

ACROSS THE BRIDGE

THE
Masterpiece
SERIES

M Gicheru

Chapter One

Hail jail! The house for all. The only house where a government minister and a pickpocket dine together, work together and discuss matters on equal terms. It was here that I met Mthemba, the convicted minister, Kongore, the convicted advocate, Kisu Mwili, the convicted magistrate, Njoroge, the rapist, Mathenge, the pickpocket, Shikoli, the chicken-fucker and most remarkably Kisinga, the gangster. A large family of devils and angels.

I loved this house called jail. The only place where equality was exercised regardless of social class. But now I was leaving it. Going back to the free world I had loved to hate. The world of hate, greed, struggles for power, assassinations and social injustice. But most of all, I hated myself for what I was.

A factory reject! That was what I was. Made up of third class material. The leftovers of Creation. I suspected God must have created me shortly before lunch. The lunch bells were ringing when He was making me. In a hurry to leave His workshop, He left me incomplete. Worst of all, He gave me the brain of a chicken and the body of a human. Probably by mistake.

God! No wonder He lives in hiding where I can't reach Him for complaints. Prayers? Out of the question. I tried all kinds of phrases and flatteries and even wanted to sacrifice a ram. *Wapi!* I got the same results. So I concluded that God's computers were

not channelled to my station. I succumbed to the ignobility of creation. But that was before I met her, Caroline. The woman who made me cross the bridge.

By then I was a houseboy. I was beginning to miss home. I missed the cockroaches, the lice, the bedbugs and the night chorus of rats in the thatch roof. Ah! It was a long time since I had had a jigger. I had got so used to living with vermin that I had come to accept them as part of my family. I could almost pinpoint which rat was the father of which, tell the difference between a pregnant cockroach and a fat one and even notice a missing rat. That was home, far away from the heaven I was living in.

Yes, I was a houseboy in this heaven. I loved it although I knew it was temporary comfort. I could be kicked out at any time and go back to the god-forsaken suburbs where adults sang Christmas carols in the middle of the year; where folks walked long distances to draw water and where wives didn't wear knickers because their husbands didn't mind.

Quite unlike home where folks shared meals with animals—short of chewing grass, in this new home I shared the luxuries of my master. I ate the same royal jelly that I cooked for him, lived in a stone house and not a mud cave, slept in a comfortable bed instead of that rock-hard bed I had known for years, clean bedding instead of rags, electricity and all. I was determined to stay. Actually I was just beginning to get settled when the unexpected happened that night.

It was around midnight when I was woken up by a soft knocking on the door. I was in the middle of a funny dream and at first thought that the knocking was an illusion. A mix-up in my dream. I listened attentively. All I could hear was the gentle hum of

the winds brushing against the twigs of the neatly trimmed eucalyptus trees in the compound. Soft and musical, the wind sounded like a night angel singing a lullaby to the sleeping bosses who lived in those exclusive residences. Ambassadors, company executives, top civil servants and other representatives of the cream of creation. This reflection always gave me a feeling of guilt. I felt like a thief, breathing the same air as those men of distinction.

I dismissed the knocking as imaginary and resettled myself in the bedclothes. But it came again, this time distinct and insistent. I was suddenly alert and partly alarmed. I couldn't figure out who the visitor could be at that time of the night. A night thief? I wondered. But the place was well-guarded. There was a security guard at the gate, not to forget the constant police patrols which kept undesirable characters out of this honoured place. After all, I reasoned, only a stupid thief would come to the servants' quarters while all the precious things were in the main building where the boss and his family slept.

'Who is it?' my voice quivered with apprehension.

'It's me,' a soft voice replied. I felt a cold stream flow up in my system when I realized who the caller was. At first I was frozen in a mixture of disbelief, fear and excitement.

In that moment of frenzy, the only person who jumped into my mind was my boss, Kahuthu. The rich brute who could happily cut me into pieces and feed me to the dogs if he got to know what was going on at this hour.

Kahuthu was a progressive native in the corps of New Africans. A top civil servant, he lived among the dignified, owned a large bungalow, big cars and uncountable property. To him, I was just a part of his

discarded property. He was hardly aware of my existence in his home compound except when our paths crossed, which was rare.

Like most people in his social bracket, Kahuthu lived the western way, talked western, laughed and coughed western, dinner jackets and all. His children hardly spoke their mother tongue or used their native names. They knew very little about their fellow natives who lived in the unprivileged suburbs because they were born and brought up in an exclusively western atmosphere. His son, Peter, couldn't tell the difference between a dog and a goat as he hadn't had a chance to visit the suburbs where goats and people shared the same room.

The unexpected visitor was Kahuthu's only daughter, Caroline. The pearl of the family. She was also Kahuthu's major problem.

The rich civil servant had always had one fear: that Caroline might associate herself with those outrageous teenagers wearing funny bell-bottoms and bring shame to the family. As a measure to save her from the ignorance of youth, he strictly supervised her.

She was at school in a cliquish day high school. This meant that he was in a position to keep an eye on her. To protect her from hungry teenagers, he made sure that she remained within the home compound whenever out of school and never went out without a chaperon.

But as the saying goes: Man proposes, God disposes. When Kahuthu was making plans for his daughter, God was making His. It was only natural that Caroline, already an adult, and beautiful and lonely, would try to seek the company of a member of the opposite sex. But the only man within her restricted reach was the only man within the home

compound. The houseboy named Chuma. Me.

Before this fateful night, I was puzzled about her strange behaviour which I hadn't noticed before. Until recently, she used to look down upon me with a mistress-to-servant attitude. But when she realized that something was missing in her system, a natural urge that only a man could handle, she started seeking the company of the only male within her reach.

One afternoon, I was weeding the flowers near the hedge when the housemaid next-door whistled at me. Like Caroline, the housemaids in this location were sexually starved. They were desperate creatures with no access to young men other than the male servants. That made me an eligible suitor for the maids' kingdom around me. But the regulations stipulated that I should not invite my mother, let alone a maid into the servants' quarters.

Looking across, I saw the maid standing on the other side of the fence, beckoning me frantically. It was the third time that she had made this kind of approach. Twice before I had failed her, mainly because I objected to her idea of sneaking into my quarters late at night.

I looked around, just to make sure nobody was watching me. Then I walked to the fence.

'You braggart!' she spat. 'Do you think you are so handsome that I must keep running after you?'

'Cool down,' I said. 'Unless you want to see me kicked out of this place, stop having ideas about jumping over the fence at night.'

'Coward!' she hissed. 'No wonder you couldn't make anything better than a servant.'

She was getting on my nerves. 'And what are you over there?' I burst out. 'The Minister of Kitchen

Affairs?'

'At least I do a woman's work,' she retorted. 'Men are not supposed to be housewives.'

My male ego was provoked. 'Look here, Teresa. It's not my fault that my mother brought me into this world to be what I am. I germinated from a poor quality seed: the leftovers of Creation. You belong to the same category. Born to serve others. Now, let's stop this rubbish about what I should be and what I shouldn't be.'

She smiled placatingly. 'I was only joking.'

'I love jokes, but not being ridiculed. I hate being reminded of what I am because I know it, and there is nothing I can do about it. At least for the time being.'

'O.K.,' she conceded. 'How about tonight?'

'What of it?'

'We meet tonight,' she commanded rather than requested. 'If you don't want me to come to your quarters, we could meet right here.'

I thought for a while. Maybe I was simply docile or unsure of myself. Or probably I had been repulsing her approach because she was making it too easy for me. Obviously I wasn't attracted to her but she needed me as a tool for her own convenience. I was just about to give her my reply when I happened to look over my shoulder and saw Caroline approaching. When I turned my head again, Teresa had already fled, leaving her demand unanswered. She wasn't taking a chance with the daughter of her boss's neighbour catching us doing the forbidden.

I retracted my steps to the flower garden and pretended to be busy. It was a Saturday afternoon and I wasn't needed in the kitchen until later. From the corner of my eye, I watched Caroline strolling in the flower gardens, carrying her elegance like Miss

Universe exploring her beauty kingdom. She was slender and tall and built with high quality material. Looking at her, I wondered if she was really walking or floating. Too nervous to meet her eyes, I looked the other way until I was sure she had by-passed me. This had always been the routine. We had all along been strangers to each other; strangers by social distinctions.

I turned my head, expecting to find her gone. My heart jerked when I saw her standing behind me, staring at me with blank cold eyes. I had seen that look before; the look of a prisoner in search of escape. Only this time I was the object of her look.

For the first time since we both became aware of each other's existence, our eyes met in a straight line.

'Are you surprised?' her voice sounded a long way away.

'Surprised . . . eh . . . ah . . . no,' I slurred.

She smiled slightly. Then she said it. 'How do you like that girl?'

'Which girl?'

'The ayah you were talking to over the fence?'

'Oh. That one?' I didn't know what to answer.

'Is she your girlfriend?' she pursued.

'What?'

'Do you love her?' Now, now! What's she up to?

'No,' I said flatly.

'Just friends?' Shit!

'Maybe.'

'You are lying.'

To myself, I said: So what!

'You are lying,' she repeated.

Well, I thought, you can tell your father that his servant is having an affair with the maid next-door.

That might make me decide whether to stay or go.

Seeing the hostile look in my eyes, she put on a mischievous smile and nonchalantly walked away. I watched until she disappeared behind the bungalow.

That decides it, I told myself. She'll wait for her father to come home and report the matter. The way her father loved her, a single word against me was enough to have me kicked out of the place without notice. But then, what would I lose? A meagre salary at the end of the month, the comfortable bed and delicacies. But then, all the good things I enjoyed here were mere privileges and not rights. I had lived without them and I could still do so. The sooner the better!

But when a week passed without a word from my employer, I decided that Caroline had either let the matter drop or she simply had no ill motive. Meanwhile, I caught her several times watching me from a distance, but she never got so close as she did that afternoon. Teresa didn't call again. She had either given up or got scared after that incident.

So, it was a bolt out of the blue when I recognized Caroline's voice calling at my door in the middle of the night. I hesitated before I could struggle out of the bed to open the door for her. There could only be one reason for her calling at that hour, an unimaginable reason.

My heart throbbing and my knees buckling, I slid out of bed and went to the door. I unlocked it with all due care lest the clicking of the keys might attract unwanted attention. She was standing there, her majestic frame silhouetted by the blazing moonlight. Her cream-white nightie added to the splendour and gave her a ghostly look. I was seized by a whirl of consternation.

'Are you surprised?' The same question again.

'Yes,' I admitted in a voice that sounded as if it was coming from a deep pit. She didn't make any attempt to be invited into the house, and I was too mystified to welcome her in.

'Sorry to disturb your sleep,' she said after a lengthy moment. 'Or maybe your girlfriend is in?'

'Which girlfriend?'

'The one I saw you with.'

'I told you she wasn't my girlfriend.' My voice carried annoyance.

'I am sorry if I butted into your affairs,' she said.

'You didn't butt into my anything.' The tension was now beginning to relax as the conversation developed. But I was uneasy. My eyes kept roving here and there, just in case Kahuthu emerged and caught us.

'It appears you don't want me in your house,' she said with urgency. 'I am going.'

'Oh, pardon me.' I had now enough courage to welcome her in. She looked reluctant to enter, as if she had suddenly changed her mind or she dreaded her own idea. It was not until we were engulfed in the darkness of the room that I screwed up my courage and sought her hand. She put up a slight resistance, the way they always do. A rule among women. They want something and they don't want it. They say no, when they mean either yes or no. Because they are supposed to be on the defensive side and men on the offensive side.

She let me hold her hand while I desperately groped for something to say. She was an elephant and I was a mouse. How would a mouse court an elephant?

'Eh . . . won't you sit down?' I stammered. I

dragged her towards the bed. I didn't switch on the lights for fear that it might draw attention from the main building. She seemed to realize this too, as she didn't suggest putting the light on. We sat on the bed, side by side.

'It's nice of you to visit me,' I mumbled the only sentence that came into my head. She didn't say anything. I racked my brains, searching for something to say.

'Your father,' I said. 'How do you think he would react if he found out what we are doing?'

'My father!' She spat out the word as if it reminded her of something unpleasant she had eaten and was getting rid of.

'But he loves you dearly,' I said. 'Don't you love him as much?'

'I didn't come here to discuss my father,' she said sternly. 'If you have nothing better to tell me . . . ' She made as if to go. I held her back and struggled to calm her down.

'O.K. O.K.' It was now the moment to make the approach. The darkness served its purpose for I couldn't imagine how I could face her with lights on. The special commodity I wasn't supposed to make friends with, let alone touch. Then it occurred to me that she was using me like Teresa wanted to use me. I didn't mean anything to her but I had something her father couldn't buy her. The only precious thing God gave me.

I pulled her into the bed and noticed that she had nothing on under the nightie. There was no time for preliminaries as I lacked the appropriate language for such an extraordinary encounter. But while so much happened that night, I didn't pause to consider how much damage I was causing to myself. It wasn't until

much later that I realized the major significance of that night. I had crossed the social bridge. I was on the other side, far away from where I rightly belonged. And it was too late to turn back.

Chapter Two

Things started taking on a new shape. Caroline gradually ignored the social barrier between us. She frequently visited my room and more often than not made her demands. Her mother caught us chatting a couple of times, but like her husband, she couldn't believe that I posed any danger to her daughter. My inferior standing and the social incongruity between her and me eliminated any suspicion.

But Caroline overdid it. I caught her several times staring at me when her parents were around. One evening, I saw Kahuthu and his wife exchange glances when Caroline rushed to help me arrange dishes on the table. Kahuthu definitely put on his glasses, a thing he always did when puzzled. But Caroline was more crafty than her parents thought. She suddenly realized her mistake, and corrected it before her parents could give the observation further consideration.

'You fool!' she raved at me. 'This is not the way to arrange dishes.' Her back was turned to her parents so that they couldn't see the expression on her face. She was smiling at me and at the same time calling me a fool. I was amused and nearly laughed. Her quick action saved us from suspicion. Kahuthu removed his glasses, satisfied that there was nothing fishy

going on between his daughter and me.

When Caroline made her usual visit to my room that night, she apologised.

'You didn't take me seriously, did you?' she said. 'You know I didn't mean to call you a fool. I wanted to fool my parents.'

'You shouldn't have come to help me with the dishes,' I said. 'The way you did it, they nearly caught us.'

'I was seized by a strange emotion,' she said. 'I really don't know why I did it. But then I corrected the mistake in time.'

'We'll have to be careful,' I said. 'Maybe they won't be fooled next time.'

'I'll take care,' she said. Then she bit my finger.

As the weeks drifted by, our relationship solidified to a point of no return. We became inseparable and sometimes careless. Caroline always had a reason for being near me. When I was weeding the flower garden, she would tell her parents that she wanted to collect some flowers for the vase. She would join me in the garden and pretend to be busy picking flowers while she talked to me.

When I was busy in the kitchen, she would suggest to her parents that she should do some practice lessons in domestic science. That excuse would give her a ticket to the kitchen where she would join me and help me wash the dishes. Meanwhile, we would chat under the cover of clinking utensils. One day when Caroline was helping me wash the dishes, she asked, 'Chuma, how did you do in school?'

I admitted that I had done poorly and that I wasn't the intelligent type. For instance, my English was a direct translation of my mother tongue. Instead of saying, 'I failed in my exams,' I invariably said, 'I fell

down.' Instead of saying 'employ me,' I said 'write me work.' Instead of saying 'I feel pain,' I said 'I hear pain.'

'Have you given up ever furthering your studies?' she asked with concern.

'It is too late now. I can't go back to school.'

'But you can study at home privately,' she suggested. 'There are correspondence schools and they are cheap and efficient.'

'I don't think I can make it,' I said hopelessly. 'I am not the type that can study on my own. Even with a teacher I failed.'

She gave me an encouraging smile. 'Everything is possible if there is devotion and stamina. You can make it if you want to.'

For a while, I was convinced by her remarks. Then I started wondering why she was so concerned about my poor merit in life.

'Chuma,' she said seriously, 'take a correspondence course for the sake of your future. Without good education, the prospects for your future are dismal. Surely you don't wish to be a houseboy for the rest of your life.'

I felt ashamed. For the first time, I wondered why I hadn't thought about the betterment of my future before. Was I going to remain a houseboy for the rest of my life?

'I could help you,' she said. 'I can always avail myself to you in case of difficulties. I have a lot of books which you can use.'

'Thank you so much,' I said abruptly. 'I'll enrol with a correspondence school as soon as possible.' And I meant business.

Women can make men do wonders. Especially if the man is in pursuit of a woman far above his social

class. Following Caroline's wise advice, I became a student-cum-houseboy. I studied all sorts of funny subjects: Geography—how cold it is in Greenland; why the earth is round and not flat like a tray; why the sun looks like a small lump of *ugali* yet it is bigger than our Earth; gravity—how this powerful force tends to pull everything towards itself . . . is it gravity or gluttony? History—Christopher Columbus . . . the man who could live in the ocean like a fish, but who couldn't tell the difference between India and America . . . Patels and Apaches were the same thing to him.

I was amused by Science. This was a subject I couldn't handle without Caroline's aid. She explained how atoms mate with other atoms to make molecules; how later those molecules make love to other molecules to make compounds; how those compounds could be dangerous if not well-tethered.

Geometry: the lousy theorems and the perpendiculars . . . those vertical erections which bisect horizontal crazes . . .

I studied until my mind chirped with lessons. I knew, but I didn't admit to Caroline that I was fighting the formidable. Just messing with time. I wasn't the type to succeed through forced lessons. Although the tutor encouraged me with fake correct marks, I rarely got the minimum pass marks. After four months of day and night studies, I gave up, but kept on fooling Caroline that I was still pushing on. Then, the worst happened. Caroline was pregnant.

She disclosed the news to me during one of our night meetings. I wasn't surprised, but I cared.

'How old is it?' I asked in a startled note.

'Three months,' she said. 'I could have told you before, but I was scared and I wasn't sure.'

Silence befell us. Was I worried!

'What do we do now?' I asked.

'I don't know.' She didn't sound as frightened as I.

I did some quick thinking. Something had to be done fast. This was a critical turning point in my life. It was tantamount to a disaster.

Abortion? I thought. I didn't know how abortions were administered, but I knew they were as dangerous as snake's venom. That was out.

'I-will-marry-you' talk was out of the question. That she knew as well as I did. There was only one way out; get out of the place before her parents got to know what was going on. But I couldn't imagine life without Caroline around. Despite the complications of the situation, I had developed a strong love for her. She had given me a sense of pride. She had made me believe that I was a man. She had destroyed the powerful barrier between her and me. She had ignored her merit for my sake. While nobody else had ever cared . . . about my future, she had cared . . . Oh God, why did we ever start this!

'Caroline,' I said, 'if your parents come to know this, I will be in trouble. As I look at it, there is no way out except for me to get out of this place at the first available chance.'

