

KILL ME QUICK



MEJA MWANGI

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by

Meja Mwangi

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For the Mejas and Mainas waiting and hoping.

Chapter One

Meja sat with his shoes swinging over the sewage water that dripped from a hole in the back wall of the supermarket and flowed under the culvert he was sitting on. He was tall and lean, with short and neatly combed hair, and wore an oversize black suit, a tie, and a pair of oversize black shoes that his father had lent him.

He saw a beggar walking up the road peeking inside dumpsters and talking to an invisible companion. A man in a grey suit rushed past with his hand over his nose, and a woman in high shoes hurried in the opposite direction covering her nose against the stench. A woman with a baby on her back talked and laughed as she sifted in the rubbish around the dumpsters. More people passed by, some rushing and others not.

Meja saw them, as he sat in his ill-fitting suit with the stench of the backstreet in his nose, and worried. He had had been in the city three days. He was yet to find something that did not scare him. The busy people, the heavy traffic, and the tall buildings, filled him with awe. He had landed in a strange world where everyone was an adversary, every vehicle a dangerous beast and every building a dark dungeon. It was not what they had said he would find in the city. This was not the place of his dreams. How would he survive it?

Maina hopped out of the dumpster with a paper bag in each hand and joined him.

“Food,” he said, dropping the bags at their feet.

Maina was shorter than Meja, but he was just as lean and as hard, and his hair was a dusty, twisted bush on his head. He wore tattered overalls black with oil from the discarded oilcans and old bottles that he collected from the garbage bins for recycling.

He sat down and started sorting the bags. One bag had fruit; squashed bananas, mouldy oranges, and a pawpaw that was just a mushy mess at the bottom. In the other bag were a dry loaf of bread, chocolate that looked like

shoe polish and some hard scones.

Maina broke the bread and gave Meja a piece. Meja had not eaten for some days, but the look of the food left him with no desire to eat. Maina went ahead to crunch on his piece, looking over his shoulder now and then.

“A year ago, I would not touch it either,” he said. “I thought I would get a job and live like those people.”

Meja avoided looking them in the eyes in case one of them recognised him.

“Don’t worry,” said Maina. “They do not see us. “Only policemen and city *askari* see you.”

There were no police officers or city *askari* in sight. Maina tossed away the rotten half and ate the rest of his orange. Then he found something dark and mushy at the bottom of the bag. He scooped it with two fingers, regarded it uncertainly.

“I don’t know what this is,” he said.

He tasted it, thought about it, tasted again, and nodded. He offered it to Meja.

“What is it?” Meja asked.

“It tastes good, “ he said.

Meja shook his head.

“You are not hungry,” Said Maina.

He wrapped it in plastic and set it aside for later. Then he crunched on his bread.

“I tried to get a job,” he said, his mouth full. “Any kind of job. I went from office to office knocking on doors, and from shop to shop begging them to hire me. What qualifications? They asked. I gave them my school certificate. Experience? I told them I had just finished schooling. It was the same wherever I went. They got angry with me for wasting their time.”

Meja watched him break a scone with a rock, all the time talking and glancing over his shoulder.

“Everywhere I went, *Hakuna Kazi*. No vacancy. Every place I looked was *hakuna kazi*. There was no work.”

He tasted the chocolate, thought about it, and decided it was safe to eat. He offered it to Meja. Meja shook his head.

“It takes time,” he said. “It is hard, not impossible.”

He had arrived in the city with several of his friends, fresh from high school and, like Meja full of dreams. They lived well for a while on the little money they brought from home. Tea and bread, and sometimes a fried egg, for breakfast, *ugali na sukuma* in the evening. They had lived as they thought city people lived. Their money had run out before they got jobs.

He broke something in two and offered half to Meja. Meja again shook his head.

“Try an orange,” he said.

The smell aside, the orange was not too bad. Meja could eat some of it by holding his breath when he took a bite.

“Our job-seeking gang broke up, when we ran out of money,” Maina said. “Some went back home upcountry. Others ventured into Main Street to join the bag-snatchers and the pickpockets. A few took up robbery and mugging. They are all in prison, or dead.”

Maina had chosen the backstreets and the side streets, where the pace was slower and life less violent.

“The choice is yours,” he said.

“We read all those books for nothing?” Meja asked.

He could hear his peers, those who did not go to school, laugh at his plight.

“Look at him now,” he could hear them say. “He thought he was better

than us. Look at him now.”

It scared him more than the police and the city *askari*.

Maina shrugged. He too had believed the lie, told by parents and teachers, that going to school was the way to escape the yoke. They had said it was the only way to avoid ending up as a farm ox like his father, like his uncles, and like everyone he knew. He had read every book they gave him, carried a book everywhere he went, even to the toilet, and spent every moment he had turning the pages and absorbing their content. He had studied things he did not have to, and ended up yoked to books.

Now he was through with books, with ploughs and with anything to do with farming. Sometimes, when the nights were so cold in the dumpster that he could not fall asleep, he swore he would never return home unless he got a job.

“There are two ways,” he said to Meja. “The main street and the backstreet. Then there is the way home to the *jembe*. I will die before I pick up another *jembe*.”

“Where are the jobs they said we would find in the city?” Meja asked.

Maina pointed at two *mkokoteni* men, their bare backs shining with sweat, unloading sacks of potatoes and carrying them inside the supermarket.

The thought of having to settle for that kind of work was terrifying. So was the prospect of going home without the job he came to find. What would he tell his people? That he had failed them and could not find work in the city like other young men his age? That they had wasted their money sending him to school? He would find a job equal to his education or die trying.

“Do that,” Maina said. “It is a waste of time, but do it.”

Meja rose to go resume his job-search. His shoes, which just that morning had cost him to polish, were covered with dust. They were getting loose on his feet too. He sat down and stuffed more newspapers in them. Then he was ready.

“We meet here for dinner,” Maina said. “Then we go find a place to sleep.”

Job seekers did not sleep at the same place two nights in a row. Sometimes the police and the city *askari* went around arresting homeless and unemployed people and locking them up. In three days Meja had slept in an empty dumpster, in an abandoned car in the alley, and in front of an all-night bar. Looking at the overflowing dumpsters, he wondered where it would be next.

“I will show you,” Maina said.

He picked up his sack. He too had arrived in the city wearing his father’s oversize suit. In less than two weeks, had sold it for food.

“You will get rid of yours too,” he said.

A suit would attract attention from policemen and *askari* believing it to be stolen. Beggars would think he had money, and pickpockets and mugger would target him for the same reason. Only office managers were unimpressed by job seekers’ attempt to look smart.

“When they say to get out,” Maina said, “do not hesitate. And stay away from Main Street.”

Meja spent the afternoon going from street to street, and from office to office, climbing stairs, and knocking on doors. He talked to anyone who saw him, asked messengers if they knew of a job, and pleaded with security guards and gatekeepers to let him inside to talk to the managers. He begged secretaries to allow him to the bosses. Few asked to know his qualifications. He told them all anyway, and, in his desperation, told them again, and again, repeating himself until he could not think of what else to say.

Late in the afternoon, having bribed a security guard to let him in, he entered an office with a bad-tempered manager behind the desk.

“You are late,” the man yelled, without looking up. “I can’t interview you now. Come back tomorrow.”

Meja stood hesitated. The man looked up.

“Your brother told me you were desperate for a job,” he said. “Come back at nine, or don’t come at all. This town is full of young men who can keep time. Get out.”

Sensing Meja’s confusion, the man squinted at him.

“You are not Oliver?”

Meja shook his head.

“Who let you in?”

“The door was open.”

“Out!”

A secretary poked her head round the door.

“Oliver will not be coming,” she reported. “He says he found a real job.”

The manager threw his pen at her. She ducked and closed the door. Meja started to leave.

“Can you sell insurance?” the manager asked him.

“Insurance?”

“Mary,” he yelled. “Show this fool the door.”

The secretary handed Meja to the guard he had bribed to be allowed inside.

“I told you,” the guard said.

Meja ended up by the entrance and the sign that said, No Vacancy! *Hakuna Kazi!* His desperation rose, as the day wore on. He went into shops and restaurants asking to sweep the floors, and dust the tables. Any sort of work.

“*Ati kazi?*” said a shop assistant. “You want work here? Come with me.”

Meja had missed the No Vacancy sign by the entrance.

“You see this notice?” the man said. “It was put there when I started working here as at your age. Since then there has been no vacancy here.”

Meja gave up on the main streets after that. He turned down a side alley that led him back to the backstreets. He walked along, without caring where he went, his mind in a storm of rising despair. He passed a man urinating on a wall.

“What are you looking at?” the man yelled at him.

Meja looked away and hurried along. He tried not to look at the man searching in the trash around an overflowing dumpster. The man was collecting cans and bottles and tossing them in a sack. He found a chapatti, smelt, and dusted it. He was about to taste it when he turned and saw Meja about to pass by.

“Any luck?” he asked.

It was his friend Maina in a ragged wig. He laughed at the look on Meja’s face and took off the wig.

“I found it there,” he said.

They stepped aside for a rubbish truck to pass.

“*Chapati?*”

He offered the one he had just found. Meja shook his head. He pointed at a steel back gate.

“The best restaurant in the backstreets. Sometimes they throw away whole ones.”

The smell of food was overwhelming. From the smoke rising over the wall and the smells and the sounds that came through the back door, it was a busy restaurant. The sort of place that might have a job for him. Seeing the look on his face, Maina laughed.

“They do not hire school leavers,” he said, picking up his sack. “But go try your luck.”

Meja approached the steel gate, stopped uncertainly. The thought of another rejection weighed down on him. Two could handle it better than one.

“Come with me,” he said.

“They know me too well,” Maina said. “They call me *chokora*, the dustbin boy. They will not let us in, if we are together.”

Whether in Main Street or backstreet, Meja was alone. To try or give up, to go or stay were all up to him. Maina had fought his battles and settled for the backstreets. Meja would not give up so easily. He would never resign himself to recycling cans and bottles. He would sweep floors, shine shoes, and push a handcart if he had to.

He stepped up to the steel gate and knocked. The door made such a loud noise he stepped back startled. Maina nodded encouragingly.

“Again,” he said. “Harder.”

Meja pounded on the gate. Someone yelled from the other side. They heard footsteps approach.

“The gateman,” Maina said quickly. “Tell him you have an appointment with the manager. Better be kicked out by the manager. His name is Kaka.”

He ducked out of sight behind the dumpster. The gateman opened the door a crack.

“What?” he asked.

“I want to see the manager,” Meja said.

The man looked at Meja, looked up and down the street and again at Meja.

“I want to see Mister Kaka,” said Meja.

“Why?”

“I have an appointment.”

The man regarded him uncertainly. He had heard voices as he opened the

door. Then he saw the large envelope in Meja's hand and opened the door a little wider.

Meja squeezed through into a busy backyard cluttered with sacks of charcoal, piles of firewood and smoking blazers. At one end was a man peeling potatoes and tossing them in a bathtub. Next to him was a pile of sacks of potatoes waiting to be peeled, but the man seemed to be in no hurry. Another man was washing dishes, another fanning a *jiko*, and three cooks were stirring pots and serving.

Meja had reason to hope. There was work at the restaurant, and the manager did not deny it.

"I have work," he said, "but can you do it?"

Meja assured him he could.

"What can you do for me? What have you got that I can use here?"

"I have a first in chemistry," said Meja.

"Food chemistry? Can you cook?"

"Cook?"

"*Pilau*, for example?" said the manager.

Meja had no idea what it was. He shook his head.

"Can you cook at all?"

Cooking was something Meja had never thought of as a job. His father did not cook and his grandfather had never cooked and they did not teach that in high school.

"I can clean," he said.

He had to learn that in boarding school.

"Everyone here cleans," the manager informed him.

"I have physics," Meja pleaded.

“Gitau, my security guard, has a diploma in computer science,” said the manager. “Athumani, the potato peeler, has a degree in culinary science. Do you know what that is?”

Meja had never heard of it.

“How to feed ten customers on one potato. Athumani makes *bhajia* out of thin air and *chapati* out of potatoes. You need to do such things to work here. All my waiters have diplomas in waiting.”

Nothing Meja had studied in school had anything to do with food.

“What I need are young people who can do things with their hands and feet, and not just their heads. I will show you what I mean.”

He took Meja by the shoulder and led him out of the office to the kitchen. The kitchen was a chaotic busy place with cooks, assistant cooks and waiters rushing about and yelling at one another.

“All these people have *been* to school,” he said.

He pointed at a big man in patched trousers and a greasy apron sweating over a table full of rolled *chapati*, with his face, and arms covered with flour.

“That is Makau,” he said. “Makau is a graduate of the University of Puna. He studied something I cannot even pronounce, and, before he came here, he tarmacked for two years looking for a job. Fortunately, his Indian girlfriend had taught him how to make *chapati*. Now he rolls *chapati* better than an Indian woman. Makau!”

The man smiled and waved.

“What did your girlfriend teach you?” the manager asked Meja.

The question took Meja by surprise. He had never thought having a girlfriend could be an advantage in looking for employment. On the contrary, he had been made to believe that a girlfriend was unnecessary distraction on a young man’s journey to the future. But he could not remember anything he learned in school that could be useful here.

“I can sweep and clean,” he said.

“That is the Gitau’s job,” said the manager. “The gateman did not go to school, so he does anything the others will not do.”

He ushered Meja out of the kitchen and back to the yard.

“Come back when you have a skill,” he said.”

“I will clean the toilets,” said Meja.

“Gitau does that too.”

“I can peel potatoes.”

The potato peeler heard and waved his knife at him.

“I can cook *ugali*,” Meja said.

“So can Gitau, but we do not let him do that.”

Her started to leave. Meja held his coat.

“Give me a chance,” he begged. “I will show you what I can do.”

The manager tried to shake him loose. Meja knew he was violating Maina’s first rule of survival, but he hung on. He did not want to go back to the dumpsters.

“Gitau,” the manager called at the gateman.

Meja was still begging for a chance, when he landed back in the alley with one shoe in his hand. Maina was leaning on the wall waiting. He waited until Meja finished lacing his shoes.

“I told you not to insist,” he said. “See now what they have done to your suit.”

Two shirt buttons were missing and the jacket had a tear under the armpit. He started off, and Meja followed.

They walked in silence, all the way back to their place at the back of the supermarket, then sat for a long time without talking.

“You will not find a job looking like that,” Maina finally said.

Meja sat hunched against the wind and watched as the street slowly emptied of its day people.

“They will think you are chokora like me,” Maina told him. “Chokora do not belong on Main Street. Chokora belong here with the dustbins.”

Meja was still in a daze trying to come to terms with the roughing up he had received from Gitau the security guard while the others watched and laughed. The streetlights blinked to life and lit up the streets and the sky over the city with a warm glow that was beautiful to look at.

A chilly wind blew down the backstreet with dust and paper and the smell of sewage. They huddled together, backs to the wind, and waited until the garbage men came in their noisy truck emptying dumpsters. The truck rumble on down the street and, when it was gone and there was no one to see them, they darted across and hopped inside the largest of the dumpsters. They snuggled together for warmth.

Meja did not return to Main Street the following day, or the next or the next. Meja never knocked on office doors again. With Maina’s help, he soon forgot he had ever been to school, and he tried to forget he had a family at home, waiting to hear he got a job. He forced a smile and went wherever Maina went and did as he did. He stayed out of trouble, avoided the lure of petty crime, and vowed not to end up a thief or a beggar.

The cold and wet season gave way to the hot dry season. Swarms of flies and mosquitoes joined them in the dumpsters and hot, dry wind funnelled dust and rubbish down the back streets. The pickings from the rubbish bins diminished. The dumpsters behind the supermarket no longer overflowed and the struggle for food intensified. They had to compete with the dogs and the cats, the beggars and chokora children from the slums.

Life was no better on Main Street either due to the draught. Pickpockets and muggers returned to the back streets scaring away the back-street mechanics, the street vendors and anyone trying to make an honest living.

Some of Maina's friends returned from prison promising to find a job and make a fresh start. Food got scarce and the competition for recyclable trash was fierce. Dumpster scavengers fought and injured one another over empty cans and old bottles. Maina thought the time had come to try something else.

"*Mkokoteni?*" Meja asked.

"We don't have money for a pushcart. I have a better idea."

This time they would try it differently. They headed to the suburbs and went from house to house offering to work for free. That was Maina's better idea.

"We are tired of doing nothing," he said to suspicious house owners. "We will wash your car, cut the grass, and trim the hedges."

All for nothing? Even Meja had to wait to see the end of it. Most house owners told them to go away or get a beating, but some were intrigued enough to try them. Maina was good at it too, whistling and singing as he washed the cars, cut the grass, and worked Meja just as hard as himself. Sometimes they were finished in time for lunch and the housewives would give them something to eat. At other times, they were at it until sunset and got neither food nor gratitude. But most of the people were good people and they felt guilty letting two hard-working boys go away empty-handed. Sometimes they paid with food, and sometimes with food and money. Then Maina acted surprised and promise to would work for it next time.

Maina spent his share of the money as fast as they made it. He ate in kiosks and smoked whole cigarettes.

The dry season passed, and again came the rainy season with its share of misery for the backstreet people. Streets flooded and ditches overflowed, and burst sewers sent rivers of sewage down the streets. Not a single culvert or dumpster was habitable. Rain chased the street people to abandoned buildings and to bus shelters and anywhere there was a roof. There they found some of Maina's old colleagues demanding rent for shelter from the rain.

Halfway through the rainy season, Maina come up with another plan. He bought a shovel, and a hammer, found an old bucket and they went back to the suburbs in search of potholes. When they found a pothole so large that vehicles had to slow down to go through it, they set up a red flag in it, placed a makeshift MAN AT WORK sign next to the hole and went to work. Meja sat by the hole breaking rocks in smaller pieces and tossing them in the hole, while Maina shovelled soil from the roadside into the hole. When a vehicle approached, Maina stopped to direct it round the pothole.

“Good morning, boss,” he greeted the driver cheerfully. “What about something for the workmen, boss?”

Most drivers ignored him and drove on without looking at him. Others just tossed money out of the window and drove on, but a few stopped to thank him for the excellent job he was doing.

“If only more young men were like you,” they said.

“Thank you, boss,” Maina said.

“Keep it up.”

“What about a little lunch, boss?”

“Tomorrow,” the man said driving off.

“We’ll fill this one tomorrow then,” Meja said rising.

“Tomorrow we go elsewhere.”

They went from one end of the suburbs to the other and from road to road looking for generous drivers. When they found them, they stayed for a while on the road, and took their time filling the potholes. Sometimes they worked the same pothole for several days. When a pothole was productive, they filled it up in the morning and excavated it in the evening, so there would be work for the following day. It was a good strategy, and kept them receiving tips from grateful motorists, until someone figured their racket and alerted city *askari*.

That was the end of their road repair business. In the meantime, Maina had realised the dustbins in the suburbs were full of recyclable trash. He took Meja on early morning raids, through the suburban dustbins collecting repairable and recyclable rubbish. What some people threw away, others bought. And Maina and Meja made money. But it was not enough. Whatever they did, however they did it, everyone cheated them. From the woman who sold them old newspapers, to the butcher who bought the same to wrap up his meat; from the scrap metal buyers to the tea kiosk owners for whom they fetched water, everyone wanted to make the boys work for really nothing.

The scrap buyers' scales read the same no matter how much scrap was weighed on them. The assistants rushed through the process fast so there was no time for protest.

“Five kilos,” he said tossing the scrap in the back of the pickup.

Then driver calculated the price on the back of his hand and paid without explaining how he arrived at the total. When Meja protested, the man put his money back in his pocket and told him to hop on the lorry and get his scrap out.

The bottle buyer made Maina empty his sack by the roadside and arrange the bottles by type, colour, and size. Then he went through them looking for reasons not to buy any of them. One day the bottles were too green, the next day they were too white, or too brown, too big, or too small, or too whatever would make them valueless.

“I will take them off your hands,” he offered. “Just to help you boys. “

“Help us how?” Meja asked him.

“Chokora understands. We have done business before.”

Meja turned to Maina.

“It took us two weeks to find these bottles,” he reminded.

Maina shrugged.

“I am a good man,” said the bottle man. “Chokora knows.”

Meja again turned to Mania. He was tired of carrying the sack of bottles about. They could not leave it where they slept, for someone would steal it.

“Are you selling or not?” asked the buyer.

Meja walked away leaving it to Maina.

“Chokora?”

“We are not selling,” Maina said.

The man picked up his cart ready to push off.

“Wait,” Meja reconsidered.

He took Maina aside. They discussed the problem. They argued.

“I have places to go,” said the old man.

“Wait,” Meja said to him.

Maina was for breaking the bottles and calling it a day.

“How much?” Meja asked the old man.

“I told you.”

Meja held out his hand. He was hungry, and a little money was better than no money.

A light drizzle started to fall.

Meja loaded the bottles on the cart and the old man pushed off. They stood and watched until he turned out of sight. The drizzle turned to downpour. All the dumpsters would be uninhabitable by the time it stopped raining.

Chapter Two

An old man walked down the back street, searching in the alleyways, and the dumpsters. He was uncomfortably hot in his brown suit and hat, and smell of rotting waste was overwhelming. He stopped to get his bearings, and took a handkerchief from his coat pocket. He wiped sweat from his face and neck, took off his hat, and mopped his bald head. Then he walked along ignoring the people who passed him hurrying to get out of the stench.

He found what he was looking for at the back of the supermarket. The boys were sitting by the ditch eating food they had taken from the dustbin. They did not notice him, until he stood over them and greeted them. They sprang to their feet ready to run for it. Then they saw how old he was and relaxed. The old man was sweating heavily, and his nose was twitching at the stench of rotting garbage from the dumpster.

“Do not be afraid,” he said to them.

“We are not afraid,” Maina said.

The old man inspected them, noting that while they were about the same age and build; one had shoes and a coat, while the other was barefoot and ragged.

“I mean no harm,” he said to them.

