. 'Amani, he's my little brother.' The nurse led her to the cubicle where Jommo turned around as soon as she walked in. He was covered in so much blood Wanja was afraid to touch him. There were tears in his eyes as he held Wanja back and tried to explain to her what she was about to see, but she fought past him. Aunt Wairimu broke down as soon as she saw Wanja. There was even more blood on her. It covered every inch of the front of her body. It had dyed her skin and dripped from the hem of her skirt. She wondered if perhaps her cousin had been mistaken and it was her aunt who had been in the accident.

Then she saw him.

Amani was lying still on the bed. His eyes were closed and he looked so at ease that he had to be asleep.

'Wanja, there was an accident. He's gone.' Her uncle's voice broke and Aunt Wairimu stepped back and collapsed into a chair behind her. Time stood still. In that tiny space filled with death, none of them spoke, or moved or breathed.

'No. He's my little brother.' Wanja whispered as if she would wake him up if she spoke too loud. Then she changed her mind and decided that she had to wake him up.

'He's my little brother, he can't die.' Wanja said, looking at his swollen head and wondering why it sat at such a weird angle at the top of his inflamed neck.

'Amani – wake up small bro.' She touched his shoulder. He was cold. She remembered how it irritated him when she called him bro. 'I'm not a bro, I'm your brother,' he would correct her as he rolled his eyes.

'Amani – wake up, little brother.' She didn't notice the nurse who was standing behind her in case she fainted, or that there were tears in her eyes as well.

'Amani –' she touched his face. It was colder than his shoulder, and she recoiled, shaking her head and looking at her aunt and uncle wanting them to explain why her little brother had died and they had lived. She thought she would die from the pain in her chest. She wanted to die from the pain in her chest.

He was her little brother.

Chapter Eight
Wednesday, 2nd January 2008

When Ngugi's car choked and sputtered to a halt, he was glad that it was outside the tourist police station adjacent to the American Embassy. He was tired, hungry and frustrated and didn't think he would be able to deal with any more surprises.

His journey from Embakasi should have been pretty straight-forward, he knew the back routes well and was careful to avoid potential trouble. More often than not, this meant that he would be driving off the main roads on *muram* roads that bore all manner of sharp objects that had either been planted on the roads by car-jackers and thieves or had ended up there coincidentally. He'd had three flat tyres between Embakasi and Umoja. When he got tired of taking the punctured tyre back to the same petrol station for repair, he decided to call AA to ask for roadside assistance. The woman on the line simply said that they had suspended all services to members in order to ensure the security of their staff. She laughed when Ngugi protested and asked to speak with her superior.

He had gotten lost in Umoja for hours and then found himself in Dandora by mistake. On a regular day it was already a treacherous place to be and the tension of the PEV made it more volatile. When he decided to stop at a police station to ask for directions, he was made to stand in a long line behind people who were reporting break-ins and missing persons. He tried to explain to the police at the front desk that he just wanted directions, but he was sent back to the back of the line which had now grown by a few more people. Eventually the directions he had received from the exhausted policeman had been sketchy and unhelpful.

A girl approached him as he walked back to his car and discovered that one of his tyres was flat. She was desperate to get to her mother's house in Roysambu and would be happy to show him the way out of Dandora if he would give her a lift. He declined the offer and said he was going in the opposite direction even if going to Roysambu would get him to the right side of town. The girl stood by and watched as he changed his tyre for the fourth time. By the time he was done, the sun was up and he was sure he would be able to find his way out in no time if he could only remember what the policeman had said, but he couldn't. He looked behind at the queue that was now snaking its way out of the station door, and rolled down his window to speak to the girl. She looked harmless enough and it would not kill him to have some company. He told her that he would also need her help finding an open petrol station and she obliged and gleefully got into the car.

She wasn't very talkative which Ngugi was grateful for, but she revealed that the house that she and her sister lived in had been broken in to two days before and everything was cleared out. Her sister was away at work, and she was afraid to sleep in the house alone so she was going to her mother's house until the storm passed.

She sat and waited in the car as Ngugi got his flat tyre repaired. He watched her from outside the car, just waiting for her to snoop around the car for valuables when she thought Ngugi wasn't looking, but she hardly moved and he felt like an idiot for thinking the worst of her.

Once they were on the way, she explained that they would have to use some back routes to avoid the road blocks and Ngugi, was more than happy to oblige. She directed him past sections of Dandora that had tarmac roads, and when the tarmac

ended, she encouraged him to keep going when the road was so narrow that people had to duck into adjacent shacks and corridors so that the car could pass through.

'Is this really a road?' he opened his window and folded the side mirror so that it didn't get knocked off as pedestrians squeezed past him.

'Yes, this is where I live. I know it.' She said with a defensive pride and once again Ngugi felt stupid for doubting her.

'Turn here,' she pointed to the left, and Ngugi executed the narrowest turn that led to a dead end at a massive garbage heap.

It happened really fast. The woman whistled as she stepped out of the car. She wasn't in any hurry, so Ngugi thought that she was coming out to check where they were and how she had gotten them lost. Out of thin air, there were half a dozen men stripping Ngugi's car of its side mirrors, wheel caps, indicators and headlights. One of them had somehow managed to get the boot open and was off-loading the spare tyre that Ngugi had just repaired as well as the tool kit. One of the thieves reached in, opened the passenger side door, and continued to rob him calmly.

'*Leta simu,*' Ngugi reached into his pocket and handed over his phone.

'Wallet,' he obliged and the man pulled out the last of his cash and threw the wallet back at Ngugi. It landed in between his feet. The thief sifted through the glove compartment and slammed it shut before he reached into the back seat and grabbed Ngugi's bag. He opened it and searched through it quickly. He tossed Ngugi's house keys at him, and removed the vomit stained shirt before he slammed the car door shut and leaned in through the open window.

'Happy New Year, *Mheshimiwa* Mwangi,' he said and disappeared into the maze behind him.

It had happened in under a minute and Ngugi didn't know whether to laugh or cry. A now familiar feeling crept up his throat and he swung his door open and hurled out the watery contents of his already empty stomach. He tossed the smelly shirt that had nauseated him out onto the garbage pile and it occurred to him that they might come back for him. The thief had referred to him by name; he must have been marked the minute he entered Dandora, or even earlier. He started to panic. The only thing left to steal was the car, so he was safer abandoning it and travelling on foot. He was just about to do so when he heard the sound of cars whizzing past on a paved road. The sound was close by. He was sure that it was coming from the

other side of the garbage dump. He heard it again, this time something caught his eye on the road that was a few metres behind him. He was at the end of a narrow road that led off the tarmac to the garbage dump.