'How dare you?' she protested. 'Can you possibly walk out on me and leave me to face my parents alone?'

'But what can I do?' I argued. 'My presence will only make things worse. Your father will not let me get away with it. He might even have me jailed.'

She was silent because she saw the sense in my appeals. She seemed to think parallel to me, but she was still impulsive.

At that moment, I had a mind to suggesting

abortion but I decided to wait for her to take the initiative. If she suggested it, I thought, then I could investigate the possibilities of such a treatment. It was risky, but it was equally dangerous for her to remain pregnant.

'All right,' she said at last. 'It will be some time before they notice it. We'll keep it a secret until it is no longer possible to hide. Meanwhile, promise me that you won't go.'

There was nothing I would have loved better than to stay, but there was nothing I dreaded more than facing Kahuthu to explain why Caroline was pregnant. Now I was sure that she didn't consider abortion as a remedy.

I thought for a while. It was no use arguing with her. It would be an endless argument with no solution.

'I promise I'll stay,' I said.

She embraced me passionately. It hurt me to imagine that she was not made for me. The chances were a hundred to zero that she was embracing me for maybe the last time. I had already made up my mind to resign the next day. She would be in school when I tendered my resignation. What a surprise she was going to have, when she came back from school to find me gone! And me, somewhere in the remote reserves, I would be lamenting for her.

'Somehow,' I said to myself silently, 'I'll meet her again under favorable conditions!' But I didn't convince myself.

The next day, I woke up earlier than usual. Actually I didn't wake up, but rose from the bed. I hadn't slept a wink. My eyes were sore after staring into the darkness all night. Caroline, as usual had left shortly before dawn.

At 7.30, the usual government vehicle with a uniformed chauffeur came to collect Caroline. I watched through the window as she sauntered towards the car. In her school uniform, a grey skirt and white blouse, she looked so innocent and delicate that I felt a spasm of guilt at imagining what was coming to her. She entered the car and looked towards my direction, as if she was aware that I was watching her. My heart gave a lurch when the car pulled out and removed Caroline from the vicinity. 'Till we meet!' I murmured to myself. A hot tear-drop flowed down my cheek.

As Kahuthu never reported on duty earlier than eight o'clock, I found him having breakfast. He gave me the usual casual look, half hostile and half godly.

'Sir, I am resigning,' I said politely.

He gaped at me. A ham sandwich in his hand remained suspended in mid-motion.

'What was that again?' he asked.

'I am going home, Sir.'

He looked at me as if it was the first time he had ever seen me. Then he resumed munching his ham.

'What is so wonderful about home?' he asked at last.

'I want to do some farming.'

Again he gave me a hard stare. He was wondering how a cheap creature like me could own a farm which produced more than the salary of a house boy. People of my class were not supposed to own farms.

'Why come to me?' he snarled. 'Don't you know the right person to see?' This came as a complete surprise. I had expected him to haggle with me and probably persuade me to stay on. After six years of perfect service, I thought I deserved some credit. These rich ass-holes, I thought furiously. They never

give a damn about what a poor man has done for them. Instead, they expect the poor man to worship them even when it is their turn to command. I was abashed.

'I thought I should bid you farewell,' I said, hiding my disappointment. He nodded reluctantly.

'Go well,' he said in a note of dismissal. As far as he was concerned, I no longer existed in that room. To him, parting with me was like parting with diarrhoea.

As I walked out of the room, I felt dishonoured, humiliated, unwanted and valueless. I instantly developed a strong hatred of rich men.

Chapter Three

For the seventh consecutive night, the heralds of dawn found me still awake. A dog howled somewhere across the hills in reply to another dog. In my mother's hut, I could hear Giceru the he-goat chasing Njiru the she-goat. Puh! . . . Mymymymym-mymymy-y-y-y . . . ! So sexy was Giceru that when there was no she-goat to mate with, he would chase his own brothers or make love to trees. He even raped his own kids.

In this place, rats didn't use family planning. They knew how to welcome a visitor, especially if he was fresh from town, where his heels had grown soft from wearing shoes every day.

One rat couldn't understand why I was so mean with my heels. It kept on sniffing at my heels whenever I showed signs of sleep. But unfortunately,

sleep was no more a part of my life. I was like a watchdog.

It was now a week since I had left Kahuthu's place and settled on the half hectare of land which was the only property for my parents, my three brothers, and me. All my brothers were married, with at least three kids each. Two were labourers in a nearby sawmill, while the third one earned his living by tilling the exhausted plot. My mother tilled the land while my ageing father spent his days swallowing the native *muratina*. I hardly saw him except when somebody called in to report that the old man had been located lying in a ditch some distance away. Then I, or one of my brothers, would go to collect him and stagger home with him. Old people must be accorded all due respect by their children. Even when they shit on themselves at beer parties.

My dreams were haunted by Caroline. I kept on wondering what she was doing and how she was feeling about me. Was she missing me as much as I was missing her? Had she told her father about the pregnancy? What was going to happen when her father found out? Many unpleasant things can happen when a hobo like me impregnates the daughter of a Black Duke like Kahuthu. But since nothing had happened so far, I shifted my mind to the immediate problem: what to do for a living.

With my limited education, the only income I could expect to earn in the future was through manual work. I had already made up my mind to start something really worth doing. After a careful survey of various petty prospects, I made up my mind to be a carpenter. The idea was given to me by an old friend called Zakayo.

Zakayo owned a small workshop near the local

dispensary. This was the vantage point for his business because coffins are needed by the dispensary.

'You may think that this is a useless business,' Zakayo had told me as he proudly polished a coffin, but when you start doing it, you never want to stop it. These are not the old days, when dead bodies were unceremoniously planted into the soil with only a blanket. Nowadays, people have developed a sense of respect for the dead. And what last respect can a dead man expect from his people than a wooden suit—a coffin.'

'You talk as if you are amused by dead bodies,' I had said.

'Of course,' he had retorted. 'If people didn't die, I'd run the business at a loss and probably close it. Long Live Death.'

Zakayo had offered me a partnership in the business on condition that I didn't mind straining my soft muscles. I was to pay him some money as capital and later work on a fifty-fifty basis. As I still had my six months' pay almost intact, I decided to give Zakayo a half of it.

For the next two weeks, I spent my days in the workshop with Zakayo teaching me a few tricks about the tedious job. My muscles started hardening, my veins protruded like potatoes pushing up to the surface of the soil, and blisters covered my palms like a leper's.

Carpenters are cursed! They'll never get away with anything not after they made the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

To my disappointment, the business wasn't as booming as Zakayo had led me to believe. The demand for coffins wasn't promising. People in this area didn't die in large numbers. And contrary to

Zakayo's allegations, some people had their dead relatives buried without coffins—just like planting potatoes.

A man whose father had died asked me when I talked to him about burying the deceased with honours. 'What is the use of a coffin if white ants can consume it and reach the body?'

However, the business earned us enough income to cater for our daily financial commitments and a little saving. I adjusted myself to the prevailing circumstances; trying to save as much as I could. But my efforts were interrupted when one evening Caroline suddenly appeared.

I was chatting with my mother outside her hut when she looked up the path leading into our home.

'A stranger is coming here,' she announced.

I followed her look and made out the unmistakable figure of Caroline. My heart jerked with apprehension. It is difficult to explain how I felt as I speechlessly watched her walk towards us. Even today, when I see a schoolgirl wearing a grey skirt, my stomach contracts with a cold spasm.

Till now, I hadn't mentioned Caroline to my mother, nor why I had resigned. She was taken aback to see my expression.

'Do you know her?' she asked, her eyes searching my face.

'Yes,' I said in a hoarse voice.

Before she could seek further explanation, Caroline reached us. I couldn't hold back the urge to meet her.

'How did you come here?' I asked, locking my hand in hers.

'I asked the way,' she said. 'Your funny name made it easier for me because there are not many people with such a name in this region.'

I looked at my mother shyly. 'This is Caroline, the daughter of my former boss, Kahuthu.'

My mother smiled at her amiably. Then came the critical point in their first meeting. Caroline couldn't offer the traditional greetings. She looked at me for help. In return I looked at my mother to warn her that this was not a typical girl. She was brought up in an atmosphere where traditional greetings were legends. She understood my message and gave Caroline a pathetic smile.

'Welcome,' my mother said and started to busy herself preparing something for the guest.

I led Caroline to my mother's hut, because it wasn't in keeping with our culture for a man to receive a lady in his room when the parents are watching. The fact that there was no separate table-room explained why I had to take her to my mother's house.

We sat on stools near the hearth. A glowing ember between the three cooking stones was sending up a curl of smoke all over the room. I didn't dare look at Caroline in the face. I was ashamed of my own poverty. To Caroline, a hut like this one was supposed to be somewhere in the museum. As I cast a glance at her, I caught her scrutinizing the room the way a scientist would scrutinize a dwelling once occupied by Stone Age men.

'How is Nairobi?' I asked to keep her busy.

She had a problem in answering me. Her throat was half choked by the smoke coming from the embers and her eyes were wet with tears. This smoke can really hurt the eyes, especially if the victim is inside a small hut with no ventilation.

'Nairobi was all right this morning,' she said. 'How is your family?'

'All right.'

A short silence followed. The only noticeable sound was that of my mother's axe as she split wood outside. She was definitely wondering why this expensive-looking girl had decided to visit us at such an odd hour and in such a peculiar way. I was equally worried.

'What made you come at this time of the evening?' I asked.

'Problems. They now know.'

I had expected that. I wanted details.

'This morning,' she said, 'we were taken for the occasional medical examination. The doctor immediately knew that I was pregnant. He didn't tell me but I saw him make a note of it. To make it worse, he knows my father. He told me to remind him of my father's telephone number, giving an excuse that it was a long time since they had met and he wanted to have a chat with him. Obviously he wanted to contact my father and tell him what he'd discovered.'

'Did you give him the number?' I asked. My voice was rattling.

'What was the point of hiding it? Even if I didn't tell him, there was a directory nearby. After all, it is very easy for anybody to contact my father.'

'Then?' I sighed.

'I didn't know what to do. I knew that by the time I reached home my father would be yearning to get his hands on me. How could I face him? So I decided to run away before the news reached him. Immediately after leaving the doctor, I stealthily made for the city centre where I caught a bus to this place. I didn't know it was that far.'

I brooded for a long moment. Was I dreaming? No, this was real.

'What do you intend to do now?' I asked stupidly.

'Go with you to my father. You are a man. You can explain to him what happened and what you want to do.'

For a brief moment, I had a vision of Kahuthu; a thick man with a stiff neck like that of a rhino, big eyes which only looked at expensive things, and which despised all cheap things. I saw him looking at me as if I was a worm wriggling in his meal and saying, 'Why come to me?'

What a joke! If Caroline expected me to face her father, there was something wrong with her mind.

'You know you are asking the impossible,' I said apologetically. 'The best I can expect from your father is a broken rib. I am sorry, but I can't face him in any kind of dialogue. Maybe in a courtroom.'

'If that is the case,' she said, 'I'll stay with you here.'

'But Caroline,' I protested, 'you can't possibly live here. In the first place, you won't be able to tolerate the conditions of this place. We are poor people with no signs of improvement in the foreseeable future. You just can't live here. On the other hand, your father can cause trouble for me. I'd be charged with abducting you. I don't know what the law would do with me.'

She started sobbing. I feared that my mother would come and find her in that state, but as she came staggering in with a bundle of wood, Caroline composed herself.

My mother joined us and started feeding the fire with wood. She didn't seem anxious to know what all this was about, although the expression on her face indicated that she smelt trouble. She avoided looking at Caroline because of the latter's outrageously short

skirt. Sitting on a stool, her thighs were exposed up to her pants. This was all right with the new generation which didn't regard the thighs as private parts, but to a woman of my mother's age, everything above the knee was a private part.

'Why don't you tell your mother what is going on?' Caroline said in English. My mother knew no English.

'You think it is necessary?'

'You are keeping her in suspense.'

She was right. My mother was beginning to show signs of impatience and disappointment. As any other mother would, she was entitled to know what was going on between her son and this lovely and sophisticated girl.

I struggled to find words which would fit into this kind of conversation. It is hard to talk to parents especially when you are explaining the improbable. It becomes hell when your parents laugh at you. That was what I feared: my mother laughing at me.

'You are in trouble?' That was my mother. Oh lovely mother! Just as I was struggling for words, she came to my aid.

'Sort of trouble,' I said, feeling relieved.

'You came here because you impregnated your master's daughter?'

I laughed. So did Caroline.

'Yes.'

'And now she has come to look for you?'

'Yes.'

'Does her father know that she is here?'

'No.'

'Are you intending to marry her?' *Oh Mother. How?*

As I didn't reply, Caroline looked hard at me. My mother went on stirring the porridge.

'Yes.' Oh God, what am I saying!

My mother smiled and said nothing for a while. Caroline was looking outside. I couldn't tell what effects the three letter word had on her.

'Then you'll have to talk to her father,' mother went on. 'Otherwise it'll look as if you've stolen his daughter.'

I wished she could understand what that meant. She was deliberately fooling me. She was just trying to make a man out of me when she very well knew the incredibility of such a situation. On my part, I didn't want to show her that I was incapable of negotiating for a wife—no matter what kind of father the wife-to-be had.

Briefly, that was the end of the talk with my mother. As I didn't say yes or no, she let the matter end there. But right inside she knew that a yes or no had one ultimate goal: trouble.

That evening, the whole family gathered in my hut. They were all anxious to see this popular dignitary's daughter who wanted to marry the down-trodden son of a *muratina* toper. My brothers came with packets of sugar. Their wives brought food, specially prepared for this great, great day when Chuma was to be regarded as a man. Even my father cancelled his usual trip to the beer party.

Man! It is wonderful to be applauded by well-wishers when they think you are getting married. But it is equally disheartening if the girl you love is the daughter of a Black Duke who is not aware of such arrangements. You should have seen the faces of those who were wishing me well. They tried to hide it with their forced smiles, but worry was firmly printed on their faces. My mother couldn't help staring at me with scornful eyes. She even tended to sit near me as

if to protect me from an invisible grabber.

Later the party came to an end and everybody returned to their quarters, leaving Caroline and me to ourselves. Despite the vast difference between her father's bungalow and my slum, she looked enthralled and not very much out of place. Among my family members, she had looked like a white missionary teaching native pagans how to say 'Hail Mary.' But now as we chatted in low voices, she looked completely relaxed. Could she change, I wondered? I wished she could. I tried to liken her case to similar cases. Oh yes, she could if she wanted. Take for instance the case of that president who was deposed: he now lives in hiding. No motorcades to escort him; no soldiers to salute him; no jubilant crowds to cheer him; no glories, nothing but hiding. And that Sultan of Zanzibar who had to run for his life when he was dethroned: now I hear he lives in a backyard somewhere in Europe. No more servants and women to attend him, no more living in the splendid palace.

Could Caroline adjust herself as those people had? Could she accept what fate had given her and forget what fate had robbed her of? Maybe she would, I comforted myself, but that would not be the end of the problems. There was her father to think of.

Now that my parents were aware of my intention to take Caroline for a wife, I had the privilege of sleeping under the same roof with her. Experience first, negotiations later. But it made me feel very awkward to think that my mother and everybody was aware of what I was doing with her inside the hut. I even imagined my mother listening carefully to all that was going on.

The night was lovely because this time we had no fear of an intruder like Kahuthu spoiling our love

making. But I had the problem of guarding Caroline from rats. She would suddenly wake up when rats yowled and cling to me for protection. The new grass-mattressed bed was not that comfortable and the bed-bugs, reinforced by lice were a real bother. For reasons best known to her, she ignored the inconvenience of her new environment.

'Have you made up your mind?' she asked, shortly, after we had gone to bed.

'Yes,' I grunted. 'I will talk to your parents.'

Chapter Four

'What is wrong with you Chuma?' Zakayo asked. He was sawing a piece of wood but his eyes were on me.

'Nothing,' I said. 'Only tired.'

'Come on,' he insisted. 'I hear you have brought a princess home.'

I didn't like the way he put it.

'Tell me,' he went on. 'Is it true that you are marrying the daughter of a famous tycoon?'

'Who told you?' I asked, feeling a sense of pride.

'Who doesn't know? Such a rare happening is bound to raise a lot of speculation among the neighbours. That is what is being whispered all round. They say you are the most daring man in this location. They envy you because you have bought yourself a ticket to wealth.'

'Are you praising me or mocking me?' I asked half annoyed.

'Why should I mock you? I wish I was in your shoes.'

I had vowed not to discuss Caroline with anybody. In the first place, nobody was likely to help me out of the jam I was in. Secondly I wanted to keep my affair with Caroline as secret as possible, so that when the worst happened, nobody would have any advance knowledge of what was going on. But as things were now, I realized how hard it was to hide the truth. I told Zakayo all about it, hoping that he could suggest a solution.

'I see you are in trouble,' he said at last. 'As things are, there is only one way out.'

'What?' I asked hopefully.

'Get married in the District Commissioner's Office.'

I felt like kissing Zakayo. Why hadn't I thought of it? A couple could always get married in the D.C.'s Office regardless of objections from parents. This was a constitutional ruling and nobody no matter how big could defy it. And the only condition was that the couple were mature people.

That morning I had cheated Caroline by telling her that I was going to see her parents. This was the third consecutive day of our living together as man and wife while the matrimonial formalities remained a wait-and-see case. What Kahuthu was doing was a puzzle to us, but one thing was certain: he was ransacking the whole country looking for his daughter. I wasn't surprised that he hadn't thought of coming to my place. To him, I suppose it was unimaginable that his daughter could be with me.

'But on the other hand,' Zakayo interrupted my thoughts, 'you have to convince the D.C. that you have been refused marriage. If you don't do that, you will be charged with eloping and things will be tough for you.'

'But I have just told you how dangerous it is to face that brute. If I do, maybe you'll never see me again. These big people have so much influence that they can even shoot you and get away with it.'

Zakayo nodded with understanding. 'Then for that matter, you can send elders. Though your man is a brute, he must have some respect reserved for the old. He will definitely kick them out, but then, you will be free of blame should he sue you for eloping.'

I thought over Zakayo's words for a long moment. What a fool I had been! I could have solved this puzzle as soon as Caroline had agreed to live with me. I should have sent elders to see Kahuthu, knowing very well that this would force a showdown. I would then be able to establish a case before the D.C.

'I'll admit to you that you have come to my rescue just as I was about to go crazy. May I tell you that I have just thought of rushing home to make arrangements for elders to see the girl's father tomorrow morning?'

Zakayo smiled wryly. 'You better do it before it is too late.'

I prepared to depart.

'By the way,' Zakayo said, 'are you sure that you'll live with the girl happily?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Why not?'

'I was just asking. This is a rare case, and as your friend, I feel I am entitled to ask you very personal questions. How have you fared with her for the last three days?'

'All right. I am satisfied with the way she is adjusting herself to her new surroundings.'

He nodded casually, but his expression was doubtful.