“You can’t harm us,” said Maina.

“I want to help you,” he told them.

“Why?” Maina asked.

“How?” asked Meja.

“I can give you a home,” he said.

They looked at each other.

“We have a home,” said Maina.

The old man was tired. He sat down on the culvert to rest before resuming his search. Since these two did not want his help, he would have to go find someone who did. The boys, having accepted he was harmless, sat down next to him and resumed their interrupted meal. Maina offered him an orange. He shook his head.

“Why do you want to help us?” Meja asked him.

Everyone asked the same question. From his employer to his neighbours, to the congregation at the church where he was a deacon, everyone asked why he took it upon himself to rescue and rehabilitate street rats. Some malicious people spread rumours about his motive for helping homeless street boys, but he knew their evil mind would think the same outrageous thoughts if he helped street girls as well.

“I help street boys,” he said.

“Don’t you have your own children to help?” asked Maina.

He did not. That was why he had decided to help orphans.

“We are not orphans,” Maina informed him.

“Why do you live in dustbins?”

“We cannot get work,” Meja said.

“I will give you work,” he told them. “If you come with me.”

“Come with you where?” Maina was suddenly suspicious.

“Where I live,” he said. “It is not far from here.”

They looked at each other. They said a lot without speaking.

“What sort of work?” asked Maina.

“I cook for a big man,” he said. “I need a kitchen help.”

Again, they glanced at each other.

“Do you have a wife?” Maina asked.

“I never married,” he told them.

Maina shot to his feet.

“Go now,” he said. “Go now before we beat you up!”

The old man scrambled to his feet.

“I just want to help you,” he said.

“We don’t need your help,” Maina said.

The old man started off, looking old and rejected. Meja watching him go, looked down the back street with its dumpsters, and smelt the stink of the garbage like he had not smelt it since his first day in the city. He realised that, in all the time he had been there, he had not seen or heard anything about the city that he liked. Hope seemed to have had died the day they Gitau the watchman kicked him out in the backstreet for insisting on having a job. Since then, he had not for a moment imagined he might ever see hope again.

The old man seemed sincere enough to be the miracle Meja prayed for every night.

“Wait,” he said.

The old man stopped.

“I will go with you.”

The old man waited.

“Let us go,” Meja said to Maina. “He has jobs for us.”

“*Jembe* and *panga* jobs?” Maina said. “Not me.”

“We did it when we repaired roads.”

“Not on a farm.”

“Goodbye then,” said Meja. “I will come see you here when I get my first pay.”

“What makes you think I will be here?”

“Where will you be?”

“I will find my own job. Go with your old man.”

Meja turned to go.

“I will walk you to the bus stop,” Maina said.

On the way to the bus stop, the old man talked about himself. His name was Boi. He was a cook and a man of God. He had helped many boys out of the backstreets, some of whom had gone back to school and even to University. He did not expect any gratitude and did it for the love of God. Then he talked about the new life that lay ahead for Meja. The work was not hard and the conditions were not bad. Meja would get a house, a daily ration of flour and milk, and a salary at the end of the month. The Big Man would decide how much he got based on Meja’s work.

“What does your boss do?” Maina asked.

“He is a farmer and a man of God.”

“Does he have a wife?”

“His wife died,” said the old man. “His children live abroad.”

“I will come with you,” Maina said. “But only until my friend settles down.”

“I will be fair with you,” Boi’s boss said to Meja and Maina, when they were presented to him, after they had washed and looked presentable. “You will be housed, and you will be fed, but only if you work hard. This is not a holiday camp.”

That, was it? They had expected to be told their duties and responsibilities, and their pay and working hours, but that, was it? He was about to walk away when Maina spoke up.

“What about our pay?” he asked.

“Your pay?” asked Big Man.

Boi had instructed them not to ask the big man about pay at their first meeting. He nudged Maina to shut him up.

“Boi said we would be paid,” Maina said.

“Where do you come from?” The Big Man asked him.

“Nanyuki.”

“How much did you earn in Nanyuki?”

When he hesitated, the Big Man walked away. Boi heaved a sigh of relief.

“You will be paid,” he said. “Come.”

He showed them around the farm and pointed out their work. One would work in the garden, as there was need for just one assistant in the kitchen. They would have to decide which one worked where.

A short distance from the farmhouse was the workers’ quarters, a collection of mud and thatch huts crowded together. The huts were old and crumbling, some seeming about to fall, but they looked inviting after the cold of the dumpsters. Dogs, chickens, and children played along the village lanes from sunrise, when their parents went out to work, to sunset when they returned from work.

Maina and Meja were given two collapsing structures at the far end of the village away from the rest of the workers. They inspected each hut in turn, checking out the roofs and the walls to see how much work it would take to make it habitable. Both huts leaned to one side, away from each other as if to deny kinship, and the walls were holed and the thatches infested with rats. Soot hung from the roofs, so heavy in places it caused the roofs to sag, and the floors were thick with dust.

Then they came to the details that mattered. Meja’s hut was neither circular nor rectangular, but it was dark and crisscrossed by cobwebs. It had

fleas too, so many fleas they hopped about on the dust, but that was not the main issue. It was hard to decide which of the two openings was the door and which one was the window. One was low and narrow while the other was high and wide and about a foot off the floor.

Maina's hut was round, less sooty, and free of fleas and bedbugs. There were signs of mice and rats there too, but fewer than in the other hut. They decided to move in it together.

Before leaving them to their own devices, Boi gave them the information he thought they needed. They would work from dawn to dusk, with half an hour break at midday, and for that they would each receive a pound of flour and a cup of milk at the end of the day. They would be happy at the farm, if they worked, otherwise he would send them back to the backstreets. His house was at the other end of the village, and they were free to go to him with any problems. He gave them two large gunnysacks each, one to sleep on and the other to cover themselves with.

"Chokora," the foreman said, the moment he saw them lining up workers receiving the day's rations. "Who says you can eat without working?"

"Boi," Meja said.

"Boi is in the kitchen," said the foreman. "I am foreman here. Get out of line."

Meja started to leave, but Maina made him stay.

"Boi said we can have food," he said.

"Then go eat in his kitchen," said the man. "Get out of line."

Other workers grumbled, told Maina to get out of the line. Maina stayed in line until someone brought Boi. They had their first self-cooked meal that night in their own house, and, although it took them most of the evening to prepare, it was more delicious than anything they had eaten in the city. Then Boi brought them two more sacks and two old blankets and stayed to inform them they would work under him and he would expect respect and obedience.

After he left, they made their beds by the fireside.

“I like it here,” Meja said, lying down to sleep.

Maina reminded they had the foreman to deal with, and the question of their pay to sort out.

“We came for the money too.”

“So, you will stay?”

“Until you settle down.”

Over the next two months, Boi made them try every job there was on the farm, to find out which ones suited their age and education. They worked under everyone and Boi. They learned to milk, looked after pigs, learned to drive tractors and slaughtered chickens for the market. No one wanted to work with them for long, and they ended up at the farmhouse with Boi. Maina said he was allergic to gardening and became the kitchen-help. Meja got the *jembe*.

Meja had nothing against the *jembe*, or any implement that earned him money. He saved every cent he could, while Maina spent his on cigarettes and new clothes. They did not talk about home and the families they left behind. They had food and a place to sleep. For now, that was enough.

The Boi they had in the kitchen was far from the soft-spoken old man who rescued them from the streets. The Boi in the kitchen was impatient and hard to please. He gave them different areas of responsibility, to stop them standing together idling. He did not want them resulting to their unhealthy chokora habits and indiscipline. To Boi nothing was done right or well enough. They were not allowed to stop and rest or worse to sit and talk. The punishment was swift and serious. Anyone found engaging in time wasting activity lost half the day’s ration. Meja and Maina were constantly on half ration.

Chapter Three

A light rain was falling outside. A chilly wind blew in through the cracks in the door agitating the flames, as Meja spooned the last bits of food from his dish mouth. Maina licked his plate, then his fingers, slowly and methodically starting with the little finger of his right hand and working his way to the thumb. Meja added wood to keep the fire going. He watched Maina start on the left hand.

The only furniture in the room was the two wooden crates they sat on, and the shelf with their utensils. They had two mugs, two plates, a water bucket and two old cooking pots Boi had loaned them. Their sleeping places were on the floor on the opposite sides of the hut. They cooked on three stones in the centre of the room.

Maina finished licking his fingers and his plate and sent the plate flying across the room to the rack to await washing. Then he belched and rubbed his stomach.

“That was good,” he said.

“But for the salt,” Meja set his plate down by his side.

“The way Boi has been watching me, I was lucky to get the cooking oil,” said Maina.

He lit a cigarette. The lamp threw grotesque shadows on the walls.

“I like it here,” he said.

“Can you cook *pilau*?” Meja asked.

“What is that?”

“What the restaurant manager asked me. If I could cook *pilau* he would give me a job.”

“I don’t want to be a cook.”

“You work in the kitchen.”

“Not for long,” said Maina. “As soon as I save enough, I will start a shop. My uncle has a bicycle shop.”

No one in Meja’s family had a business. What he would do, as soon as he saved enough, was return to the city, and make real money. That would never happen on the farm. As soon as he had enough for bus fare, he would go back to the city and do whatever it took to make money. He would survive on Main Street.

“With your speed,” Maina laughed. “You need speed and cunning, and courage to face up to and survive mob justice. You must be able to withstand pain.”

On Main Street, anyone who ran was a suspect. Main street mobs liked nothing better than to chase down and beat suspects to death. He was there, and tried the things the others did, and nearly paid for them with his life.

“The mob chased me to the backstreets and I did not have the courage to go back.”

“Did you steal?” Meja asked him.

“I took things here and there, but only when it was easy.”

“What did you take?”

“I don’t remember. I do not want to talk about it.”

Then he stared at the fire, being sad. He could sit like that for the whole night. Sometimes he went out in the night and walked and wept softly by himself. Then he put on his mask and came back smiling. Meja was not fooled by the smile. Maina missed his home and family.

“There is no home to go back to,” Maina said. “That is the truth.”

His father had four sons, two daughters and a small piece of land. They lived in a rented a house so they could use the whole land for cultivation.

They sent Maina to school, so he would go get a job and support them. Before he left, his father called him aside and informed him that he taken all his inheritance in education. There was nothing more for him to expect from his father. Go get a job, he said, then come back and help educate the others.

“He would be happier if I did not go back at all, than go back empty-handed.”

“You have a job now,” Meja said. “If we put our money together, you can go one month and I the next.”

“It would take more money than we save working here. But you can go home. I will lend you my pay.”

It was tempting, but Meja knew he could not do it. His people would want him home, with or without money, but he could not face them with his failure.

“You will never go back?” Maina asked him.

“When I get enough money.”

The rain was to a steady downpour. The tin lamp was out of diesel. One of them would have to steal back to the workshops to milk the tractors. Meja fanned the fire back to life. The flames danced in the wind blowing through the holes in the wall. He lay back on his bed. Then he saw them. They sat along the top of the wall, big, black rats, their eyes sparkling in the firelight as they stared down on him.

“They want to know where you saved the leftovers,” Maina said.

“Go away,” Meja yelled at them. “We it all.”

“Try eating this.” Maina threw them one of Meja’s shoes.

The eyes vanished, soot showered down, and the shoe landed on Meja’s head. He threw it at Maina. Maina ducked and it ended up on the crockery rack. The eyes reappeared immediately. Then the rats charged down the walls, a mass of grey raining down from the thatch. Maina had disturbed their nests

and woken up the rest, and they were all out for revenge.

“Look out,” Meja yelled covering his head.

Maina ducked under his blanket and sealed the openings. They heard the rats rampage through the hut overturning the pots and looting the kitchen place. When they had cleaned the pots, and licked the plates, they raged through the hut looking for anything edible. They tried to get under the blankets.

Meja fought them off, kicking out and thrashing his arms. One of them found an unguarded opening and charged in. He leaped up and tossed it squealing in the fire. It ran out under the door, and the rest fled back up the walls to the safety of the thatch.

“This can’t go on,” he said. “They will eat us in our sleep.”

Maina lay still and left him to deal with the rats. Meja lay down again and braced himself for the next attack. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. It was still raining outside and the roof was beginning to leak. They exchanged worried glances, and decided to ignore the knocking.

“Chokora?”

It was Boi’s voice.

“I want to talk to you,” he said.

Maina snored loudly. Meja followed did the same and pretended to be sleeping.

“I know you are awake,” Boi said to them. “Open the door.”

Meja stopped uncovered his head.

“Open it,” he whispered.

“You open it,” Maina whispered back.

“He is your kitchen boss.”

“Your garden boss too.”

Outside the hut, Boi stood half in the rain and getting wetter and colder. He had to lean on the door to get away from the rain.

“Chokora,” he said. “I can hear you. Open the door.”

The wind blew the rain on his shoes. He leaned on the door too hard, and, with a loud screech, the nails holding the bolt gave way. The door flew open spitting the startled old man inside. He stumbled, tripped on a stool, and landed in the fireplace, where he sat dazed for a moment, mumbling incoherently while the boys exchanged puzzled glances. Then he shot up and halfway to the roof, and screamed. He ran for the door, tripped on the same stool, and landed outside in the rain. He yelled again and ran into the night.

The room was quiet for after that. Even the rats kept out of sight.

“Do you think he hurt himself?” Meja asked.

“You saw how he ran out,” Maina said.

“His trousers were smoking.”

“He is all right,” Maina said. “Do not worry about him. Shut the door.”

Meja shut the door and propped the crate against it. He got back in bed. They were quiet for a moment. Then Maina laughed.

“He scared the rats,” he said. “They will never come back here.”

“What did he want to talk to you about?”

“To remind us of the virtues of discipline and vigorous work,” Maina said. “I am tired of hearing it.”

“He has no one else to talk to,” said Meja.

They were the closest to him.

“He will have to pay for my attention,” said Maina.

“Do you see us old and lonely like him? Without real jobs?”

“What is a real job?”

“A job that pays money,” Meja said. “Real money that we can send home. Like a teacher or a ...”

“I always wanted to be a teacher,” Maina said. “I could not go to teachers’ college, because I had to find a job and help my family. I was also going to get married.”

“Why?”

“Her father was a family friend,” Maina said. “So, I was to get a job, marry her, settle down and take care of my brothers and sisters.”

“Was she good-looking?”

“I think so,” Maina said. “We grew up together, so I never looked at her that way. She was like a sister to me. Did you have a girlfriend?”

“No,” Meja said, “but there was a girl. She did not notice me, but I thought she was pretty. I would walk by her house every chance hoping to see her. I dreamed she would one day notice me, when I got a job and a car.”

“I never dreamed of a car,” Maina said. “A bicycle, like my head teacher had. But now ...”

They were quiet for some time, listening to the night and the rain and to their own thoughts. The rats ventured back to forage and the wind nearly blew the door open.

Boi sulked for the rest of the week. He avoided talking to them and instead went through the foreman. The foreman cut their rations and demanded they go apologise to the old man on their knees. Maina did not see why they had to apologise.

“He is the one who should apologize,” he said to the foreman. “He broke down our door and sat on our fire.”

Boi revenged in his own way too. And with a severity they could not have imagined. He gave them conflicting instructions, and then reported them to the foreman when they got something wrong. He made a mess of the

kitchen floor so that Maina was continuously mopping and polishing. He polished floors until his shoulders ached. Meanwhile, Meja watered the gardens until they were swampy. When Boi ordered him to water the bushes beyond the gardens fences, Maina was outraged.

“Now he has gone too far,” said Maina. “We must stop him.”

“How do we stop him?”

“I will think of something. Just let him keep coming.”

Meja was for peace. He was tired of hiding when Boi came to the garden looking for salads. He wanted to once again be able to hang out by the kitchen window chatting to Maina.

Then, one day, while Boi was busy thinking of ways to make his life harder, Maina hit back. He turned off the oven, while lunch was cooking, then went on mopping and polishing. Shortly before lunch, Boi realised the oven was off and the boss was due home soon. He could not be certain what had happened and did not think Maina could be so vicious. All the same, he had the foreman quarter Maina and Meja’s rations.

Maina waited for some time before making his next move. The roar that erupted at the Big Man’s table that evening told him he had succeeded.

“Sugar in steak?” Big Man yelled. “You are too old for this job.”

Boi was in a panic. Admittedly, he was sometimes a little absent-minded, but he was certain he had not sugared the steak. How sugar had ended up in the saltshaker was also mystery. But, now that his career was threatened, he was willing to consider all possibilities, including the possibility that Maina was after his job.

There was a lull in the kitchen war while he thought of his next move. There was peace in the kitchen, and in the garden, and the boys received full rations. Maina believed he had won.

“This is how it was meant to be,” he said, lying in his bed after the evening meal. “No more lectures, or complaining from the old man. This is

peace and quiet.”

Even the rats in the crockery rack foraged quietly.

“Your friends are happy too,” Meja said.

“They are my country brothers,” said Maina. “They share everything, including half rations. I will take them to the city when I leave. They will do well in the dumpsters.”

“I wonder what they would do if I washed up after dinner?”

“They will eat us,” Maina said.

“Tomorrow I wash up,” Meja said to the rats. “I will wash your plates tomorrow.”

That tomorrow never came. Maina and Meja woke up to find their world turned upside down in the night. Thieves had broken in Big Man’s house while he slept and stolen his computer, his radio, and a camera. The Big Man was furious. He summoned the farm workers and demanded to know who had done it.

Boi could not have done it. Meja and Maina knew nothing about it and neither did the foreman. All he knew about was the farm machinery and the labour and the flour and the milk and nothing more. The rest of the workers hardly ever went to the farmhouse. Boi suggested searching the workers houses anyway.

A search party, headed by Boi and the foreman, went through the huts, turning up a lot of soot, fleas, bedbugs, rats, and a snake. They found nothing of interest at all, until they came to the last huts. The huts belonged to the chokora, the street boys Boi had brought from the city. The stolen items were stashed at the back under the crockery rack.

They did not bother pleading their innocence. It was such an obvious frame-up some villagers loudly voiced their doubts. It did not make any sense to them at all, but it made sense to Meja.

“You should have left him alone,” he said to Maina, as they packed their belongings.

“He started it,” said Maina.

“And he finished it.”

Boi did not go to see them off.

Chapter Four

Maina and Meja landed back in the backstreet where they had started, a little older, a lot wiser, and more desperate. It took a lot of talking to convince Meja it was the only place they could go. Nothing much had changed to the back of the supermarket in their absence. The same busy people rushed past by with the same indifference, holding their noses against the stench from the same dumpsters. Meja sat as before watching them go by and wishing he could be one of them.

A hand reached out of the dumpster and dropped a bag on the ground. It was not Maina's hand. Meja wondered where Maina was. Two urchins ran down the road chased by a security guard. The hand dropped another bag.

Then Maina came from the back entrance of the market, where he had gone to look for work and walked towards Meja. He saw the plastic bags the hands from the dumpster had dropped and picked one of them. As he examined the contents, a grey head suddenly pop out of the dumpster and looked about for the bags. He saw Maina walk away with one of his bags and yelled at him.

“You!”

Maina glanced back and kept walking. The old man hopped out of the dumpster and ran after him. Meja rose nervously, as Maina ran towards him.

“Catch,” Maina tossed the bag at him and ran past.

Confusion raced through Meja's head as the bag flew at his face. He instinctively opened his hands and the bag in them. Through the confusion, he heard a voice scream.

“*Huyo! Huyo! Huyo!*”

More voices joined in the clamour and, before he knew it, his legs were

moving away. They did so slowly at first, trying to surreptitiously walk away from an uncertain situation, then increasingly fast until he too was soon running after Maina. He did not know what was in the bag, or why they were chasing after him, but something said to hang on to whatever it was and run. Someone grabbed at him. He dodged and ran on.

“Thief,” he heard them yell. “*Huyo, huyo, huyo.*”

He stopped running. He was not a thief, and he could explain why he was running. He was scared, that was all. Then a mob charged from a side lane led by one *askari* and came running towards him.

“Thief,” they screamed. “Stop him, catch him.”

Someone aimed a rock at Meja. A security guard swung his club at his head. He ducked and ran.

Suddenly, it seemed the whole city was after him, shouting and trying to stop him. He dodged into a narrow side lane, remembering to keep to the backstreet and always to the backstreet, as Maina had taught him. They chased after him.

“Thief,” they shouted. “Stop him, catch him. Thief!”

One pursuer was armed with an empty dustbin, others with sticks and stones. Meja ran into another side alley, emerged on an unfamiliar road, and ran on, weaving, and dodging among the dumpsters and the dustbins and the pedestrians. The mob kept after him.

“*Huyo! Huyo! Huyo!*”

He thought he heard a gunshot and glanced behind. There was a policeman now leading the chase with his gun drawn. Terrified, Meja ducked in an alley. The mob went after him. He evaded the many hands trying to grab him, leapt over rubbish heaps, and upset dustbins, and when he looked back again, the policeman was shoving people aside to get a clear shot.

Meja was so frightened that, though his head said to run down to Grogan Road, his legs headed uphill towards Main Street. He knew he should be

running in the opposite direction, deeper into the old part of town, but his legs would not listen. He ducked into another side street, his legs still moving faster than his mind, collided with a beggar, and sent him flying in the gutter. He heard another gunshot and decided he had had enough. He was ready to give up, but his legs would not stop running. They turned left, then right, then left again, and he went along having lost all sense of direction. Then, suddenly, they were on the Main Street. There were people everywhere.

Meja had nowhere to run to get away from them. His heart was pounding wildly. Sweat poured down his face into his eyes and into his mouth, a salty sweat spiced with terror. He heard the pursuers behind him get closer with every second, but he dared not look behind him. His mind now said to stop and wait for the mob, ask them why they were chasing him. His fear said to run back to the safety of the backstreets. His legs took off up the road, away from the mob that was now almost on top of him.

He ran into window-shoppers and beggars and busy Main Street people. He ran into messengers and delivery people sending them to the pavement. Someone grabbed at him, missed, and fell slowing down the mob. Everyone was grabbing at Meja and shouting.