Calm took over when the car started. He inched forward to straighten the car and then reversed quickly on to the paved road and stayed on it until things began to look familiar.

Most of the roads were open and those that were not had heavy police and military presence directing traffic through alternative routes. The sound of gunshots didn't startle Ngugi anymore. When he heard them, he simply turned around and drove away from the sound. He had not planned to pass by Wairimu's house but when he found himself in her neighbourhood he could not resist it. He was glad to see that things were relatively calm, and even happier when the security guard at the entrance to her estate confirmed that he had seen them leave early the previous morning and they had not been back. The guard recognised Ngugi, and said that he had voted for him, and then he glanced at the car and asked if he had had trouble on the way. Ngugi simply smiled and thanked the man for his support.

Within minutes, guards from the hyper-securitised embassy were standing at Ngugi's car demanding that he move it as it was a potential threat. He simply shrugged his shoulders and said that he had run out of petrol, knowing that the men couldn't leave him there. They grumbled as they swung their rifles over their shoulders and pushed the stalled car into the gates of the Gigiri police station. Ngugi thanked them as he stepped out of the car and walked towards the reception. This was familiar territory and Ngugi was promptly greeted by some of the policemen on duty. The station was nowhere near as busy as the one in Dandora, but there was certainly more activity than usual. An old buddy of Hon Muli's explained that they were now taking cases from as far as Mathare because the stations could not keep up with the amount of work that was coming in. He said that although the media was reporting death tolls of up to eight hundred in just four days, he suspected that that was only in Nairobi. This was not just violence; it was a full blown civil war, worse than the struggle for independence.

Ngugi listened to the man in horror, the things he had been through seemed like child's play compared to what was being described. He couldn't bring himself to ask

for a car to drop him home, although he knew that this man would bend over backwards to help him. He was about five kilometres away from his house, and based on what the policeman said, things had been quiet on this side, and they were doing everything they could to keep it that way. He was exhausted, and it would take at least another three or so hours before he got home if he decided to walk, but it wouldn't kill him. If he was lucky one of his neighbours would spot him and give him a lift.

He bid the police at the station farewell and told them he would be back for his car in a few days. He avoided the questioning gazes as he left without greasing the policemen's palms as was customary during his visits. As he left the station he was glad he had chosen to walk home. He had travelled on this road home countless times but never on foot and the one thing he had learned from the events of the past few days was that he needed to start viewing his country through a different lens.

Ngugi hadn't anticipated coming home to an empty house but was relieved that he didn't have to immediately explain why he had come home on foot. He walked around his house, enjoying the feeling of the cool tiles against his burning feet. He recalled his final moments in this house before everything fell apart. His argument with Wanja, the hundreds of supporters who had sat outside to see him, Amani walking around the house with his amusing stickers, Kavata leaving... it had all seemed like centuries ago and in light of what had happened since, it felt like water under the bridge. He reached for the landline to find out where Wanja was, but realized that the only number he remembered off the top of his head was Kavata's. He dialled it anyway, not expecting it to ring but hoping it did anyway. He had Wanja and Wairimu's number written down in his office, but decided to take a shower before he phoned them. He wouldn't mind a few more minutes of silence.

He heard voices in the house while he was in the bathroom. Wanja had returned. Keen to see that his daughter was safe, he dressed up, and called out to her as he walked down the corridor to the living room where the voices were coming from. He glanced outside as he passed by the front door and saw Wairimu's car in the drive way and wondered why Amani wasn't running down the corridor to meet him as he usually did.

Jommo was standing by the window gazing out onto the balcony, the blood on his shirt and trousers had dried up and now looked like brown paint. Wanja and Wairimu were holding each other, rolled up into a tight ball on the sofa. Wanja's eyes were swollen shut and Wairimu looked like she had lost several kilograms since he had seen her last. Ngugi's nephews were resting on the sofa, he assumed they were asleep as they didn't acknowledge him when he walked in.

'What's going on? He scanned the room for his son. Jommo began to speak, but Wairimu stopped him. She stood up and turned to face him. She was dressed in a hospital gown and was still holding on to the bag that had her bloody clothes. She looked as if it hurt to be on her feet.

'Ngugi, please sit down.'

'Wairimu, where is my son?' He looked around the room again. Jommo took a few steps towards Wairimu and held her to support her. She shrunk away from him and hissed at him to not to touch her. Jommo didn't bother to hide the tears in his eyes as he went back to his spot by the window.

'Ngugi, there was an accident on the way here yesterday morning.'

'Wairimu, where is my son?' Silent, exhausted sobs emerged from Wanja as she lay spent on the sofa. Ngugi's eyes were fixed on her.

'Ngugi, he's gone. He died. I am so sorry Ngugi....'

No one tried to stop him as he punched the wall and knocked vases off their pedestals and overturned the cabinet filled with Kavata's precious chest. Wairimu just stood there, in the way of his rampage, explaining what had happened as he tugged at the curtains until they snapped off their hooks and sent pictures flying off the walls. Jommo stepped in to stop Ngugi when a framed picture landed on Wairimu's foot and the glass cut her. He was much taller than Ngugi so it should have been easy to restrain him, but his sadness and shock had given Ngugi an unnatural strength and it was a battle to get him to go outside. He took a few steps towards the corridor and looked back to Wanja who had just heard the details of what happened to her brother for the first time and was reeling. He looked at his daughter and then at the rampage he had caused, noticing that Amani's stickers were still all over the house where he had left them. His loss was not his alone. Wanja looked up at him and for the first time in years, he saw the little girl he was

once so obsessed with protecting. He rushed across the room to his daughter and held her as they sobbed together.

Jommo led Wairimu and his children to another room and left Ngugi and his daughter to share a moment for which they would one day be grateful, even if they wished it had never come.

Cheptoo's dreams that night were so filled with images of burnt bodies that in the end she decided not to bother with sleep. She was lying down on a mattress on the floor with three other volunteers who had come in from different parts of the country, and had been afraid to sleep anywhere else in case they were attacked. She went over the events of the day over and over again, each time forcing herself to remember a new detail. Like how the buttons of the front of her dress had popped when she was struggling to get through the crowd that was holding her back. Or that she had initially thought that the men behind the burning of the church were policemen, because they had used handcuffs to bind the one man to the church. Or how some of the victims' shoes had melted and glued their toes together and she had to pry them apart with her fingers so she could to tag them.