'I don't mean to discourage you, but listen to this:

a woman in love will do anything to keep her lover. They say love is blind, but it doesn't remain blind forever. Only when obstacles crowd in does blind love start to see. That is when trouble starts—enough trouble to make a man hang himself or break free from the law.'

'Why are you telling me all this?' I was unable to control myself.

'Don't take me wrongly,' he said apologetically. 'I am not accusing you or anybody in particular. These things happen.'

I didn't wish him farewell as I walked out of the workshop.

Elders are the most daredevil creatures that walk in the remote urban areas. Tell them that you are intending to marry the daughter of Fire, and they'll definitely walk into the fire to mediate for you. As a matter of tradition, they reserve the prerogative of negotiating for an intended wedding no matter how complicated it is. As a young clansman seeking their help in such cases, they would be failing you if they didn't respond to your appeal.

I didn't have to go far in search of a contingent of elders to go to contend with Kahuthu. I found my father in his usual drinking place among a throng of elders. My appearance was a gift to them because I had to buy them a couple of small bottles of bear, or 'tu-smalls,' as they were called. That alone made me a hero. When later I told my father about my problem, he called a number of his fellow drinkers into a private audience and told them what was going on. Nearly all of them were willing to go and tackle Kahuthu the next day.

I was more amused than disturbed. If only these fishes knew whom they would be up against, I

thought, they would have second thoughts. But since I was using them to establish a case rather than negotiate a case, I let them think that it was that easy. It sort of embarrassed me to think of the kind of reception they would get from Kahuthu, but it had to be that way and that way only. After all, what other service could I ever expect from my father and his beer-sodden group?

I was invited to join the elders for discussion, which obviously entailed buying more beers. Briefly, they told me what was required of me. A sum of two hundred shillings was to be the 'stealing fee' because I had taken Kahuthu's daughter without his knowledge and that amounted to stealing. Of course I had to pay their expenses.

A drama started when I told the elders that they were to go alone, without me or Caroline.

'It is unnatural,' protested one elder. 'How can we go to bargain for something out of sight and for somebody out of sight?'

I nearly told them what the situation was, but I didn't want to scare them. I had to cultivate a good excuse to justify my stand.

'My presence will only make things worse, and will probably foreclose any possibility of negotiation,' I explained. 'But if you go and soothe him, we'll arrange for a day when we shall all go to see him.'

They exchanged glances. 'For that matter,' said the chief spokesman, 'our mission will be solely to report that you have his daughter with you and we are willing to negotiate for your marriage.'

'Briefly,' I said.

They agreed.

The next morning, a dramatic scene took place outside my hut. Six elders were anxiously waiting for

my directions. The dramatic part of it was how they were dressed. As they were going to meet a very important person, they had done everything possible to make themselves presentable for that special mission. One had his white hair well combed and neatly parted. Another one had on an over-sized suit which he must have borrowed from his son. By the way he was behaving, it was clear that he had never worn a suit before. The belt line was above his stomach and the creases were facing sideways. Another one had taken the trouble to borrow spectacles because he believed that spectacled men looked smart and civilized. My father outdid them all. He had spent the whole night preparing himself for the occasion. His feet which had previously looked like yams were now shining after he had worked on them with a bathing stone. For the first time in his sixty years, he was going to wear shoes. He had a problem in deciding which shoe to put on his right foot and which one should go into the other. Worse even, the shoes belonged to my brother whose size was number nine while my father's size was number seven. You should have seen the way he dragged his feet, not sure that the shoes were still following him. You should also have seen how he wore the tie. It was outside the dirty collar and stuck out like a hangman's rope.

I gave them the details of how to find Kahuthu's house. The arrangement was for them to be there before lunch, because Kahuthu never failed to go home for lunch. Among them was a younger man who had been to the city of Nairobi before, and who was to guide them.

When at last they departed, I watched them with sorrow. I felt sorry for them and for myself. It reminded me of the story of Moses and the infamous

and me paved the way out of prison. I feel much happier here with you than with my parents.'

'But don't forget that your education has been interrupted.'

'It is even better that way. My examination is due in three months. Now we can study together . . .'

She remembered something. 'By the way, I haven't seen you studying since I came.'

'Tension,' I lied. 'How could I concentrate when so many things are happening?'

'But you are still anxious to see it through.'

'Of course, yes.' I meant it. I had decided to resume my studies because now I had ample time and Caroline was handy. Unlike before, when I had studied blindly with no particular motive, this time I had a motive: to close up the wide gap between Caroline and me.

Working on the maximum of time and distance involved, I expected the mission of elders to be back after dusk. So I was surprised when at 6 p.m. a child came running to the riverside and announced that we had visitors. I stretched up and saw who the visitors were.

If I haven't told you why I had decided not to go to the workshop that afternoon, it was because I had expected this to happen. On the first point of information, Kahuthu was bound to react one or two ways; either take his time to decide how to handle me, or come straight. He had decided to come straight.

When I saw what we were up against, my heart skipped a beat. Kahuthu wasn't taking a chance. He had used his influence properly. The whole place was infested with police. Their target was me.

It is difficult to explain what happened within

Pharaoh of Egypt. They looked determined like Moses himself. They even had walking staffs like the one Moses had had. But the difference between the time of Moses and this time was that staffs couldn't be transformed into snakes as Moses had done with his before the Pharaoh. Miracles had long since passed into oblivion. And as it was, those elders had to perform a miracle if Kahuthu was to listen to them. Kahuthu and Pharaoh were identical.

I didn't go to the workshop that afternoon. I took Caroline down by the riverside where we chatted to the background of splashing water.

'I've got a feeling something horrible is going to happen,' I said. 'As soon as your father knows that you are here, a lot of nasty things are bound to happen.'

'But what can we do?' she said desperately. 'Whatever happens, good or bad, a problem will have been solved. At least, we shall save my father from looking for me further.'

'Tell me, what if your father comes for you and takes you with him?'

'I won't go.'

'And if he uses force?'

'That is something else, but I'll fight before he does it.'

She held my hand firmly and said, 'Chuma, this might look ridiculous to you, but let me tell you. I won't deceive you by saying that I love this kind of life that much, but it is far better than being enclosed in a palace with no outside contact. I am a human being, not a pet in a cage. I like mixing with people, visiting places, seeing jungles, mountains, birds, farms, children playing and all the other things that a free person is entitled to see. What happened between you

that short time, because I saw very little of it. Caroline and I stood like a pair of criminals before a firing squad. She grabbed my shirt firmly, as if expecting me to protect her from the advancing party. That is another inborn weakness with women. Just because you are a man, they think you can protect them from a cannon ball.

Kahuthu was the first one to reach me, followed by his gang of policemen. He wasn't in the mood to ask questions and I wasn't in a position to answer them. From that moment, I was like a football. In the confusion that followed, I heard a woman scream, but I was too busy to care.

Chapter Five

When I think of judges, I think of God. Because like God, a judge decides the fate of a man. Just as God decides to kill one of His creatures, a judge condemns somebody to death.

Judges don't have hearts. Their hearts are engraved with Penal Codes. It is very easy for them to give the ruling: 'Ten years jail and fourteen strokes.'

Woe unto you if you are brought before a judge who is suffering from a hangover or diarrhoea. In a hurry to rush to the toilets, he won't bother to consider your case seriously. He will leave you at the mercy of the merciless Penal Code. That was what I feared as I waited for judgement.

The usual godly atmosphere hung inside the packed courtroom. The judge, clad in his official

gowns represented a kind of earthly god, while the clerk, the journalists and the police served as his angels.

Sitting at the prosecution table was the stocky prosecutor for whom I wished anything from heart failure to a fall from the topmost storey of the Kenyatta Conference Centre. Seated in the first row of the congregation were Kahuthu and his wife. The civil servant looked like a deposed president hiding among peasants. My entire family and friends sat in the middle rows, the furthest distance from the Kahuthus.

On this day, the judge was going to give a ruling on a very rare case. It wasn't very usual for a poor carpenter, an ex-houseboy to have a row with a senior civil servant over his daughter. It was equally rare for an educated, sophisticated and cultured girl to have anything to do with a plebeian like me.

At the first hearing, the Court had heard how Chuma, a carpenter by profession had forcibly abducted Caroline Wambui, the daughter of a respectable man. The charges went as far as stating that I had behaved in a way likely to cause a breach of the peace in that I had resisted arrest. That explained why my face was battered: a scuffle with the police.

At the second hearing, witnesses had clashed with the prosecution almost to the point of open war. Boldly calling the police liars, one of my relatives had made it clear that he was going to help me file a suit against the State, for the treatment I had received from the police, even if it meant selling all his land.

The most enthralling witnesses were the elders who had gone to see Kahuthu. They made the court almost burst with restrained laughter when they related how Kahuthu had thrown away their walking

stuffs leaving their weak legs almost helpless. My father had lost his shoes, which didn't fit him properly in any case in the rush to get away from the bully who had no respect for the elderly. Another elder had stumbled and nearly lost his four remaining teeth. He explained that since this had been the first time for him to wear trousers, his movements had been hampered as he tried to get out of the place. The bespectacled elder had lost one eye-glass and not realized it because it was hard for him to notice that anything transparent was missing.

The most interesting spectacle in the courtroom was Caroline. She had remained deaf to all questions. The obvious reason was that she had been told by her parents what to say against me. A couple of times, she had opened her mouth to say something but when she looked in my direction, she became tongue-tied. Apparently she wanted to disappoint neither her parents nor me. And that had made the judge very suspicious. It made everybody wonder what the judge was going to rule.

The moment of tension came when the judge shuffled the files before him and looked straight at Caroline.

'Caroline Wambui,' he called.

Her mother gestured for her to stand up.

'Do you know that man?' the judge pointed at me.

'Yes,' she said in a faint voice.

'Is it true that he detained you in his home without your consent?'

She looked around helplessly. I saw her mother trying to wink at her, but she avoided meeting her eyes.

The judge repeated the question.

'No. I went there myself and decided to stay.'

Whispers and sighs expressed the feelings of the people in the courtroom. Kahuthu fidgeted as if his seat was infested with biting ants. The expression on his wife's face reminded me of something I had read about Sodom and Gomorah; the wife of Lot who had turned into a pillar of salt.

'May I suggest that you are, or you were in love with the accused?'

Again she looked around, and this time our eyes met.

'Yes.' More sighs and whispers.

'Could it be likely that you were forced to disagree with your parents because they stood between you and your love?'

'Yes.'

'How old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

'That's all,' the judge said, and then called my name.

'Your honour,' I nearly shouted.

'How old are you?'

'Nineteen, Sir.'

'That's all.'

A deep silence hung in the courtroom. Tension mounted within me so that it became a problem to breathe. Looking across at Kahuthu I saw him busily mopping his shining face with a handkerchief. His wife was still in Sodom.

The judge started his marathon ruling.

'In view of the facts before me, I find this case to be a special one, needing special consideration. Starting with the accused, it has been established that Symon Chuma is a law-abiding citizen who has worked for the plaintiff for a number of years, during

which time he befriended Caroline Wambui, the daughter of the plaintiff. Somehow, a love developed between the pair and eventually reached a point of no return. Owing to obvious difficulties, the pair plotted to retreat to the only place where they could avoid harassment.

'The allegation that Chuma had enticed Caroline into running away with him and later detained her, is a fabrication in that Caroline has admitted that it was she who followed him and decided to stay.

'The accused acted in a commendable manner. For instance, he stayed with Caroline in his own home instead of hiding, as often happens in such cases. He even took the trouble to settle the possible dispute in an orderly manner. There is strong evidence to support the allegation that Chuma sent elders to see Caroline's father with the intention of starting formal negotiations leading to the marriage of the two lovers.

'However, I don't approve of the way the accused and Caroline behaved in the first place. It led to the plaintiff worrying for three days about his daughter's disappearance. Under such provocation, the plaintiff was bound to be rough with the accused when they met. If such a thing happened (he didn't want to commit himself) the technicalities of the objective (not the law) would put the blame on the accused.'

He hesitated for a while, looked at the congregation blankly and then prepared to pass the sentence.

'The court finds Symon Chuma not guilty of all the charges laid against him.'

Somebody coughed, unable to restrain his emotional build-up. All eyes were directed at me like the guns of an execution squad aiming at the victim. Kahuthu made as if to rise, but the judge had one

thing more to say.

'May I also point out that the Law upholds personal liberties and freedom of determination. Caroline is over sixteen and therefore mature enough to differentiate between bad and good. Chuma is nineteen, a mature male capable of looking after himself. There is no law or individual who can stop the two from acting on their decision so long as there is a mutual consent between them.'

Hurrah! You should have seen the reaction of the people. If a courtroom was a pub, the magistrate could have drowned in beer. Judge of Judges, spotless character, impartial, no fear or favour, may God keep him longer to judge people!

What happened outside the court drew a crowd of spectators. Kahuthu and his wife stood at the end of the corridor as if their legs had rebelled. Shielded by my supporters, I slowly walked in the opposite direction to avoid a possible confrontation with the bewildered couple. That gave Caroline an option to decide which direction to take—towards her parents or my group.

As if the drama had been pre-arranged, Caroline had lagged behind the diverting crowds. She hesitated for a while, looked across at her parents and indecisively walked left. Then she increased her speed and walked towards me!

Chapter Six

'You know what?' Zakayo said. 'You must be the luckiest man living with a woman far above your class. I'll admit to you that I didn't expect your provisional marriage to last a week. Now it is a month since, and you seem to be living happily.'

'You know Julius, the charcoal dealer? He married a girl far above his class. I tell you he really had it. She couldn't eat the kind of food we eat. When his mother brought her maize and beans, she called it gravel and refused to eat. She referred to porridge as 'glue', and posho meal as 'cement'. She had to have her own special food, prepared in Western fashion. Mugo ended up penniless. Now he is serving a three year jail sentence after he was found guilty of shop-lifting. His wonderful wife is enjoying herself with Ministers.'

I was beginning to get fed up with Zakayo. He was always making indirect remarks about me. He had a way of cultivating stories which seemingly referred to other people, but which fitted my relationship with Caroline. Whatever motivated his flippancy was obvious: he wanted to find out how I was faring with Caroline. And that was the last thing he was going to get from me.

Since taking Caroline into my custody, (remember we weren't legally married), a number of events had followed one another. Firstly, she had a problem in coping with the transitional situation. For instance, her soft stomach couldn't digest the kind of food that our financial status provided. This was to be expected, taking into consideration that she had been brought up on exotic dishes and had had no

opportunity of mixing with the lesser natives whose stomachs could digest anything softer than a stone. Her delicate backbone couldn't bear a jar of water. Unlike the other rural women who had grown up sharing the work with donkeys, she had grown up sharing the comfort of her father's wealth.

My mother accorded us all the help she could. 'Give her time,' she would tell me when Caroline was in difficulty. 'It takes time for a river to change its course.'

Another problem was language. As stated before, Caroline had grown up speaking English as her mother tongue. It was in her system and cumbersome to change. Once too often, she would speak to mother in English unaware that the old woman was deaf to that language. Mother would laugh it off and sometimes mimic her jokingly.

There was a moment of laughter when she caught a cat stealing milk. 'You because!' she shouted at the cat.

'Why do you call a cat 'because?'' I asked with laughter.

'That's the word Caroline uses when she's angry,' she said innocently. As far as mother was concerned, the word 'because' was a kind of curse.

But we were all wearing masks to hide our inner feelings. Caroline was only pretending to be one of us. During her unguarded moments, I saw her brooding. She slept late and often stirred restlessly in bed till dawn. I saw pity and not love in her eyes.

I was living beyond my means. Although Caroline seemed to be becoming assimilated into the new environment, it was going to take time before she could chew a plateful of grains and call it a meal. My pitiful earnings were hardly enough to maintain her

previous style of life.

I wanted to make her happy; to make her feel secure and proud of the man she had chosen for a husband; a man who was supposed to be her servant; yet a man for whom she had renounced her privileges.

It dawned on me that I was developing into another self. My conscience was evolving into another being; the conscience of a man over-reaching himself. I started to feel hatred for everything around me: the slums, the jiggers, the rats, the workshop and everything else that reminded me of what I was.

Before I met Caroline, I had never dreamt of achieving anything beyond a bicycle and probably a tin-roofed slum. Now I was thinking of cars, bungalows, servants and whatever else Caroline missed by changing sides. She had already instilled ambitions into me. But I didn't have the vaguest idea of which direction to go in or where to start the get-rich campaign. It occurred to me that I had no brains. Yes, God didn't give me the brains for this kind of challenge. I was only a chicken-brained fluke!

'You are growing thin, Caroline,' I said one evening. She was reading while I was staring absent-mindedly at some map drawings.

'Don't let that bother you,' she said. 'I have several tough situations to cope with; my disgruntled parents, my studies, the pregnancy and the change of climate. Time will overcome all.'

'A long time,' I said.

'Not so long. My examination is due in two months. That will cancel out one problem. Three months after that, the baby will come; that cancels out the second problem. After that, my parents will have cooled down and it will be the right time to patch up the differences. I've got a feeling that

Already my mother is dearly missing me.'

'Do you expect them to change their attitude towards us?'

'One day they will. Don't forget I am their only daughter.'

The sorrowful note in her voice betrayed her feelings. I now realized that she wasn't feeling the same way as when she had first arrived. She was in a dilemma. I was to love her, but she needed security which only her parents could provide.

'Supposing your parents changed their attitude towards us, what is the best you can expect from them?'

'They would recognize us and most likely help us. For instance, my father could help me get a good job after my examinations. He could also use his influence and secure you a good job.'

All that was possible if Kahuthu made it so. If you are related to big fish like Kahuthu, you don't have to carry education certificates with you. All you have to do is walk into an office and start working. Duncan, for instance, was a semi-illiterate. But since he was a first cousin to a famous director, he was made a Sales Manager with a big firm. You should have heard him on the phone: 'Harrow, thales manija thpeaking . . .'

But the relationship between Kahuthu and me was not on that scale. Ours was a cat-and-mouse business. Instead of expecting help from him, I expected destruction. Till now, the possibility of revenge was not to be disregarded. Protection by law is not something to rely on if you have a conflict with an influential man.

'I am thinking of resigning from this profession,' I said suddenly.

'And do what?' Caroline queried.

'Anything else more profitable.'

'Such as what?'

'Trading with agricultural products. Somebody told me that the tomato business is booming. John Nyanya did it for only six months. Now he drives a Peugeot 404.'

'Whatever is your choice is my choice,' she said.

'I'll start it tomorrow.'

She was obviously startled by my quick decision, but she neither objected nor recommended.

Zakayo wasn't surprised when I told him of my intention to cancel the partnership.

'What are you planning to do next?' he enquired.

I told him.

'This is a free country,' he said with a voice full of pity. 'Who knows, maybe that is your channel of success. With me, I'll keep on with this job. You never know what is coming. For instance, Joseph was a carpenter like me. Yet, he was later to become the father of Jesus.'