“Kill, kill, kill.”

He still had no idea why they were after him, but there was no time to find out now. He had seen the violence a mob unleashed with flying rocks, swinging clubs, stomping boots, and bullets. He would die if he did not get away from it.

He left the sidewalk and started across Main Street. The second he stepped off the sidewalk, he realised he had made a mistake. From then on, everything he did, saw or heard unfolded in a slow, dream-like manner, a series of pictures that seemed to have nothing do with one another, or with him.

He heard a woman scream. A car hooted. There was a loud rumbling, followed by the screech of car brakes. Then there was a whoosh of warm air

and the smell of motor oil, and his feet left the ground. He felt no pain, just a strange detachment as he went spinning head over heels in the air, a car gliding noiselessly below him, tires smoking as they skidded on the asphalt. He saw his pursuers upturned faces frozen with fear, as they watched him fly over the car and land several paces behind it with a noiseless thud, thud, thud. Then blackness. And still there was no pain.

Through the darkness, he heard voices, a cacophony of voices, speaking in many tongues, excited, marvelling at what had happened.

“Did you see that?” one said to the others.

“He flew like a bird.”

“He must be dead.”

“I think he is alive”

Meja’s eyes popped open. He was on a bed of pain in the middle of the street, surrounded by curious faces. There was a policeman with him, inside the circling crowd, looking down at him uncertain what to do. The car stood a few paces away, forgotten by all but the young men trying to extort money from the driver.

“He is alive,” the policeman announced.

“Finish him off,” someone said.

The crowd surged forward.

“What did he do?” asked the policeman.

“He broke a car window.”

“And stole the radio.”

“No,” someone else said. “He snatched a necklace.”

“You were not even there,” said a woman’s voice. “It was a purse.”

“A purse and a watch.”

Meja lay on the road and heard them talk about him, and the terrible

things he was supposed to have done. Most thought he was dead, but he was alive, and still holding the bag that Maina had thrown at him. Now that he was no longer in any hurry, he took a good look at it. Through a rip in the plastic saw two smashed mangoes. Flies hovered over his hand outstretched, but they were more interested in the blood.

He wondered what happened to Maina, why he was not there with him. Then he remembered the gunshot.

Chapter Five

Maina ducked in the first alley and kept running. He heard a gunshot, heard the outcry die out behind him and ran on. He did not stop running until he was way out of the city centre. He did not have to worry about Meja, he said to himself. Meja would be all right. They would meet later at the usual place when the outcry was over.

He gradually relaxed the farther he got from the city centre. He walked along roads that he and Meja had travelled before looking for work and filling up potholes. Some of the potholes that they had filled were still good. He marvelled again at the size of the houses and the cars. It seemed he had never seen them before and he wondered who owned them, what schools they had gone to and what sort of jobs they had. He shrunk from the road, and tried to be invisible, as they drove past him.

The suburbs had been all right in the days, when he had come looking for work. Back then he could lose himself among other job seekers, fruit vendors and hawkers. None of those were there anymore. Now there were signs everywhere forbidding hawking, solicitation, and loitering, and warning of fierce dogs. Maina felt naked and exposed, shaken and guilty. He had to get out of there back to where he belonged, before a policeman appeared to ask what he was doing there.

He was rushing down Lower Hill Road, keeping away from the gates and the fierce dogs, when he came across a man sitting on a culvert by the roadside smoking.

“You,” the man called. “Come here.”

He stopped. His feet said to run, but his legs had done the entire running they could do in a day.

“Me?” He asked the man.

“Who am I talking to?” said the man. “Yes, you. Come here.”

“Why?” Maina asked.

“I want to talk to you.”

He was in black jeans, a white shirt, and a green tie. His hair was down to his shoulders in dusty dreadlocks. He was thin and hard face, and he did not look like a policeman. Maina approached. The man offered a handshake. Maina kept his distance.

“Sit down,” the man showed the place by his side.

His eyes were hard and bloodshot, and he had a small beard.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To town.”

“You are in town, man,” said the man. “Where are you going?”

Maina shrugged.

“Where do you come from?”

“Nanyuki.”

“Nanyuki?” the man asked. “Is it true your donkeys smoke *bhang*?”

“I don’t know,” Maina said.

“I heard they chew *khat* too.”

Maina heard a lot of bad jokes about Nanyuki, told by people who did not know Nanyuki, but he had not heard those two.

“Do not worry,” said the man. “I am also from Nanyuki. What is your name?”

“Maina.”

“Razor,” the man again offered a handshake. Maina took it this time.

“Sit down,” said Razor, dragging him to the culvert.

Maina had no choice.

“You don’t remember me,” the man said, “but we went to school together. Do you remember Manga?”

Maina did not remember such a name.

“What about Kim?”

He did not remember any Kim either. A passing car slowed down as the driver checked them out.

“What are you looking at?” Maina’s new friend asked the driver. “Get lost.”

The driver waved and drove on.

“Where are you going?” Razor asked Maina.

“City.”

“I will walk with you.”

Razor continued questioning Maina as they walked. He was out looking for a job too.

“What sort of a job?” Maina asked him.

He did not look like a cook, a gardener, or a watchman.

“A future job,” he said. “Where do you work?”

Maina did not know the safe response to that one. He now knew that the man was not a policeman, but he still did not trust him.

“Here and there,” he said.

“And where do you live?”

“In the city.”

“We all live in the city, man,” Razor said. “Where do you live?”

The road dipped downhill through a park, crossed a highway, and made straight for Main Street. They could now see the tall buildings and the smoke that hang over them like a rain cloud. Maina pointed vaguely.

“There,” he said.

“Alone?” asked Razor.

“With a friend.”

“Female friend?”

The man asked too many question, like a policeman. Maina shook his head.

“Do you have a gang?”

“No,” Maina said.

“Would you like to join mine?”

Maina hesitated.

“What sort of gang?”

“A gang,” said Razor. “Working together for the good of all. We do not hurt people. We just take stuff, while they sleep, and that is all.”

He stopped to look about and pointed.

“You see that window?”

He was pointing to a house just visible over the fence.

“They do not close that window at night,” he said. “They think it is safe, because it is high and surrounded by a stone wall. Nyoka can jump that wall, squeeze through the window and come out with their TV, and they will not hear a thing.”

“How?” Maina asked.

“He has talent,” Razor started walking. “What is your talent?”

“Talent?”

“What are you good at?”

“Mathematics,” Maina said.

He had earned the highest marks in his school.

“Any fool can pass a school exam,” Razor said. “What else can you do?”

Meja had played football at school. Everyone had said he was a talented player.

“We don’t play football in Shanty Town,” said Razor. “Come with me and I will show you what we do. My boys will be happy to see you.”

He saw Maina hesitate.

“You can’t live alone in the street anymore. They will gang up on you and take what you have. Where is your friend?”

The last Maina had seen of him, Meja was flying down an alley with a load of mob justice at his heels.

“He can join us too,” said Razor.

“I don’t know where he is,” Maina said.

He related the incident with the plastic bags, the fleeing street boys, and the chase. There was no telling whether the mob caught up with Meja.

“When a mob comes after you,” Razor said to him, “you run to, not from the police.”

Maina could not remember giving that life-saving advice to his friend, but he did warn him against running on Main Street.

“I will look for him later,” he said.

They passed the afternoon at the park, watching preachers berate job seekers over unemployment, immorality, and crime in the city. Meanwhile, Razor educated Maina in the workings of the streets and the gangs that ruled them. Maina had experienced the intimidation and the extortion by gangs that hounded them in the suburbs claiming to own repair rights to potholes. Now

he learned that dumpsters and garbage dumps in certain parts of the city had gangs that claimed exclusive rights and assaulted anyone found foraging without paying protection. Beggars too paid homage and a part of their take to the gangs that controlled the streets.

The sun was going down when Maina decided the time had come to go find Meja. The park was deserted. The preachers, the jobless and the hawkers had gone. The last of the freelance photographers took a last picture of a couple holding hands by the fishpond, and the last ice cream seller was pushing his tricycle out of the park.

Maina and Razor went looking for Meja, starting their search at the back of the supermarket. They worked their way through the back lanes, looking anywhere Maina and Meja had spent a night. Razor kept his patience in check by whistling a tune that made Maina nervous and more desperate. After looking everywhere, he thought his friend might be, Maina began to worry.

“Why do you look in dumpsters?” Razor finally asked. “Is your friend a dog?”

“Let us go,” Maina said. “I will find him later.”

They left the city centre with the masses heading home after another day in the city, crossed the river, and left the city far behind. Maina did not ask where they were going and Razor did not say. After an hour of walking, they topped a rise and began the descent into a sprawling slum settlement inside the city’s old dumping ground. The houses were made of recycled plastic paper, rusty metal cans, mud, grass and anything that could give shelter from wind, sun, and rain. They were thrown together with no plan or pattern, and built so close together that they appeared to be a waste dump, from the top of the rise. The only sign of life, the only prove that there were people under all that paper and plastic garbage was continuous hum like that from a beehive.

“Shanty Town,” said Razor. “I am happy when I find it here.”

Corrupt city officials wanted to move it and its residents somewhere far away from the city, but the fat people at City Hall could not decide where to

move it, and how or when to do so. The county had surveyed the land and gave it to the councillors, to the politicians, to judges, and important Government people. The slum dwellers were living on borrowed time.

“But you are safe here,” Maina said. “Whatever you were running from cannot follow you here.”

He led the way down, through lanes and footpaths so narrow they sometimes had to walk sideways to pass through. Smoke, dust, and the smell of sewage were everywhere. There was also the smell of burning rubber. Razor said it was from the old tyres that the dwellers used for fuel. There was also a stench of burning flesh. That was from a crematorium across the valley. Most of the sewage smell was from the river that split the place in two, but some of it was from a fertilizer factory at the other end of the valley. Then there was the smell of people, many, sweaty, unwashed bodies living cooped up together.

Maina began to relax. The tensions of the backstreet, the fears that had kept him running like an overwound clock about to detonate, begun to slip off his shoulders, and be replaced by a warm feeling of wellbeing, as he squeezed his way through the narrow lanes after his newfound friend. Razor called into some of the houses as they passed inquiring how they were. Occasionally a voice answered from the pile of plastic and rusty sheets assuring him they were all right. A bleary-eyed face peeked out of a doorway to gape at Maina. It ducked back out of sight when Razor asked what he was staring at.

Some distance into the heart of the slum, Razor entered one of the houses leaving Maina outside. Maina heard voices from within, a short exchange within followed by a woman’s laughter.

“Chokora,” Razor called out.

It was dark inside. Maina could barely make out the shapes of the people there. Some of them were smoking *bhanghi* and the room was full of smoke. He stood by the door peering, waiting for Razor to tell him what to do or where to go.

“Away from the door” said an angry voice.

Maina moved stepped aside and onto someone’s foot.

“Watch it, fool,” a voice said.

Then his eyes got used to the gloom and he saw them. There were eight men sitting on boxes and on upturned buckets and on the floor looking weary. Razor sat on the only bed in the room with his hand caressing the leg of the only woman in the room. She lay on the bed, supporting her head on one arm, and eyed Maina with dark suspicious eyes. When she spoke, her voice was hard and unfriendly.

“What are you?” she asked him.

“Maina,” he said.

He did not know how else to respond. The others were watching him, asking the same question with their eyes.

“He is Chokora,” Razor said.

“You never told me you had chokora friends,” said the woman.

“It was a long time ago,” Razor said.

Then he turned to Maina and introduced her.

“Chokora, this is my gang,” he said. “The boys I told you about. The one-eyed one is Jicho. The hungry-looking one is Nyoka. We call him Snake. The bearded one I call Professor Hakuna Kazi. He went to University and could not find a job. We do not understand what he says, so do not listen too hard. The one sitting on the floor is Kifagio and that one by his side likes us to call him Jitu. I do not know why he wants to be called giant, when he is so small.”

Maina interest in the gang rose as each name was matched to a face. Jitu was thin and frail, but was Jicho even thinner. Jicho was in a faded red, or brown, football jersey and old jeans like Razor’s. His claw-like fingers clutched a thick stub of *bhang*. His one good eye watered so much from the smoke, he had to keep rubbing away the tears with the back of his hand.

Between the wiping and the watering again, the one eye watched Maina.

Professor was smoking too, and examining his fingernails with interest. He had a pointed beard that looked distinguished, bald and wizened, but from what Maina could see in the gloom, was not so old. Kifagio was thick and, as Maina was to find out later, not just in body, and he was older than everyone else in the gang. His cheeks were sagging and some front teeth were missing. The remaining teeth were brown from smoking and chewing tobacco.

“And this is Sara,” Razor said, kissing the woman. “She is my woman.”

Sara was thin and tall. Her dark eyes had long eyelashes that, when they blinked, which they did constantly, were invitingly and frightening.

The gang had no guns or any sort of weapons, as far as Maina could see, and there was no radio, fridge, cooker or furniture in the house. All they had was their *bhanghi* and one another. Maina’s idea of a gang of vicious criminals hiding away from the police, and only coming out occasionally to rob a bank, suddenly faded.

“I am glad to meet you all,” he said to them.

There was momentary silence in the room. Then everyone resumed whatever he was doing before Maina’s arrival. Kifagio rose, stepped up to Maina and stood glaring at him. He was bigger and meaner than anyone Maina had ever faced so close.

“How do I know you are not a policeman?” he asked.

Razor shot from the bed.

“Because I say so,” he said.

“The last friend you brought us led the cops here. How do we know this one is different?”

“Because I say so.”

“Razor,” said the woman, “we are concerned for the safety of all of us.”

“We?”

Razor looked round the room. Most of them avoided his eyes. Finding himself without support, Kifagio stepped back to his place and sat down. Then Professor rose and spoke up.

“We had a meeting,” he said.

Sara rolled her eyes in despair and lay back down. Razor was looking round the room, raking the gang with his eyes, waiting for someone to tell him the rest of the story. When his eyes got to Sara, she turned her back to face the wall. Professor was sweating, when he turned to the others for support. Tension was heavy in the air.

“Whose idea was it?” Razor asked.

Professor waved at the others. They did their best to avoid eye contact. Professor wiped the sweat from his face and fingered his beard uncertain whether to sit down.

“Kifagio?” Razor called over his shoulder.

Kifagio shook his head and continued staring at the ground.

“Jitu?”

“Not me, Razor.”

Razor turned back to Professor.

“Mwalimu?”

“We were just talking,” said Professor.

“Was it your idea?”

Professor shook his head.

“It was not anyone’s idea,” Sara turned to face the room. “We were talking, remembered Chief and the other one we lost when your good friend turned out to be a policeman, and that was all.”

Then she turned to face the wall again. Razor whipped out a knife. Maina stepped back startled.

“It was not really a meeting,” the Professor said to Razor. “It was just a ... a look-back at life. Where we were then, versus where we are now. Just a matter of perspective, that was all it was. No meeting at all.”

Sara whipped around and faced the room.

“It was a meeting,” she said. “And, since no one has the manhood, I will tell you what it was all about. The two good men who died because your good friend turned out to be a police informer.”

Then she turned and faced the wall. Razor snapped round and held the knife to Maina’s neck.

“Are you a rat?” he asked.

“A rat?”

“An informer?”

“No.”

“Policeman?”

“No.”

Razor turned to the gang, pointing his knife at Kifagio. Kifagio choked on smoke from the joint he was sucking on.

“No more meetings without me,” Razor said to him.

Kifagio nodded. He was about to pass out from the smoke in his lungs.

“I will be present in all future meetings,” Razor said to all. “Is that clear?”

They nodded, all except Sara who was facing the wall and missed the knife drama.

“Yah, yah, yah,” she said aloud to herself. “Bla, bla, bla, and you are the king of the world and the brave leader of a gang of gutless cowards who can’t keep a secret.”

Razor turned to her.

“That goes for you too,” he said.

She rose from the bed. She was wearing a very short skirt and a tight, little blouse that barely covered her ample bosom. She slipped her hand in Razor’s, moved close so that her body rubbed against his, then smiled up at him.

“I did not mean to upset you,” she said. “I have nothing against your new friend. We have nothing against any of your friends. It is just that we do not want another tragedy. We have been together for how long now?”

Razor shrugged.

“Is he really worth it?” she asked.

Razor looked Maina up and down. Then he turned to the gang.

“He is my friend,” he said. “If I say someone is a friend, he is a friend.”

“Until he turns a rat?” Sara said.

“Chokora is not a rat. He is my old schoolmate.”

“You really went to school?”

“Ask him.”

Sara turned to Maina, standing by the entrance feeling unwelcome. The proceedings had left him confused and not sure whether he was coming in or going out.

“Tell her,” Razor ordered.

Standing half inside and half outside the door, Maina hesitated.

“The truth,” she said harshly.

Maina felt exposed, vulnerable, and uncertain. He could not remember having laid eyes on Razor before that day. He was almost certain Razor never attended any school he went to. But he needed a friend, read or unread and Razor was the only one at hand. It would be foolish, and dangerous to expose the only person who seemed to like him.

“Yes,” he said. “It is true.”

“Now sit,” Razor ordered.

Maina looked for a seat. Finding none, he flopped on the dust by Kifagio.

“Give him a smoke,” Razor said.

Kifagio searched his pockets, found a roll, lit it, took a long pull, and handed it to Maina. Maina hesitated. He had seen what *bhangi*, did to students who smoked it. They dropped out of school, became full time *bhangi*-smoking and stole chickens.

Maina considered the offered smoke with trepidation. What to do now? He could smoke it, and be one with the gang, or get up and run for his life. He feared that smoking the roll of *bhangi* would be the first stage of failure for his dreams. On the other hand, running would label him an informer. The gang would give chase, and catch him before he found his way out of Shanty Town and beat the hell out of him. They were watching and waiting.

“Smoke that thing or give it to me,” said Professor.

This was not the time for second thoughts, not with Sara regarding him with those hard eyes, and everyone else waiting for him to prove Razor wrong. He held the joint between finger and thumb, as he had seen Kifagio hold it, put it to his lips and inhaled deeply. He felt the smoke go tumbling down his throat to his lungs and block every air sack. He felt his chest inflate and swell, until he thought it would blow up, then he exploded in a fury of coughing, and choking, and retching and was about pass out on the floor. He heard the gang laughing, as Mwalimu was pounding on his back to dislodge the smoke stuck in his lungs.

Razor put away his knife and got back on the bed with Sara. She hugged him and he kissed her, and they forgot the gang.

Kifagio reached for the cigar. Maina held it back.

“Once more,” he said.

Now that he could breathe again, he had something to prove. He had to show them he was as much a man as any of them. He smiled at Kifagio. Kifagio snarled back, as he watched him take quick puffs.

“Take it easy, schoolmate,” Professor wrestled the joint from his fingers. “This thing is not for school boys.”

He took a hard pull and passed the joint to Nyoka. The joint went around, and everyone forgot about Maina. He was finally one of them, and they smoked and talked with him like an old friend. They got high and mellow, and did not understand every word everyone said anymore, but it did not matter. What mattered was they were talking, and laughing, and being friends and among friends. Maina felt he had known everyone for years and, under the influence of the joint, loved everyone regardless whether they welcomed him or not. They were one happy family, bound together by Razor’s blade, and the *bhanghi*.

Outside, the evening wind stirred the dust and blew it through the narrow lanes, spreading the smells from the sewage, from the crematorium, and from the *bhanghi* party going on in Razor’s house. Along with them were the smells of food, sounds of children playing, of babies crying and the moans of men beaten down by life.

Early the following day Maina returned to the city to find his friend. He searched the entire day without success. In the days that followed, he returned to the backstreets repeatedly, but it was in vain. In the end, he concluded Meja had gone home and stopped looking for him and settled in the gang.

Razor’s boys taught him how to be one of them. He learned to walk, talk, and surround himself with an air of Shanty Town gang arrogance. He learned how to live, eat and drink without money, by doing the things he had feared before. They taught him to confront the fear that had confined him to the backstreets and the dumpsters.

The professor schooled him on how to pick pockets, swipe wristwatches and lift purses from women’s handbags without getting caught; all the skills

needed for survival on Main Street. Nyoka took him to the suburbs and showed him how to scale perimeter walls without waking up the watchmen, and how to go in and out of mansions without disturbing the guard dogs. He showed him how to open closed windows and doors and carry off whole wash-lines while the house girl was still hanging clothes. Kifagio taught him to open locked cars and take away the radios without setting off the alarms.

The lessons were frightening. Maina dreaded the day he would have to put what he was learned into practice. The thought of snatching a watch, or a wallet, and running away with a mob chasing after him, was so terrifying he thought of leaving the gang. But going back to backstreet without Meja was equally frightening. He by then was convinced Meja had given up on making it in the city and embraced the plough. He was tempted to swallow his pride and go back home, but he knew it would be too much to expect his people to accept that he, their most educated son, had failed to make it in the city and ended up in a gang.

Life in the gang was on of sporadic feasts and famines. They ate when they had food and starved when they had none. No one grumbled or complained, accepting the good and the bad, the ups and the downs as they came.

“Do you hear the children crying from hunger?” Razor asked, when they forgot why the place was named Shanty Town.

He lay on the bed with his queen and smoked *bhang*. That was the one thing they always had. Their next-door neighbour was the main *bhang* supplier in Shanty Town. Razor’s gang protected him from other gangs and he supplied it with all the free *bhang* they could smoke. They sat for hours smoking and waiting for someone to come up with ideas on how to raise money for food and *chang’aa*.

Then, one very hungry afternoon, without any warning, Razor asked if anyone was hungry. Everyone assumed it to be a rhetoric question, since they were always hungry, and they disregarded the question. Razor suddenly

leaped out of bed, and confronted them.

“Who is hungry?” he demanded.

They looked at one another.

“Kifagio?” he asked.

Kifagio shook his head.

“Jitu?”

Jitu shrugged.

“Nyoka?”

Nyoka laughed.