The medic had insisted that Cheptoo see a counsellor as soon as they got back to the base. Cheptoo was reluctant at first, but she eventually agreed, eager to do whatever she needed to remove the images from her head. The counsellor was a woman about the same age as Cheptoo, who explained what she could do for her. She added that Cheptoo would have to do most of the healing herself, and in her own time. Cheptoo didn't want to heal herself, because she didn't ask to be chased away from Nakuru or to come to Eldoret and see the things she had seen. She wanted the people responsible to pay for it. She asked if anyone had been arrested, and when the counsellor shook her head, Cheptoo said that she had seen them all and would be able to help the police find them.

The counsellor discouraged her. She would be putting her life in danger by going to the police. It was more complicated than it looked. There was no telling if the police were involved in the massacre or not. How could they explain why none of them had been there to stop them, or that they hadn't gone to the church even hours

after the massacre. The counsellor spoke in hushed tones as if she was sure that someone was listening. She could not stop Cheptoo from going to the police. It was the right thing to do after all. She only asked that she consider the repercussions carefully. If she hoped to see Thuo and her children again, then recording a statement was not the wisest thing to do.

Cheptoo considered the counsellor's words, but they did not deter her. The next morning, she went back to her and told her that she still wanted to record a statement, but she also wanted to leave Eldoret. She needed to get back to Nairobi and if the Red Cross could help her, she would record the statement and leave Eldoret immediately.

There were no Red Cross vans coming or going to Nairobi. Supplies were being transported by helicopter, and there was no way they could get her onto the helicopter unless she was in critical condition, and even then, the hospitals in Nairobi had started turning away patients because they were beyond capacity. The best they could do was get her on the train which was due in Eldoret in a few hours.

Later that morning, the volunteers said goodbye to Cheptoo, some of them hugged her tight and applauded her courage. She smiled back thinking to herself that they must not know the meaning of bravery because she felt like a coward. The medic changed the dressing on her wound and gave her a bag with some medicine and water.

At the police station, the counsellor had to convince one of the policemen to take Cheptoo's statement inside the Red Cross van away from any curious ears. He joined them in the van with one sheet of paper and reluctantly wrote down her statement. Cheptoo relayed every detail that she had forced herself to remember the previous night. How many men she saw with jerry cans of petrol; what the man who handcuffed the incinerated man was wearing; what he looked like; how many men had brought them snacks. She noticed the policeman had stopped writing before she was done speaking and when she asked why, he said that the single sheet of paper he had brought with him was full on both sides. Cheptoo offered to wait while he went back to the station to fetch more paper, but he claimed he had a brilliant memory and would remember everything she had said and finish writing the statement later on.

When they were done, the policeman thanked her, folded her statement and put it in his shirt pocket and climbed out of the van. They then sped towards the train station, and on the way there, the counsellor encouraged her to go to a police station in Nairobi and record a second statement once things had calmed down.

Kavata was desperate for a toilet. She'd spent the last hour trying to figure out how she would be able to leap off the train in Eldoret, run into the bushes to pee and then get back on. She had convinced herself that she would be able to do it in three minutes. Then she saw the number of people waiting to get on the train when it slowed to a stop. There were three maybe four times as many there as there had been in Webuye and she was sure that if she got off the train, she would be stuck in Eldoret.

Most of the people in the waiting crowd were rushing towards the 'others' cars as well. She hoped that they would run right past the car she was on because there was clearly no more space, but a good number of them stopped despite her fellow passengers telling them that there was no space. Kavata stood up. She would get injured if she remained seated on the edge of the train. Some of them held out their hands so that they could be pulled up by those who were already onboard, and even if she didn't want anyone else on her car with them, she had to help. She had pulled three women up when the train began to move again and the people on the cars were shouting at her that those were enough. There was a woman with the entire right side of her face bandaged who was trying to get on. Kavata grabbed her arm and pulled her up. Kavata lost her footing for a moment and one of the men who was behind her had to help her get the woman on board. When she was finally onboard, there was only standing room left on the car. The woman thanked Kavata when she had eventually caught her breath.

They spent some time rearranging themselves. More people had to climb onto the top of the bricks so that there was room for the rest to sit in two rows at the edge of the train. Kavata guarded the corner she had been sitting in and refused to move when people tried to edge her out of the way. Finally everyone had a space to

sit and the man who had appointed himself the prefect of the car made an announcement that no one else was to get on to that car at any of the other stops. He glanced over at Kavata as he spoke.

Four hours later the train stopped in Nakuru and a few people hopped off, but no one got on and Kavata finally had room to stretch her legs. The woman with the bandaged face was now right next to her. She wondered why a Red Cross volunteer was travelling on the train. Tears were running down her face as they passed through Nakuru, and Kavata reached into her bag and pulled out a packet of Kleenex that she had bought in Atlanta. The brilliant whiteness of the tissue looked horribly out of place on the train. The woman's tears were causing the tape that held her bandage to come off her face. When the woman turned her face to thank Kavata, they both gasped.

'Mama Wanja!'

'Cheptoo, what... ' They both struggled to pick out which question to ask from the many options running through their minds. Kavata leaned in to embrace the woman whom she had known for most of her adult life. But like her Kleenex, it was a misplaced gesture. They struggled to find a language that they could converse in discreetly. They would stick out more if they used English, and it would be too simple for anyone on the train to eavesdrop if they used Swahili. They realized that they had both learned to speak their husband's language, so they whispered to each other in Kikuyu.

'What happened?' Kavata let Cheptoo ask the first question; her presence on the train warranted a lot more explanation. She gave Cheptoo the abridged version of her four day journey across continents. When she was done, Cheptoo struggled to imagine how such a thing was possible for someone like Kavata.

'These are surely the end days.' Cheptoo said, but something else occurred to her.

'So that Sunday when you disappeared, *ulienda ng'ambo?*' Kavata nodded and began to ask her question but Cheptoo wasn't done.

'Did Thuo drive you to the airport?' the mood of their conversation suddenly changed. Kavata nodded her head, and made an attempt to change the subject.

'Where are your children? Are they well?' but anger had already taken over.