I laughed. 'If you think Jesus will be born of a carpenter again, it won't happen here. This is not Bethlehem and certainly not Nazareth.'

'So what do you suggest I do, transfer my business to Bethlehem?'

'If you can. At the rate the Jews and the Arabs are killing one another, the demand for coffins must be tremendous. But you'll have to look after yourself because you might end up in a coffin yourself.'

'I'll miss you Chuma.'

'I'll pray for you Zakayo.'

'What will you say in your prayers?'

'I'll pray for cholera to come to this part of the country. When that killing disease comes, you can be

sure of making at least ten coffins a day.'

'Don't pray for that. You seem to forget that your family lives in this part of the country. If cholera comes here, it won't choose.'

Chapter Seven

Karina market is a good place if you are a pickpocket. Saturday is the major market day when farmers from all over Mathana Division assemble to convert their sweat into money. All roads leading to the market are crammed with traffic: women plodding with heavy loads on their backs, men pedalling their bicycles, donkeys farting as they drag loaded carts, a stupid goat leading its owner to the livestock market yard, thinking that it is being taken to green pasture and so on.

Following the wise advice of John Nyanya, the man who claimed to have bought a Peugeot 404 through the tomato business, I embarked on the trade. It required tolerance and patience. Above all, I had to bear mixing with women who were the main suppliers of tomatoes, argue with them and participate in their gossip. In the open market, rain was our chief customer.

I swore to see it out and ignore the peculiar environment and company. According to Kiragu, the minimum profit per day was not less than a hundred shillings after buying several crates of tomatoes at a distributor's price and selling them at a wholesaler's or retailer's price. Working on those figures, I thus

concluded that I could make over a thousand shillings profit within a month. That was enough for me and Caroline.

But as it was the rainy season when all the farmers grew tomatoes, the market was tomato-red. They were far in excess of demand. Some were even left to rot in the market yard after sales deteriorated.

The prosperous customers were rich people from big towns, who came with their lorries and proudly examined the crates of tomatoes on display. It took more than a bribe to make those big bellies buy your tomatoes.

'These are fresh from the garden,' a seller would shout to a merchant. The merchant would stand, arms akimbo, look down at the seller and mention the price with no option to bargain. A short argument would follow and the merchant would threaten to move on if he couldn't buy the goods at his price. Rather than wait until the tomatoes rotted, the seller would yield and sell them at a give-away price. The merchants were taking advantage of the surplus production of tomatoes. They didn't give a damn about the poor farmer who had sweated while tilling the garden or the poor seller who laboured to bring the products to the market. It was a man-eat-man business.

I realized with disgust that Nyanya had deceived me. The tomato business was not that profitable, no. You can't buy a Peugeot 404 with tomato money. Nyanya had either stolen that car, or sold some other type of tomatoes. Not pink tomatoes.

After three full market days of shouting 'fresh tomatoes!' and getting very little out of it, I gave up the business. Mixing with women and arguing with tomato merchants was going to get me nowhere.

I wanted money. Big money.

For the next few days, I walked the streets of the small town like a lost dog looking for its master. I surveyed all possible ways of making good money. I interviewed everybody who seemed to have a secret of making money.

'This is not a bad business,' Kago the shoe-shiner told me. 'But for an ambitious man like you, I'd not encourage you to be a shoe-shiner. Men are not millipedes.'

'What do you mean by that?' I asked.

'Do you know what a millipede is?' he asked quizzically.

'Yes.'

'How many legs has a millipede?'

'I don't know.'

'According to what the teacher told us, a millipede has a million legs. That is why it is called millipede, short for million legs.'

I couldn't comprehend what the joke was about.

'What has this business got to do with millipedes?'

Kago laughed loudly. 'What I was trying to tell you is there aren't many shoes to be polished in this small town. If men were millipedes, each man would wear a million shoes. With so many shoes to polish, a shoe-shine boy would be a millionaire in a day. But then, men are not and will never be millipedes. So there is no chance of a shoe-shiner becoming a millionaire.'

I laughed heartily.

'That is not all,' Kago went on. 'Once you become a shoe-shiner, you have to put up with all kinds of shit. There are customers who want you to lick their shoes if the brush fails to make them gleam like the moon. Then there are the women; thank God

that a woman has never sat before you to have her shoes polished. The way they sit on the stool. You can't avoid the temptation to look up their thighs. While one eye looks at the brush, the other eye stealthily explores the thighs of the customer. I can tell you what kind of knickers my women customers wear.'

'Is that great?' I asked amusedly.

'If it is great to my eyes, that's enough. What amuses the eyes amuses the body.'

That was Kago the shoe-shiner. The man who knew more shoes than faces and more about knickers than legs.

In order to kill time, I associated with small-time businessmen. The idea was not to gain anything from them, I was just curious to know how and why they liked their unyielding occupations. Maybe they could influence me into accepting what Fate had given me and stop the craving for what was beyond my reach.

Muchomba the hand-cart pusher had something to tell me.

'It is very hard to be a cart-pusher. Very interesting too. A cart-pusher does the job of ten people at the same time: he is the engine, the front wheels (if the cart has only two rear wheels), the accelerator, the brakes, the horn and all the other ingredients that make up a moving machine. One advantage of this business is that it makes your muscles so hard that no dog can bite you and not see a dentist. The only trouble is when you want to take a woman. She'll call you a stone.'

That was Muchomba the *mkokoteni* man. According to my judgement, he should have been employed by Car and General. He could have shown them how to make a car with brakes, accelerator, engine, horn,

and steering wheel all in one piece.

Why couldn't I take life like those people? Why did I want to be rich overnight?

I was ambitious. I wanted to be even with Kahuthu. I wanted to drive a car so that he could see me. I wanted to own a bungalow like the one he lived in. I wanted to prove to him that I wasn't the kind of excreta he thought I was. Had he bribed God to be what he was? Hadn't he a pendulum like me, red blood like me and all?

Money money, oh money, where are you hiding?

At about the time I was on the verge of going crazy, a sympathizer asked me if I would mind working in a pub. It looked hard work, but right then I had no choice but to take whatever position that offered a means of livelihood.

The sympathizer was a plump tycoon called Mundia. He owned three pubs and a number of shops.

Mundia was illiterate. He relied on his employees to do the accounting for him. He had a way of detecting a cheat. If you grew a tummy like him, he concluded that you were helping yourself to his money. He couldn't imagine how any of his workers could grow a tummy out of the little pay that he gave them at the end of the month. So, when one of his counter-men grew a tummy, he was sacked and the position was vacant. I filled the vacancy.

Pako Pako Bar and Restaurant was the simplest place to find and the easiest place to get lost in. Situated near the outskirts of the small town, the location was suitable for adulterers and small crooks who infested the town like bees in a hive.

The inside was typical of any other pub in the urban areas. Hanging on the dirty wall was a piece of torn carton which served as the menu. It was headed;

Price list, and footnoted *No Krendit, for Krendit comes tomorrow.*

It was easy to find your way to the toilets because all you had to do was follow the foul smell which penetrated into the bar. Inside the toilets was what looked like a private parliament as well as an information bureau. Inscribed on the walls were signs and words referring to certain politicians and harlots. They read: *Makena has been . . . ed by a dog*. *Kioko's thing is as long as a Donkey's: Vote for K . . .* (obscene word).

Oh man! Have you ever worked behind the counter of a crazy pub? If you haven't heed my words; be gentle to the counterman. It requires more than a genius to work behind a pub counter.

Dealing with drunkards and money at the same time is not that simple. You have to put up with all kinds of characters who will call you names and toss you about until your mind rings as if you have bells inside your head. Some don't want to pay and now and again, you won't know who has paid and who has not. If at any time you count the daily takings and get the correct amount, you are fit to be a computer.

I had to exert all my willpower to manage the crazy job. Fortunately, as I've told you, Mundia the proprietor didn't take accounts seriously. As long as I didn't grow a tummy, he was satisfied with my work.

After completing one month, I started having funny ideas. I thought of taking advantage of Mundia's weakness. I started by misappropriating five shillings a day, then ten, fifteen . . . the metamorphosis of a thief! I became so artful that whenever Mundia doubted a counting, I had a solution ready. I avoided buying a new shirt or anything that might make him suspicious. When my stomach was full with

food, I suppressed the bulge lest Mundia might think that I was growing a tummy.

Meanwhile Caroline was still struggling to fit herself into her new environment. Her stomach was now full, short of two months to give birth. That rendered her more delicate than ever. She had to have new clothes to fit her new size. Though she didn't mind wearing Jinja fabrics, I thought it unpleasant seeing her dressed like a peasant girl. I wanted her to be proud of me; to keep her above the standard of my average means. To do so, I had to extract more from Mundia's fortune. This time, I had big ideas.

I must have been stupidly unreasonable to plot such a give-away fraud. But I was convinced that I could get away with it. My daily pocketing reached over thirty shillings. Mundia started speculating why business was slackening.

One morning, he came with two men who also owned bars but never trusted the accounts to their employees. I was made to understand that they were going to audit the accounts dating from my first day of work.

I suppressed the fear in me and answered all their questions. It took nearly the whole day to go through the documents. When at last they left, I could tell that they weren't satisfied with my explanations. They exchanged furtive glances. Mundia's chinky eyes were wide open. I didn't like the look on his face.

I was kept in suspense until evening. That was when I learnt that something was going to happen. Mundia had already made up his mind to sack me. He didn't tell me because he feared that I might make a last snatch. I didn't even know whether he was going to sue me in court. All I knew was that he was waiting for closing time to come and then break the

news to me. I learned all this from the person who was to take over from me.

I was disturbed. I didn't want to lose such a money-making career. Once he sacked me, I would be helpless. There was Caroline to think of and we were in a situation where money was badly needed.

I did some quick thinking. If I was to be sacked, I had to have some money to keep us going until another opportunity showed up. To have that money, I had to swindle Mundia for the last time. This time it had to be a large amount, worth the risk, and capable of meeting my immediate financial commitments. The risk was obvious, but the pressure was critical.

I brooded on the possibilities of facing the law. It would be a straightforward case. Stealing by servant. Where could I hide?

At present I couldn't think of a place. But I convinced myself that the world was wide. I could always hide somewhere until I bumped into another opportunity. By then, Mundia and the law would have forgotten the case.

At nine, the bar was full. The worst thing was that Mundia had decided to hang around instead of going to his other bars. The reason was obvious, but that wasn't going to stop me effecting my plot.

I counted all the money in the till. I had so far received nine hundred and fifty shillings. That was nothing compared to the risk, but anything was better than nothing.

Keeping my eyes on Mundia and the people around me, I stealthily tucked the notes in my jacket pockets. When I was satisfied, I made for the back door, pretending that I was going for a short call.

I just managed to reach the back yard when I heard Mundia shout at me from behind. I stood still, my

legs too weak to run and my heart drumming.

'Since when did you start putting money in your pockets instead of keeping it in the cash-box?' Mundia asked ironically.

Without a warning, Mundia smacked me in the face so hard that I lost my balance and reeled backwards. Very soon, I was surrounded by a crowd.

It was a straightforward case. I had been caught red-handed. I pleaded guilty and tensely waited for the magistrate to pass the sentence. He gave me eight months and pointed out that I would have to pay back Mundia his money when I came out of jail. It sounded a lenient sentence.

Outside the court, my relatives and sympathizers watched me being escorted to the Black Maria. Some tried to utter words of comfort while some stared at me helplessly. Caroline was weeping with her face turned away from me. I begged the policeman who was guarding me to let me have a last word with her.

'Chuma, why did you do it?' she whimpered.

I looked into her swollen eyes and felt a pang of bitterness to think that I would not see her for months . . . if I ever saw her again. I was too ashamed to answer her. The policeman became impatient and started pushing me. I pleaded with him to wait.

'What shall I do now?' she asked in dismay.

I said, 'Caroline, forgive me. I did what I did because I wanted to make you happy. Remember me while I am in jail. I'll come back . . .' What could I promise her from jail!

I felt an urge to break free from the policeman and run . . . but how far could I go while I was handcuffed.

'I suggest you try to make peace with your parents while I am away,' I said.

She looked at me questioningly. She was wondering why I was making such a suggestion. Before she could answer, the policeman whisked me away.

Cruel world! What could I tell her? What could I do when the law stood between her and me? How could I comfort her as she cried watching me being escorted into the prisoner's van?

I had no tears to cry with or words to speak. My mind was a mess of hopelessness. I blamed my mother for having brought me into the cruel world. She should have aborted me and saved me from the sufferings I had had.

Before the policeman closed the van door, I waved at Caroline and the other group. They waved back at me, wishing me a happy rotting in jail.

Chapter Eight

Briefly, that was why I was in jail. The house for all. Away from the reality of life. Where the daily routine is well-defined.

'Why were you brought here?' asks a prisoner.

'Because I made love to a chicken. My chicken.'

And we all laugh. Pickpockets, doctors, advocates, ministers, thieves and all. We all join in the laughter.

'How is it like, making love to a chicken?' asks the doctor.

'Like making love to any woman with wings and feathers.'

More laughter.

'Puah!' exclaims the engineer. 'I'll never eat chicken again!'

'Then you'd better never eat any meat,' says another prisoner. 'There are people who make love to goats and cows. How do you know if the meat you ate last came from that district where they make love to cows?'

'Change the topic,' commands the pickpocket. The eyes are turned on him. 'Why did you come here?' asks the minister.

'Because I pickpocketed a lady.'

'What was the prize?'

'A roll of used Tampax.'

And we all laugh. This routine helps to cure the prison ulcer. It distracts the minister from the memories of his lost dignities, the lawyer and the judge from humiliation, the thief from the police, the lifer from nightclubs. It distracted me from Caroline.

'What do we have for supper?'

'Like yesterday. Half-cooked beans and posho.'

'I'm hungry.' That comes from the former company director who until recently couldn't touch the prison food. Now he loves it as much as he loved the barbecue they serve at the Hilton Hotel.

Of course it had taken time to settle down in this lively house called prison. My one resolution was to bury the past, live in the present, and march into the future a new man. I had already concluded that Caroline was the wrong shoe for my foot. It had been an accident. One of those tricks of Destiny.

Out of sight, out of mind. It was now my chance to shake her out of my mind. Time I recrossed the social bridge back to where I belonged. Where Creation had seen fit to put me.

But I was playing a losing game. Every time I

thought about her, a horrible emptiness descended on me. I had already received information from mother that Caroline had gone back to her parents. That I had expected. No parents, no matter how offended would refuse to take back their defiant daughter. It was obvious that she had to seek reunion and mercy at such a time of distress and hopelessness. Her love for me had made the impossible possible. We had lived together, tied in a strange string of love. Now that I was no more, her parents were her dearest possession.

Three things kept me wondering. Was it all over for us? Had the new turn of events cancelled all that we had created together. And finally, what had happened to the unborn baby? She was seven months pregnant when we parted. I wouldn't be surprised if something had been done to get rid of the unborn baby. I couldn't imagine Kahuthu allowing her to deliver a baby who was fathered by a beggar. It would contaminate his highly-bred family!

Thinking these things over while I waited for my release, I realized what a hard time I had ahead of me. I wasn't sure of what I was going to do next. I dreaded the idea of going home to be the target for accusing fingers. Everybody in the neighbourhood now knew what had happened. I was branded a thief. A woman had made me steal.

But on the other hand, I was anxious to know what had happened at the last minute. Maybe Caroline had left a message for me. Only I couldn't understand why she didn't write to me. I couldn't understand why nobody knew what had happened to the unborn baby. But whichever way I looked at it, a reunion between Caroline and me was unthinkable. I doubted if she would ever talk to me after what had

happened. Who wanted a thief? Secondly, I suspected that by this time she had woken from the world of folly and realized the mistake she had made by loving a man a thousand staircases below her class.

There was always something to look forward to. New faces of new prisoners. Heated debates and stories as prisoners related their personal experiences. Our ward was composed of real characters, ranging from a famous politician to a tramp. The highlight of the current topics of discussion was the forthcoming general election. We got material from the fresh prisoners who had witnessed the struggle for power in the constituencies.

'I bet that stupid Minister will be returned to Parliament,' a new arrival predicted. 'His rivals have already been crushed into powder. One of them was found floating in the river.'

'You mean that Minister with a barrel belly like he had kwashiokor?'

'Yes.'

'Shit! Whenever I see his photograph in the newspapers, I tear it off and use it as toilet paper!'

'It beats me why everybody wants to go to Parliament. Take for instance, Daniel Tama. He squandered all his money on the campaign. Somebody advised him to use the harlots as his main campaign tool. He seemed to forget that harlots go for erection and not for election.'

Laughter.

'I understand he became a mental case after he lost the election.'

'Yes. He talks to trees and stones. Somebody caught him addressing trees in the forest: 'Brethren, trees, I hate my own kind, the human beings. I love you, dear trees and my wish is to be of service to you.'

Vote for me and I'll make sure you have enough water and that nobody turns you into charcoal.

'Do the trees answer him?'

'Yes. When the wind makes the branches creak, he thinks that they are applauding him. Poor Daniel.'

Amongst my closest comrades was Kisinga, a young man with an oversized head as if the Creator had confusedly planted the wrong head on him. He called himself Kisinga to sound like Kissinger, the famous American globe-trotter who earned a reputation by separating the warring Jews and Arabs. But unlike Henry Kissinger, my friend Kisinga could not separate two fighting cocks. All he did was talk and brag. He was a gangster, but this time he had come to jail charged with assault.

There was something about him that I liked. He could be a braggart, but had the talent of exposing his morals to my advantage.

'I was a good citizen until they broke my heart,' he told me one evening. 'I was a cop, serving the public. Then that day came when they sacked me because I refused to favour an aggressive rich brute against a helpless innocent native.'

'And that turned you into a gangster?' I asked.

'Yes. I found it was the only way I could get even with the authorities.'

'But you are bound to be the loser in the long run,' I observed.

Everybody else in the ward had gone to sleep, leaving the two of us chatting.

'Maze,' (that was his usual way of addressing somebody), 'I refused to be tossed about in the name of good citizenship. I refused to be a vulture, scavenging the remains of rich men's exploits.'

'Take me for instance; I was a policeman. Dedicating my life to the public and the state. I was transferred to the frontier to face constant dangers. See what I got at last? Dismissal and loss of benefits.

'Then I was in the country, struggling to make ends meet. So one day I asked myself: if I had risked my life for my own country, why shouldn't I risk my life for my own self? After all, what comes first, my country's problems or mine? Why should I fight for somebody else while my house is invaded?'

His morals had inspirations which later took effect on me. I was in the process of crossing another bridge. This time not a social bridge, but a society bridge. From law-abiding to lawlessness.