“Me hungry?” he shook his head. “Try Chokora.”

Maina was busy mending his shirt, with thread and needle borrowed from the wife of the *bhangi* seller next door, and missed the drift of the question.

“I am starving,” he said.

“So am I,” said Razor.

Maina continued his mending.

“Would you like to eat?” Razor asked him.

Maina looked up interested. He was certain there was no food in the house, the last time he checked, but he nodded and said he would love something to eat.

“So would I,” said Razor. “Since no one else is hungry, why don’t you go get us both something to eat?”

Maina was suddenly alarmed.

“Me?”

Razor lay back next to Sara and left him to it. He was in a panic. Kifagio gleefully explained it to him. So far everyone else had taken turns supporting the gang. All he had done was eat and learn.

Maina looked round the room. Professor was poring over his fingernails. Professor did whatever Razor said, ate whenever others ate and left the rest to providence. Jitu was dozing at his corner. Others were smoking and getting high. Only Kifagio seemed interested in Maina's plight. He watched Maina pull the shirt over his head.

"Some advice?" He asked.

Maina turned eagerly.

"Two options," Kifagio said. "You do as Nyoka would and walk around Shanty Town until you find a stray hen, goat or an untended kitchen. Or go to the city centre and do as you have been taught.

Razor looked over his shoulder.

"Go with him," he said.

"Why me?" Kifagio asked.

"You like to help."

"That is against the rules," Kifagio protested. "He must prove himself. That is what I had to do; what we all had to."

"And what were you before that?" Razor asked. "Before I made you what you are?"

"I was by myself," Kifagio said. "I was ..."

His voice trailed off. He looked round the room for support. He got none.

"Lost, scared, hungry and wanted," Razor reminded. "All of you wanted by police."

"As I am aware," said Professor, regarding his fingernails with interest, "nothing has changed."

"Chokora is not wanted by anyone," said Razor.

"Except by you," said Nyoka.

"Shut up!"

“You made the rules,” Kifagio gained courage from the others.

“I still make the rules,” Razor told him.

“Rules are rules,” said Kifagio.

“Except for the exceptions,” said the Professors.

“What exceptions?” asked Razor.

“When the rules are broken,” Professor said, “they cease to be the rules and become just rules. And rules are made to be broken, so there is really no such thing as the rules. It is all just a matter of perspective.”

“What is he talking about?” Kifagio asked Razor.

Razor turned to Sara. She turned to face the wall.

“We can all see that Chokora is a big asset,” Professor said. “Potentially a very major asset. Therefore, quid pro quo, what applies to the rest does not apply to Chokora.”

They stared at him lost.

“What is asset?” someone asked.

“Something big,” Jicho said.

“What are you talking about?” Razor asked Professor.

“What I am saying is,” Professor went on, “Chokora has something we all wish we could have. He has youth, and energy and, before I forget, education. Education is important. Education has its uses.”

The gang stared at him.

“What are you saying?” Kifagio asked him.

Up to this point, he had assumed they were discussing gang rules and were all on the same side. Gang rules were gang rules and all gang members were equal. Professor laughed at him.

“Who told you that? Most people are less equal than others. Ask any

educated man.”

“Like you?” asked Kifagio.

“That is all I am saying today. Unless anyone has a question.”

“Shut up,” Kifagio said to him.

“I already have.”

Maina tucked his shirt in his trousers, as he followed the argument, and waited for a decision to be reached, and someone to tell him what he should do. Should he stay or should he go? He watched and waited.

Kifagio suddenly took a swing at Razor. Had the blow connected Razor would have been floored, but he saw it coming, ducked and shoved Kifagio sending him into Maina. The two went down, with Kifagio on top, and he scrambled to his feet ready for another charge. He found Razor’s knife inches from his throat.

“*Sasa?*” said Razor. “Now?”

Kifagio turned and punched Jitu instead, knocking him flat on his back. Then he turned to Razor. He was shaking with fury.

“What now?” Sara asked them.

“Out!” Razor ordered.

Kifagio looked from the knife to Sara.

“What now?” she asked him.

“We are just talking,” he said.

“Talk is over,” said Razor. “Out!”

He advanced with the knife held in front of him. Kifagio stepped back, hands raised.

“I will do it,” he said. “I will go with Chokora.”

“Out!” Razor stabbed at the air between them.

“I did not mean it that way.”

Kifagio had his back to the wall.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I am sorry.”

He turned to Sara. She turned her back on them and lay facing the wall. He walked out without another word.

“Go with him,” Razor said to Maina.

Maina ran out after Kifagio.

It was still daytime in Shanty Town; hot and dusty and smelling of sewage. Chickens scratched in the dust, mangy dogs lay in the shade and a gang of ragged children chased a rag ball down the lane. Kifagio glanced over his shoulder, saw Maina following and kept walking. He led down one narrow, sewage flooded road and up the next, mumbling to himself shoving people out of his way. He kicked chickens in the gutter, pushed children aside, and yelled at strangers. Maina kept his distance until they were out of Shanty Town and on their way to the city. He fell in step with Kifagio.

“I am sorry,” he said.

“You know I did not even want to know you,” Kifagio said. “If it was not for you ...”

“What did I do?”

Professor, who had been following them unnoticed, now caught up with them.

“He said I go with you,” he said.

“Why?” Kifagio demanded.

“A matter of perspective,” said Professor.

“Shut up.”

“I already have,” said Professor. “But I brought the chalk.”

“I said shut up.”

“Okay.”

He handed Maina the chalk.

“That is for you,” he said, smiling happily. “Today is your big day. Today you get to be a man.”

The chalk was for marking the victims clothing so as not to lose him in the crowd. Maina was in a panic, as he followed them along the road to the city centre and Main Street. His fear of policemen and street mobs grew with every step. He was in full panic by the time they reached Main Street. People were everywhere. Dodging around them was nerve-wracking. Every pedestrian was watching him, every policeman and watchman waiting for him to make his move so they could pounce on him. It was impossible to keep up with the others, as they went about looking for his first victim.

When the prey was finally sighted, Kifagio pointed him out to Maina. The moment he had been dreading had come.

“There is your man,” Kifagio said. “Do not lose him.”

The man was in a blue suit that bulged in the breast pocket where he had his wallet.

“You can see he is loaded,” said Professor.

Maina was so terrified he forgot everything he had learned since joining the gang.

“What do I do?” he asked them.

“What do you mean what do I do? You are a thief, you steal it.”

“There is nothing to it really,” said Professor. “You bump into him like this and you ...”

His hand shot in and out of Maina’s pocket fishing a dirty handkerchief.

“See?” He said, handing back the handkerchief. “There’s nothing to it.”

The man’s money was inside his coat pocket and not so easily reachable.

“Just a matter of perspective,” said Professor. “Nothing to it.”

They followed the victim around waiting for a chance. Maina prayed the man would go in a shop, and never come out again, or get in his car and drive away. They followed him around and watched him shop.

“What is the matter with you,” Kifagio asked him.

“He walks fast,” Maina said.

He could hardly hide the shaking.

“Run after him,” Professor said.

“You can hit him,” added Kifagio.

“Do not do that,” Professor said quickly. “Do not get us killed.”

Maina rushed after the blue suit. His mind racing and his heart pounding from fear, he was tempted to run back to his backstreets and dive into the safety of the first dumpster. But he was unfamiliar with the part of Main Street, and there were too many people about, and he feared running into a policeman and having to explain why he was running. Someone might mistake him for an escaping thief and set the mob after him.

He rushed after the prey. They came to a bus stop, just as a bus was stopping, and the man made for the door. Maina made a grab for the jacket and missed. The blue suit vanished inside the bus. Other passengers jostled Maina pushing and shoving to get inside the crowded bus. He pushed back, as they forced him back inside the bus. The bus started off. Kifagio and Professor hopped on board at the last minute and hung out of the door. The bus left the centre headed for the suburbs.

The conductor approached Maina with his hand out for the fare. Maina panicked. He had not seen or handled money for months and could not remember when he last had any. He pretended to search in his pockets. The conductor waited and other passengers smiled knowingly. He was ready to give up and confess, then Kifagio dug in his rags and came up with the fare. Professor opened a window to get some air. They would need all their wits

now that they had lost the protective cover of the Main Street crowds.

Their quarry alighted a short while later and entered a gate close to the bus stop. Maina was desperate, as he saw the man about to disappear inside the house. Before they could stop him, he went after the blue suit, arriving at the door just as the man disappeared inside and closed the door behind him. Through the window, Maina saw him drop his shopping bags on a table, take off his coat and hung it on the back of a chair. Then he took his shopping and walked through another door calling for Phoebe.

Maina opened the door, dashed in, and snatched the coat, sending the chair crashing to the floor. He was half way to the door, when the man reappeared, saw what was happening and threw something after him.

“Thief!” he shouted. “Thief!”

People on the road heard the shouts, saw the thief come fleeing towards the gate and tried to apprehend him. Maina altered course for the back of the house where a six-foot high fence was the only obstacle. Beyond it was a back road and freedom. Maina leapt at the wall, grabbed the top and hoisted himself over it. He landed on the other side bruised, but still hanging on to the coat, rose and limped away. Kifagio and Professor were there waiting at the corner. They dragged him along, congratulating and slapping him on the back.

Chapter Six

There was feasting and merriment at Razor's house. Sara had swept the floor and cleared it of cigarette ends and idle gang members. Then she had gone to the market and bought tea, sugar, rice, flour, cooking oil and other commodities that had not been seen in the house for a long time. She also brought back roast meat, *ugali*, bread and some strange sauces the seller said was good with meat.

"But what is it?" Razor wanted to know.

"Salsa?" Professor stepped in to examine the jar of sauce. "Salsa is Spanish for *kachumbari*. Salsa is also a dance originally from ..."

Apart from Razor, the gang did not care what it was, or where it was from, if it was edible. They devoured it in big mouthfuls, talking in grunts and gestures, their cheeks filled, pausing now and then to congratulate Maina making it possible. Food and goodwill flowed as freely as the special *chang'aa* Sara had bought from the *bhangi* dealer next door.

Despite the many aches and bruises he had sustained, Maina basking in his glory, was happy to hear Kifagio call him friend. Kifagio kept slapping him on the back and telling how he had charged inside the bus without fare. The story got more exciting with every retelling. First Maina had pursued the man screaming into the house and emerged wearing the man's coat. In the next version, Maina had knocked down the gate, overpowered three watchmen, stormed in the house, and stripped the coat off the wearer's back. Maina gave up denying he was a hero and wallowed in the praise. Whatever the truth, no one could deny he had made the party happen. Even Sara looked at him with different eyes than before. He thought he saw Sara wink at him, but that was just the *chang'aa* and the *bhangi* speaking.

Jitu called for a speech to thank Maina for a job well done. Professor

promptly volunteered, but he was too drunk to still be on his feet long enough to get to the point of his speech. He started telling how a whole family had charged after Maina armed with clubs and pangas, and how Maina had fought them off with karate kicks that the Professor had never seen in a Chinese film. Kifagio accused him of lying and the two almost came to blows. Then Nyoka rose abruptly, startling everyone for he had never volunteered for anything, and announced he had a speech.

“Friends,” he said. “We are all friends. Friends are ... friends.”

He swayed, and was about to fall on Kifagio, but Kifagio pushed him back upright.

“Friends,” he continued, steadying himself, “Chokora is our friend.”

He swayed backward, and was about to fall on the bed, but Sara planted her foot on the small of his back and shoved. He staggered to the middle of the room before, steadied himself and continued his speech.

“Friends,” he said, “Chokora is a friend’s friend, friends. Friend’s friends, friends are friends and ...”

“What are you talking about?” Razor asked him.

“I am just saying that I love you all, my friends.”

“Sit down, fool,” Sara said to him.

Nyoka sat down and applauded himself.

Then Jicho tried, but was so full of love and praise for Chokora he could not hold back the tears running down from his one eye.

“I do not know what else I can say,” he said and sat back down on the floor.

Another fool rose to speak and, when he too was discovering that he did not know what to say, Sara gave up and invited Maina to sip from her bottle.

Maina hesitated. He had seen all sorts of intoxicating things ingested to get high, but, apart from his initiation smoke, he had not been tempted to try

any of them. Now with everyone in such high spirits, and Sara smiling at him so attractively, the time had come to step into the unknown.

Razor watched him accept the bottle from Sara, take a big swallow and hand it back. The room was suddenly dead quiet, all eyes on Maina. Then the *chang'aa* hit the base of his stomach and bounced back up knocking him to the floor in a fit of choking and coughing and fighting for air. The gang burst out laughing. Professor thumped him on the back to release trapped air from his lungs so he could breath.

“You must take it slow,” he said. “It is not called kill me quick for nothing. Take it slow, classmate.”

“Like this?” Razor took the bottle from Sara, tilted his head back and poured half of it slowly down his throat.

“Ha!” he said.

“That way it does not burn your throat,” said Professor.

“Try another sip.” Razor offered him the bottle.

Maina accepted the bottle and held it up to the small light that found its way through the doorway. Though it burnt like fire, it was clear like water. He shook his head and handed back the bottle. Sara took out the wallet Maina had brought back from his dangerous mission, and which was now hers by right, and gave some money to Nyoka.

“You run to the kiosk and bring Maina some soda,” she said.

“Run?” Nyoka was doubtful.

“Run,” she ordered.

“I don’t think I can run,” he said to himself. “But I will go.”

He struggled to his feet, and could barely stand, but there was no arguing with her. He reeled to the door and staggered outside. They heard him sing loudly as he went.

Kifagio offered Maina a joint. They smoked and waited for Nyoka to

return. Soon it was dark outside and still no Nyoka. It was pitch black inside the shack, not that there had ever been much light before, but then there had never been so much food and drink and joy and happiness. Now, and for no reason at all, everyone needed to see everyone's face. They could not do without it light. Jitu was talking to Nyoka, unaware the man had left to buy soda, and telling him how much he loved him.

"What is keeping him?" Sara asked impatiently. "Kifagio, you go find Nyoka."

He left the shack, doing his best to walk straight, and the rest waited. Darkness had dampened the party spirit. Jitu grumbled it was too dark to see his friend Nyoka. Razor missed seeing Sara's beautiful face.

"Jitu," said Sara, "take this money and go buy a candle."

Jitu took the money and staggered off. They waited. Darkness suppressed conversation, so they spoke in whispers. Jitu took so long Sara had to send someone else after him. Then she remembered Nyoka and how he could hardly stand when he went singing happily away.

"Mwalimu," she said to Professor, "Go find Nyoka and the others. Tell them if they have drunk my money, I'll kill them."

Razor offered to go with him. Maina was left alone with Sara. They listened to the footsteps fade away. The house was dark and silent but for Sara's heavy breathing.

"Chokora," she said, "come sit here next to me.

Maina, hesitates.

"Come," she ordered.

He rose and hesitantly took Razor's place on the bed. He sat exactly where Razor had sat. Sara took his hand in hers.

"You did well today," she said, caressing his hand. "Better than anyone has ever done; even Razor. "I am so happy inside."

She placed his hand on her bosom.

“Feel how happy I am?” she asked him.

Maina emitted a small, scared wail and tried to withdraw his hand. She held on.

She took his other hand and wrapped his arm round her shoulders. He was about to faint from fear and something else.

“Kiss me,” she said. “Chokora, kiss me now. Kiss me quickly before Razor comes back.”

Then she kissed him, clamping her mouth to his so he could hardly breathe. Suddenly filled with fright, he tried to get away. She clung to him, pulled him down on the bed. Suddenly, there was a sound, and a silhouette appeared at the door peering inside the dark room.

“Where is everyone?” A voice asked.

Nyoka stood at the door trying to get used to the dark. Maina shot from the bed, tripped on a crate, and went crashing into him. Nyoka cried out in panic and fell back outside. He rose and bolted down the way yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Nyoka,” Maina called after him, “Nyoka, it’s me Maina. Don’t be scared, it’s only me.”

Nyoka disappeared down the lane screaming.

“Let the fool go,” Sara said. “He is like all the rest.”

“Shall I go for them?”

“No,” she said. “Come back here now. Chokora, come back here right now.”

When he hesitated, she rose, found a stub of a candle, and lit it. She threw the door screeching shut, grabbed him by the scruff and hauled him back on the bed.

Razor and the gang returned at dawn the following morning, roaring drunk and in high spirits. They brought neither soda nor candles, just their ragged carcasses and unlikely stories. They tried telling it all to Sara, to explain what had happened to the money she had given them, but she was not listening.

The short of it was, they had all ended up at the same *chang'aa* den deep in the heart of Shanty Town, having made their ways there variously and dubiously, and now they had neither the money nor the things she sent them for. None of them could explain it in any way that made any sense, but it did not matter, because no one was listening. Sara lay comatose on her queenly bed, and Maina sat with his back to the wall a catatonic look on his face. He could barely remember the faces talking at him, but he remembered lying in a bed with a bag of *bhanghi*, a bottle of *chang'aa* and Sara. The rest was a sweet haze, and all he wanted now was to be left alone to sleep it all off.

The gang was not through celebrating him. Razor found Sara's wallet, ordered more *chang'aa* from next door and the party continued. Only Maina was concerned by the noise. When he voiced his discomfort over disturbing the neighbours, the gang shouted him down.

"To hell with neighbours," Razor said. "This is Shanty Town and I am the king. I order you to drink as loud as you like."

It was daylight by then, but the only light inside the hut was the red glow from the joints of *bhanghi* making the rounds.

Maina's reputation as a provider grew, as time went by, but he continued to amaze them with his ingenuity. The big drawback, he soon realised, was that the gang now expected him to return with a wallet full of cash whenever he went out on patrol. They began to rely on him, and spent days smoking *bhanghi* waiting for him to bring food.

Maina patrolled for hours in the suburbs, where he had once mended potholes, looking for opportunities to make money. He dived in dustbins looking for recyclable garbage as he had done once, but now he was also

always on the lookout for anything left carelessly lying about, anything he might convert to cash. Most times he went home empty-handed, but sometimes he returned with enough money for food and drink.

Chapter Seven

Maina was finally a tested and qualified member of Razor's gang. He was not afraid of policemen any more, but he kept his distance from them. They hated anyone not in a suit, or inside big a car, and if someone looked innocent, they assumed he was hiding something and demanded he prove his innocence. One could not trust a policeman.

"It is quite simple really," Professor tried to break it down for Maina. "A policeman can see that you have no money or means, ergo, you must be a potential felon, or in other words a criminal in waiting. He might shoot you dead on the spot. Law allows it, but then again, that may be just what you are looking for. It is all a matter of perspective. You cannot argue with perspective. It is useless trying to reason with one, ergo, when a policeman says hello, he means run like hell. Just a matter of perspective, that is all."

A policeman could ask a suspect anything. Like where he was coming from, where he was going, why he looked so hungry or why he had no shoes on his feet.

"*Kijana*," a policeman sayss, "Young man, why are you sleepwalking across the road like a hungry hyena? Don't you know cars can kill you? And what are you doing in the street when everyone is at work? If you cannot find a job, go back to the village and take a *jembe*."

Some people were foolish enough to say they had no land to go back to.

"So, you decide to loiter in the streets stealing side mirrors?"

"I do not steal side mirrors."

"What do you steal?"

If one insisted on reasoning with them, he ended up at the station helping with investigations he knows nothing about.

“You can’t win against them,” Professor said to Maina.

Maina stopped on the rim of the valley above Shanty Town, at the point where the city stopped and Shanty Town began, where sense and nonsense parted company, and where dreams and aspirations stalled, refusing to continue into the valley of despair. It was a terrible place to be. Every time he got there he had a vision of doom, of something slowly and irreversibly breaking apart and ceasing to exist.

He stood rooted to the spot, gathering courage to continue. People passed him, stealing fearful glances at him, as they went on their way. They knew him as Chokora, one of Razor’s boys, the one who did not curse at them or frighten their children or kick their chairs or chickens out of his way. He had heard rumours that he also lent money to those in need, but that was untrue. Sara made sure of that no gang member had any money to squander on such things.

He stood at the top of the rise inhaling the garbage smoke, and the dust, and the smells from the sewer plant, and from the crematorium across the valley that rose in a hazy cloud, and spread like a shroud that entombed the place in an acrid bitter air. People stepped off the road and walked round him on their way back home from the city where they spent the days like him searching for sustenance. Many were born in Shanty Town, and most would die there having never seen the possibilities that lay beyond their horizon. It did not surprise him to hear Shanty Town citizens talk of the squalor as a mere prison sentence that would one day end, and from which they would walk away free to fulfill their destiny.

“One day,” a resident who had lived all his life in the place, and was fast heading to the grave, would say, “I will get out of this place and never come back here.”

Such was the spirit of Shanty Town.

“Hello,” a girl’s voice said behind him.

Her name was Delilah. She was tall, and as lean and straight as a bamboo

pole. Everyone said she was the most attractive girl in Shanty Town, and she was his friend. At least that was what she said.

“Do you still dream of marrying me?” she asked him.

Maina took her hand.

“Day and night,” he said.

“Have you found a job then?” she asked.

“I’ll get a job,” he said. “When can we go out?”

“When you get your first pay,” she said. “Real pay from a job job.”

“Job jobs are hard to get, but ...”

“Keep trying,” she said, letting go his hand. “I must hurry home or my brothers will come looking for me.”

She had been looked for work, any kind of job for a long time and she had finally found one at Friends Bar. She was a barmaid. He could not get a job as a cleaner, but she had a job as a waiter.

“But you are still looking, right?” she said.

“Still looking,” he told her.

It was a lie, and she guessed it, but she understood. Shanty Town was full of men who would work given a chance. Her father and her three brothers were such men. When they were not in prison, for doing something desperate, they were out looking for work.

“One day,” she said to him. “One day.”

“One day.”

One Day was their mantra; Shanty Town’s mantra. One day I will do something other than what I am doing now. One day I will have something that I do not have. One day I will be the somebody that I am not today.

Sometimes the gods smiled, and some wish came true. Delilah had a job.