'You mean my husband was arrested because of you? He has been in jail for I don't know how long. I have not seen him in almost two weeks and it's because of

you.’ Cheptoo was shouting now. She had abandoned Kikuyu because the unfamiliar tongue could not carry the anger that she felt for the woman who had been the source of all her agony. Kavata was trying to calm her down but that only made her angrier.

‘Don’t tell me to be quiet; you don’t know what my life has been like because of you. I have been to hell. I have seen devils. So many that I know they will be following me until the day I die. Don’t tell me to be quiet!’ The passengers on the train were now silent and listening, thankful to have something to entertain them during the journey.

‘What did you give him? What did you tell him to make him agree to abandon his family and stay in jail because of you.’ She was hitting Kavata now, and shouting at the crowd to throw her off the train. She was worse than those people who were killing their neighbours.

Kavata was halfway between begging Cheptoo to shut up and shoving her off the train. She was aware that she was partly responsible for the mix up with Thuo, but there was obviously something she didn’t know. The train prefect was shouting at Cheptoo to be quiet. There had been peace on the train before she got on it and she should show some gratitude for the woman who almost fell off the train trying to get her on board. Cheptoo calmed down but her face was so tightly twisted into a frown that a section of her bandage had peeled off.

‘Cheptoo, what are you talking about. Please tell me what happened.’ Kavata tried one last time in Kikuyu. There was a long silence before Cheptoo spoke of the things that transpired the day after Kavata left. She had begged Thuo to tell the police what he knew about Kavata’s disappearance and he had refused to speak even if he was being called a criminal. She told her about the days and nights she had spent looking around the house for clues of where Kavata might have been so that she could take them to the police and have her husband released. She explained how she only left for Nakuru at the very last minute, because she didn’t want to leave her husband rotting in a jail cell. Then, she talked about the violence and killing in Nakuru. About the church.

Kavata could not apologise, all her words seemed inadequate. There was no way she would have imagined that asking Thuo to tell a little white lie would have had such a domino effect. She had no idea that Thuo would guard her secret so faithfully.

She could do nothing else but accept full responsibility for everything that Thuo and his family had been through. She begged Cheptoo for forgiveness; even if she had calmed down and admitted that Thuo was also to blame. Cheptoo finally asked why Kavata had to leave so abruptly. The reasons for her departure which had felt so fundamental a few days ago, now seemed so foolish and childish that she couldn't bring herself to speak of them. So she said that her marriage to Ngugi had been difficult. Cheptoo then asked what had made her change her mind and come back.

'I realized that I was the one who was being difficult.' The two women sat in silence for hours. Kavata sobbed quietly for a good part of the journey past Naivasha. She realized that Cheptoo hadn't been asleep when she suddenly spoke.

'Let's both pray that we get our husbands back.' Cheptoo took Kavata's hand and held it in hers as they journeyed on past large pineapple farms on the outskirts of Thika.

Chapter Nine
Thursday, 3rd January 2008

The only reason Schola was able to leave Kisii for Narok was because she had money. It was clear that Nairobi was the only place she could still go so she had paid a policeman ten thousand shillings to get her as close to Nairobi as possible. That place turned out to be Narok so she pulled the money out of her brassiere and climbed into the police van in between the two policemen, who were young enough to be her sons. They tried to start up a conversation with her as they passed through the numerous road blocks that were now being manned by the army, but she remained silent. The army was also controlling things on this side of town and every time they questioned why a civilian was travelling in the front of a police car, Schola would be forced to reach into her blouse and pull out a bribe.

The driver had been rubbing his knuckles up and down Schola's thighs as he changed gears for the entire length of the journey. She had ignored it at first, not wanting to give him the benefit of knowing that he was bothering her but this only

served to encourage him further. She had just had enough of it and decided to protest, when a foul stench took over the fresh air and forced her mouth shut. A humongous pig ran across the potholed road that cut through acres and acres of wheat. The policemen on Schola's left insisted that he wanted to go after the swine. They could slaughter it when they arrived at the destination and have a feast. He jumped out of the van and ran toward the pig like a child chasing bubbles. His prey went towards some houses that he assumed were the farm workers' quarters and when he got there he called out to his colleague to come and help him. They had hit the jackpot. There were at least a dozen pigs over there, he said, milling about feeding. They could sell them for a fortune.

Then he looked closely at what they were eating and began to shriek. His colleague ran after him.

The greedy pigs were happily feasting on decomposing human bodies. Their carcasses were strewn all over the clearing at the front of the houses, limbs and torsos disjointed and discarded further away by the indiscriminate pigs. Schola sat in the van listening to the two men screaming, but she didn't move from her spot in the car. She wished that she had taken the driving course that Kavata had tried to convince her to take several years ago. That way she would have left the foolish men there and driven off. Instead she waited in the van. She knew what the men had seen based on the thick smell of stale death in the air. She just wanted to get on with the journey.

The one who had found the bodies trembled all the way to their destination mumbling incoherent things. The driver got tired of stopping every few metres so his colleague could vomit, and insisted that he travel the rest of the way with his head hanging out of the window. The driver rebuked him for his stupidity, telling him that this is what he got for always thinking with his stomach. He acted unaffected by the whole thing but his body was frozen stiff and he had stopped molesting Schola's upper leg because he couldn't stop his hand from trembling as it moved from the gearstick to the steering wheel and back.

Schola's money was no good in Narok. No matter how much she offered them the policemen were adamant that they would not go any further. They both had never been to Nairobi and they had no business going there. It had been two whole days since she had left Kisumu and now the sun was setting on the third day. The Narok

police post was deserted, the only other vehicle there looked like it hadn't moved in years. All she had seen on the way to the police post were scattered tin shacks and mud houses along the road. She just needed to get to the town, but she had no idea how far it was, and the quickly receding sun was telling her that it was not a good idea for her to go find out. She followed the police men into the converted four foot container that served as their police post. They had already settled down on thin mattresses in opposite corners of the room.

'How much do you want to take me to town?' There was no response from the driver. His colleague had already faded into a stuttering sleep.

'*Afande*, please help me. What am I supposed to do in this bush?' the driver shot up from his mattress.

'Mama, you said you wanted to go to Narok. This is Narok and yes it is a bush. So people do not travel through it at night.' He pointed to a chair behind one of the two desks in the room and told her that if she wanted any more help, she would have to wait until morning. He told her to lock the door and then he rolled over to sleep.