Time dragged by, each day marking a milestone towards a blank destination. Relatives visited now and then, but we never discussed Caroline. By now she had almost escaped my mind. The chord that had held me to her was gradually slackening. Somehow I thought it was good that things had happened the way they did. We had drifted apart by means of the same odd circumstances that had brought us together. Now the flame was dying. The ember was still glowing with memory. But only Heaven knew if the glow would smoulder into another flame once I was out of jail.

It was sheer coincidence that Kisinga was released on the same day as I. It was a piece of luck for me as I badly needed a comrade of his kind. I didn't know who among my old friends would still keep up their friendship after what had happened.

As the bread-shaped bus roared towards the countryside, a choir of Akolinos wailed above the motor. They were singing something about life after death.

'Shit!' Kisinga rattled. 'The way they talk about

heaven! You would think they have been there and come back alive.'

'Don't you believe in life after death?' I asked for the sake of joining in the conversation.

'I believe in death after life,' Kisinga said.

'That is paganism,' I objected.

'I'd rather be a pagan than a pretender,' he said. 'Know what? Most of the religious believers are natural failures. People who tried to make it in life and got disappointed. Defeated in the real world, they reverted to another world which only exists in their imagination.'

'So you think there is no heaven and hell?' I asked.

'We have both of them. Right on earth. For instance, we have just come from hell. We have paid already for the sins we committed.'

I thought about myself. Kisinga was wrong. I had just come out of a state jail and was now walking into the world jail.

'But don't you think there is the final heaven and hell?' I pursued.

He thought for a while. 'Well if there is a final heaven, it'll be underpopulated. If only Catholics will go to heaven, then I'll team up with the other Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and all. And even then, not all Catholics will go to heaven. They say not a speck of sin will enter heaven. Show me one single person who doesn't have a speck of sin!'

I gave up the argument but Kisinga pushed on.

'I sometimes try to imagine what happens when one dies. Where does the soul go? I tend to believe what an old friend told me. He was a science student who professed to know much more than his tutor.

'He used to lecture to me, vomiting some scientific terminology. Matter is neither created nor destroyed.

For instance, when you boil water, it turns into steam. You haven't destroyed the water because the same steam can be condensed into the same water.'

'What has that to do with life and death?' I queried.

'The same process,' he said. 'My friend was convinced that life is like steam. It evaporates upon death and reforms elsewhere.'

'I don't get it.'

'Well, this is what I mean. When you die, your soul goes into another being. Not necessarily another human being. The process is called reincarnation. Re-birth of the human soul into another physical body.'

'What a crazy belief!'

'It's true,' he said firmly. I thought he was nuts.

'You can't be sure because you never proved it,' I challenged.

'I think I proved it.'

I was now doubting his sanity.

'I had a friend called Musa who died of sexual exhaustion,' Kisinga went on undauntedly. 'Shortly after his death, I noticed a strange similarity between him and a dog in the neighbourhood.'

I raised my hand to stop him going on. He ignored my gesture. 'This dog kept looking at me every time I passed by. A couple of times it nearly followed me but I repulsed it. Then I had a dream in which I saw Musa and the dog merged together in a ghostly singleness. Then I knew why the dog had been behaving so peculiarly. It was poor Musa's soul which had been reincarnated into the dog's flesh.'

'It was only a dream,' I pointed out. 'Do you take all your dreams seriously?'

'I discovered it wasn't just a dream the next morning,' he said. 'I walked over to the dog and called:

"Musa". The dog responded with a wag of his tail and a sorrowful howl. I knew right then that it was Musa trapped inside there. He had had his punishment all right. In the former life, he had always behaved like a dog. Exhausting himself with sex. And now he was a dog.'

I sat back and sighed with amusement. Kisinga had a way of keeping the time moving. It helped to kill the suspense which engulfed me as I retraced my way home. I looked out of the window and scanned the looming landscapes as the bus tore through the countryside.

'In other words, the soul enters another being and imitates the former being?' I asked, to keep the conversation going.

'Briefly,' he said. 'A president who grabs everything he wants becomes a pig in the next life. A fool becomes a sheep, a thief a rat, a braggart a peacock and so on. But the souls may reincarnate into superior or inferior beings depending on the behaviour of the former host. A humble beggar might be reborn a king and vice versa. The soul can also fly and regeminate in another corner of the world. Today you are Chuma, next time Patel or Peng Hua or Smith Johnson or Franco Gama . . .'

I noticed that the bus had pulled into the lay-by where I was to alight. Kisinga was going further on and I knew how badly I was going to miss him. He had already told me how I could find him. We shook hands and I alighted. 'Expect me any time,' I said.

'I'll be standing by the window waiting for you,' he said heartily.

At home, I was received like a prince returning from exile. The first question I asked was how Caroline had left.

'She wept for a week after they took you away,' mother said sadly. 'We tried all we could to comfort her but to no avail. Without you, she was no more one of us. I'll admit we were relieved when she decided to go back to her parents. She wasn't sure her parents would accept her back and none of us dared go there to confirm her re-admission or rejection. When she didn't come back, we assumed that she had been accepted.'

A notion hit my mind. What if Caroline had been rejected by her parents? The chances of suicide could not be overlooked.

'You just assumed that she made peace with her parents and left it at that?' I was fuming. 'She could be dead for all you know.'

Mother looked at me helplessly. 'Caroline wasn't the type that commits suicide. She had iron will-power.'

'Not that we hated Caroline,' my brother joined in. 'She was nice and tolerant, but see what happened. If you really love her, the best you can do for her is to leave her alone.'

'If you must have a wife,' mother said, 'look for a girl of your own kind. Get yourself a *calico* (typical girl).'

I listened to their opinions and decided they were right. Caroline was not of my kind. The best I could do for her was to leave her alone until a miracle made me her equal. And when would that be?

I was fooling myself. I couldn't for a single moment get her out of my mind. It isn't natural for a man to cancel the existence of a woman he loves so much.

Her clothes and books were as she had left them. They were now my souvenirs. Their presence in the

room gave me a feeling that she was still around. Now and then, I would open the wooden box I had made for her and stare at the left property with a painful heart. At night, I would search for her in the bed, miss her, and open the box to look at her clothes.

For six consecutive nights, I searched restlessly for an answer to my woes. I was torn between two opposing forces: to go and look for her, or to wait for time to cancel out my love for her. I didn't get anywhere. I started blaming Creation. Did God make man in His own image? Then why were some people more equal than others? If God had not discriminated against me in wealth distribution, I complained, what was happening wouldn't have happened.

The meek will inherit the Earth. But when? After they are dead or downtrodden by Kahuthunites!

I recited a collection of poems which Kisinga had taught us in jail:

*It is easier for an elephant
To enter the hole of a mouse
Than for a poor coward
To enter the kingdom of money.*

That was Kisinga the gangster-cum-poet. I was beginning to miss him. And in the middle of the night, I made up my mind to go to Nairobi the next morning. I was going to look for Kisinga and Caroline.

Chapter Nine

According to reliable information, Kisinga had gone to the Cameo Cinema. I arrived there shortly before 3 p.m., so that I could be present when the first session ended.

The place was congested with patrons who formed a long queue stretching from the cinema to the street. As the posters indicated, the name of the film was 'Language of Love,' a Swedish Production of pure sex. It was alleged that the film tended to offend women and heat men's blood.

I proved this to be true when the patrons filed out of the exit on to the streets. Their expressions were indicative of their physical feelings. Women walked silently and apparently scared of men. Men seemed to be in a hurry to go home and repeat what they had seen being done in the movie. Some of them walked with their hands in their trouser pockets to restrain their stubborn pendulums from bulging out.

I waited on the pavement while people came out. Then I saw him. He was in the company of three girls.

'Hey Maze,' he greeted me cheerfully. 'How did you know that I was here?'

'I followed your scent,' I said.

'What happened? I thought I was to see you a week ago. I have been leaving messages for you at Kilo's Bar every day.'

I explained to him how I had had a battle with my family.

'All the same,' he said, 'meet my women.'

He introduced me to the three women who all looked like professional prostitutes. I shook hands

with them politely.

'I am a polygamist,' he blurted out. 'However, I can always surrender one of my wives to a friend like you. Which one do you fancy?'

I looked at the women stupidly. I didn't like any of them, but I didn't like to make it obvious.

'How about this virgin?' He touched a full-bellied bulldozer wearing a thick Afro wig and all kinds of make-up. She looked pregnant though she wasn't.

I grinned at the offer.

'Or this one,' he patted another equally ugly swinger. 'Look at her teeth. They are as white as tapeworms.'

They all laughed off the joke. It amused them even to be insulted by Kisinga.

'They are all very good,' I said.

We started walking down the street, the women leading the way. Apparently, they had an agenda for the day and Kisinga was their chief guest, or host, whichever way you look at it!

As we lagged behind the women, I briefly told Kisinga what had happened since we had parted.

'So you have come to stay?' he asked.

'Yes, and also to try to contact Caroline.'

'How will you do it?' he asked. 'You might find yourself in another fix.'

'I have taken that into consideration,' I said without conviction. 'I have been trying to formulate a way to go there without causing any embarrassment, but at the last minute I was defeated. I have an idea, but I'll need your help.'

'How?' he didn't sound happy. He couldn't understand why a man should be so crazy about a particular woman.

I explained. 'Kahuthu has a young boy who is at

school in Nairobi. He is about ten years old and I think he can be of some help. The idea is for you and I to go to the school at closing time. I'll stay at a safe distance while you question the boy.'

'Why not you?' he queried.

'Because I don't want the boy to recognize me. If he does, he'll surely tell his father and you know what would follow.'

'And how do I approach him?' he asked.

'First, call him by his name and fake a story about knowing his father. Remind him of a day you had visited his parents. Tell him you own a motor-bike because he was, and I think he still is crazy about motor-bikes. He will beg you to visit them so that you can give him a ride on your motor-bike.'

'Then what?' Kisinga said laughing.

'Then mention Caroline. Ask him whether she is still at school. For heavens sake, let that be the most important part of the conversation.'

Kisinga thought for a while. His eyes were on the three women who were still leading the way. He didn't like the idea of parting with his women to help a friend who was becoming a bother.

'But how do you know that the boy won't call me names and provoke me?' he asked.

'I bet he won't offend you if you handle him properly. But there is one thing you have to take care of: the school closes at four. About ten minutes later, a driver goes to pick up the boy. You'll have to rush the conversation, or you'll be interrupted.'

He didn't say anything. That meant he was offering his help reluctantly.

As it was already 3.30 p.m. we had only thirty minutes to reach the school. Kisinga walked fast and caught up with the women.

'I'll meet you at the usual place in two hours time,' he said apologetically. 'I have urgent business to perform right now.'

The women stared at him, obviously disappointed. Then they eyed me the way a chicken would eye a cock which has robbed them of a worm.

'Let's go,' Kisinga said to me before the women could raise any complaints. He had a way of disappointing women just as he had a way of pleasing them.

We reached the school five minutes before closing time. I suggested we walk some distance away from the gate to a vantage point where we could see the children coming out so that I could point Peter out to him.

Shortly, the usual commotion that children make indicated that they were leaving their classrooms. They started running towards the gate, shouting at one another with their boxes clattering loudly.

I scrutinized the boys, one after another. Then I saw Peter.

'There he is,' I told Kisinga, 'the one in a green pullover.'

Kisinga spotted the boy. He slowly walked towards the gate.

I watched tensely as Kisinga approached the boy and started a conversation. Though I was some distance from the gate, I could sense the puzzled expression on the boy's face as he confronted a stranger who claimed to be his father's friend. Kisinga was gesturing with his hands as the boy stared at him. A group of boys joined in, curious to know what was going on between their companion and the stranger.

A few moments later, the boy seemed to be relaxing. He was telling Kisinga something. Then he started

making gestures with his hands. He stretched his hands forward as if riding an imaginary motor-bike. The trick about the motor-bike was working successfully. One of the boys listening to the conversation made a 'brrrrr' noise imitating a motor-bike.

About two minutes later, the boys started dispersing, apparently no longer interested in what Kisinga was asking Peter. Kisinga was now on the point. I could sense a feeling of unease in the boy. He appeared sad, and no longer enthusiastic about the conversation.

As I tensely watched the unmatched pair, a blue Peugeot 504 pulled in and stopped opposite the gate. It was the government vehicle which had always been at Kahuthu's disposal. The chauffeur was the very old man I had known for years.

Without warning, Peter picked up his box and trotted towards the car. Kisinga walked away nonchalantly. He waited until the car pulled out and then came towards me.

'Sorry Maze,' he said. 'Your wonderful princess is out of bounds.'

My heart shrank. 'What do you mean?'

'The girl was taken away as soon as she arrived. Peter hasn't seen her since.'

I felt like crying. 'No clue?'

'He has a clue all right. One day, he overheard his father speaking on the phone. It was a trunk call from Mombasa. He mentioned Caroline.'

'That is all?'

'That is all.'

We walked towards the city centre.

'What are you going to do now?' he asked.

'I don't know.'

'You are not thinking of going to Mombasa?'

'I don't know.'

He looked at me with concern. 'Listen Maze, Caroline is like any other woman except that she is a higher class. Why don't you get her out of your system and live peacefully?'

I didn't answer.

'If you are thinking of going to Mombasa to look for her, you are fooling yourself. Mombasa is not like a kitchen. It might take you the rest of your life to trace her. After all, what will you do if you do succeed in finding her?'

'Please my heart.'

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently. 'It is your business.'

We reached the city centre and walked down the crowded streets. We turned into a side street and entered a large half-lit room. It took a couple of seconds for my eyes to adjust themselves to the sudden change.

It was a private drinking place, with piles of beer crates scattered all over. It was furnished with worn out sofas and old chairs. A strong foul smell of sweat and alcohol hung in the room like a fog. A score of drinkers were sitting in various positions: some on the sofas, others on the chairs, and some on empty beer crates. Among them were the three women that Kisinga had taken to the movie.

The drinkers gave us a casual look, recognized Kisinga and then lost interest in us. Kisinga briefly saluted them, then led me to a less congested corner and offered me a crate to sit on.

'This is our heaven,' he said. 'There is less noise and less interference.'

We settled on the crate.

'What will you have?' Kisinga asked.

'Fanta.'

Kisinga was astonished. 'You are not a baby, Maze.' Then addressing the waiter, he said, 'Give him a Tusker.'

Though I had served on a bar counter, I had never come to like beer. One day, I had taken a couple of bottles and got so intoxicated that I mistook a seventy-year-old woman for a teenager. I hence decided to be a teetotaller.

But now I was in a fix. In company where sobriety was associated with juvenility I now had to break my vow, at least to please Kisinga.

'All right,' I yielded.

The place was one of those mushrooming off-licence dens. The beer was cheap and police surprises few. One could drink at any hour of the day and doze off on the sofas. It was the right place for people like Kisinga who had little to do all day.

Kisinga took out a roll of bhang and smoked it casually. Nobody looked interested or worried. They all seemed to know one another and were bound together by singleness of purpose. I instantly knew I was in the wrong company.

'Don't panic,' Kisinga said to me. 'Once you are in the place, you are above law.' He passed the drug to another person. A heated conversation ensued.

'Are you sure there is that much money in that place?' Kisinga asked.

'The cashier himself told me,' replied the other man.

'Then we could do the job this Saturday.'

'We have already agreed on that. We'll walk in before they close for the day.'

'One gun is enough.'

'No. We need an extra one to take care of the guard.'

Kisinga turned his head and grinned at me importantly. 'Pardon me,' he said, 'I should have introduced you to my friends.' He started the introductions. 'The man at the corner is called Azu . . . short for Athumani.' I nodded in acknowledgement. 'And that is Kipchoge.' He pointed at another man who was resting his head on the lap of one of the three women. The man nodded at me evasively. Kisinga pointed at another man who was dozing with a glass in his hand. 'That is Njagathi. He is named after a lizard because he can climb up a wall in erect posture.'

Njagathi woke up upon hearing his name mentioned. He gave me a brief acknowledgement and went back to sleep. 'See, he has the sense of a lizard.'

'Why climb up walls?' I asked.

'I'll tell you later.'

He pointed at a bearded man who was arguing with one of the women.

'That is Joginder. He is named after the famous East African Safari Rally driver. He can drive across a river without a bridge.'

I was beginning to feel bored.

'And I am Kisinga the Adviser,' he said.

'How about the other people?' I asked.

'Some are strangers like you, but only heroes come to this place. We have a mutual understanding not to ask what one does for a living.'

'So, the people you have shown me are members of your gang?'

'That is a bad word to use. We are all heroes of the 'give the poor man his due' movement. This is our headquarters.'

'And the women?' I asked.

'They are our keepers in times of curfew.'

'Curfew?'

'Yes. When we are hiding from the Pharisees.'

'Pharisees?'

'Yes. The police.'

I sat back and scrutinized the heroes.

Azu the leader was a stocky man with big red eyes and a horrible face. He looked a cool character.

Njagathi was built like his name—a lizard. He was a small man with protruding eyes and coarse hair which stood out like porcupine quills. When he wanted to look at something by his side, he didn't have to turn his head because his protruding eyes could see at an angle of 215 degrees.

Joginder was a short plump man wearing a wild thicket of beard. He only needed a turban and brown polish to make him a genuine Singh.

'These people can't do without me,' Kisinga boasted. 'All the time I was in jail, they did nothing except lose two of our active heroes.'

'What happened?'

'They broke into a shop and stole a number of boxes, thinking that they contained valuables. You know what was inside the boxes? Trash!'

'Then what happened?'

'They didn't go far before the Pharisees confronted them. A battle ensued in which one of the Pharisees shot his own hand and another one shot one of the heroes. Another hero was arrested.'

'Terrible,' I said.

The beer was beginning to take effect on me. My eyesight was blurred and things were revolving. The bulldozer who had looked so ugly before now looked like a beauty queen. She caught me regarding her and smiled proudly. Other than me, nobody else seemed interested in her. She was so ugly that a starving

cannibal would have to get drunk before he ate her.
'What have you been doing since we parted?' I asked Kisinga, to keep the conversation going.
'Light duties,' he said. 'First we do light duties and then a heavy duty.'

'What are the light duties?'

'Making cars blind or crippling them.'

'You mean stealing cars' head-lamps and tyres?'

'Not stealing. Picking.'

The note in his voice indicated that he was beginning to nod off and he didn't want to encourage further conversation. That was too bad for me because I wanted to keep my mind busy so as to distract it from Caroline. And when Kisinga leaned against a crate and closed his eyes to sleep, I suddenly felt lonely. Caroline came to mind again.

What was she doing in Mombasa, I wondered. Two reasons could account for that. Firstly, Kahuthu had made sure that she was in a place where I could not trace her. Secondly, he had feared that his reputation would be destroyed if people got to know about what had happened to his daughter. The only way to avoid such speculations was to send his daughter away and wait for time to cancel out the unpleasant past. Meanwhile Caroline would forget me and think big.

But what had happened to the baby? Aborted? If not, then where was it? Obviously living with mother.