They walked down the alley together, talking and laughing about the day's trials, the difficulties of dealing with life. Maina was the only man in Shanty Town who dared hold her hand and walk with her. Her brothers were members of a violent gang that preyed on Shanty Town residents rather than go out in the city and deal with the police, and the competition.

Maina had sneaked her back to Razor's house once, when Sara was away visiting her sick mother, and the gang out on patrol. He and Delila had sat on Sarah's bed and talked about hopes and dreams.

His hope was to get a job, any job and make enough money. His dream was to start a plastic recycling business, buy a house and a car and be someone. Her dream was to get out of Shanty Town, have a house of her own, and a man of her own, but the man had to be a loving man, and have a decent job too.

Delila had gone to one of the best schools in the city, and read books he never heard off, and set her sight on the stars he could not see. It amazed him the things she knew and thought, and he could not see how she had had no job for such a long time. With her looks and her brains, she should have been in the suburbs, already with a rich husband and a car and all the things she dreamed of. But, alas, she was of Shanty Town, and seemed destined to live and die in Shanty Town.

She would not marry a Shanty Town gangster, no matter how much money he had. She did not consider Maina a real gangster, since he had been to school, and he tried to get a real job, and he was not like the others. Still he was in a gang and therefore a gangster.

They stopped halfway to the bottom of the road. She lived somewhere to the left of the road, in an area controlled by her brothers' gang and he dared not set foot there. Razor's gang had a historical reputation, but none of them dared venture alone in areas controlled by new gangs. The new gangs were younger, educated and carried guns.

"I will stop being a gangster," Maina promised. "I have a plan."

And she had to hurry home before her brothers came looking for her and find her talking to him. She laughed and walked away. Watching her walk away from him, Maina swore to leave Shanty Town and get a job. It was the only way he could hope to have a chance with her. He walked on home to Razor's house to tell them his plan. He hoped the gang would be delighted by his plan, and the news that they would soon eat again.

The gang was sober, and hungry and desperate, as ever. When food and *chang'aa* were absent from the house, so were fun and laughter, song and dance, rowdy brawls and any sign of life. The only visible vital signs were the eyes popping open when Maina walked in, then clanging shut again when they saw he had not brought any food. There was the slight movement of bottoms seeking better, more comfortable positions.

"Anything?" Razor asked, the moment Maina walked in.

"Lots," Maina said, standing over Nyoka and waiting for him to vacate the crate so he could sit down. Nyoka hesitated.

"Snake!" Maina said to him.

Nyoka moved to the floor. Maina flopped on the crate. Since his first big score, Maina's standing in the gang was just below that of Razor and Sara. Razor was alone on the bed. Sara was out extorting money from *bhangi* and *chang'aa* dealers to buy food for the gang. Razor was feared for slashing uncooperative sellers with his knife, but Sara, with her mixture of threats and feminine charm, was better at coaxing money and goods from the most aggressive of the dealers.

Other than the sitting arrangement, there were more changes in the house. Now there was a stove, some pots and pans, plates, and mugs, and all of it stuff that had unnecessary before Maina and his big score. The jacket from that job was now Razor's royal cape. He wore it with pride, and he was right in bragging that there was no other like it in the whole of Shanty Town.

Since Maina's memorable job, Sara had unexplainably started cooking, concocting meals, some of it edible, and being the housemother, and overly

friendly to Maina, when Razor was not around. She had shopped for the kitchen things herself, but it was doubtful any of it would be staying long. With the gang's resources deteriorating by the day, the crockery was becoming irrelevant by the day. The stove was already a nuisance. It took up space and consumed wooden crates, formerly used only for sitting on, and was demanding more firewood. One of the hut's support beams had disappeared in its hungry belly. Soon someone would have to go for firewood and no one had energy to spare.

"What did you get?" Razor asked Maina when he returned from his day's patrol.

"Nothing today," he said.

Those who had opened their eyes hoping to catch a ray of hope closed them again. A stomach rumbled.

"Tomorrow?" Razor asked.

"Not even the day after," Maina told him.

It would take a few days and lot of patience. It would also need cash.

"Cash?" Razor turned to face the paper wall. "What for?"

"I will need things," Maina said to his back. "A file, some paper and a pen."

"A pen?" Razor turned to face him.

"A pen," Maina confirmed.

"What for?"

"To write with," said Maina. "This time it will be different. This time I will use paper and pen like they taught me at school."

"Forgery?" asked Professor.

"Nothing so primitive," Maina said.

Something totally new, something that would pay a hundred times or

more what it cost.

“It had better be,” said Razor. “We have no time to waste on foolishness.”

“I will need a work coat,” Maina said.

Razor lay back and closed his eyes like the rest.

“It is like this,” Maina started.

He expected the gang to sit up and listen. Not even Razor had the energy for it.

Chapter Eight

Maina woke up very early on the morning of the next big action, washed, combed his hair, and did his best to make himself look respectable. Sara had given him the money he needed the night before, with a warning not to squander it on foolish plans.

“It is an investment,” she explained. “You understand what that is?”

“You want it back,” he said.

“All of it,” she said. “With interest.”

She had a little book in which she recorded all the gang’s income and expenses. She recorded everyone’s input, commented on how much food they ate, and threatened with starvation anyone who did not get off his seat and start bringing in money.

“No free food,” she said to the gang, as they watched her dish out extra meat to Maina.

Razor did not like that, but there was nothing he could do about it. She was looking after the interests of his outfit and Maina was the only man in the house who worked with his hands as well as with his head.

“She is good,” Professor said quietly, “But for the fact that there is no business here to talk of, she runs this outfit like a real enterprise.”

It was still dark outside and only Sara was awake when Maina left Shanty Town that morning. He had to jump in the ditch to hide when he saw approaching cars in case the occupants turned out to be policemen.

During his research patrols in the past weeks he had confirmed that not all the houses on Shady Avenue had guard dogs. Now he waited at the end of

the avenue until the milkman came along pulling on his cart loaded with milk crates. As soon as he passed, Maina started after him, staying out of sight, and watching every move he made. The milkman stopped at every gate, to deliver a carton or two of milk and then moved on. Maina noted every move the man made and how long the household took to fetch the milk from the gate. He followed the milkman to the end of avenue and on to the next road. When they got to the third road, Maina turned back. He had seen enough. He took an early morning bus to town and walked the rest of the way to Shanty Town.

He heard the noise and the commotion from a long way, a rumbling sound punctuated by cracks and booms. A pall of black smoke hung in the skies in the direction of Shanty Town. Maina heard the distant wails of ambulances and fire engines, and he started running.

The residents of Shanty Town were gathered at the top of the hill watching their home burn. They were confused and frightened, but no one cried, not even the children, as they watched their lives go up in smoke. The valley was a lake of fire so fierce that the firemen were afraid to dive in and rescue those who could not get out of it on their own.

The destruction was fast and ferocious. The flames consumed everything that stood in their path, illuminating the frightened and confused faces of women, half naked children and the sweat-drenched men in their underwear who gallantly tried to save their possessions. Firemen fought back to save houses on the edge that were untouched by the flames. It was a losing battle. Fuelled by the enormous amount of paper and plastic, and other flammable trash that had been used to construct the houses, the fire rampaged through the pit, leaping from house to house, and consumed all in its path.

A man ran out of the flames with his clothes on fire, and dashed towards the watching crowd with the things he had salvaged from his burning house. The crowd ran from him. A fireman tackled him to the ground and smothered the flames with a blanket. Then he carried the unconscious man to an ambulance waiting at the top of the hill.

Shortly after, the fire engines ran out of water. The firemen went for more water leaving the fire still raging on. The crowd heard the screams of a child and three men ran towards the source, but the roof collapsed with a burst of sparks and smoke, and the cries stopped.

By mid-morning, the flames were out. The ruins smouldered for the rest of the day. The cloud of smoke drifted away across the city, and soot rained down in fine particles that settled on people's heads and on their bodies, entered their eyes, mouths, and nostrils, and weighed heavily on their hearts. It was not until late afternoon that someone was able to venture down to see what he could salvage.

Maina found his gang on the other side of Shanty Town, between the cemetery and the crematorium, leaning on the perimeter wall of the crematorium staring with vacant eyes at the destruction in below. They looked up when he joined them, then went back to staring at the charred remains of their Shanty Town.

“What happened?” he asked them.

They gestured at the ruins, but could not find the words.

“We were asleep,” Razor said.

“We heard a loud noise,” Nyoka said.

“We went outside and saw a big fire,” said Kifagio.

“Then we all ran,” Professor said. “We do not know what happened.”

Maina thought to ask how they had ended up on this side of the valley. They did not know, they said. They saw a big fire, they ran and they ended up on this side of the valley. It was enough that they were all alive.

Maina sat on the grass next to Sara. She seemed to notice him for the first time.

“Do not cry,” she said, patting him on the shoulder. “Everything will be all right. No one should cry.”

Maina could not cry if he wanted to. It was not something that men in his family did. Below them, firemen were sifting through the ashes looking for human remains. At the edges of the town, where the fire had spared more structures, rebuilding had already begun. Then policemen and city *askari* arrive in lorries and chased away spectators. After that they descended in the valley and drove everyone out with clubs and gun butts. Those who resisted were arrested and tossed on lorries and driven away to jail. The gang was mystified and alarmed.

“Why?” Jitu asked himself.

“Did you think the fire was an accident?” Professor asked him.

That was the first thing that came to the mind. But why would anyone want to cause so much destruction?

“Because of money,” said Professor.

The valley was prime property, now vacant and untitled. It made no economic sense to leave such land in the hands of vagrants and destitute, to be occupied by criminal mobs that had no income, or work ethics, and did not pay taxes.

“Why?” asked Kifagio.

“Are you deaf?” Professor said to him. “Chokora, you went to school, explain it to him. Tell him, Chokora.”

Maina shrugged, for he too did not understand it any more than they did, and went back to staring at the unfolding chaos in the valley below.

“This is now vacant, prime property and ripe for development,” Professor said. “The time has come for the squatters to be encouraged to move on.”

“Burning and beating?”

“It is called constructive eviction.”

Down below they were pelting policemen with sticks and stones. Policemen responded with batons and clubs. More policemen arrived, with

dogs and tear gas, and escalated the war. There were gunshots, and tear gas canisters started exploded all over. A chaotic fight raged through the ruins, the smoke, and the ashes. The gang watched it flow one way, then saw it go the other way, as the two sides fought to force each other out of the valley. It seemed there would be no winners in the end.

“What now?” Maina asked Sara.

“I am thinking,” Razor said.

He sat with his head in his hands looking thoroughly devastated. Like other residents who had lived all their lives in Shanty Town, he had never imagined this sort of eventuality, the possibility of a life without Shanty Town. This was the end; he might as well be dead.

A cloud of tear gas drifted across the valley toward where they were. Sara rose abruptly, looked at their sad faces, and shook her head disappointed at them. She touched Maina on the shoulder.

“Let us go,” she said.

“Where?” he asked startled.

“I will show you,” she said.

She did not look at anyone else and, for a frightening moment, Maina thought the invitation was just for him. Then Razor stirred, and the others rose with him, and the gang was ready to be led.

“You heard the woman,” Razor said. “Let us go.”

Maina stepped aside. Razor followed Sara, who was already walking briskly away, and the rest followed.

“When do you start?” Razor asked Maina.

“Tomorrow morning,” he said.

Then they were silent. They followed Sara along a path hugging the hill, away from the smouldering valley, and then down to the river’s edge, and kept walking. No one asked where they were going, or what they would do

when they got wherever Sara was taking them. After trekking for an hour, Nyoka complained of hunger. Jitu did not see too well in bright light and asked when they would get where they were going. Kifagio wondered whether anyone knew where they were going.

“I know a place,” she said.

Somewhere on the other side of the city, away from the city authorities and their *askari*, was a place where they could start over. They would rebuild their house and their lives. Shanty Town would be reborn. And just as they had done before, the other residents of the destroyed valley follow. There had nowhere else to go. Like frightened creatures, and hounded by squalor, destitution and a city government that did not care, or recognize them as people, they would follow Sara and her gang to their new Shanty Town to continue their disrupted lives.

Chapter Nine

Cedar Avenue had not had milk delivered to the houses for a long time. Delivery trucks stopped serving the area after the last rains when the roads turned to rivers and potholes became impassable. The area residents were excited when an agent of Riverside Dairies came around and offered to resume milk delivery. Riverside Dairies would deliver milk to their doorsteps at no extra charge. All the customers had to do was pay Riverside Dairies a weekly deposit and the balance at the end of each week.

For two days, Maina went up and down Cedar Avenue in white overalls, bearing the logo of Riverside Dairies that Nyoka had stolen from a milk delivery truck. He carried a file in one hand, three different coloured pens in his breast pocket and a pencil behind his ear. His hair was combed and parted in the middle like a politician, and his shoes had been mended and polished by Nyoka.

Each day he returned to new Shanty Town with a tidy sum of money. The gang was all in, looking hungry and lifeless, when he entered the hut. He showed them the money he had made that day and they hugged him and told him how good he was. Nyoka promised to shine his shoes every day from that day on, and Jitu offered to carry his file, and Kifagio asked if there was anything he could do for him. Razor merely patted his back, but Sara rose from the bed holding out her hand. She counted the money while Maina waited.

“Is this everything?” she asked sternly. “You did not give any of it to your girlfriend?”

He shook his head. She stashed some of the money inside her blouse. Then hugged and kissed him, right in front of Razor and said Maina was the sort of men she wanted in her gang. Her gang! Maina’s mind jolted in panic.

No one else seemed to notice, or care that she had just usurped Razor's role as leader.

"Jitu," she said, "take this money and go buy meat. All of it for meat, and meat only, you hear? Kifagio, go buy charcoal. And, I mean, just charcoal. Nyoka, get off Chokora's seat."

"Sit down," she said to Maina. "Today I'll show you I am a woman. I will make you *pilau*."

Maina hesitated, and glanced in Razor's direction. She shoved him in the seat vacated by Nyoka. She fetched a bottle of *chang'aa* from under her pillow and poured him a generous measure. Nyoka offered him a joint. They smoked and sipped *chang'aa*, while Sara prepared a special meal in honour of Maina's ingenuity. She let everyone know, and acknowledge that the only reason she was feeding them was because of Maina. Otherwise she would have let them starve to death.

Kifagio, Jitu, and Nyoka were too happy, and too uneducated, to understand it completely, but Professor shuddered. He felt the frigid wind of change, and it was not a comfortable one. Out of his fear for his future, he offered to accompany Maina on his next foray. Sara shot that idea down.

"Not on your life," she said harshly. "Maina does not need any of you fools meddling in his business."

Maina's new business was a proper business, a respectable business that needed real education and real intelligence. There was no way she would let any of them spoil it for him.

"This is not one of your machete and axe jobs," she said to them. "You will all stay right here with me and let a real man handle it. Watch and learn, and try to grow, all of you."

"Baba Chokora will work for us," Jitu said bitterly to Professor.

Professor smiled sadly, the thin smile of a man who knew when to let go, and instead proposed a toast to Chokora's success. They drank to that till late.

Maina was in the suburbs before sunrise. He was waiting at the end of the Eastern Retreat, when the milkman came around pulling on his cart. He followed the milkman as he went from house to houses delivering milk. He retrieved the milk that the man delivered and put it in a bag over his shoulder. They got to the end of the street and continued to the Western Close lane. As milk cartons decreased in the milkman's cart, they increased in Maina's bag. When they got to the end of the close, Maina ducked in the ditch, and watched the milkman get onto the lorry waiting there for him. The lorry drove away and Maina retrieved the last bottles.

The bag was so heavy he feared it would break as he delivered the milk to his customers on Cedar Avenue. Then he folded his bag and hid it in a bush by the side of the road and went home feeling like a man with a job.

Residents of Cedar Avenue had milk that day. Those on the Retreat and the Close had to make special arrangements for their children get milk that day. Most thought the delivery truck had broken down. Some had heard it pass by in the early hours of the morning. It had happened before that they missed the day's delivery and received credit on their accounts. This time they receive no credit, and no double delivery the next day, or the next or the next. For a whole week, they received no milk.

At the end of the week, one of them called Riverside Dairies demanding an explanation. The manager called his delivery people and they called their delivery boys and they assured him they had all done their jobs. Then the manager called in his assistant and they put their heads together and discussed it for a while. They decided three heads were better than two and called in the shift foreman. They questioned him for some time and decided to call in the truck driver and his delivery boy. Cats and dogs were discussed too, but none of them had ever heard of a cat or a dog taking off with milk containers without leaving a trail of spilt milk. Quick phone calls confirmed there were no signs of broken milk containers or spilt milk at any of the affected locations.

The manager called the police. No one liked the way the detectives went

around the factory asking question, least of all the milkmen who delivered to the affected areas. They questioned them as though they were the suspects.

Early the next morning, two detectives were waiting in a hideout along the Western Close before the delivery lorry arrived. A light drizzle was falling, when they heard it approaching from way off, backfiring and rattling enough to wake the whole street. Then the milkman appeared pushing his cart and started making delivery.

The detectives waited until he had passed their hiding place talking to himself about the cold. They were about to start after him when a second milkman appeared, looking exactly like the first milkman, and started picking up the milk that the other dropped. They waited until he too had passed their hiding place before following him.

They went from gate to gate, until they came to the end of the street. The first milkman, still unaware he was being followed, reached the end of his delivery route, got into the waiting lorry and it drove away. The second milkman collected the last milk container then led the detectives down the street and around the corner, where he started making his deliveries. The case was solved. It was not about a dishonest employee, as originally suspected, but a straightforward case of theft, a felony of the kind policemen dealt with on daily basis.

They followed the bogus milkman down the road, all the time debating what to do with him. Should they arrest him, send him to prison and expect to arrest him again sometime in the future over another moronic one-man crime spree like this one? Or just shoot him and save the trouble? Then, during their whispered discussion, they realised there was a possibility he was part of a bigger picture, a member of a larger, and more dangerous gang, that included some of the customers to whom he delivered the stolen milk. The case would be more interesting, and a whole lot more worthwhile, if they arrested the whole street and charged every resident with the crime of knowingly receiving stolen goods.

Maina was unaware of all that was going on behind him, when he turned into Western Close and continued delivering, his back hunched against the morning drizzle. He was in good spirits, despite the cold. It was his last day as a milk deliveryman. Later that day he would collect the balance for the week's supply and go reinvent himself in another part of the city.

He had just made the last delivery when two figures stepped out of the shadows.

“*Jambo*,” said one of them.

Maina immediately realised who they were. He charged forward, dodged round them, and tried to flee. One of the men, reacting fast, whacked him on the back of the head with a baton dropping him in the ditch. He lay on his back looking up at the hazy figures bending over him and thought he was dreaming.

Chapter Ten

The bus that brought him home was an old, familiar monster with broken seats and smoking engine. The driver wrestled with the steering wheel, his cap tilting at an angle, and the old engine spewed clouds of dark smoke. It was the only public transport that braved the dusty road and rocky tracks going up to Ngaini Village, and was always overloaded with farm produce, livestock, and tired men and women.

The passengers neither saw nor cared about the driver or the bus. They just wanted to get home at the end of a long market day and rest. Some stared out of the windows, others were sleeping, and one or two argued with the conductor over how much money they would pay for the luggage.

In the back of the bus sat a young man with torn clothes and a bewildered look on his face. His eyes darted from one face to the next and dropped whenever any of the faces noticed him. He heard them tell stories and laugh. He drew comfort from the language they spoke for understood it.

The bus swam in a fog of dust and exhaust smoke, as it sought and felt its way through the familiar landscape. Through the window, the young man saw hills and landmarks he remembered. Banana fields went by, and maize fields also came and went and occasionally he saw women weeding. Then, lulled by the scenery and the voices around him, he dozed off and slept until the bus jolted to a stop.

“Last stop,” said the driver. “Everyone alight here.”

The bus had reached its final destination. The driver and his assistant would spend the night at the small market town and head back to the city the following morning.

Passengers alighted and the conductors hopped on the luggage carrier to

unload their luggage. The young man lingered uncertainly in the back seat, his heart pounding and sweat pouring down his face. His stomach ached too, and he was not sure whether it was the hunger or the anxiety that hurt him so much.

He lingered in the back, cold with apprehension. Deciding to come back home had been the easy part. Lying on the hospital bed, swimming in a soup of broken bones and abandoned dreams, with nothing to do but wallow in remorse and self-pity, it had seemed like the right thing to do. Now sitting in the back of the bus doubt assailed him. Would they recognize him? Would they understand? What would his father think?

“Everyone out,” the driver called out from the doorway.

Everyone was out except the young man. He had to get out of the bus and go home. Slowly and with significant effort, he rose and stretched. He straightened his clothes and passed his hand over his clean-shaven head. Then, walking with a slight limp, and hiding his right hand under his shirt, he crept out of the bus and into the late afternoon air.

“Do not forget your luggage,” said the driver.

The young man had no luggage. He had returned exactly as he had left, with just the dust in his pocket. Most of the passengers had dispersed, gone home to their families to share whatever they had brought back from the city, and only the market women remained, arguing with the bus conductor over unlabelled loads of bananas that they could not decide belonged to which of them.

“Mine is the big one,” one of them said.

“Mine is the ripest,” said another.

“The fat bunch is mine,” another one said.

“No, that is mine.”

“It is mine.”

“Ask the conductor, he knows what I gave him.”

The conductor explained that one bunch of bananas was like any other to him. The women loudly disagreed.

“Would you like to come up here on top of this bus and see?”

The women looked at one another.

“I did not think so,” he said.

The young man tried to walk behind the women, hoping to slip away unnoticed. The last thing he needed was the attention of strangers and their tough questions.

“Are you not the son of so and so?”

“The one who went to school?”

“How is the city?”

“Do you work for the government?”

“Are you a big man now?”

“Where is your big car?”

His stomach hurt so much he walked bent over. He was almost clear of the women when one of them grabbed his hand.