Schola had been unable to sleep since her journey began, but she found herself dozing off as she sat in the wooden chair with her head resting on the low table. The silence outside was a welcome and soothing break from the sound of gunshots that had punctuated the darkness of the past few nights. She wasn't sure how long she had been asleep, but it didn't look like it was morning yet so she wondered why the driver was waking her up.

He grabbed her by the arm, lifted her off the seat and threw her onto his mattress. Only then could she see that he wasn't wearing his trousers. She looked over to where his colleague was still fast asleep. She was about to scream when he held her by the neck and told her to be quiet unless she wanted to be fed to the pigs as well. He then pushed a disgusting cloth so far into her mouth that she was sure she would swallow it. She gagged as her throat rejected the coarse fabric, but when he tore her blouse open and squeezed her breasts before he stole the last of the money from her, Schola understood that swallowing his dirty socks was about to be the least of her problems.

He looked at her, with eyes full of questions, when he dismounted her and there was blood all over his penis and on the mattress beneath her. Schola had not made a sound the entire time. She willed her body to turn to stone so that she wouldn't feel

a thing and wondered how much more she would suffer. The sound of the other policeman snoring and mumbling through her rape had added to her torture. She had hit the floor hoping that the sound would wake him up but the driver grabbed her hands and pinned them to the side of her body and given her a final warning before he went stiff and she hoped he was dead.

He dismounted her and walked over to the waterless sink and wiped himself with the sock that had been in her mouth. He lingered there with his back to her as if he expected her to be gone when he turned around.

Schola rose from the ground and looked at the wad of cash that was still on the ground beside his strewn trousers. She bent down to pick it up just as he turned around and when he began to protest, she stood up straight and shot him a stern glance that dared him to steal anything else from her. She turned around and opened the door, grateful that she had not locked the padlock on it as he had told her too. It was a struggle, but she fought through the pain so that she didn't limp when she left the police post in the dead of the night and walked down the road that she hoped would lead her to the town.

She had not gone very far when she heard her attacker calling after her, warning her that there were bandits and wild animals on the way. She kept walking, step after painful step. She had nothing left to lose.

Thuo had to convince a local locksmith to break the lock to his house and let him in after he had spent the night at his doorstep, hoping that Cheptoo would emerge from the darkness. When his neighbour found him in the morning, she told him that Cheptoo had left before the election and had not been back since. News of Thuo's arrest had spread around Kangemi, so he was not surprised when people avoided his gaze as they walked past him. No one was quite sure why he'd been arrested, but they all suspected the worst. He soon noticed that people were not talking to each other generally. Certain parts of Kangemi had been through its own version of hell and people were silently coming to terms with it.

Thuo's neighbour was happy to let him wait at her house for a few hours, but when it began to look like Cheptoo would not be home anytime soon, she suggested

that he get a locksmith to let him in. Thuo had no money to pay him, but in these times, televisions were prized possessions and the locksmith was happy to hold on to Thuo's until he paid his bill.

The waiting was making him lose his mind. He paced around the house that now felt bare without his wife's presence. Later, when the silence began to suffocate him, he walked around the neighbourhood asking if anyone had seen her lately. He received gruff responses; no one was interested in helping him find his wife. Everyone had lost something. Thuo fought to keep thoughts of his children out of his mind; that would certainly throw him overboard. He had thought sitting in a jail cell had been the worst thing that could have happened to him but he was wrong. At least there he could assume that his family were in a better place than he was, waiting for his return.

When he could take it no longer, he gathered whatever valuables he could find around the house. Their VCD player, radio, he even pulled their clock off the wall and went back to the locksmith. He asked him to loan him some money and hold these items as well until he was able to pay him back.

When he arrived at the Mwangi residence the gate was unlocked but he wasn't sure if he should ring the bell or let himself in as he had done daily for over fifteen years. He walked up the driveway, unsure of what he was doing or what to expect when he got to the front door. The house showed no signs of life. Although it was noon, the outdoor security lights were still on and he knew immediately that Schola, the only person here who would have had news from Cheptoo, was not here. He hesitated for a while; fear gripped his limbs so that he was unable to move. Recollections of what had happened the last time he was on this driveway made him realize that he might be re-opening the door to his prison cell by being here. Nothing would stop Ngugi from calling the police as soon as he set eyes on him and informing them that the foolish fugitive had returned to the scene of his alleged crime. He looked up at the home of the people he thought he had known so well, and for so long, and marvelled at how suddenly everything had changed.

He noticed Ngugi's car missing from the driveway. Thuo had no idea if he had won the election or not. He remembered how stupid he had been to imagine that his

life would improve fundamentally when Ngugi won. He was walking away from the house when a voice called from behind him.

'Hello?' Thuo's first instinct was to run, but he turned around. Jommo recognised him immediately and walked towards him. Things had surely changed. Thuo had only ever seen Jommo at his Thome home when he was dropping or picking Amani up from spending time with his cousins. He had never seen Jommo at Ngugi's house.

'Thuo, *habari*. Are you working today?' The news of his arrest had obviously not spread as far as Thuo thought it had. Jommo's clothes were so creased they looked like he had been sleeping in them. His eyes were tired.

'No, I was just coming to look for Schola.' Jommo looked at him blankly. He wouldn't know who Schola was.

'The housegirl. Is she in?' Jommo shook his head and Thuo bid him farewell and turned to leave.

'*Ngoja* Thuo, I think Ngugi might need you today. I don't know if you have heard but we have had some bad news.' Thuo turned around. When Jommo broke the news to Thuo that Amani had died, he could no longer stop himself of thinking about his children. The shock of the news forced him off his feet and he lowered himself on to the pavement, cradling his head in his hands. Jommo brought him a glass of water.

'Where is Mama Wanja?'

'We don't know exactly, but she was on her way back from -' Jommo hesitated, '- her trip.'

'And *Mzee*?'

'He arrived yesterday. He is inside.'

Jommo enquired about Thuo's family, if they were safe and if they had been affected in any way by the violence. Thuo explained that he had remained in Nairobi, leaving out the details of the reasons why, and that he had not heard from them in days. Jommo asked what he could do to help but Thuo was hesitant to involve any member of Ngugi's family in his problems until he had spoken with Ngugi. He didn't know if he was still welcome here, but he couldn't find the words to explain this to Jommo.