My mind wondered through various suggestions as to what Caroline could be doing in Mombasa. It was obvious that she wasn't just killing time, doing nothing. Her father must have got her a position. She could be a trainee nurse, a trainee teacher, in a secretarial college or in employment. It was futile looking for her.

But, I thought, if she had a baby, she was living in

a private place. She couldn't live with it in an institution.

As I brooded over the issue looking for an answer, I recalled that Kahuthu had a friend in Mombasa. He used to visit Kahuthu regularly and I had heard them talking about buying a hotel in Mombasa. His name was David something and he was also a senior government official in a Ministry I couldn't recall.

Could Caroline be living with David, I thought? If she had a baby, I reasoned, then she, or the baby, or both, were most likely living with him. But even if she was living with David's family, that was not the solution to her whereabouts. As Kisinga had said Mombasa was not a kitchen. I couldn't stand the suspense. Somehow, sometime, I would look for Caroline. At least to satisfy my curiosity.

'Hey, Kisinga,' Joginder called.

Kisinga stirred, ground his teeth and mumbled, 'What is the time?'

'The government was overthrown while you were asleep.'

Kisinga woke up, rubbed his eyes and yawned.

'Damn cinemas!' he cursed. 'I was dreaming about the cinema I saw today.'

'Language of Love?' said the bulldozer.

'Exactly. I was dreaming that I was bisecting those Swedish girls. Look at my trousers.'

Everybody awake laughed. Kisinga stood up and walked towards the toilets. When he came back, he said, 'I'll first take this friend of mine home then re-join you.'

I stood up, and followed him into the dark outside.

Chapter Ten

The golden sun emerged from the horizon like a raging bonfire. The window of the shack faced east, so that the rays of the rising sun penetrated inside like ghostly spears.

'Chuma,' a silent voice seemed to tell me. 'Look at that sun. How many times has it risen and found you in the same place? How many more times will it rise and find you still at the bottom? Beyond that sun, is Mombasa. That is where your love is hiding. Hiding from you because you are poor, unwanted, and without a future.'

'Look at the sun carefully, every day it rises and sets. It comes to inspect what people have been doing at night. It finds some dead, some born, some sick, some preparing for war, some fighting, some poor and some rich.'

'Chuma, there is always a way out of every mess. It depends on how you plan your way out. Fortune favours the bold. The right place for a coward is in a drain.'

'Chuma, a man has two days: the birth day and the death day. Whether you like it or not, the death day will come. But don't let that happy day find you where you are. Death by a bullet is far more glorious than death in a gutter.'

Am I going crazy, I thought? I was half asleep and half awake. I was reciting Kisinga's daily advice.

Since taking up residence with him, he had been stuffing me with all sorts of advice. So persuasive were his ideas on me that his words lingered in my mind day and night.

A number of things had happened during the last

three weeks.

First, I had become a toper. Kisinga never kept money and beer apart.

He spent money as quickly as he received it. He never minded me bothering him like a parasite. I had to rely on him for all of life's necessities, food, bed, water and women.

I tried to minimize parasitism on him but he wouldn't let me. He would feel offended if I refused beer or declined to join him in women's company. He even paid the love fee for me or offered me his left-overs.

Already, I had established regular visits to a certain Doctor Patel. Two weeks hardly passed without visiting the doctor to do something about a burning pain in my urethra. The doctor seemed to be happy about it. After several visits to his clinic he never bothered to ask me questions. He would grin at me, show me to the couch and prepare his needle. Man! It wasn't the pain down there that made me hate harlots. It was the way Doctor Patel threw his needle at my buttocks. You would think he was playing darts! At that rate of receiving darts, my buttocks would soon look like a dart-board.

Kisinga took everything easy. If three weeks passed without catching the social disease, he would remark: 'Has this leak disappeared from the country?' Whenever he discovered that he was affected, he would grin and say: 'I am afraid of going to the toilets. I have caught a simple cold.'

We were living in a one roomed timber house which Mama Kisinga had kept aside for him. She was the landlady of several shacks on the outskirts of the city. I hardly saw much of her because she spent her days in the market stalls, and her nights with men.

Like mother like son. She never minded what Kisinga was doing or discouraged him. She was proud to be the mother of a gangster.

So far, I had managed to avoid involving myself in the malpractices that Kisinga had been trying to get me into. I remained at home, playing draughts with my neighbour. In the evening or at night, Kisinga would come to boast to me about the great plans for the night. He would take me to a nearby pub, buy me drinks or women and then disappear until the next morning. He would then brief me on the night's operations, usually about how they beat up a watchman, made cars blind and crippled, and so on.

But on this particular day, as I watched the golden streaks of the rising sun, I had a presentiment that something had gone wrong somewhere.

It was now two days since I had seen Kisinga. It wasn't usual for him to stay out that long.

Before leaving, he had told me of some wonderful plans they had had. They were plotting to break into a jewellery shop. According to him, this was going to be the last light duty. They had other plans to conduct a heavy duty, meaning daylight robbery.

Wondering what could have happened to him, I could only think that they hadn't succeeded and were probably in the hands of the law.

I imagined many things: maybe he was in police custody, maybe hiding, or killed.

I didn't want to imagine him killed. He might be a gangster, but he was just too good to die. He was everything to me: a father, a brother, a keeper, a comforter . . . everything. I had come to adore him so much that I would do anything within my capabilities to get him out of a jam. But what could I do for him if he was in the hands of the Law?

I listened to footsteps outside and expected him to come in. When the footsteps faded away, more tension accumulated inside me. I jumped out of bed and opened the window.

For a brief moment, my mind shifted from Kisinga.

Beyond that rising sun in Mombasa. That is where Caroline is hibernating. Hiding or being hidden away from me because I am a lesser native. And to be a higher native I must have money.

I tried to imagine what she was doing at that time of the morning. She is sleeping, her beautiful head lying on a pillow, breathing softly and . . . what? Is she missing me?

No Chuma. If she was missing you, she could at least have written to you while you were in jail.

Maybe she is with another man.

A higher native than you. A man from the privileged class like herself. Maybe a son of a Minister, a clergyman, a tycoon.

No. It can't be. She still loves me, but she has to please her father. She is waiting for me. We shall be reunited. But first, I must have money. Money to make her happy. Money to impress her father. At all costs I must have money! But from where?

I heard footsteps approaching. Then Kisinga appeared at the window. Seeing me standing there, he retreated and nearly took off. Criminals are very impulsive people. They think that everybody in the wrong place at the wrong time is a Pharisee. Kisinga probably mistook me for a Pharisee waiting for him.

'What is the idea of you standing there at this hour?' he cried, short of breath.

'Missing you,' I said, feeling relieved.

'Oh Maze, you nearly made my blood clot. I was

just thinking of a Pharisee waiting for me in a gay corner.'

He was panting as if he had been running.

'Where have you been for two days?' I asked.

'In the bush, making love to animals. It was horrible.'

'What happened?'

'The Pharisees competed with us in a racing rally. They have crucified Joginder.'

I was shocked.

'We broke into a shop and helped ourselves to a number of watches and jewellery. We got into the car with the loot and drove out, but a number of Pharisees in a 999 car chased us and managed to puncture the rear tyres of our car. We all got out and took to our heels, but Joginder lagged behind. He got a hole in his buttocks and pissed blood.'

'Horrible,' I said.

'We ran for miles until the Pharisees lost us. We hid for a day and returned to the City last night.'

'And the loot?'

'We left it in the car. You can't run fast with a load on your back. However, we had also emptied the safe and pocketed several reds (hundreds).'

He took out a roll of notes and smiled.

'After this, we are taking a holiday. There is a big day ahead of us and it is advisable to have some leave. Meanwhile, we are looking for somebody to replace Joginder and another one to replace Kipchoge.'

'What happened to Kipchoge?'

'He decided to quit last night.'

'Why?'

'Because he is no longer confident of winning races with bullets. They are becoming faster than he.'

'And where will you find the two?'

He looked at me challengingly. 'It is easy to find men for this kind of work. It is just a matter of looking for two desperate men who have no other way of short-cutting to the kingdom of money. You are desperate, aren't you?'

I shrank. I had all along expected him to make such a suggestion. All the kindness he had been showing me was a trap.

'You need money,' he went on after seeing my tense reaction. 'You can't earn good money through legitimate means. The time has long gone when honesty took anybody anywhere. Look at our bosses? How much dishonesty has been reported about them? They smuggle maize and rice to Uganda. What happens? They get away with it because they are men of influence.'

'We read in the papers about some characters hoarding essential food commodities while the country is starving. What happens? The police investigations never materialize because the people concerned are men of influence.'

'We read in the newspapers about the police discovering a haul of ivory hidden in somebody's premises. What happens? The story disappears from the papers because somebody somewhere has used his influence to stop the investigations.'

'Maze, big people use their influence to steal. Small people use force.'

He stopped talking for a while, cursed, then went on. 'Gangsterism is like any other profession except that it has a bad name. It was there in the beginning and it will always be there.'

'Just like a doctor uses a needle, a gangster uses a gun. Just like a vendor robs a buyer by way of a

large profit, a gangster robs a bank by way of doing

'Maze, look at your case for instance. You've been robbed of a lover because of your poor financial status. You'll never make it unless you gather courage. Only courage and self-sacrifice will take you to a position where your relationship with Caroline will be recognized.'

He took out a roll of bhang and lit it. He looked very serious.

'Maze, I took pity on you when you related to me how the world was treating you. I felt I had a duty to do and offered to let you stay with me. Now I am offering you a loophole out of your misery. I don't mind helping you further, but I'd like to see you earn your own money.

'It is not our custom to tell outsiders what we are planning to do, but I'll hint to you that the plan we have is highly explosive. It is worth a fortune, which means plenty for each one of us. The risk is there of course, but the take is worth it. It is just unfortunate that we lost Joginder and Kipchoge, otherwise, I wouldn't bother you so soon.

'I know you can make it if you follow instructions carefully. There will be very little for you to do. Just causing terror.'

He stopped his long monologue and waited for my reply.

A strange fear gripped me. I didn't know what to tell him and he knew it. A series of visions loomed in my mind. I saw blood, police guns, 999's. I saw myself among the gangsters, raiding a bank or whatever Kisinga had in mind. I saw myself running away from the police, a hail of bullets shattering me. I recalled a newspaper's reports about how gangsters were treated: got killed, arrested, wounded, and worse

even, the Government had already passed a decree: the penalty for armed robbery was death by hanging.

My two minds started debating: Chuma, don't let this crook mislead you. He will take you to your doom. Go home and live like other men of your class. Don't let your ambitions be your hell.

No Chuma. Don't panic. Fortune favours the bold. Have courage and listen to Kisinga. He is offering you release from servitude. Remember Caroline?

But Chuma, there is no guarantee that you'll get the money.

No Chuma. Take heart. If you don't risk, you don't get. How many mobsters have got away with it? Look at Kisinga for instance. How many raids has he conducted but he still comes home safely? Aren't you ashamed of living on what he so courageously earns while you are waiting for him as if you are his wife?

What have you got to lose anyway? Your life is cheap useless. A bullet is better than the gutter. You'll never rest while Caroline is out of your reach.

'O.K, Kisinga,' I said. 'Tell me what part I am supposed to play in your plans.'

He smiled triumphantly.

'Now you are behaving like a man. This is the plan. Four weeks from today, we'll hold up a bank a hundred kilometres away from here. It will be on the last Saturday of the month, the day teachers assemble from all over the divisions to collect their chalk salaries. The amount involved will not be less than half a million.'

I gasped. Kisinga was relating the plot the way a boy would tell his friends about plans to steal oranges from a neighbour.

'Taking into account that you are inexperienced, I have arranged to put you in a less hot spot. All you'll

have to do is empty the tills while we stand guard. Johnny will help you.'

'Who is Johnny?' I asked.

'He is a spoilt child who calls himself Johnny instead of John Maina. He is a movie addict who regrets having been born in Africa because there is no Hollywood in Africa. He has many aliases depending on his current favourite movie star. Sometimes he is James Bond, John Wayne, Kung Fu—all fancy names.'

'What does he do?' I asked.

'Presently, he is doing nothing. He came out from jail a week ago.'

'So he is experienced?'

'No. He went to jail because a certain bank manager didn't like his signature. He had attempted to withdraw a lump of money with a forged cheque.'

'He has never been involved in armed robbery?'

'No. But he has been trying to do it. He is so much enthralled by cowboys and Mexicanos that he wishes he was one of them. The idea of carrying a gun in real life enchants him so much that he is willing to participate in a hold-up just to have an opportunity of pointing a gun at somebody.'

'So he will carry a gun?'

'Yes.'

'And me?'

'A simi.'

'I don't want to hurt anybody.'

'You don't have to unless you are compelled to do so.'

I was silent for a while.

'For that matter, I would like you to do me a favour.'

'Mention it.'

'First, I want to go to Mombasa and rely on luck to find Caroline.'

I had expected him to blush, but he grinned.

'I knew you would come to that,' he said. 'What will you do with her if you find her?'

'I'll be happy to see her—maybe for the last time.'

'Last time? Why last time?'

'Because I can't be sure that I'll come out of this alive. You can't either.'

'Now Maze, where is your faith? What makes you think that things will go wrong?'

'Because they do.'

'So you are making your will?'

'Kind of.'

'And you want to give Caroline the last kiss?'

'I don't know. It depends on the outcome of the robbery.'

He looked at me encouragingly. 'Maze, after this, you'll buy your own car. You'll drive it into Kahuthu's home and show him that you are a man. You'll take Caroline in the car, take her to outings, cinemas, parties—all the glorious spots. Kahuthu will not want another son-in-law.'

I wished his words were blessed. He had a way of making fantasies look real.

'Anyway Maze, I can't stop you going to Mombasa to look for a pin in the Indian Ocean. What do you want from me?'

'Company and finance.'

He didn't like it. I was asking for too much.

'Maze, you know there is no boundary between you and me. I'll tell you now that I was beginning to get bored with you, but since you have agreed to earn your own money, I don't mind doing you a last favour.'

'I don't quite like the idea of going to Mombasa, but then I don't want you to be annoyed with me. I'll agree to take you there on condition that we come back soon. It requires a good time to make arrangements for the kind of task we have ahead. Promise me that if the search for Caroline proves futile we'll come back immediately.'

'I promise.'

'And if the search succeeds?'

'Still we'll come back immediately.'

'You won't change your mind after you see her?'

'I won't.'

'If you do,' his voice was hard and menacing, 'I'll never forgive you. It will involve making other arrangements and probably spoil the plot.'

'I promise I won't change my mind.'

Chapter Eleven

I hated Mombasa as soon as I stepped out of the bus. It would have been a better place if people were allowed to walk naked. On the sun-baked island, the atmosphere was Arabic plus salt plus sex. Everything tasted and smelt salty. Everything looked Muslim and sexy. Mosques and Arab-oriented architecture monopolized the town.

Whichever way we went, we only saw the influence of Islam. Everything sounded Arabic. The natives tended to look Arabic everywhere you went. *Shikamoo . . . Marahaba . . . Salaam . . . Alaikm . . . haki ya Mtume . . .* and so on. Even sheep seemed to

bleat in Arabic, hens cackled in Arabic, birds sang in Arabic and even the roar of the Indian Ocean sounded Arabic. Nothing sounded African.

Standing at the water's edge opposite Likoni, we watched two ferries plying between the mainland and the island, carrying loads of passengers and vehicles. Most of the people around were Muslim women, clad in black *bui-buis*. It was whispered that these *bui-buis* could hide a *Choga*, as homosexuals were called. It was also alleged that those women could hide votes inside the *bui-buis* during elections.

A long ship hooted like a giant farting as it glided towards Kilindini Harbour. The sailors on the ship frantically waved at the people on the ferry. They looked anxious to come ashore so that the harlots in town could relieve them of the load which their blood had accumulated during the voyage. That explained why Mombasa was full of cross-breeds: half Chinese-half African, half European-half African, half Asian-half African and so on.

'Maze, have you ever read any history?' Kisinga asked. He was staring at the ocean with keen interest. As with me, it was his first time to see the Indian Ocean.

'Yes. I read quite a bit of history.'

'What did you read about this ocean?'

'How Moses led the Children of Israel across the ferry.'

'That is in the Bible. You are mistaking the Red Sea for the Indian Ocean. Does this ocean look red?'

'I forgot my history,' I said.

'The most important thing about this ocean is that it brought the Portuguese to Mombasa. Ever heard of a man called Vasco Da Gama who was bow-legged enough for a train to pass under him?'

'Yes. Gor Mahia footballers could use his legs for a goal.'

He shifted his gaze to two men who were lazily paddling a canoe. Apparently, they were desperately looking for fish in low waters.

Kisinga mumbled to himself, 'Come to me all ye fishermen. I'll make you fishers of money.'

'That is unfair to the Bible,' I said.

He ignored my remark. Then he said, 'Did you read about Jesus and Peter?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Jesus walked on water followed by Peter. But Peter lost his faith and sank.'

'Do you believe that?'

'Yes I do.'

He laughed.

I stared at the blue water and wondered how anybody, mortal or immortal could walk on it. The Bible said it was possible. So it was.

Kisinga kept his eyes on the two fishermen. 'Can you read the thoughts of those two people?' he asked.

'I can tell that the fish have been unfair to them.'

'Yes. They are wishing that the ocean would dry up so that they could collect the fish. They are thinking like you.'

'Like me?'

'Yes. If all the buildings in Mombasa disappeared, you'd find Caroline.' He was right. I was just thinking that.

For three days, we had been hunting for Caroline in all kinds of places. We had enquired in pubs, hospitals, schools, offices, everywhere. Kisinga had a way of conducting the inquiries without making himself look a fool in the eyes of his informants.

Our search was not solely for Caroline. We were

looking for a man called David something. It was only through David that we could get a hint of Caroline's whereabouts. A senior government official like him was bound to be known about if not famous.

We had visited a government office and enquired after David. A reliable informant had told us that there used to be a David Njoroge who was no longer working with them. He reportedly ran his own business and lived somewhere across the ferry. Further enquiries had proved futile.

We had decided to keep a day long watch at the ferry, hoping that Caroline might appear. This was the second day and Kisinga was beginning to feel bored.

'Maze, we are not cats waiting for a mouse that will never come.'

'So?'

'So we get out of here and never come back.'

I was defeated. I didn't want to bother Kisinga, but I wanted to stay much longer.

'Let us give her another day,' I said.

He didn't answer me. We walked away.

Our visit coincided with the end of the month of Ramadhani. The Muslims had been fasting. Some starving and some cheating. The streets were crowded with gloomy looking people whose devotion to religion had made them go on empty bellies.

When at last the Chief Kadhi reported that the moon had been sighted, the gloomy Muslims turned into jubilant crowds. Feasts and dances were the highlights of the nights. Everybody was talking about Idd Fatur.