“Come here, you,” she said him. “Help me with this load.”

She had a sack of potatoes she wanted moved from the bus. There was no way he could lift the sack with his maimed hand, so she dropped it, grabbed his good one and set him to work. They carried the basket aside, and without letting go of him his arm, she took him back to the bus and the shouting women.

“Stay here,” she ordered. “You have more work to do.”

The driver and his conductors were both up on the luggage rack deciding which bunch of bananas belonged to which screaming woman.

“They are all green up here,” said the driver to the women.

“Mine’s greener.”

“Mine’s longer.

“The fattest one is mine.”

Driver and conductors exchanged worried glances. Then they took hold of the nearest bunch and heaved it over the side.

“Watch out,” said the driver. “Here it comes.”

The market women scattered and the bananas landed on the ground. While they watched outraged, the driver and his conductor cleared the luggage carrier, tossing everything down in a heap. Then they got down and went off to have their tea. While the women were busy sorting out their luggage, the young man slipped away unnoticed.

He struck out of the market following a path that he well remembered, one that he did not want to travel, and go where it went. He dreaded what lay ahead, what would happen when he met the first person that would recognize him. The moment the dreadful questions would begin.

The sun was about to set, when he arrived at the last fork on the path. The right fork led to the people he had betrayed, and who would not understand or forgive. To the left led round a small wooded hill, past the neighbours’ fields, down a valley, across a stream to the wilderness.

He stood at the fork contemplating the two paths. One led to shame and dishonour, while the other one led to the unknown. He stood there for a long while wrestling with the doubts and the fears.

“Meja?” a small voice called.

He looked down and saw his twelve-year old sister looking up at him. Small for her age, she was dressed in a ragged dress and had no shoes on her feet. Feeling suddenly light-headed, he staggered to the fence and leaned on it.

The girl took his arm.

“They said you would not return,” she said.

He went down on one knee, so that his face was level with hers, and hugged her and kissed her face, and held her in a desperate embrace. He felt her bony ribs, and felt her little heart beat fast and smelt the dust and the wood smoke on her dress. Tears came to his eyes. She pulled away from him.

“I can write,” she said.

She dragged him back to the path, got on her knees and started writing on the dust with her finger. She stopped to read what she had written, wiped it away and started again. Meja stood and watched and wished he could just fade away, disappear like he had never been. His head throbbed to the sound of cowbells from a nearby homestead. Calves cried for their mothers and goats called to their kids. The smell of the fields in need of rain and of wood smoke and cow dung, and that of home and family came at him from every direction.

“There,” said the girl, eyes wide with excitement.

He stared at the writing on the dust.

“What does it say?” he asked her.

“My name,” she said. “I can write my name.”

She said it with immense pride. It was spelt wrong and it made him sadder.

He hugged her.

“Did you bring me?” she asked.

His wracked his brain. He could not think what it she was referring to.

“The necklace,” she said taking his hand again. “You promised me a necklace if I learned to write my name.”

It was a rash promise, made impulsively to a pestering child, and easily

forgotten, buried under the avalanche of future reality. Now he remembered and was about to die from the shame. He had promised a lot more things to a lot more people. If their memories were as clear as his little sister's, he was in more trouble than he had imagined.

She tagged his hand.

“Did you bring it?”

He could not find the words.

“Who is home?” he asked her.

He could just make out his mother's hut in the banana gardens that surrounded it. Smoke was rising from the roof.

“Mother,” she said. “Father went to borrow money for books. He said, if I read and write, I can come stay with you and get a job. I can write your name too, see?”

She let go of his hand and started writing on the dust. He watched her write his name, but, it was like a worm had formed the writing on the dust. He corrected it, erasing a letter, and adding two.

“There,” he said.

“Your hand,” she was staring at it horrified. “What happened to your hand?”

He felt suddenly weak. He dug his fingers in the dust to steady himself, then remembered and thrust it back in his pocket.

“Your hand,” she could not stop staring at the hand in the pocket.

“Write,” he said. “Write, write, write.”

He looked down at the finger writing on the dust. He remembered how happy she was, how joyful and sad they all were to see him off when he left for the city. And how hopeful they all were that he would come back lift them from the poverty of the countryside.

How could they now understand how hard he had tried, and how terribly he had failed. There was no way they could relate to the years in the backstreets scavenging for everything from food to shelter, the months on a hospital bed, or the months of begging on Main Street, shamefully exposing his deformity to get the fare home.

The girl traced her knowledge on the dust, looking up now and then to see he was watching.

“What happened to your hand?” she asked again.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Does it hurt?”

“No,” he said, “it does not hurt.”

A teardrop landed on the dust next to her writing. She looked up and saw his face screwed tight to stop the tears falling from his eyes.

“Do not cry,” she said. “It will be all right again.”

His head started hurting. He heard the mob baying for blood, heard the blare of a car horn and, turning suddenly, knocked the girl to the ground. He fell and lay still.

She picked herself up and tried to lift his head.

“Meja!” she cried.

She tried to turn him on his back. She stared at his motionless body, his twisted and scarred hand holding on to the handful of grass he had grabbed trying to steady himself. She turned and ran to the house crying for help.

“He is dead,” she screamed frantic, “Meja is dead.”

By the time she returned with an alarmed household, he was gone. They stood at the fork looking around.

“He was here,” she said.

“Who was here?” they asked.

“Meja,” she said. “He fell there.”

They could just make out the writing on the dust where the girl was pointing. There were signs of something having happened, and the girl was not known to lie, but Meja’s name had been gone from their lips and minds for so long that it was hard to believe her. Then, from where she had written her name on the dust, she picked a silver coin.

“See?” she said. “He left money for my necklace.”

Her mother took the money from her and, not sure what to make of it, led them all silently back to the house. It was not enough for fees, or for books, or even for a necklace, but Meja had left them all that he had brought back from the city.

Chapter Eleven

Darkness fell fast. Clutching his rags against the cold, Meja walked back down the road the bus had come. The bus would not be travelling back to the city before morning, but that was not his problem. Without fare back, he had no choice but to start walking.

It was a cloudless night. The sky was wide and the stars were many. A light wind blew from the hills, a cold and dry wind, and there was no hiding from it. It was twelve miles of darkness back to the highway. From there he could head north into the unknown, or head south back to the slightly familiar; the city and all its trials.

He had made a bad mistake thinking he could go home and pick up where he had left off. Now there was nothing to do but go as far away from home and from his past as he could.

He walked through the night, and it was still dark when he reached the highway. He was tired and hungry, and sad and bitter. He found a hidden place in a ditch, lay down just out of reach of the freezing wind, and tried to sleep. It was not easy falling asleep. Down the road, where the road crossed a swampy river, the frogs were having a croaking party. Around him, the crickets chattered all night long.

He woke up to the rumble of a heavy lorry heading to the city. It was still dark, and he was stiff from the cold. He dragged himself out of the ditch. His leg was stiff and, when he tried to stretch it, pain shot up through his entire body. He massaged it gently back to life, then did the same for the hand, slowly stretching the fingers one at a time until the cramps dissolved in a warm ache and he could use both limbs. Then he started walking.

He had walked about a mile, when the next vehicle appeared, charging down the road at high speed. He braced himself, stepped out into the glare of

the headlights and waved it down. The lorry sped past him, so fast he had to leap off the road to save his life. He walked for about an hour then sat down on the embankment to rest. Getting back to the city was not going to be easy. He was tempted to walk back home, to go face his shame and end the suffering. He thought a long time about it. Then he rose and continued walking, slowly at first but with greater determination with every succeeding step.

He covered four miles more before again stopping to rest. The next three vehicles all did not stop. After resting for a while, he resumed walking. More lorries passed him, as the sun rose over the hills, and then came buses and cars. He let the buses go by, as he had no money for the ride, and he waved down the cars and the truck. He had almost given up, when a construction lorry stopped for him.

“Where are you going?” the driver asked.

“To the city.”

“Thirty,” the driver held out his hand.

“I have no money,” Meja said.

“Then why do you stop me?”

“I am going to look for a job.”

The driver hesitated, looked him up and down.

“How much do you have?”

“Nothing.”

The driver looked him up and down, shook his head.

“I am not going all the way,” he said, “but I will take you as far as I go. Get in.”

The front was full. Meja limped to the back of the truck. It was a high lorry. He hopped up, grabbed the top the top of the tailgate and started hauling himself upward using the good hand.

“Ready?” the driver called out.

Then the lorry lurched forward, dragging his lame foot on the ground. Meja cried out and let go of the tailgate. As he started to fall someone yelled, and a hand grabbed his arm from above, and hauled him on board.

“Sit over here,” said the man who helped him aboard.

They crawled under a tarpaulin to hide from the wind, and sat coughing and sneezing from the dust, as the lorry sped towards the city. They could not talk, even if they wanted to. The truck rattled, and rocked and tossed them about under the tarpaulin as it swept round bends at high speed.

After what seemed like an all day, the lorry jolted to a stop. They lingered under the tarpaulin. They heard the driver’s door open and shut. There was the sound of movement on gravel, then the driver banged on the side of the truck.

“Step down,” he said. “You have arrived.”

The lorry was inside a stone quarry, surrounded by mounds of rocks and gravel. The sides of the quarry were a hundred feet high, and stretched for yards all round. The rock crusher was set against the rock face, on a structure made of wood and iron sheets. There were people all over the place, some ending their shift and others starting. Meja saw all that from the top of the lorry as he readied to jump down.

“This is as far as we go,” his traveling companion called from the ground.

Meja had been so awed by the place he had not seen the others disembark. He hopped down and stood next to the man who had saved him from a nasty fall.

“The city is over that way,” the man said. “Come, I will show you a short.”

It was still early; the sun was yet to reach inside the quarry and it was cold still. The man led him round the mounds of gravel, and along a path that

went up the cliff and out of the quarry. They were panting when they came to the top. The city was visible in the distance, rising above mist and the smog. While they watched, the streetlights started going out one by one.

“Follow this path,” said the man. “It will take you back to the main road to the city. You cannot get lost. Good luck with your search.”

Meja hesitated. Now that he was back in the city, he did not know what to do, or where to begin looking for a job. The crippling fears that had assailed him the first time he came to the city were again upon him. The fear of the tall buildings, and of the heavy traffic, and of strangers and mobs in the streets.

“Are you all right?” the man asked him.

“Yes,” he said.

“Go well then.”

Meja made to start off, then stopped. He looked at the man, looked at the distant city, and hesitated.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” the man asked him.

“No,” he said. “I am fine.”

Summoning his last bit of courage, he started walking. He stopped after a few paces, thought for about it, and limped on. The man saw him walk slower and slower until he finally stopped. The man shook his head and walked back down in the quarry. Meja turned around, ready to admit to his fears and ask for help, but the man was gone.

Gripped by panic, he ran back the way they had come. He rushed down the path at a dangerous pace. The man was halfway down the rock face, rushing to get back to his job. He heard gravel roll after him and span round startled. Then he saw who it was and waited.

“I need a job,” Meja said to him.

“Here?” the man asked. “In the quarry?”

Then he saw the desperation on Meja’s face.

“It is demanding work,” he said.

“I can work hard,” Meja said.

“Very hard work,” said the man.

“I can do it,” said Meja.

The man considered.

“When I say hard, I mean very hard, impossibly challenging work.”

“I can,” said Meja.

The man saw the determination, shrugged, and started walking.

“I will take you to the foreman,” he said over his shoulder.

Other workers were lining up at the site office to have their cards stamped. Big, boisterous men with muscular bodies. Meja and his newfound friend silently joined the line and waited. All around them, lorries came and left filling the air with dust and diesel smoke. The workers called out greetings, and foremen yelled at them to move faster. Then the crusher came to life with a thunderous roar that drowned all other sounds. The workers had to shout at one another.

“Ngigi!” yelled the foreman from his cubbyhole.

“Boss,” Meja’s friend shouted back, handing in his work card.

“Has your wife delivered yet?”

“Not yet?”

“What is she waiting for?”

“She heard that I would be rich one day.”

“Mine gave up waiting and now I have six.”

“You are a foreman; you can afford six children.”

“Wait until you get one,” said the foreman.

He punched Ngigi’s card, then noticed Meja.

“Who is he?”

“He wants to work,” Ngigi said.

“Here?” the foreman studied Meja.

Meja nodded. The foreman turned to Ngigi. He shrugged. The foreman unlocked the door of his cubicle.

“Let me out,” he said.

Ngigi stepped aside. The metal door of the foreman’s box opened to let out a giant, with bulging chest and huge arms crisscrossed with veins. He took a better look at Meja.

“Is this a joke?” he asked them.

Ngigi shook his head. Meja also shook his head.

“He worked in a quarry before,” Ngigi said.

Meja was so startled he almost give it away with the look on his face.

“Where?” The foreman did not believe it.

“Nanyuki,” said Meja.

“I know Nanyuki,” said the foreman. “Where in Nanyuki?”

“Batian Construction,” Meja said.

It was the only quarry in Nanyuki, just up the road from his high school he went to. He left out the part about going to school there and getting top marks in every subject. School certificates were as irrelevant here as in the offices he had visited in the city.

“I worked for Batian,” said the foreman. “A good Indian man. But that was before you were born. What did you do there, clerical?”

“Everything,” Meja said.

“Everything?” Ngigi asked. “Was that how you got the limp?”

Meja nodded. The whole truth was another way not to get a job, any job,

even this one. The man looked him up and down, and shook his head.

“This is arduous work,” he said, “very hard work. You see the picks they are carrying? One of them is as heavy as you are.”

“Water bucket?” asked Ngigi.

“We have Ouma,” said the foreman. “I would fire him to give your friend his job, but Ouma is related to my wife and you know how wives are.”

“Probation?” Ngigi asked.

“What is the point?” said the foreman. “He will fail, and not be paid for it, and then I will feel bad about it.”

He turned to Meja.

“There is no point” he said. “Go find a job somewhere else.”

“I will not fail,” Meja said. “Try me.”

“Tell him what probation is all about,” the foreman said to Ngigi.

Ngigi explained that everyone had to pass the probation to get a job at the quarry. Failure meant no job. It also meant he would not be paid for the day.

“I can do it,” Meja said.

“Let him try,” Ngigi said.

The foreman scratched his chin.

“Take a pick and hammer,” he said pointing. “Ngigi will get you the rest of the tools.”

Ngigi hastened to find the tools. Meja tried to lift the pick and hammer. Watching him struggle to lift the tools to his shoulder, the foreman shook his head again. He was feeling bad for him already.

“You see this pit her?” he said. “This pit was dug by hard core prisoners. By desperate men who had no choice.”

Meja had the pick on his left shoulder. He tried to lift the hammer to his

right shoulder. The hammer stayed on the ground with the handle leaning on his thigh.

“To pass the test, you must burrow six feet into that rock face,” said the foreman. “We call it the poor man’s grave. When they finish digging it, most men are ready to be buried in it. A few have been carried out on a stretcher.”

Ngigi came back with a bag of wedges.

“Go with him,” the foreman said. “He will show you what to do.”

Ngigi walked off in the dust and the smoke, the bag of wedges clicking over his shoulder. Meja dragged the hammer on the ground, while others were carrying their picks and hammers as though they were made of wood. Few paid any attention to the man dragging his tools along the ground.

Ngigi stopped a couple of times to wait for him. Then, realizing it might take them all day to get to where they were going, he took Meja’s hammer on his shoulder and led the way along the bottom of the rock face.

All along the cliff were men at work with their picks and their hammers. Some sang as they worked, while others worked silently, growling, and grunting with every swing of the pick and every blow of the hammer. The sound of steel on steel was everywhere, as the roar of the crusher fell behind.

Ngigi took Meja to the farthest end of the pit, where the walls narrowed into a ravine and there were no men working there.

“They would make fun of you,” he said, tossing the hammer on the ground, and setting aside the bag of wedges. “You are alone here.”

Meja dropped the pick, looked around. He was so far away from the others that the sound of the crusher, and the singing reached him only when the wind changed directions. The cliff wall was so high the sky was like a glass ceiling.

“There is no formula to digging six feet grave out of this rock,” Ngigi turned to leave. “How you do it is unimportant. Good luck,”

“Don’t you measure it for me?” Meja asked.

“It is pointless,” said Ngigi. “I will come back after you get going.”

He walked away and Meja was suddenly alone with his first real job, a man’s job. He spat in the palms of his hands and hoisted the hammer high over his head. It took so much to raise he had no strength left to swing the hammer. He let it fall back to the ground, and it bounced off the floor and nearly landed on his foot. He rested for a moment then lifted it a second time with the same results.

Ngigi had stopped some paces away to watch. He came back and came running and looking worried.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Meja confirmed he was all right. Ngigi took the hammer from him.

“You hold it this way,” he said.

He spat in his hands and gripped the handle firmly with both hands. Then he slid his left hand down the shaft to the neck of the handle, just below the head of the hammer, while the left hand held the handle near the end.

“Then you ... whip it back over your head and bring it down hard like this.”

Sparks and fragments flew in all directions. He lifted the hammer again and struck the rock a second time. More gravel fell from the rock face. With the third blow, he had enough chips at his feet to fill a wheelbarrow.

“Rock is hard,” he said, pausing for breath, “but it is not as hard as a hard-headed man like you are.”

He swung at it two more times and again stopped to rest.

“Ten years ago, this pit was under black cotton soil,” he said. “Barren wasteland not good for anything. Then men came and dug out the soil, and excavated and now it is a quarry. You meet strength with strength. Strike it hard repeatedly and, eventually, it will give way. Try it.”

He gave back the hammer.

“No, hold it this way,” he said. “Give me your hand.”

Then he saw Meja’s hand and was speechless. Meja saw on his face the same horror he had seen on his sister’s face.

“An accident,” he explained.

He had managed to conceal the worst of it from everyone, including the foreman, for fear they would not give him a job because of it. Now Ngigi was staring at the hand almost afraid to touch it.

“It is all right,” Meja said flexing his fingers to show they worked. “It does not hurt.”

But, in his head, he heard the sound he would never forget, the panting of a bloodthirsty mob, and the shouts of “thief, thief, kill, kill!”, then the car horn and the screeching breaks. He spun round instinctively. There was nothing behind him, but the rock.

Ngigi regarded him with growing uneasiness.

“I am all right,” he said again. “I can do it.”

“Well then,” Ngigi backed away from him. “As I said, no formula.”

He walked away and this time did not stop, or look back.

Meja waited for the shivers that racked his body to stop, before turned his attention back to the rock. He stared at it like at an enemy, one that he knew was fierce and stronger, and could annihilate him with a single blow. But he had the hammer, he was the man, and a man was smarter than rock.

“I can do it,” he said to the rock.

He spat on his palms and rubbed them together.

“I can do it,” he said.

He gripped the hammer as his friend had shown him.

“I can do it!”

The scream rang through the pit, and was picked up, and magnified by the walls, and hurled back at him so loud the rock seemed to mock him.

“I can do it!”

He hurled himself at the rock enraged, wielding the hammer in a wild frenzy and ignoring the numbing pain that shot from his scarred fingers and up the scarred muscles into his arm. Growling like an enraged beast, he flung his whole being, his mind, his body, and his hammer at the rock until sparks flew. Swinging it up and down, and up and down, he struck the rock with the hammer until his hands blistered, and bled, and his body was one hot ache. Sweat ran from every pore in his body, and down his face into his mouth, but he neither felt it nor tasted it. Not even the sound of the crusher could penetrate his senses.

The sun rose higher and got hotter, so hot the rock was hot to the touch, but he hammered on, unfeeling and unthinking and only vaguely aware of his looming failure. Ouma, the water carrier, came to offer him a cup of water, but Meja neither saw nor heard him. He went away worried by what he saw in Meja’s eyes.

After an hour of enraged hammering, he dropped the hammer and staggered back away from the rock to catch his breath. He was hot and raw, and his entire body was on fire, but the rock was intact. He collapsed in a heap next the hammer. He was certain he could not lift it anymore. He buried his head in his hands in despair, leaned his back on the rock and closed his eyes. As he drifted to sleep, he thought he heard the rock laugh at him.

Ngigi woke him up some time later. It was lunch break. The miners were filing back to the quarry head for lunch leaving the tools where they lay. Ngigi and Meja followed them. The crusher was turned off and the dust had settled. The miners lined up to buy food, served in plastic bags and sold for a uniform price regardless of the contents. The moment realised the food was for sale, Meja tried to step out of the line. Ngigi dragged him back in line.

“They give credit,” Ngigi said to him. “I have it.”

They received their food, found a quiet, shaded place under an idle truck and sat to eat. There was little talk among the miners while they ate. Afterwards, they lay in the shade to rest, and Ngigi offered him a cigarette. He shook his head. Ngigi lit his cigarette, took a couple of puffs, and turned to Meja.

“What now?”

Meja looked up startled. His only friend seemed to have written him off as a failure.

“I have not failed,” he said.

“Of course, not,” said Ngigi. “You have the whole afternoon and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. You do not fail until you give up. You can hammer on the rock until you die and no one will try to stop you. But you do not get paid for it, that is all.”

“I will not fail,” Meja said.

They were silent for a while after that. It seemed there was nothing else to say. Then Ngigi pointed.

“See that man there?” he said. “They call him Bulldozer. He was not even a one-stroke lawn mower when he first came here. Just a small bag of bones, and see how big and awesome he is now. He breaks more rock in a day than many of us do in a week. There is still a lot of day left to today.”

He crawled deeper under the shade of the truck and closed his eyes.

“Why don’t you measured it for me?” Meja asked him.

“You will know when you have dug a fool’s grave.”

Meja crawled from under the lorry, rose.

“It is lunchtime,” Ngigi said.

Ngigi opened one eye, regarded him seriously.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Meja.”

“Listen, friend Meja,” he said. “That is rock. Anger or determination does not impress rocks. You cannot wear it down with persistence, or hurt its feelings with insults. You find a way inside it instead, a weakness you can exploit to bring it down.”