Jommo sensed Thuo's indecision and decided to call Wairimu out to speak to him. Since the accident, she had not spoken a word to him, and he had been looking for

an excuse to say anything to her. Wairimu came out of the house almost immediately, with eyes as drained as her husband's.

'Thuo, I'm so glad you are here.' She threw her arms around him and she invited him into the house but he declined, insisting that he would come back at a better time. Wairimu held his hands and apologised for what he had been through. It was a huge misunderstanding, and even if she had had nothing to do with Thuo's arrest, Wairimu took on the responsibility for her brother's actions. She asked him to forgive them all, and insisted that they would help him find his family whether he wanted them to or not.

Thuo sat tentatively at the dining table inside the house as Wairimu handed him her cellphone for him to call whoever he needed to. Cheptoo's phone was switched off and without his phone, the only other number he could remember was Schola. They spoke for several minutes while Jommo and Wairimu stood by waiting and hoping for the smallest morsel of good news. Schola was at a refugee camp in Naivasha and was trying to get to Nairobi but it was impossible as the highways had been closed for days. Thuo reported that she had lost everything in Kisumu. She had nothing but the clothes on her back. What Thuo didn't say was that he had never heard her sound so desperate and defeated. There was no fight left in his friend's voice and Thuo dreaded imagining what she had been through.

Jommo was instantly on the phone and calling everyone he knew in Naivasha. A few minutes later, they called Schola back and told her that a friend of Jommo's who owned a fleet of tour vans would be at the camp to collect her before the end of the day and would bring her home.

Ngugi was drawn out of his bedroom, curious as to what could have happened to break the silence that engulfed his home. He walked into the living room just as they were winding up the call with Schola. Thuo stood up when he saw Ngugi and looked straight at him. The pain in Ngugi's eyes was unbearable, so he lowered his own eyes.

'*Pole, pole sana Mzee.*' Thuo's voice broke as he spoke; his mind was filled with thoughts of his own son. Ngugi stared at him as if he was looking at a ghost, his mouth gaping like a fish out of water. Thuo began to think that he was wrong to think that he was welcome here. Then Ngugi pulled him into an embrace and

apologised over and over and over again. There were tears in both men's eyes when they disengaged.

Chapter Ten
Friday, 4th January 2008.

Schola shed her first tears when she heard of Amani's passing. She pleaded with Thuo to tell her that he was lying and that it wasn't so. Thuo drove slowly and silently on the roads that had life creeping back onto them as Schola kept begging him take back the news he had just given her. He took the long way home from the shopping centre where Jommo's friend had dropped Schola off. He wanted to spend a few moments with her before she slipped back into the life they both knew and give her a little more time to process her loss. Ngugi, Jommo and Wairimu had already given him more help trying to find his family than he expected, but he felt that only Schola would understand the anguish he felt.

Thuo had already made the decision to go to Nakuru as soon as he got Schola home safely. The stories he heard about the extent of the violence were beyond belief and regardless of Ngugi's and Jommo's attempts to convince him that it was a bad idea to go to Nakuru, he could no longer sit back and hope that his family would appear. He had already left word with his neighbours to call him if Cheptoo arrived in Kangemi, and had given them the number of the phone Ngugi had loaned him to use and delivered the same instructions to everyone in Kangemi who knew his

family. He taped a note to the door of the house as well just in case they arrived when Kangemi was sleeping.

Schola had not spoken with Cheptoo since the day Thuo had been arrested. This was the final confirmation that Thuo needed before he set out for Nakuru. When he told Schola of his plans, her tears for Amani grew into sobs for Thuo. She begged him to stay, to give it a few more days. She explained that her trip back to Nairobi had only been possible because Jommo's friend had organized a police escort, and even then it had been a challenge. She had already lost one of her sons and could not bear to lose another.

Schola went straight to her quarters as soon as she got into the house, glad that no one had seen her when she had walked through the house. No one else would see her so broken and she didn't want to taint the only home she now had with signs of the things she had been through.

Everything in her room was just as she left it, and the familiarity of it brought her great comfort. She wrapped the clothes she had worn in a plastic bag, and slid them under her bed. She would burn them later. She was exhausted and her body cried for some much needed rest, but she bathed, put on her pink checkered uniform and made her way to the kitchen.

Wanja was the first person she saw but there was no sign of the poised young woman Schola had left behind few days ago. Now, she appeared lost and confused, just the way Amani looked when he had just woken up from his afternoon nap. When Schola wrapped her arms around her and shared condolences, Wanja didn't respond. She just stood there and shrugged when Schola released her and asked her if she wanted anything to eat. Wairimu came into the kitchen and told Schola that she didn't need to work right away but Schola insisted that she wasn't tired. She lied that she had slept during the entire trip to Nairobi even if both women could see that her body was struggling to keep up with her movements. Schola couldn't sleep if she wanted to. She was still afraid that strangers would attack her in the dense and dark silence.

She didn't ask what had happened to Kavata's china cabinet, and the rest of the furniture when she swept across the living room trying to make it look as unchanged as possible. She suspected that nobody would eat, but decided to cook a meal anyway. There was almost nothing to eat in the house. She thought about the

last of the money she had reclaimed and could mentally picture it in the paper bag with the clothes she had planned to burn. She would ask Thuo to drive her to whatever market was open. When she looked out the kitchen window and Thuo wasn't sitting in the yard like he usually did, she realized that he had decided to go ahead and chase death in search of his family.

Her voice shook as she told Wairimu what she suspected and Wairimu woke Jommo up from his nap and told him to do something. Jommo was not sure he could convince any man not to go to all lengths to find his family, or wanted to for that matter. However, he was able to convince Thuo, who hadn't gotten very far due to the limited public transport, to come back and allow them at least to organize for him to get to Nakuru as safely as possible.

By the time Thuo returned to the house, Jommo and Ngugi were sitting together and had already made a series of calls. Jommo's sources in Nakuru confirmed that the violence had not subsided, but because of the high police presence in the town, the fighting had been contained in the more rural sections of Nakuru. An announcement imposing a curfew had been made earlier that day. Many people were against it and he feared that it would cause more protests. The situation in the areas around Thuo's home had been dire in the beginning but the fighting had moved on and things were calm now. The only vehicles getting in and out of Nakuru were army trucks and relief vehicles. Jommo's contact would try and go to Thuo's home and check on his family. Thuo gave the man directions to his aunt's house and asked him to look for them there if they were not at his house. A few hours later, Jommo's contact confirmed that he had visited Thuo's aunt. She was unharmed and was looking after Thuo's children, but they had not heard from Cheptoo since she left for Eldoret. Jommo's contact would be able to extract Thuo's family in a few days after tensions around the curfew subsided. Thuo's respite was short-lived. He was grateful that his children were alive, but he could not imagine raising them without Cheptoo.