We spent the third evening in a *Makandara*, watching the Digos play *Chakacha*. It enthralled Kisinga so much that he postponed our day of departure

indefinitely. The reason was that he had already established relations with a beautiful Digo girl. He was curious to know what they hid behind the *buibuis*. The up-country folks had a funny belief that Digo women were special. They claimed that, once the *buibui* is removed for you, you don't feel like going home. And that explained why so many people from up-country had migrated to Mombasa and had never gone back home.

The next morning, I went to the ferry alone because Kisinga was busy with his new love. I arrived there at 7. a.m, the best time to catch somebody going to town.

As usual, the two ferries alternated as they carried throngs of people going to work on the island. When Mvita was on the mainland ramp, St. Michael was on the island ramp.

It was easy to search for my target as most women wore *buibuis* from which Caroline was exempted. I looked at all the women inside cars.

Eventually, the flow of traffic thinned out. The ferries were running half empty. I was disappointed at not seeing Caroline among the arrivals.

I started thinking like Kisinga.

Perhaps I had come to the wrong place. Maybe Caroline was not in this part of the town or country. *I was like a cat waiting for a mouse that would never come.*

I was beginning to look foolish, standing there and watching people come and go. I walked on to one of the ferries and took a seat on the rafts, so that I could see the widening ocean. As it cost nothing to be ferried across, I decided to remain there until I was fed up with moving to and fro. That was the mistake I made.

St. Michael, the ferry I was on was waiting for Mvita to clear off the mainland ramp. The two ferries were so close to each other that I could see who was getting on to Mvita. A group of tourists from the South Coast beaches and a score of locals boarded the ferry. A girl wearing a red blouse and a blue skirt joined the group entering the ferry. It was Caroline. Unmistakably Caroline!

I was so stupified that I lost my mind and shouted, 'Caroline!' The rumble of the ferry's engine and the cars drowned my cry. I thought I saw her turn round, as if she had heard her name called but wasn't sure.

I came to my senses when I saw the people around me staring at me. They thought I was mad.

Just then, Mvita got under way and slowly floated towards the island ramp. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't jump into the ocean and chase the departing ferry. All I could do was to wait until St. Michael took me to the island. By then, I thought, Caroline would have gone in a direction I didn't know. My only hope of catching her was if there was no bus at the other side.

I impatiently waited for the ferry to take on its load. I kept my eyes on the towering cabin in which the coxwain was lazily watching the people and vehicles boarding the ferry. At last he rang his bell to indicate that it was time he took us across. It took only three minutes to reach the island bank but it seemed to me like a century.

I was the first to disembark. Ignoring the warning that the ramp was slippery, I made for the bus stop at full speed. By the time I reached there, a KBS bus was just negotiating a roundabout, towards the town. A man who had been there for a long time confirmed that there had been no other bus for the

last ten minutes. Caroline was in the departing bus. An old *matatu* pulled into the lay-by, dropped some passengers, and started hooting for more passengers. I walked to it, followed by other passengers.

The *makanga* (*matatu* conductor) started shouting 'Mwembe Tayari.'

I got into the *matatu* and impatiently waited for the driver to move. Unfortunately we were only ten passengers. Although the normal capacity of the vehicle was eight passengers, the driver wanted more passengers so as to make the trip worthwhile. That meant a delay while the driver waited for some more passengers to be ferried across. By the time the car was full, Caroline would be far away.

'Let's go,' I said to the driver, unable to hide my anxiety.

He looked at me scornfully.

'This is not a tourists' car to carry only a few passengers.'

I stomached the insult and looked inside the car. All seats were solidly occupied, but the law of *matatu* drivers was to fill the car to the brim.

'How many more passengers do you require?' I asked.

He paid no attention.

'I'll pay for the seats.'

He looked behind and counted the passengers. They were ten and he wanted fifteen.

'Five,' he said.

'That is fifty cents times five to Mwembe Tayari.'

He made a slow mental calculation and nodded.

'Let's go,' I said.

There was only one bus route from Likoni to Kilindini Road. As I saw it, we could catch up with

the bus that had taken Caroline before it reached Kilindini Road. If it had already reached Kilindini Road, then the chase would be impossible because from there, the bus would have mingled with other buses from the other directions of the town. And all KBS buses were as alike as donkeys.

The *matatu* rattled up the road towards the town. I kept looking out of the window just in case Caroline had been dropped at one of the bus stops before Kilindini Road. When we reached the Manor Hotel, a vantage point for seeing the end of Kilindini Road, I spotted the bus clearing the roundabout which connected Kilindini Road and Digo Road. From there, it was going to be difficult identifying it among other buses.

'Hurry up!' I told the driver. 'I am after that bus.'

The driver and the passengers were curious to know why I was after the bus, but they asked silently. Amid blasts of horns, the driver pushed on, and we soon reached Digo Road. I looked ahead, and to my dismay, saw three KBS buses at the bus stop. My bus was one of them, but how could I tell which was which when they were all green and yellow?

I decided to take a chance, get into one of them, look around for Caroline, and if I didn't find her there, try in the next one—moving or standing.

'Drop me here,' I told the driver and paid him.

By the time I was out, two of the buses had pulled away. I got into the third one. It was so crowded that I couldn't see the third person from me. I wedged my way through the throng of standing passengers, followed by insults. My search for Caroline was unsuccessful. I made for the front door and risked my health by jumping out of the moving bus. The conductor hurled insults at me. The passengers

looked out of the windows to gape at me.

Two things happened: as I jumped out of the moving bus, I stumbled against a pregnant woman who yelled curses, her big belly facing the sky and her *buibui* kicked up to her upper thighs. At the same time, my eyes spotted something across the street. Caroline was majestically crossing the road to the other side.

I made to dash after her, but a group of bystanders who had come to help the struggling woman confronted me. Shouting in their Arabic/Swahili tones, they blocked my way and challenged me.

'*Choga! Mchenzi . . .*' and all kinds of profanities.

'I am sorry . . .,' I pleaded, trying to break through. 'I am terribly sorry. I was in a hurry to . . .'. My up-country Swahili didn't have any impact on them. Whatever plea I made, I was interrupted with such words as '*Mtoka Mbala*' (up-country man).

One of them, a kind of Mohamed Ali came at me, his massive fist ready for action. Just before he punched me, I looked across the street and saw Caroline entering a side street. She half turned to inspect what was going on across the street, then disappeared from view. Then Mohamed Ali landed his fist in my face. As I staggered and lost my balance, I wished I was Kung Fu.

Chapter Twelve

'Hey Maze,' Kisinga yapped. 'Who made your face so beautiful?'

I had a problem in speaking. My lips were swollen and my temple stuck out like a yam forming from a bud. You could hang a handbag on it. But it wasn't the pain that bothered me. It was the fact that I had lost Caroline so narrowly.

Ignoring the pain in my mouth, I told Kisinga what had happened. He seemed more interested in what the boxer had done to me than what I had told him about Caroline.

'You should have listened to me when I told you how to handle a Mohamed Ali,' he boasted. 'You hit him between the legs, and all his strength is gone. Those dangling things are very vulnerable.'

I let him please himself with his lecture on combat techniques.

'She was in the very bus that I entered,' I said. 'But she got off through the front door while I entered through the back door. The stage was congested with people.'

'What will you do now?' he asked.

'Go to the ferry and wait for her to return. She is definitely in town and she'll definitely cross where she came from.'

As we walked to the ferry, I was feeling sick. Now and then, I would remove the bandage that the doctor had pushed in my mouth and had advised me to keep there until the bleeding stopped. But how could I talk to Caroline with a muffled mouth?

All my efforts to make myself presentable to her were ruined by my swollen mouth. If only that bully had hit me elsewhere, I thought. Somehow, I didn't blame him for doing what he had done. I would have done the same thing if I had been in his place. You don't knock a pregnant woman down and expect to get away with it. I had tried to explain my case to

my tormentors but my up-country Swahili neither understood nor listened to. At last, I had convinced them that I wasn't a pick-pocket, and the bully had fled, fearing that the police might be interested in his powerful punch. No case to report.

Caroline could come any time, depending on her commitments in town. Now it was 4.30 p.m and traffic on the ferries was increasing. Kisinga was moody because he hated standing there, waiting for a woman who meant nothing to him. He started complaining, but stopped when I announced that Caroline was coming.

She walked from the ferry, her handbag swinging down her shoulders and with a number of files in her hand.

'There she is,' I told him, pointing at her. My heart prayed vigorously and I watched her walk up the ramp towards us. I nearly ran to meet her, but Kisinga held my hand.

'You might give her hysteria,' he said softly.

I gaped at her. She came up to within touching distance of us, but since she wasn't expecting such a meeting, she passed on. I thought I saw her cast a glance at me, but my appearance had changed since the time she had last seen me that she didn't recognize me at first. A few steps ahead, she stood and turned her head to look at us as if one of us reminded her of something. A picture suddenly formed in her mind. I smiled up at her. She remained stock-still.

'I warned you,' Kisinga whispered. I didn't listen to him. I strode up to her so that we stood face to face.

'Chuma,' she said in a wailing note.

'Caroline,' I gasped excitedly.

I expected her to faint but she kept on staring.

'Is it you Chuma?' she said, her voice still quivering. Meanwhile, we were blocking the way without knowing it.

'Let's walk up,' Kisinga said.

Caroline gave him a casual glance, and then looked at me. We walked up like two robots, being directed by an external power because the internal power wasn't functioning very well.

We reached the end of the pavement without exchanging any more words. Then she looked at me again. Her expression this time was not a surprised one; it was an expression of fear.

Though it wasn't my habit to hold a woman's hand in public, I stretched my hand out to hers. She flinched and withdrew her hand. Everybody around watched what was happening. She was no longer speechless.

'Chuma, please go,' she said in a terrified voice.

'Not yet,' I said. 'I want to talk to you.'

She looked at me sharply, and then started walking away. I followed her, ignoring the probing eyes. Kisinga was leaning against a pole, calmly smoking. He giggled when he saw what was going on.

She took a footpath which I assumed led to her residence. She didn't look behind, but she didn't look anxious to get away from me.

'Caroline,' I called, 'Spare me a minute. Just a little minute.'

She slackened her speed, but she didn't stop. I walked past and stood before her.

'Caroline,' I pleaded. 'You can't just drop me like this. I want to talk to you.'

She stood undecidedly. Her eyes surveyed me from head to foot. Then she asked me what had happened to my mouth.

I briefly explained to her how it had happened while chasing her. A look of sympathy registered on her face, but then she became hostile once again. I was beginning to get annoyed.

'Let's go to a place where we can talk,' I said. 'I won't detain you longer than you wish.'

She shook her head imperceptibly. I took the files from her hand and gently pushed her towards a grass-enshrouded path. She resisted for a while, then yielded. We slowly walked towards a football field. She took out her handkerchief and started sobbing.

'I didn't come to bother you,' I said huskily. 'I just wanted to see you and then be on my way. You don't seem anxious to know what has been happening to me since we parted.'

'I don't want to know,' she said.

'You don't? I want to know what has been happening to you.'

'What for?'

'For the sake of interest.'

She paused for a while.

'Forget what happened,' she said.

'You know I can't,' I said.

'But you have to. We made a mistake and that's all. Forget the past.'

For a while, I didn't know what to say. A pang of dismay whirled inside me.

'By the way,' I said. 'What happened to the baby . . .'

She looked distant. 'Forget that too.'

'I can't.'

Silence.

'Tell me, what happened?' The menace in my voice made her start. She had always known me to speak calmly.

We eventually reached the football field without getting an answer from her. I led her to an isolated yard a short distance from the path. For a brief moment, we watched the army recruits who were messing about with the small, helpless ball.

I let her mind be stimulated by the sight of twenty-two men chasing a weightless small ball and enjoying it.

'What happened to . . .' I didn't finish, because I didn't want to repeat the word 'baby.'

'It is at home,' she said softly. I felt a spasm of relief to hear that.

'A girl or a boy,' I gasped.

'A daughter of a thief.'

Right now, I didn't care what she called me. A prolonged suspense had been lifted.

'Does she live with you?' I asked.

'She lives with us.'

'You and who?'

'Njoroge's family.'

I had been right after all.

'What does she look like?'

'What is it to you?'

'Because she is of my blood.'

She kept silent. Then she changed the subject.

'If my father comes to know of this . . .'

'How could he?'

'He has spies. Njoroge is one of them.'

I was delighted by the way she was relaxing. Now she was ready to talk.

'Tell me what has been happening?'

'I vowed to my father never to have anything to do with you. I meant it.'

'Did he beat you?'

'He pardoned me for the last time.'

'And hid you here?'

'He did the right thing. The distance and the length of time helped me to forget you.'

'So you have forgotten me?'

She nodded.

'I haven't forgotten you,' I said.

'Then you'd better do so.'

'I'll try.'

Tension followed. We both looked at the inexperienced football players who were confusedly running into one another, and shouting wildly. If Pele had seen them, he would have developed an ulcer.

'How did you know where to find me?' she asked.

'I used my brains to track you down. I was dying to see you.'

'Why?'

'So that you might see me for maybe the last time.'

She started and looked at me inquiringly.

'Why the last time?'

'That is my business.'

She was now fully attentive.

'What do you mean?'

'Simple. Nobody wants a poor man.'

I sounded so sorrowful that she jerked with emotion.

'You are thinking of committing suicide.'

'Suicide would be a relief to me, but I can't do it.'

There are many ways of dying a hero's death.'

She had a vague expression on her face.

'As I see that you don't want to have anything to do with me,' I said, 'do me a last favour.'

'What?'

'Arrange for me to meet my, I mean our daughter. After that, you go your way and I'll go mine.'

Maybe it was my desperate approach that churned

her up. She held my hand firmly and suddenly, she went mad with sobs.

'Oh Chuma, I wanted to forget you. I thought I would never manage it, but when I was just about to you have come.'

I held her shoulder and caressed it. In the field, the footballers stopped playing to stare at us. They started making catcalls.

'You know I loved you, Caroline,' I murmured in her ears. 'But my worthlessness and your sophistication stood between us. I curse the womb which brought me forth . . .'

'Don't say that Chuma. You were born and you have to live. Why did you steal?'

'To make you happy.'

'Did that make me happy?'

'It was a mistake.'

'Why didn't you give yourself time?'

'And watch you suffer?'

'I wasn't suffering. It was you who were suffering. I made you a thief.'

'And now you are going to make me something else.'

She let go of my hand.

'Make you something else?'

'Yes. A dead man. A gangster. A prisoner.'

'No! Is that what you meant by saying that you are seeing me maybe for the last time?'

'What else can a poor ambitious man do?'

'Work his way up.'

'If he has time to climb up the long ladder. Me I want to climb up the steep ladder. If I stumble and crash down, I'll have nothing to lose since I have already lost you.'

'Don't talk like that Chuma. You can make it slowly.'

'I wish I could, but I can't.'

She sighed and looked at her watch. It was nearing six. Fear showed in her face.

'Martha must be wondering where I am.'

'Who is Martha.'

'Njoroge's wife. I don't like hurting her because she is too good to be disappointed.'

'So what?'

'I am going home.'

'Just like that?'

'I've just thought about it. Njoroge is busy drinking with Parliamentary candidates. I can't walk out when he is around. But Martha is reasonable. She lets me visit my girl-friends in the neighbourhood so long as I don't stay out late.'

'So you are coming back?'

'Yes.'

'And the baby?'

'That is why I am coming back. I'll bring it along with me but it will be dark.'

'Don't worry. We are two.'

Kisinga, who had been forgotten was standing near the field, his eyes moving from the footballers to us.

'You are not playing a trick?'

'I am not.'

She looked serious.

As I watched her walk away, all the old memories loomed in my mind.

Kisinga strode over to where I was standing, grinning cynically. 'You have found your cake,' he said. 'I didn't know she was so creamy.'

I laughed; I was feeling happy.

'She didn't look anxious to meet you at first. What medicine did you give her to make her listen to you?'

'Troubles and memories,' I said.

'Yes. Women are so full of pity that they would yield to a leper if he needed sympathy.'

I laughed off the insult.

'Is she coming back?'

'She said so.'

He made an obscene act with his fingers.

'If she comes, use the grasshopper method.'

'What is that?' I asked.

'Have you ever watched a resting grasshopper? The way it keeps its spiky legs bent like knees?'

I got the picture. 'Too much grass in this area.'

'Then use the Kamasutra method.'

'Which is that?'

'Go get lessons from the Singhs.'

He dipped his hand in his jacket pocket. That was his way of changing a subject.

'I have a surprise for you. We are so broke that we can't last another day here.' He cursed. 'It is not easy to rob in this hot climate where people don't wear jackets. Where can one hide a weapon for robbery?'

'You are not thinking of committing a robbery in this place?' I asked.

'It depends on the weight of my pockets.'

'I don't think we shall stay that long,' I said.

'It depends on you,' he said.

Caroline kept her promise. She came clutching a baby against her breast.

'Here is your product.' She passed the child to me.

I held the baby with mixed feelings. I couldn't bring myself to think that the kid was mine. She looked like her mother, but her nose and ears resembled what I had seen in the mirror.

I stroked her cheeks tenderly. She gurgled merrily. I had the feeling of a happy father—temporarily happy. It hurt me to think that her mother was going

to take her away from me, and maybe I would never see her again.

'Darkness is coming,' Caroline said. 'I must be on my way or Martha will be suspicious. I told her that I was visiting a friend three houses from ours.'

Before I could protest, Kisinga came over and delicately took the baby from my hand. He talked to her charmingly as he walked slowly away. I got Kisinga's message.

Caroline was alarmed. She suspected that we intended to take the baby from her. She made to rush after Kisinga, but I held her.

'We don't mean any harm to you or the baby,' I said. 'But I want to have a last chat with you while my friend looks after the baby. She is in safe hands.'

'No,' she protested. 'You can't. Tell that bighead to give me my baby.'

By this time, the footballers had left. The place was deserted save for an occasional man walking across the field.

I held her against me. She resisted weakly and then started crying softly.

'Caroline,' I said. 'Tell me now. Can you still love me?'

'It is useless,' she said. 'We failed at first and we would fail again. I don't want to give you a hard time. I don't want to make you a thief.'

'Never mind. Can you still love me?'

She was silent for a while. Then she said, 'I don't know. Give me time. Right now, I can't promise anything. Maybe after I have completed my courses. My parents won't be so strict with me then.'

Till now she hadn't told me what she was doing in Mombasa. I had forgotten to ask.

'What courses?'

'Secretarial. My father fixed me up in a good college. I started last month.'

'How long will it take?'

'A year.'

A year! I thought. To wait for her for a year! What would I be doing meanwhile?

'Chuma. It is late. Let us arrange how we can meet tomorrow in town. I'll tell you everything.'

Her plea was logical but I couldn't let her go. I was seized by a spasm, urging me to have her. Meanwhile, Kisinga had walked some distance away. He was doing well with the baby. We could hear his faint murmurs as he kept the baby busy.

I dragged Caroline further into the long grass and tufts of bush.

'You can't!' she cried.

'I can.'