Meja walked away. He returned to his work place charged, certain that, somehow, he would dig the fool’s grave, if it was the last thing he ever did.

He picked up his hammer and swung it to his shoulder. His arms and legs trembled with the strain of holding up that hammer. Then he turned to the rock and focused his energy on one spot.

“I am harder than you,” he said to the rock. “You cannot defeat me.”

Then he let fly with the hammer. It missed the target, bounced off the rock and slammed into the bag of steel wedges barely an inch from his foot. He was about to lift it again then stopped and picked up the bag of wedges. He took one out and weighed it thoughtfully in his hand.

Then he got down on one knee and studied the rock face. He scratched it with the wedge, blew away the dust, and scratched again. He wiped stinging sweat from his face, with the back of his hand, and went on searching and searching. His search was rewarded with the discovery of two hairline cracks crossing at right angles and running the length and breadth of the rock.

He took a sharper wedge from the bag, he placed it over one of the cracks and hammered it in with the other. It bit into the crack and stuck. He stepped back and studied it. Then he positioned himself, planted his feet firmly in the ground and lifted the hammer. He swung it at the wedge. The wedge slipped into the rock slightly, and this time the hammer did not fly out of his control as before. The second wedge needed one blow to sink in the widening crack.

Suddenly excited by a sense of progress, he spat into his palms and rubbed them together.

“Follow the line of weakness,” he said to himself.

Way off in the quarry, the crusher resumed its roar. Lunchtime was officially over. It was time for the miners to go back to work. Then came the clang of steel on steel, the sound rising and falling in the wind, and it might have been in another land, so far was it from Meja's mind.

Taking the pick, which up to now had seemed useless, he swung it over his head and buried the tip in the crack he had opened with the wedges. With a twist, the crack opened outwards and upwards along the face of the rock.

His hands were slippery with sweat and blood. They were also excruciatingly painful from the dust working its way in the blisters. But it hardly mattered. He dug his heels into the ground, grabbed the pick handle with both hands and gave a mighty twist. The handle slipped from his hands, and his own weight threw him backward, so that he tripped on the bag of pegs and fell on his back. He lay dazed, with gravel digging in his back, and thought it was time to admit that the rock was mightier. Then he heard a crack, followed by a roar like thunder, and suddenly the whole cliff came tumbling down.

Meja leaped to his feet and ran pursued by the sound of falling rock and a cloud of thick white dust. When he stopped running and looked back, the end of the quarry where he had been working was a mountain of broken rock. His tools and his shirt were buried under it.

He was in a panic. Not certain how much of the rock face it was right to bring down at one time, he feared he might have done something wrong. Then someone exclaimed behind him and he turned to see other miners coming toward him all excited.

"What have you done?" yelled the foreman.

Meja started to apologise. The foreman patted him on the back.

"It is all right to bring down the whole mountain," he said. "Just do not do it in one day or we shall all be out of a work."

"I won?" Meja asked.

“For now,” said the foreman. “For now.”

The miners laughed and congratulated Meja.

“I do not know how well you do from here on,” foreman said, “but I have to let you work.”

Other workers expressed their doubts too.

“It seems you have worked three days on your first day,” Ngigi said to him. “You may have to take two days off.”

“You will get your card tomorrow morning,” said the foreman.

He gave Meja another doubtful look and walked away.

Chapter Twelve

The van turned off the highway and sped along the dust road. Ignoring the speed bumps, it flew down the road with a cloud of dust in its wake. It was late afternoon, and the driver was tired after another long day waiting outside the courthouse.

A little way down the road, he came to the first gate of a heavily fortified compound with massive walls, topped with razor wire and watched over by armed men atop watchtowers. The gate swung open and the van went ahead through another gate to stop outside the administration building. Three warders, two of them armed with batons, came out to meet the van.

“How many?” asked the unarmed warder.

“Affande, just one today,” the driver said.

One of the warders walked to the back of the van, pulling a bunch of keys from his pocket. He selected a key, inserted it in the lock, turned and swung the door open.

“*Umefika*,” he said to the prisoner. “You are home.”

When the man made no effort to step out of the vehicle, the Affande stepped up and looked inside the van.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Barracuda,” said the prisoner.

“Barra ... who?”

“Cuda.”

“What sort of name is that?” asked the Affande. “Kamba?”

“No, Affande,” said the driver. “Barra Kuda is a fish that eats people.”

“Like papa?”

“Papa is nothing,” said the prisoner. “Barracuda eats glass.”

“It is a gang name, Affande,” the driver said, amused by the look of awe on Affande’s face. “A bad-boy name.”

“Is that so?” the Affande gestured at the prisoner with his stick. “Come out here, let me see how bad you are.”

The man took his time getting out of the van, moving deliberately slowly, his handcuffs jingling, all the time eyeing the warders. When he stood on the ground he towered over them, and the Affande had to step back to have a better look at him.

He was a mountain of a man, muscles chiselled out of black granite and stuffed inside buffalo hide. He had a neck like a tree trunk and dreadlocks down to his shoulders. His eyes were black too, as dark as night, and he was the meanest convict the warders had handled in recent months.

“Where did you find this one?” the Affande asked the driver.

“You know I do not find them, Affande,” said the driver, with a weary laugh.

The prisoner was strange enough to behold, but the blanket he wore, that barely covered his torso, was something else. It was Government property and made him look like an escapee from the city’s mental hospital.

“Where did you get the blanket?” asked the Affande.

“A policeman gave it to me,” he said. “To wear to court.”

Affande turned to the driver and lowered his voice.

“Are you certain you brought this one to the right place?” he asked.

The prisoner heard him and laughed.

“I told them it was all a big mistake,” he said. “I do not belong in prison. I am really a good man.”

“Really?” said the warder. “We shall see about that.”

Other prisoners, watching through the barbed wire fence separating the administration area from the cell blocks laughed and shouted comments at the giant in a blanket. The man smiled unconcerned and let the blanket blow in the wind exposing his nakedness.

“What did you do?” asked Affande.

“Nothing.”

“You say Affande to the Affande,” said a warder. “To me you say yes sir, you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said the prisoner. “It is all in the book, Affande.”

Van Driver reached inside the van for the file and read out the name.

“Alias Barra ...” he read.

“Barracuda,” said the prisoner. “That is with two ...”

“Never mind,” the Affande said. “Here we shall call you Kamongo. I am told that fish too eats everything.”

He gestured at the warder to receive the file from the driver and started off. He led the way to the office, followed by the swaggering prisoner and the two warders.

“Affande?” said the driver. “The police want their blanket back.”

“Wait for it,” said the Affande.

The prisoner let go of the blanket, stepped over it, and walked on. The driver picked up his blanket and returned to the vehicle.

Inside the office, Affande flopped in a chair, turned to face the prisoner, and was startled to find the man stark naked.

“Blanket?” he asked.

“He gave it back, Affande,” said a warder, slapping the file on the desk.

“What happened to your clothes?” asked Affande.

“Evidence, Affande.”

“Your underwear too?”

“Did not have any, Affande.”

“Have you been in prison before?”

“No, Affande.”

“Then you have a lot to learn,” said Affande. “It is a whole new school here. Some of your peers call it the University of life. To start with you must respect everyone here, warders and prisoners alike. Do as you are told and, if you do what we tell you, your life here will be a holiday. Do you understand?”

“Completely, Affande,” said the prisoner.

“Do you have any personal property?”

“No, Affande.”

“No watches, rings, wallets or mobile phones?”

“Not anymore, Affande, the police took everything.”

A warder pulled on a pair of surgical gloves.

“Bend over,” he said.

“What for?” asked the prisoner.

“Rules,” said the warder.

“Body search,” said the Affande.

A warder positioned himself behind the prisoner and tried to bend him forward. It was like trying to bend a sculpture.

“I don’t carry anything there,” the prisoner insisted.

“Bend over, Kamongo.”

“Barracuda.”

“Kamongo, bend over.”

When he did not budge, Affande spoke up.

“*Kijana*,” he said. “You are in prison now. You do as you are told. It is for your own good.”

He had a quiet authority, a fatherly voice that did not need to be raised. The prisoner gave in, and the warders got to work. They searched him thoroughly, poking and probing, until they were satisfied he had nothing on him or in him.

“We don’t like to do it but,” said Affande, “Last month a prisoner smuggled a mobile phone into the cells. A huge Nokia thing you would not think could fit inside a man. The best smart phone in town, I was told. Stolen, of course. Until then I did not know a man could carry so much back there.”

“Affande,” laughed a warder, “if we did not search them, they would bring a television hidden in there.”

“Next thing you know, they bring an AK 47,” said the other.

The Affande was looking at the prisoner with growing interest now. The man’s right arm had a long shiny scar running down from his upper arm to the back of the hand. The hand was a massive thing frozen in a half-open position like a claw. Another scar ran down one side of the body from above the buttocks and down to the knee. The skin was so tight the hip and thighbones were visible underneath. The Affande now realised that the arrogant swagger was a cleverly disguised limp rather than a practiced expression of badness.

The prisoner smiled, and waited while they argued about the size of his uniform. Finally, they gave him the largest uniform they could find and he squeezed into it. Then they gave him a blanket, a plastic mug, a plastic plate, and a plastic spoon.

Then the Affande gave him the unofficial welcoming speech, grave and sincere words of wisdom to which, the prisoner paid no attention. He just

nodded and smiled, as Affande told him of the waste that was a life of crime, and how this was his chance to learn and reform so that he could become a useful and respected member of society. There were several courses and trades that they taught at the prison. If Kamongo was ready and willing to exert himself he would leave prison with an education that would certainly guarantee him a job and a clean start in life.

The prisoner smiled and nodded and smiled until the Affande had said all he had to say. It was not clear to Affande whether he had heard or understood any of it. Then the warders led him out to the prisoner's compound, shoved him through the gate and locked it behind him.

"Cell nine," they said, "Follow the smell."

The prisoner stayed at the gate in his ill-fitting uniform. Other prisoners were going back to their cells, and some stopped to stare, but most hardly noticed the newcomer. He stood by the gate watching them and, for the first time, he looked uncertain. Up until then he had not stopped to think how long eighteen months was.

"Make friends," said one warder from behind the gate. "They are all bad boys like you."

The prisoner showed no sign of having heard. He searched among the criminals for a face to be friends with. He needed to find his cell, but he had to find his cellblock first and they had neglected to tell him. Then someone called out his name.

"Meja!"

A prisoner ran toward him with his arms outstretched. Meja recognized his dumpster friend, now looking clean and well fed.

"Are you still following me?" Maina asked him.

They shook hands and hugged.

"What are you doing here?" Meja asked.

“Five years,” said Maina. “You?”

“No so long.”

Maina laughed the old laugh that he had, when things went very badly, and hugged Meja again.

“I am happy to see you,” he said.

“I thought you made it,” said Meja.

“On backstreet?”

“Anywhere,” said Meja.

“I made it here,” Maina said. “But how did you become so huge? Have you been working out?”

“You could say that,” Meja said. “You do not look so bad yourself.”

“Prison food,” Maina told him. “A lot better than on backstreet.”

They laughed, stopped, and looked each other up and down.

“What did you do?” Maina asked.

“I will tell you about it, but first I have to find my cell. Block nine.”

“I am in block nine,” Maina said. “Cell number?”

“Nine.”

“So am I,” said Maina.

Another prisoner walked up.

“Chokora,” he said, “who is your friend?”

“My brother,” Maina said. “He is Meja. We hunted together.”

“Sara’s gang?”

“Before Sara,” he said. “Take his things to the den.”

“Number nine?” The prisoners sounded impressed. “The Affande must find you interesting.”

“Affande files his interesting cases in number nine,” Maina explained. “So that we can reform them.”

Meja gave his blanket and things to the prisoner. They followed him along the row of cellblocks to the farthest one from the gate. Inside cellblock nine, Maina led Meja down a dark corridor lined with numbered metal doors on either side. Each door led to a ten by ten cell. The cell floors were covered with sleeping mats from wall to wall. The doors were open, the occupants settling in for the night.

Number nine was the farthest cell along the corridor. Most of the occupants had not arrived for the night. Their mats and blankets were folded in neat piles by the sleeping places. There was a single light bulb, hanging high up over the cell and protected with a steel cage.

“Welcome to number nine,” Maina said.

Meja’s things were on a mat next to Maina’s. The mat had just that morning been vacated by a cell mate who was whisked away back to court to answer for a robbery he had boasted about while inside.

“It is safe to assume that the walls here have ears,” Maina informed.

“Not to worry,” Meja said to them. “Like everyone here, I am innocent.”

They laughed at the joke, and Meja decided to like them.

“It feels home already,” he said, sitting down on his mat.

“You limp,” Maina said.

The bad-boy swagger had not fooled him..

“It is nothing,” he said.

The rest of the cell mates trooped in and Maina introduced them as they walked in.

“This one is Chege,” Maina said.

The man stepped forward to shake hands.

“Two years for something I did not do,” he said.

“And this is Ndege,” Maina introduced the next man.

“Robbery with violence,” Ndege said. “It would have worked had the watchman not come to so soon, and pressed the alarm.”

As they were introduced the cell mates told how they had landed in prison. Some owned up with pride and others denied the offence, but there was little remorse. They had three meals a day, with little to no work, and it was more than they had outside prison.

Maina had told them about his friend, Meja, a brilliant student, who studied in his sleep but still could not find a job. They had believed it was another prison tale, like the ones they told to while away the hours. Now that they had seen he was real, they expected him to tell them of the great, and extraordinary, events that they believed must have landed him in number nine. But Meja was not in a hurry.

The warder came to lock the cell door, counted the inmates, slammed the door shut with a flourish and turned the key with unnecessary force. Down the corridor warders were ordering prisoners to keep quiet and go to sleep.

Mats were unrolled, blankets unfolded, and the prisoners settled down for the night. Then the tale-telling began. The stories did not have to be true or even realistic. Maina went first, and he told how he and Meja had led a mob of instant justice through the backstreets for an entire day without being caught.

“They caught up,” Meja corrected him. “But, as you can see, I am still here.”

“See,” Maina said to the others. “What did I tell you? My man is tougher than any of you.”

“What did you steal?” someone asked.

“What was in the bag?” Meja asked Maina.

“Mangoes,” said Maina.

“That, was it?” asked a cell mate incredulous.

“Rotten mangoes,” Meja confirmed.

“You stole rotten mangoes?” the cell mate asked Maina. “And left your best friend to die for them.”

“I did not steal them,” Maina said. “It was a joke we played on an old man. I did not expect him to chase us so far.”

He turned to Meja.

“And I did not leave you to die,” he said. “You ran the wrong way. You know that.”

Meja was silent, looking up at the ceiling. The bulb cast an orange light over the cell. The posturing aside, he was beginning to come to terms with the fact that he was in a prison cell with his best friend, and it was not in his plans. His friend seemed have come to terms with eating and sleeping and being counted and locked up. He worried that he too might eventually be forced to accept the situation.

“So, what do you do here?” he asked them. “Apart from eating and sleeping and being counted like goats?”

“We do whatever the warders say,” Maina said. “Here you do exactly as they tell you.”

“I meant work.”

“Are you allergic to work too?” someone asked.

Meja smiled at them, as to a gang of children, and shook his head.

“Has any one of you ever worked in a stone quarry?” he asked them. “Unlike you, I did not just go out and rob somebody. I first tried to make money the old way, by working for it. See this hand? It has done more work than all of you together.”

He held up his crooked hand, scars, and all, for all to see. It was no longer a thing of shame or a symbol of weakness. He was used to people staring at it horrified. He liked to scare people with the imagined violence.

“This hand has been inside a shark’s mouth,” he said to his cell mates. “That is why they call me Barra Kuda.”

“Barra ...?” cell mate asked.

“Barracuda,” he said.

“Barracuda can strip a man to the bone in minutes,” Maina said to the man.

“In seconds,” said Meja.

They were impressed, so he told them the extended version, the one where he and his men hijacked ships off the coast of Zanzibar and Pemba, stripped them of their money and cargo and set them on fire. He had created several myths around his mangled hand and the limp, several different versions that never failed to amaze and impress. One day he would tell Maina the real story but, for now, this version was more interesting.

“Did you go home?” Maina asked.

“I did,” he said, “but I did not stay.”

They waited to hear why he had not stayed home. Instead, he told them how he had returned to the city and worked at a quarry. It was backbreaking work, and paid for little more than food and drink, but it was real work, for real men, and it had made him what he was. They toiled seven days a week, and spent their money right there in the quarry on food and drink. On Saturdays, when they got their week’s pay, the miners splashed it on meat and drinks in the squatter shacks above the quarry, and danced with the girls who sold them food, and gave them all their hard-earned money. Meja had made good friends there, but stayed too long.

Then the quarry had finally run out of quality rock, and the crusher was moved to a place too far away from the city for most of the miners. Those

with wives and children, and those who had given all their money to the food women, were rehired at a fifty per cent pay reduction and they went off to start another quarry. The rest went to the city in search of jobs.

Ngigi invited Meja to stay with relatives in Shanty Town, where they shared a house so small they slept in turns. Meja and Ngigi sat outdoors at night moved inside the house in the morning, when others left for work. They reinvented themselves as car washers, porters, and charcoal sellers, but their tough, work-hardened physical appearances intimidated customers, and made them suspicious. Then Ngigi's relatives tired of hosting them and kicked them out.

They landed in the street decided to do whatever they could to stay alive. They picked pockets, snatched purses, mugged, and stole car mirrors. They were eventually discovered by a gang of advanced criminals and recruited for burglary, holdups, and carjacking.

"That is why I am here," he said.

He was ashamed of it now, he admitted, to be arrested for burglary, when he had robbed payrolls, mugged pedestrians on Main Street in broad daylight, and stolen cars and got away with it.

"What happened?" Maina asked.

"It was my friend Ngigi's idea," he said. "A girlfriend who worked as a maid had informed him her employer had a large amount of gold and diamonds jewellery, and bundles of money in a safe at the house."

Meja and Ngigi had gone to the house, when the master was away, tied up the watchman, made friends with the dog, disabled the alarm and spent the whole night looking for the safe. There was no money or jewellery anywhere in the house.

"Ngigi's girlfriend had made it all up, to get back at her boss for firing her without cause."

But, just so as not to waste their time, Ngigi phoned a friend, and the friend brought a lorry, and they loaded it with furniture and clothes and

everything they could, drove it all back to Shanty Town. Selling fancy clothes and furniture, and freezers, and cookers and television sets, in Shanty Town proved to be a bad idea. The police were there in a flash, sniffing around looking for the source of the stolen items. Ngigi and the others heard about it and escaped.

“They forgot to tell me about it,” Meja said. “That is how I am here.”

It had been a busy three months of shuttling between the courthouse and the police stations. Now he was ready to lie down and sleep.

“The blanket?” someone asked him.

“The blanket?” he laughed. “The girlfriend’s employer recognised the fancy suit that I wore to court, and I had to take it off. The shirt, the shoes, the socks, and underwear were also his. Everything I wore was declared material evidence, and the police gave me a blanket to wear. I pleaded guilty, to save the court’s time, and the judge decided to be lenient with me. I got eighteen months.”

The cell mates looked at one another. Some of them were serving longer sentences for petty theft. They must remember to save the court’s time next time, they said.

“What are you in for?” Meja asked.

“Nothing so interesting,” Maina said.

“He stole milk,” someone said.

“What sort of milk?”

“Milk-milk,” said Maina. “Riverside Dairies.”

“What for?”

“To sell, what else?” Maina said. “Don’t laugh, but it seemed like a brilliant idea at the time.”

Someone snored. The sound irritated Maina.

“Shut him up!”

There was a thud and the snoring stopped.

“Why milk?” asked Meja.

“I am a thief,” Maina said. “Like everyone here. That is why.”

“Tell him how you almost got away with it,” Chege said. “And what you told the judge.”

“Another time,” Maina said.

Most of the others were asleep. Chege rose to use the bucket by the door. Meja now realised the source of the smell he had assumed was the smell of convicts.

Chapter Thirteen

It was the rainy season. The earth was soaked, streams overflowed and rivers broke their banks. Crops reached for the skies, and the weeds followed in competition, spreading where crops could not. The rain continued, the maize grew tall and strong, and emboldened by the farmers' inaction, the weeds shot after the maize and encircled it and tried to weak and choke it. For many days, the farmers could not go tend to their crops for the streams and the rivers were impassable, and rain was still falling.

Then the rain stopped, and the sky cleared, and the sun was warm and bright and full of hope. Streams and rivers went back down to their old courses, and the farmers went out to their fields and took care of the weeds, which were as tall as the maize and growing. They worked fast, for the rainy season was not over, and the rain could return any time soon. They cleared the weeds and waited for rain. It did not return that month, or the one after that, or after that. Rain did not return that year.

The rivers went down, the land dried up and the crops started dying. There were cries of anguish, when faces turned to the sky and saw not a single cloud in sight. The farmers turned to their leaders for advice. A delegation went to the city to seek help from the Government.

They were gone for too long. Everyone hoped, and some were even convinced, that the delay was good news, that they were getting together the aid they would bring back. When it finally came back, the delegation brought back neither food nor money, but a team of Government officials to make sure that the delegation was not exaggerating the hunger. The Government team stayed two days, feasting with the chiefs, then left promising to return. They were never heard of again.

When a dignified period had passed, the farmers sent a second delegation

to the city with an urgent request for aid. The crops had died, they said, the livestock had died and now the people were dying.

The second delegation returned much sooner than the first, and it brought disturbing news. The cooperative society, which sold their crops and kept their money, had died, and been buried by a Government commission of inquiry leaving no records of any kind. The commission had neither the money nor the mandate to take care of the needs of the farmers.

A few people died of starvation and heartbreak. Others sold their farms and left while they could. A few turned to witchcraft to restore the lost prosperity, and the old rainmaker brought down his tool bag and set to work. The last rooster in the village, itself about to die from hunger, was sacrificed to the rain spirit. The spirits of revenge and justice, would have to wait for more roosters to be hatched.