At the same time, worry was growing about Kavata's whereabouts. The airport had been opened a day ago, but it was still not fully operational. Flights took off filled with fleeing foreign nationals. The Americans had issued a travel advisory against Kenya and the Brits who claimed to be keeping an eye on things before they made any decisions, were discreetly extracting their citizens. Ngugi had decided to

put off calling her parents to tell them about Amani until Kavata was home, but he needed to get in touch with her cousins in Atlanta to check if she had indeed left.

Hon Muli answered the phone with his voice full of the sun he was basking in in Zanzibar.

'Ngugi, great to hear from you! We were so worried when we heard what happened in Machakos.' Ngugi couldn't wait for Kavata to come home so that he could tell her how right she had always been about her father. Never had anything sincere come from his mouth, but when Ngugi broke the news, there was no doubt that what he was hearing was real pain. Hon Muli ended the call promptly after he gave Ngugi Mutheu's number and promised to be back in his house by sunset to help him locate Kavata. He hadn't disconnected the call when he told his wife that her only grandson was dead. As Ngugi overheard the elderly woman wail, he wondered if and how he would ever say those same words to Kavata.

The train hadn't moved for over an hour and nobody seemed to know why. Kavata had hopped off to finally pee and scurried back on to wait with the patient crowd. It occurred to her that they might be sitting there for days, waiting for some kind of explanation as to why their journey had come to a premature end. If there was something wrong, nobody would tell them because there weren't supposed to be any humans on a cargo train in the first place.

Cheptoo was asleep beside her. Kavata stood up to look over the edge of the train. One by one, passengers were hesitantly disembarking, careful not to go too far in case the locomotive sprung back to life. Kavata asked the train prefect if he could see anything from the top of the bricks. He shook his head and said that these trains were known to break down for days. There was probably something wrong with the engine. That wasn't good enough for Kavata. She wasn't sure exactly where, but she knew they were stuck somewhere in Thika, which was less than an hour away from Nairobi. She was sure that they would be able to get home if they could just find their way to the highway.

She turned back to the train prefect and asked him if he could see the highway.

'Si it's just over here.' His bottom lip pointed westward. Kavata nudged Cheptoo.

'We are getting off here. Let's go.' Cheptoo refused to move. She was happy to wait for as long as it took for the train to get moving again.

'That might never happen, let's go.'

'What if there is fighting here as well?'

'We have to have faith that there isn't. We've come all this way.' Kavata didn't wait for Cheptoo to respond before she strapped her bag to her back and leapt off the train.

'Just over here' ended up being about eight kilometres away and the two women were exhausted by the time they saw any sign of the Thika-Nairobi highway ahead of them. By this time, Cheptoo was so cross with Kavata that she wouldn't so much as glance in her direction. But all was forgotten when they saw that beautiful stretch of grey tarred road.

With no landmarks or signs to guide them it took a while to figure which side of the highway led to Nairobi and which one went back to Thika. When a *matatu* with a Thika sign on it whizzed past them the two women ran across the highway giggling like little children.

Kavata and Cheptoo stood at the side of the road, sticking out their arms at every passing car. After a while they came up with a hitch-hiking system of sorts in which they saved their energy and enthusiasm for cars that they could see had space for them. They waved and jumped and pleaded for these cars to slow down but the drivers did everything they could to avoid looking at them. They adjusted rear view mirrors that were already perfectly aligned and fidgeted with their radios. Kavata recognised the gestures. She had often been the one speeding past strangers in need, convinced that their cry for help was a dishonest ploy to rob her. So as they stood there, she knew it would be a miracle if anyone stopped. She contemplated walking the rest of the distance home, then an idea snuck into her mind and she walked towards the pineapple farms and found a bush to hide behind. Cheptoo had assumed that Kavata had gone off to pee again and carried on trying to flag down cars. Moments later, when Kavata emerged fully dressed in the Sunday suit she had shrugged off in order to fit in, Cheptoo didn't need an explanation to why she had chosen to change clothes in the middle of nowhere, she just sat back and let Kavata

take over the hitch-hiking and a few minutes later, they were sitting in a young woman's air conditioned car.

The three women listened to the radio on the way home. The man on the radio reported that protestors had uprooted the train tracks in Kibera and therefore no trains were able to pass through Nairobi.

Chapter Eleven

Sunday Lunch

Any pastor you asked would tell you that they had never seen their churches as full as they were that Sunday, a week after the post-election violence hit the country. After days spent watching the country burn, hearing gruesome stories of hurt, loss and heartbreak, Kenyans drew back the curtains of their homes and unlocked their doors. They left their radios, televisions and internet connections on while they dusted off their hats and polished their cars, listening for the news just in case the fragile calm that they were experiencing ruptured again and they had to abandon their Sunday plans. When they were sure all was well, they packed their families into their cars and did what they had been taught to do in the face of a crisis. They went to church.

‘Let us pray.’ Pastor Simon’s voice was sombre as he spoke, but it still lifted those around him to their feet. They shuffled into a circle and held hands. The Mwangi balcony had been too small to accommodate the hordes of people who arrived to offer their condolences. Pastor Simon had told the congregation of their loss that

Sunday morning. He had encouraged his followers to keep the family in prayer as they dealt with the loss of not only the election but their son as well. The gathering was moved to the back yard where tents had suddenly sprung from the ground to accommodate the prayers for Amani, and meetings to plan his burial.

Kavata remained seated, and the pastor didn't protest. Next to her, the pastor's wife wrapped her arm around her shoulders and pulled Kavata towards her hip in an awkward sideways embrace.