The rainmaker did his magic. Then he stepped outside to check for results. A speck of a cloud appeared in the horizon, but it would be days before the speck turned to rain. The old man crept back in his hut and lay down to wait.

Rain came when all but the rainmaker had given up hope. The land turned green again, and the crops thrived again, and the livestock that had survived the drought grew big and fat. Calves pranced with joy and children played late into the evening. Song and laughter were heard again. Everyone was at peace with everyone else, and with the spirit.

There were rumours that the cooperatives society had resurrected too and scouts were prowling the farmlands valuing the next harvest. Now that the tough times were over and forgotten, no one was bitter or angry with the cooperatives men, or with the Government that had stolen their money and refused to help in their hour of need.

It was in this season of forgiveness that Maina returned.

The sun was setting, the sky was red and gold, and a cold wind was blowing. Rain clouds were gathering above, while everything below braced to

meet the coming storm. Maina was sweating, despite the cold, and his heart was full of apprehension. Many years had passed since he left to find a job in the city. He had grown from a boy to a man, from a man to a thief, and from a thief to a suicide looking for forgiveness and love.

Coming home was the hardest decision of his life. It was a parting of ways with his old self, the thinking, hoping, and loving self that had kept him sane for a long time, even as he sunk in a swamp of desperation. It was the real suicide.

Razor's gang had broken up, when Sara decided it was more fulfilling to be a woman and a mother, than a gang leader, and went off to raise Maina's son away from Shanty Town. Maina was devastated. Heart-broken, Razor sought solace in *chang'aa* and was found drowned in a sewage ditch only a few meters from the house.

Several gang members tried to lead the gang, to hold it together, after that. Kifagio tried too hard to instill discipline and ended up killing Jitu. Professor nearly went mad trying to make one-eyed Jicho see life from an unfamiliar perspective. Then it was Maina's turn to run the gang that Sara had ran so effortlessly, but he did not have the heart for it. He abdicated and went in search of Delilah to marry her and start a new life. He had not seen her since the great fire burned down the old Shanty Town. Many lives and dreams were destroyed along with old Shanty Town. But Delila had said to come back when he was ready and mature, when he tired of being a bad boy.

He was now as mature as misery, and he was sick and tired of being bad, but Delila was nowhere to be found. He searched every slum in the city, in the bars and boarding houses, and asked anyone he thought might know her. No one seemed to know what happened to Delila after the great fire. He went looking at the last place she had told him she worked.

Friends Bar was deserted but for an unfriendly barmaid, and three gangsters huddled in a corner table. The men looked up, and stopped talking, when they saw him enter and walk up to the bar. The woman listened, shook

her head, and walked Maina back to the entrance. She pointed down the road and went back inside.

The bar down the road was as dead as the first. The girl behind the bar directed him to another girl dozing in a corner. Angry at being woken up, she was short and stern.

“I don’t know where she is,” she said to him. “Ask Rose, over there.”

“Rose,” she called, as Maina walked over, “he wants your friend Dalila.”

“Dalila is in prison,” said Rose.

“Not Dalila,” said another barmaid. “Delila.”

“Delila is not my friend,” said Rose. “I don’t know what happened to her. Ask Mercy, she was her friend. Mercy?”

Mercy joined them from the kitchen.

“He is looking for Delila.”

“The one who had Aids?” asked Mercy. “She died.”

“That was Daniela.”

“Oh.”

“Delila, the tall girl.”

“Oh, that one? She went to have a baby.”

“When?” Maina asked them.

“Months ago. She went back upcountry?”

“Wasn’t she also getting married?”

“That was what I heard.”

The women had stopped talking to Maina and started talking among themselves.

“What sort of man would marry a woman with a baby?” they asked themselves.

“There are good men?” one said.

“Where?” Maina asked.

“Upcountry,” one said. “Back in her home.”

“But she was born in Shanty Town?” he said.

“Was that what she told you?” They laughed.

Maina looked down, and walked away his heart weighed down by sadness. He did not look up until he was back in Shanty Town, and inside the house. The gang was out and he had no one to talk to. He lay on the bed they had inherited from their dead leader and hoped to die. He was there for a long time, looking up at the roof, thinking how his life had turned out all wrong and meaningless. It was all too much for him.

They found him dangling from the roof with a rope round his neck, and they cut him down, and revived him, but were lost for what else to do. No one they knew had ever tried suicide before, and they did not know what to do or say.

“Why?” one asked.

“You can’t understand,” he said.

“We understand,” said Professor. “Lack of perspective. No perspective at all.”

“You don’t understand,” Maina insisted.

“We understand very well,” insisted Professor. “You are sick and tired of life as you know it. But you are not alone. This is Shanty Town; we are with you all the way.”

“We are not,” a voice said from the doorway.

Meja stood at the door, looking on as he had while they cut his friend down and brought him back to life.

“Why not?” Nyoka asked.

“It is as it is,” Meja said. “As it has always been. The strong survive, and the weak take the painless way out. He taught me that himself.”

He looked at the angry eyes around him. None of them could be as angry as he was. He felt betrayed and let down. He turned to Maina.

“Be strong or perish,” he said to him. “Isn’t that what you taught me?”

Maina avoided his eyes.

“Nothing is given to man?” said Rugaru, the newest member of the gang. “Isn’t that what you taught us in prison?”

Maina looked down to avoid facing them.

“We can’t help him,” Meja said.

He picked up the rope and tossed it at Maina.

“Go do what you have to do,” he said. “Just do not do it here. Go now. Get out!”

The gang watched startled, as Maina picked up the rope, studied it for a moment, turned and made for the door.

“Make it good and tight,” Meja said, with more anger than sadness. “Don’t let someone else to cut you down by mistake, as we did.”

Maina stopped by the door. There was neither anger nor hate in their eyes. Just a sad realisation, an understanding that only a true friend could show. He stepped out of the hut and was gone.

Nyoka shot up to follow him. Meja grabbed him and shoved him back in the room.

“Sit down!” Meja ordered. “Sit down all of you. He must face it alone.”

“You are ...” Nyoka could not find the words.

“Heartless,” said Meja. “How many tears did you shed when Razor died?”

“If he hangs himself,” said Nyoka. “I will ...”

“Hang yourself too?”

Nyoka did not know what he would do, and neither did the others.

“Settle down,” Meja said to them. “Maina will not hang himself. No one does that twice on the same day.”

“But what will he do without us? Where can he go?”

“Upcountry,” someone said. “Back to his people.”

“I don’t think so,” Meja said to them. “I do not know what he will do, but Maina will not go back home.”

That was where he was wrong.

Maina was so embittered by his Meja’s words he decided on the one thing that would test his had courage.

But, as he walked the road to his home, his determination started to fade. He was assailed by doubt. Would his people recognize him? What would they say? What would he say? What would they do? Would they accept him broken and jobless as he was? And then what would he do?

Darkness fell as he stumbled through a maize field, forded a stream and walked about looking for a landmark. He blundered along dark village paths for some time before he came to a house.

The woman who opened the door was a stranger, and he could tell, by the look on her face, that she did not recognise him either. She was about to close the door on him.

“Wait,” he said.

He was from here, he told her, but he had not been home in a long time and had lost his way in the dark. He was looking for his father’s house. Kamau’s house.

“Kamau?” she said. “What is his other name?”

“Chief,” he said. “They called him Chief.”

“Chief?”

“He was not a real chief. They just called him that.”

“Chief,” she said. “And not a real chief. The only Chief I know is Chief Kimani. He is a real Chief.”

Maina walked away from her door, and retraced his steps along the path that led him there. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed, and rain was not far behind. He made his way to the next farmhouse down and knocked on the door. A man in boxer shorts opened the door. He seemed to be going bed.

“There are many Kamaus here,” said the man, impatiently.

“Kamau Chief.”

“Chief Kimani?”

“Not a real chief,” Maina said. “They just called him that.”

“Ah, that Kamau,” the man suddenly remembered.

“You know him?”

“My wife called him father of Maina.”

“I am Maina,” Maina said. “Where is his house?”

“Are you really Maina?” he asked. “The son who went to school? Where is your car?”

“I don’t have a car.”

“How did you come here?”

“I walked.”

“All the way from town? That is such a long way.”

Lightning lit up the night illuminating the man’s puzzled look.

“They said you had a job in the city. A big house and car.”

“Can you direct me to his house?”

“His house is over there,” the man pointed. “It is the third one from the big tree.”

Then he shut and bolted the door.

Maina walked back the way he had come, following a path more felt than seen. He counted two houses after the big tree, and came across a fence he did not remember. He walked along the fence until he found a gate. A dog barked from the other side. He banged on the gate. The dog barked louder. A voice called out from the house.

“Who is there?”

“Maina,” he said. “Your son Maina.”

“Wait there.”

The voice called for someone to go open the gate. Maina heard footsteps approach and a key turn in a lock, then a chain fell off the gate and it opened a crack and someone looked round it. Another flash of lightning lit up the face of a young man. The young man took him to the door of the house then disappeared round the back with the dog. The man at the door was not his father or anyone he remembered.

“Who are you?” asked the man.

“I am Maina,” he said. “I am looking for my father. Kamau Chief. I am his son.”

“His son?” The man was suddenly suspicious.

“Is this not his house?” Maina asked.

“This is my house,” the man said. “Kamau Chief does not live here anymore.”

“Where does he live?”

“I do not know,” said the man. “I bought this place from the bank at an auction.”

Maina's mind went numb. The man said he had lived there for over three years. He did not know where Maina's family went after selling the land.

"I heard stories," he said.

He had heard that Kamau Chief was a good man, loved by all. That was why they had called him Chief. Because he was a good man, a reliable man, worthy of leadership. But Kamau Chief had fallen on hard times, after taking a cooperative loan to send his son to the city to find a job. The son never came back to pay the loan as expected.

Maina dug his fingers in the wood of doorframe to support himself. His head was spinning and his legs about to give way.

"During the drought, Kamau Chief sent his other son to the city to look for the first. He too did not return. It seems the city is a bottomless pit from which no young man ever returns."

Maina barely heard him; so hard and fast was his head now turning.

"It is cold out here," the man said. "Come inside."

Maina backed off. He could not enter that house now, not the house in which he was born, grew up in and that now belonged to a stranger. The house in which he left his parents to languish in poverty. He walked away, back the way he had come.

"Which son are you?" The man called after him.

Maina heard the gate close behind him, and the dog start barking again. Tears ran down his face. He did not know where he was anymore, or where he was going or why.

Then the rain started falling. Thunder roared over the hills, lightning lit up the fields, and rain fell with fury. Maina staggered on, blinded by the tears and the rain. He tripped and fell, and lay in the soaking mud crying.

He lay there for a long while, unable to rise and accept the truth; that, because of him, his family was gone, scattered by poverty and despair; that

because of him he no longer had a home or family. He closed his eyes and hoped to drown in the rain that was now pouring down with a vengeance.

The rain was still falling, when he woke up some hours later. He had not drowned, but he was cold and his body was one big ache. His limbs were cramped and his head was throbbing. He got up and staggered along. Lightning illuminated another house. He went and knocked on the door. A voice asked who was knocking.

“Maina,” he said. “Open up.”

He hammered on the door, and, eventually, it opened a crack and a face peered outside.

“What do you want?” asked a man’s voice.

“Let me in,” Maina said. “I am cold.”

“We are sleeping.”

“Then give me some food,” Maina said. “I will eat out here. Just give me something to eat, please.”

“Who are you?”

“My father was Kamau Chief. Did you know him? I do not know where he is. No one knows where he went.”

The man tried to make sense of what he was saying, decided he was drunk, or crazy, and started to close the door. Maina threw himself at the closing door knocking the startled man back inside the house. Maina charged in after him. The man scrambled to his feet and grabbed a *panga* from behind the door. Maina closed in. They fought for the *panga*, upsetting furniture and breaking things.

Outside the hut, lightning flashed, thunder rolled and rain poured. The dog at the house that once belonged to Maina’s father howled. The howling woke up the neighbours, and worried them for the rest of the night.

Chapter Fourteen

The van driver stepped down and waited for the warders. It was late afternoon and he was tired after another long day outside the courthouse.

“Affande, you will not believe who is back,” he said to the head warder.

He unlocked the van door and swung it open. Then he stepped aside to let Affande see for himself. Affande smiles at the sight of the prisoner.

“Chokora?” he said, “what are you doing back already?”

“Not Chokora, Affande,” said the driver. “This is the other one. The Barra ...”

“Cuda,” said the prisoner.

“Kamongo, you promised not to come back.”

“They brought me back, Affande.”

“Come out here, let me see how you are,” said Affande.

Meja crawled out of the van, yawned and stretched. He hacked loudly and spat at the driver’s feet. Affande stepped back to have a better look at him.

“Am I mistaken or have you grown smaller?” he asked.

“I have not eaten well for two weeks, Affande,” Meja said. “They don’t waste food on remand prisoners anymore. I pled guilty not to starve to death in their cells.”

“I’ll see what I can do for you,” said Affande. “But you have to tell me why you are back.”

“Life outside is not what it used to be, Affande,” Meja said.

“So you chose prison?”

“They caught me, Affande.”

“Doing what?”

The driver handed over Meja’s file. Affande glanced at it. His eyes widened.

“You did what?” he said.

“I did not, Affande,” Meja said. “This time, it really was not my fault.”

Van Driver guffawed.

“Tell me,” said Affande.

“Affande, it is a long story.”

“No hurry, Kamongo,” Affande again glanced at the file. “You have how many years to tell me about it?”

“Many years, Affande.”

He was looking past Affande to the prisoner compound.

“Affande, you have so many boys these days,” he said.

“No one listens to their mothers anymore.”

Meja waved his chained hands to someone behind the wire fence. Affande ordered a warder to unchain him. Meja rubbed at his wrists and, keeping his voice level and inoffensive asked Affande why he was still in prison.

Affande’s face broke in a smile.

“I have to take care of the convicts,” he said, pointing at the prisoners gathering along the inner fence to welcome Meja. “They will not listen to their mothers, so they have to listen to me.”

The driver shut the van door. The Affande was looking the prisoner up and down, noting how he had really lost weight since the last time, which all prisoners did after release, when they had to work to eat. They came to him thin and scruffy, and as hard as nails, and left cleaned up, plump, and

swearing to never return to prison.

He once believed he could change them, with understanding, and compassion and fatherly advice, but he was beginning to doubt even life could do that. They returned full of anger and excuses, blaming society, destiny, upbringing, tribalism, and everyone but themselves.

“What can I do?” they cried. “I can’t get a job. The Government is corrupt, and society is mean, and life is hard and God knows I tried to be good. What else can I do, Affande?”

Some of them cried real tears when they told him their woes.

“I am only a man,” they said. “If God needed me to be different, he would have done something about it.”

Affande heard that too often from men who seemed sincere and sane.

They took Meja to the reception office, where the warders stripped him of the symbols of freedom and choice, his watch, his gold chain, and a startlingly empty wallet.

“What, no money?” a warder asked him.

“What happened to all the money you stole?” Affande asked.

“Allegedly stole, Affande,” Meja said to him. “The police stole it from me.”

The warder pulled on a pair of surgical gloves.

“Bend over,” he said.

“There is nothing there,” Meja said. “I haven’t changed that much.”

“The rules,” said the warder.

“Is this necessary?” Meja turned to Affande.

“Regulations, Kamongo. They too have not changed.”

Meja obliged and they did their body search, poking and probing until they had humiliated him, according to regulations, enough.

“Welcome home,” said the warder.

“Back to Number Nine?” he asked.

“All your roommates are back. All except one.”

“What happened to your friend Chokora?”

“They shot him, Affande.”

“I bet it was not his fault.”

“It was not, Affande.”

“Must it always be prison bars or police bullets with you boys?” Affande wondered. “Why don’t any of you ever die of disease or accident? Why don’t you walk under a car and save society the trouble?”

“You would have no work, Affande,” Meja said.

“I would find something to do,” he shut the register with a loud bang and gestured at the warders to take him away.

“Affande,” Meja stopped at the door. “I did get myself ran over by a car.”

He held up his scarred hand.

“That did not prevent me from coming here.”

“I wondered about the scars,” said Affande.

Then they took Meja out of the office and across the parking to the second gate and the prison blocks. An armed guard let them through and shook his head, watching Meja swagger to block nine. Other prisoners were already locked up.

The cell mates had kept their promise. His bed place was waiting for him, the few possessions he had left behind piled neatly on his rolled up sleeping mat. He stopped by the door and inhaled deeply to get used to the smell of sweat, disinfectant and the night bucket by the entrance.

“It is great to be home,” he said.

The cell mates went to their sleeping places, unrolled their mats, spread their blankets and sat or lay down waiting news of the outside. They had heard how life had changed for the worse, how money was scarce, how everyone was desperate to make a living, and how policemen had been equipped with new uniforms, new and faster vehicles, and bigger, more powerful weapons.

“And better pay too,” said Chege.

He had heard old warders were quitting to become policemen.

“No chance for old men,” said Meja.

The force was staffing with educated young men, easier to train, and quicker on the trigger. Old criminals were retiring in droves.

“Did you see my woman?” someone asked.

“She can’t wait for you to get out.”

“What did I tell you?” the man said to his neighbour.

“What about my wife?” someone asked.

“She is back with her parents,” Meja reported. “Your son is out of school, and your brother says he can’t find the money where you say you buried it. They built a hospital on it.”

The man groaned and covered his head in despair. The conversation went on in this manner late into the night. Meja handed out hopeful answers to desperate questions, and told lies to make life bearable and everyone happy. True to his word, the Affande sent some food from his own house and Meja had the last home-cooked for the next seven years.

“What did you really do?” one of his cell mates had to ask.

“Same as last time,” he said.

“Housebreaking?”

“Nothing.”

“What happened to all the talk about banks and payroll heists? Was it just talk?”

“You have been here too long,” Meja told him.

Banks were no longer guarded by old watchmen armed with *jembe* sticks and dustbin lids. They were guarded by eager young policemen in bulletproof vests and armed with automatic rifles.

“Cowards do not hold up banks,” said a voice from the corner.

“Was that you, Gitoo?” Meja asked.

Gitoo was serving time for a string of violent holdups and armed robbery. Much of the bank security reforms now in place were in response to his reign of terror as the most notorious criminal mastermind in the city. Using toy guns, homemade guns, *pangas* and bow and arrows, he had robbed so many banks he was legend.

“When I leave this place,” he boasted to his devoted fans, mostly composed of failed pickpockets and muggers, “I will be a rich man.”

“No, you will not,” Meja said to him. “You should have known better than to bury your loot in the ground.”

Gitoo shot to his feet.

“Sit down,” Meja said. “A gang of city workers found it while digging for a new sewer. It was in the newspapers. Police identified the metal boxes you stole it in.”

Gitoo sat down, put his head in his hands and wept. They left him to his grief.

“Did you see Chokora?” Nyoka asked.

“You have not heard then?” he asked them.

“He kicked Razor out of the house and married Sara,” someone said. “He is the new king of Shanty Town?”

It took them a moment to realise Meja was not laughing with them. He was staring at the light bulb with pain in his eyes.

“Did he ...?” Nyoka could not get the words out of his mouth.

“No,” Meja told him. “Maina did not hang himself. He went home instead. He had sworn he would never go back there, but I made him go and he did.”

“So?” Chege asked. “What was wrong with that?”

“He killed a man there,” Meja said. “The man lived in his fathers’ house.”

“Why?”

“I do not know,” Meja said. “I read about it in the papers. They said he was found confused and covered in mud and blood.”

There was a sad silence in the cell. The bed bugs were getting impatient waiting for everyone to lie down. He could hear the men scratch under the blankets.

“The police could not get a word out of him,” he said. “They said he was out of his mind.”

“Will they hang him?” Rugaru asked.

“They shot him.”

“What?” several voices exclaimed.

“They killed him.”

There was silence.

“Bad,” Nyoka said, covering his head with his blanket. They heard him sob.

“Very bad,” Rugaru said.

“Terrible,” they said.

“Sad,” they said.

Having thus expressed their feelings, they lay down for the night. Some quickly fell asleep, to escape the reality of the bedbugs and whitewashed walls, while others prayed silently, muttering into their blankets so as not to be heard, and sobbed and wept for their souls.

“Meja,” Nyoka said suddenly. “What happened to Maina?”

“What I have just told you,” Meja said to him. “It was in all the newspapers.”

“They could not have been mistaken?”

“They had his photograph.”

He tried not to remember the photograph, his friend lying naked on the grass covered with mud and blood, his dead eyes staring vacantly at the sky. “Career Criminal Shot Dead,” the newspapers said.

“Did he look mad?” asked Nyoka.

“He was dead,” said Meja.

“But did he look mad?”

Meja tried to remember the look on Maina’s face.

“He looked the same,” he said. “He looked like Maina, only dead.”

“He was my best friend,” Nyoka said. “I taught him to crawl through windows.”

He turned over and covered his head. Meja thought he heard him sob.

In the newspaper photograph, surrounded by armed policemen and curious onlookers, Maina had looked old and wasted and covered in mud and blood, and dead. The police denied it, but eyewitness accountss said they had seen policemen drag him from a swamp, where he was hiding, and shoot him dead.

Meja looked at the Maina’s sleeping place by his side. Affande would

send another prisoner to fill the vacancy, but in everyone's heart, the space would never be filled.

He lay staring at the dim light bulb above him, and through a haze of tears, saw the ready smile, and remembered what Maina had told him when he was new in the city.

“There are only two ways in the city. There is Main Street, and there is Back Street. Then there is way home”

From the distant highway came the sound of traffic speeding to the city, with its tall buildings, its beckoning neon lights and the unfathomable backstreets.

THE END

By the same author

Rafiki

Crossroads

The Boy Gift

Baba Pesa

Winds Whisper

Dukuza

The Cockroach Dance

Going Down River Road

The Big Chiefs

Frog in a Blender

Carcase for Hounds

The Mzungu Boy

Weapon of Hunger

Christmas Without Tusker