Pastor Simon prayed in long, drawn-out sentences with gaping silences that left the room unsure of whether or not it was time to say Amen. It was as if there was so much to pray for that he didn't know where he should start. Kavata didn't pay much attention until the pastor mentioned her dead son's name. She had stopped bothering to hide the tears that now fell relentlessly from her eyes. Her tears watered the grief that was growing inside her like yeast and she didn't want it to end. She listened to the pastor's prayer carefully and wanted to stop him and tell him that he was praying for the wrong thing. He didn't need to curse the evil spirit that caused boys to disobey their parents and rush out to an angry mob. Nor did he need to ask God to grant her family peace and understanding so that they may come to terms with their tragic loss. The only thing that Kavata wanted the pastor to pray for was that Ngugi and Wanja were freed of their sadness. She wanted the pastor to pray for her family's grief to somehow be relocated to her so she could carry the heavy burden on her own until it eventually killed her. She had prayed every day that she would die, but no one would let her. They had watched her and fed her and forced her out of bed every day since she had arrived home. Before Amani died, he had warned that she would be punished for lying to him. If this wasn't hell, she didn't know what was.

Ngugi had been unable to speak to her after he had told her the news. She would often catch him staring at her in that lost way he did when he needed her to point him in the right direction. It was a look she had not seen in ages and for the months before she left, it was all she had wanted to see when she looked at him. Now, she didn't know what to do when their eyes met or when they both lay in bed with their backs to each other trying to stifle their sobbing. Wanja had refused to be involved in any of the funeral arrangements and had banished herself to her bedroom every time the steady stream of guests arrived at their home.

People milled around Kavata at the end of the prayers, muttering inaudible words and placing moist hands on her shoulders. They spoke in hushed tones, regretting that they were visiting the Mwangi's under such circumstances but relieved to be in the company of people other than those that they had been holed up with for days. Wairimu and her family were still at the house and she, Cheptoo and Schola had made sure that there was always sufficient food and drink for the mourners. Thuo did whatever he could to help the Mwangi's although he was reluctant to be away from his family for too long. He had lain in Cheptoo's arms for hours after she returned, sobbing and apologising until she told him to dry his eyes and bring their children home.

Later that afternoon, once the crowd had thinned, Wairimu called the family in to the living room for the first meeting to plan Amani's funeral. All the city mortuaries were full so his body was still at the hospital morgue, but they had been insisting that the boy's body be moved immediately. Hon Muli had pulled whatever strings he could to get him a space at a prestigious funeral home, but this would only happen in three days. They would need a place to keep him until then.

'Bring him here,' Kavata said. The sound of her voice startled them all. She had not spoken much since she had been back and now that she did, her voice sounded like that of a woman three times her age. Jommo and Hon Muli explained to her why that would not be possible but Kavata insisted. No one was going to treat her son as if he didn't have a home. She would bring him home if it meant that she had to buy a freezer to put him in. Ngugi was the first to realize that his wife was being serious. He rose to sit next to her and he put his arms around her and tried to explain that that was not a good idea, but Kavata began to call for Thuo to drive her to the hospital if Ngugi wouldn't. Her frail voice barely reached the kitchen so she fought to get on her feet as Mrs Muli and Ngugi tried to calm her down.

There was a gentle knock on the door, but no one could hear it in the midst of Kavata's protest. The young man at the door knocked again and again until Wanja, whose bedroom was the closest to the front door, grew irritated and went to let him in. She didn't recognise the young man but assumed that he was also there to pay his condolences, so she pointed him in the direction of the living room and went back to her bedroom.

Wairimu was the first to see Jane's son as he stood awkwardly in the doorway. He greeted them in a shaky voice and the room fell silent as he made his way around greeting the people who, according to his mother, were supposed to be his family. When he was done greeting them, he was standing next to Wairimu.

'Please have a seat, *karibu*. We were just having a small family meeting.'

'And you are?' Ngugi asked the question that was on everyone's mind. Kavata kept her eyes on his face long after he had greeted her, trying to sift through her cloudy mind to figure out why he looked so familiar. It dawned on her when he began to speak. She looked over at Mrs Muli, who was just as curious to hear who the familiar stranger was. Then she shifted her gaze to Hon Muli, and watched his face as his son introduced himself to him.

The post-election violence carried on for the first hundred days of 2008 and only ended when an image of Raila and Kibaki shaking hands was beamed onto every working screen in the country. More than one thousand people died as a result of the violence, though it is suspected that the number is much higher. Most of the dead people had been shot in the back. The police continue to deny that they were the cause of these deaths, even if most of the armed protestors fought with machetes and *pangas*. Almost half a million people were displaced from their homes and are still living in tented camps all over the country. Some of them have been resettled, most of them have not. No one is sure when this will happen.

There was no record of the statement she had given in Eldoret when Cheptoo went to the CID offices in Nairobi, and volunteered herself as a witness to the church massacre. Although there were about four thousand people standing around the church on the day that it was burned down, only four people were arrested in connection to the burning. They were acquitted for lack of evidence despite Cheptoo's testimony. The handcuffs that were used during the massacre bore a

police serial number. They belonged to a policeman in Eldoret. He claimed that they had been stolen the week before the church massacre.

The Electoral Commission of Kenya was disbanded soon after the election. The chairman of the commission was widely blamed for the violence. Four years after the election he spoke to the media and said that he still did not know if Kibaki won the election fairly. He also said that he had no regrets over the 2007 polls. He never lived to see another election.

Ngugi never ran in another election. However, an old drinking buddy from his university days ran for office and was elected as the youngest president in the country's history. The new president appointed Ngugi the Cabinet Secretary for Land, Housing and Urban Development. The first thing Ngugi did was make sure that the houses that he had built for the National Housing Council were re-allocated to the people for whom they were intended.

Wanja got used to seeing her name in the newspaper since she decided to keep her job at ODM. She became the party's Communication Manager and was at the forefront of their campaign for the next election, which ODM eventually lost. Hon Muli still refuses to speak to her, so does Sally. The void left by Amani's death was too severe to endure so she eventually moved out of her parent's home, but visited often to help nurse her mother out of her unrelenting sadness.

Thuo worked for the Mwangi's for two years before he quit his job to open a tour and travel company with Jommo. Today they have over sixty buses across the country. They called their company Amani Tours and Travel.

Lawrence's entire family died during the violence. Kavata offered to pay for his ticket home for the funerals. He never went back to Atlanta. He now lives in Nairobi, where he runs a successful online service where Kenyans abroad can buy their families back home goats, chicken and other livestock to slaughter during family celebrations.

Jane now lives in Germany, where she works as a care giver at an old people's home.

Schola passed away in her sleep four years after she was raped. No one had known that she was sick.