'But . . . but can't you see! This is ungentlemanly.'

'Is it?'

'Let me go . . . I'll scream.'

'I love the way you scream.'

'But Chuma . . . We are not animals. Why don't you wait till tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow is tomorrow. Now is now.'

'This place is infested with snakes.'

'They know their holes.'

'You beast!'

'Me a beast?'

'My God! I might become pregnant again!'

'And give birth to a baby boy this time.'

A short distance away, the baby was crying while Kisinga sang a lullaby to it. Kisinga had a sense of humour. He could be a gangster but he loved babies.

We escorted Caroline to a safe distance. She confirmed her promise to meet me the next day. I

was feeling like a leopard which has eaten a dog. Sweet life was beginning to spin before me. But, for how long was it going to spin?

'Maze, it is hard to be an Ayah,' Kisinga said. 'The way that kid threatened to bust my ear-drums!'

'Thanks for what you did,' I said.

'You know what, Maze? She is now yours. You have reminded her of what you used to give her.'

We reached the ferry and crossed to the island.

Chapter Thirteen

Outside Diani Farmers Bar and Restaurant, I was impatiently waiting for Kisinga to finish his business with a harlot in a nearby room when I heard a woman shout: 'Catch thief!'

I saw Kisinga running away, laughing and buttoning up his trousers while the angry woman charged after him.

'Maze, let's go!' Kisinga shouted at me. I didn't join him immediately. The woman gave up the chase and hurled insults at the fleeing man. 'You thief!' she cried.

Everybody in the bar came out to investigate what was going on.

'What did he steal from you?' a barmaid asked the cursing woman.

'See what that small pig did to me!' she raved. She showed the barmaid a crumpled packet of Roost cigarettes. The packet had been made to look like a five shilling note.

'Were you blind not to see the difference between a cigarette packet and a five shillings note?' the maid asked amidst a burst of laughter.

'The dog didn't give me time to check,' the harlot said. 'I just noticed the brown colour and concluded that it was money. I immediately put it in my bra. . . ' she stopped short when she realized that everybody around was watching her. The listeners were laughing loudly as they heard how Kisinga had tricked the harlot.

Kisinga was dangerously broke. He had disclosed the news to me that morning. He had just about what we required for our bus fares from Mombasa to Nairobi. That had compelled him to resort to his broke-time tricks. It was all my fault.

Caroline had failed or refused to keep her promise. I had waited for her throughout the day without success. The next day, I had gone to the ferry and failed to see her. After that, I concluded that she was avoiding me. I wasn't surprised, but I was so disappointed that I didn't care what happened to me. Now I was all the more determined to risk my life in any venture that Kisinga suggested. What did it matter if I was squashed by a train! What did it matter if I was shot dead while attempting a robbery! What would I lose but a broken heart!

That afternoon, Kisinga had made me understand that I was to blame for the financial chaos we were in. We had spent all his money while looking and waiting for a woman who meant nothing to him. We had either to leave immediately or get stranded a long way away from home. We were supposed to leave that evening before we squandered the bus fare—the only money we had. Yet, I wanted to stay a little bit longer. I was like a moth while Caroline was like

an electric light, a foolish moth which circled and circled around a light and died of exhaustion.

As I ran after Kisinga, my mind told me to dodge him so that he could return to Nairobi without me. But I didn't have a cent in my pockets. I had to eat while fooling around the unfriendly island. Where to sleep was not a problem. In Mombasa, people could sleep on pavements and flat roof tops. The hot climate was a natural blanket. If only I could manage to extract a few shillings from Kisinga, I thought, I could remain behind for a while. How to get my bus fare could be decided by Fate. But how? I realized that I didn't want to get out of Mombasa. Yes, I was a moth of a man circling around a bulb of a woman. I was hypnotized.

When I caught up with Kisinga, he was still laughing. I joined him in the laughter as he boasted of how he had cheated the harlot. We laughed and laughed. Then he grew serious.

'Maze, we must catch the first bus to Nairobi. Hurry up before it is too late.'

He saw that I was reluctant to go.

'What is wrong with you, Maze?' he asked angrily. 'Aren't you fed up with a woman who doesn't give a damn about you?'

'Not that,' I lied. 'I think I have caught malaria.' I pretended to shiver. 'I think I should see a doctor before it becomes critical.'

He wasn't impressed. He knew I was lying.

'Look here, Maze,' he snarled, 'Don't be a burden to me after all the way we have come. You promised me that we would return to Nairobi as soon as you had seen your love. It is now three days since you saw her but you still want to stay. I wouldn't have minded if we had money to keep us here, but we

just can't stay a day longer. We are broke.'

His ever jolly expression faded away. He was really disturbed by my behaviour. He was the last person I wanted to offend.

'You are mistaken,' I said. 'I don't want to stay here a day longer.'

'But have you got malaria?' he asked.

I was unable to hide my submissive grin. He grinned with understanding. For a long moment, he walked silently wearing a distant expression. Then, he suddenly said, 'Maze, be honest with me. Do you want to stay longer? Are you still dying to see your woman?' He looked me in the face.

'Yes. But it is impossible.'

Again he looked distant and brooded.

'Maze, I feel like a brother towards you. I always wanted to have a brother and I thought I'd found one when I met you. I share your feelings and tend to think that your problems are my problems. Do you feel the same about me?'

In spite of myself, I felt pity for him. This was his usual complaint. He had never had a brother or a sister and he didn't like it. But I couldn't understand why he decided to bring up the subject at that moment.

'You are more than a brother to me,' I said. 'I have no language to explain how I feel about you.'

He looked at me as if I was really dear to him.

'This is God's work,' he said. 'I always prayed for a kid brother. God brought you to me. I have had many friends in the gang, but none of them could be like a kid brother. I am obliged to help you out of the mess you are now in. We won't catch a bus today.'

I couldn't get it. Did that mean he had some spare money to keep us going for a few more days, I wondered.

'We are going to use the little money I have and make more money to last us a couple of days or weeks, depending on luck.'

A sudden fear gripped me as I realized what was in his mind.

'This will be your initiation into the heroes' club,' he went on. 'Since we are only two, it'll have to be a simple and quick business. The best place for such a business is on the beach, where tourists stroll in the evening. They usually carry full wallets. They often walk in pairs, a man and a woman. We shall pick out a lone pair and do it fast before they can raise the alarm.'

Kisinga was such an optimist. The way he was talking, you would think that he was discussing how he was going to withdraw his money from the bank.

'This will be your first opportunity to see for yourself how simple it is to be rich overnight. With the money I have, we shall buy two simis. Then we shall go to the beach to survey the strategy of the operation. Later in the evening, we shall take up positions. You will walk a short distance behind me after we have picked out our victim. I'll challenge the victim and then you'll come to reinforce me. I won't slash the victim with the simi unless it's absolutely necessary. If they put up any resistance and refuse to part with the wallet, then we use our weapons seriously. Any questions?'

He didn't even ask me whether I was willing to participate. This was probably because I had promised to play a part in the planned bank robbery. I looked away to hide the fear in my face. If I had

to stay longer in Mombasa, I thought, I had to have money. There was no other way of getting money except Kisinga's way. After all, I had made up my mind to trade my broken heart for anything from bullets to canon balls. It didn't serve any purpose other than yearning for a woman it couldn't get.

'Any questions?' Kisinga repeated.

Obviously I had many questions to ask, but I was dumbfounded. My heart was drumming as if the Salvation Army was marching inside it. I didn't want to show Kisinga how nervous I was. I said I had no questions.

'Well then,' he said, 'let's start the preparations.'

* * *

We reached the beach at 5 p.m. It was a lovely resort for holidaymakers who could meet the cost of luxurious hotels along the South Coast. We walked down the beach along the chain of hotels bearing funny names. The first one was High Seas, then Tamarind, Moonside, and further up were three more crowded together.

All along the beach, jolly looking tourists were enjoying the convenience of their money in various ways. Some were swimming, some lying on the shimmering sand, some fishing and some walking about.

'Have you ever wished you were a white man?' Kisinga asked.

'Why?' I asked.

'Don't you envy them? See how they enjoy life . . . as if misery is something strange to them. They come all the way from their countries just to swim and bask in the tropical sun and spend their dollars without fear . . .'

Kisinga was talking in such a leisurely manner that it looked as if we were just taking life easy along the beach and not planning a crime.

'Look at that,' he pointed at a party of swimmers, an elderly couple and their four children. They were in swimming costumes, playing like cats regardless of the difference in their ages.

'Don't you think the white man is childish?' he said. 'Can you imagine your mother playing about with you, wearing only a bra and pants?'

'I'd run to fetch a mental doctor,' I remarked.

'Yes. You would think that your own mother wanted to rape you.' He laughed loudly as if amused by his own joke. 'Actually, there are several things we can't accept from the white man's civilization. For instance, your blood cannot heat up if you see a white girl's thighs. You get used to seeing them so often that you tend to think that there is nothing private about them or where they meet. But when a native girl stumbles and you see her pants, you automatically become curious to know what is under the pants. That is our pride. Secrecy.'

I agreed with him. He was a man of many faces: politics, culture, art, gangsterism and so on. At least his superfluous monologue helped ease the tension which gripped me as I thought over what lay ahead.

'Have you ever kissed a girl?' he asked, staring at a couple who were affectionately kissing each other.

'Why?'

'Because I don't approve of it. It gives me the picture of a bird feeding its young ones. A very dirty idea indeed. Unhygienic too. It made me loathe the tip of my tongue.'

A fat old woman lying on the sand cast a glance at us, noticed our dirty looks and hurriedly scooped

her handbag to safety.

'Save your energy,' Kisinga muttered as if to himself. 'We don't need your handbag right now, but this evening . . .'

We passed her and proceeded on . . . Kisinga wanted a detailed survey.

'Have you heard about those old women tourists?' he said. 'Have you heard about the Malindi love affair?'

'No.' I wasn't concentrating on the discussion.

'Haven't you heard of white sugar-mummies?'

'No.'

'They are sex hungry. They look for young men like you or me to remind them of their good old days when their hair was not grey, their faces not wrinkled, their thighs not furrowed and their bodies not stiff. If you bisect them properly, you automatically become a millionaire. But first they have to like you.'

We sat on a stone under a palm tree and faced the roaring ocean. Amidst a continuous rumble of soaring water, the water came splashing against the sand while the swimmers took advantage of being lifted by the waves. It was a lovely scene, but I didn't enjoy it. My mind was torn between thinking of Caroline and the approaching event. Is all this happening because of a woman? I kept asking myself. Am I going to rob a poor tourist just because I have been disappointed by a woman? What if the worst happens and we get caught? Would I suffer the consequences because of a woman? No. We are doing this because we are broke. We have to raise some money for the bus fare. After this, I'll never ever think of her. Who is she after all? What is so extraordinary about her to make me want to steal?

Impulsively, I took out one of her photographs and scrutinized it, forcing on a look of mockery. Kisinga saw what was happening and sneered.

'Reminding yourself of how she looks?' he remarked.

I ignored him and stared at the photograph. The idea was to criticize her. To prove to myself that she wasn't anything special. Nothing to make me steal. Nothing to make me weep for her, look for her, lie for her . . . Look at her nose: like any other woman's nose; her mouth is not well cut . . . her teeth are abnormally white . . . like . . . like tapeworms arranged in a row . . . but those two eyes staring at me . . . like those of a cat in the darkness . . . damn her! She isn't beautiful . . .

I made as if to tear the photograph with the notion of destroying her existence in my mind. Damn it! My fingers refused to tear it. Why should I tear it anyway? I asked myself. What good will it do me? I was fooling myself. Caroline had bewitched me! She had inflicted me with a fatal wound; a wound that wasn't going to heal up as long as both she and I lived. So what! Why should I risk my life in anything dangerous? If I end up in jail, maybe the wound will heal up over there. If I get killed, the wound will be no more. If we succeed and get some money, then 'll . . . what! Hang around . . . No! I'll go straight home and rejoin Zakayo. But . . .

'This is where we shall wait for the victim,' Kisinga said suddenly. 'Under the shade of this tree, we shall keep an eye on the strolling tourists. After we have picked out the victim and descended on him, we shall escape through the bush surrounding this area.'

At 8 p.m., we were sitting under the palm tree, our weapons handy. The full moon drifted over the

endless skies sending a shimmering light onto the sea and reflecting the infinite waters of the billowing ocean. The tide was low, or as they put it, the ocean had gone for supper. A soft wind which could be a Trade Wind or Monsoon whined across the ocean making the leaves of palm trees rustle in a whispering manner.

A group of tourists walked past, laughing loudly and chatting in a language which could be Japanese or German or French or anything but not English. We impatiently waited for the right victim—a couple or a lone walker. It was a matter of taking a chance. There was no guarantee that the victim would be carrying a wallet.

My heart was threatening to explode in my chest. My legs and hands were vibrating as if I was operating a pneumatic drill. It wasn't hot, but I was sweating as tension built up inside me. Am I doing this because of a woman? Should I do it . . . ?

'Be ready,' Kisinga whispered.

A short distance away, a couple were leisurely walking, holding each other shoulder to shoulder. A woman's voice cut through the rumble of the ocean as she shrieked with laughter.

'Here we go,' Kisinga said quickly. 'Wait until I reach them, then come quickly. O.K.?'

'O.K.' My voice was hardly a whisper. I was gripped with fear, confused, trembling . . . Oh my God! Run away Chuma! . . . No. Have courage. Advance! It's now or never! No! Turn back and run away! Just a minute . . . You are not on a crusade. Why suffer for a woman? No! March forward like Chaka the mighty Zulu with his mighty assegai. But what is wrong with my legs! They have rebelled refuse to advance!

I heard the eerie scream of a woman. I could see three dark figures wrestling about. Then I heard Kisinga cry; 'Brother! Brother!' He was calling me. I made one stiff step forward and then my knees buckled. This is because of you Caroline! I reached the scene to find Kisinga pinned down on the sand by his massive opponent. We had picked on the wrong victim. The screaming woman was helping her companion to punch Kisinga on the ground. When they noticed my arrival, it was too late. My heavy club landed with a thud on the head of the man. The woman turned round, saw me, and made as if to grab the club from me. I hated it, but I had no choice. Clubbing a woman wasn't in keeping with the ethics of a gentleman. I wasn't a gentleman anyway. I gave it to her and she sprawled backwards, crashing on to the sand with a blood-curdling wail.

All of a sudden, dark figures started emerging from all directions. People responding to the woman's screams.

'Run, you fool!' It was Kisinga calling. He was already on his feet running frantically towards the bush.

Chapter Fourteen

I was subconsciously aware that I was inside a moving object. I had a series of dreams. In one of them I was dead. My soul was wandering about. Then I was a cock. A fat cock. I was in the market, being displayed for sale. Then there was this beautiful girl who came

along and inspected me. It was Caroline. She bought me and my legs were tied. I try to communicate with her, but she doesn't understand my cock language. It's me, Caroline. Chuma trapped inside a cock. You surely don't want to eat me! My God! She is going to slaughter me. Eat me. We are home and she sharpens the knife. Somebody is holding my throat for her to cut. 'Please, don't do it Caroline. Don't kill me!'

'What's wrong with you, Maze!'

I suddenly woke up and saw Kisinga sitting next to me. I was now fully awake and realized where we were, in a bus, going to Nairobi.

'You shouldn't have lectured to me about your ideas on life after death,' I said. 'Know what? I've just come out of a cock. I was being slaughtered.'

'By Caroline?' he asked amusedly.

'How did you know?' I was surprised.

'You were dreaming loudly, calling Caroline and pleading with her not to kill you.'

I felt stupid. Then I changed the subject. 'I feel terrible. I got a feeling that the man or woman I clubbed died.'

'Let's not go into that again,' he said angrily. 'If they died, they died. After all, they had to die some day.'

'But murder is one thing and death is another,' I put in. 'I feel awful to be associated with murder.'

'That makes you a great man,' he said. 'I don't know one great man in history who was not associated in at least one murder. Take for instance, Hitler, Napoleon and all: people who are remembered in history because they were devoted to death. Look at the heads of states. Mention one of them who has not been involved in the killing of a rival. Killing and power go together.'

'But not when someone kills a poor tourist for the sake of a little gain,' I remarked.

'That's where you go wrong,' he lectured. 'You kill to survive just as a politician kills to remain in power. They are both necessities.'

Arguing with Kisinga was like trying to make a river flow in reverse. You either submitted or argued forever. So I gave in and dwelt on my painful memories.

We had managed to escape from the beach and reached town in good time to catch the last bus from the coast. The snatch wasn't much but it could have lasted us some days in Mombasa. I would have loved to stay a little bit longer and see more of Caroline, but Kisinga warned me of a possible confrontation with the police. It could be a murder case and the police were not to be underestimated.

I couldn't get it out of my system. That horrifying awareness that I had committed the unforgivable. I was haunted by the memory of seeing the man sprawl into immobility after my club had landed on his head. The wail of the woman as she stumbled and her screams drowned by the roar of the ocean.

Now I was across the bridge of Law. An outlaw. Another alien being had entered me. Just as Kisinga had said. Maybe it was reincarnation. Another person's soul had been reincarnated in my physical being. The soul of a gangster who had probably died. And now we were going to Nairobi to prepare for a robbery.

I was already initiated into the world of dangerous criminals. And I had witnessed that crime paid. It had only taken five minutes from not having to having. What a short-cut! Maybe I should have taken up gangsterism as a profession in the first place. But

then I wasn't a born thief. I was a made thief. Caroline was responsible.

I turned to look at Kisinga. He was sleeping peacefully, as if nothing had happened. I lay back on the reclining seat and sought sleep. The big bus cut through the darkness enshrouding the final leg of our journey to the city.

I woke up to see the floodlights of the city. Kisinga also stirred awake and lit a cigarette.

'We'll go straight home, sleep a little and then look for Njagathi and Johnny. We have a week to go before the robbery.'

'All right.' I was no longer scared.

'But before we go into it, let me warn you,' he said. 'I didn't like the way you played your part last night. You were too slow and nearly got me squashed by that giant.'

It was the first time he had mentioned the incident. Actually I had thought of deserting him until the last second. 'Well, it was my first time.'

'I know,' he said calmly. 'That was why I didn't punish you.'

'Punish me?'

'Yes. In every profession, there must be discipline. Imagine what could have happened if you hadn't come to help me.'

I had already imagined. He could be dead, mutilated or in a police cell. Only I couldn't figure out what kind of punishment he was talking about. We got out of the bus and looked for a taxi to take us to the outskirts of the city.

We found Johnny that afternoon and Njagathi late in the evening. Kisinga presided at the meeting like a general briefing his staff on an anticipated attack on enemy lines. The way he championed me,

I looked like Carlos, the international terrorist. 'He handled two people with a mere club,' he said as he related the beach affair. He didn't reveal that I had caught the two unarmed people unawares and that one of them was a woman. 'Such courage is rare and I am sure he will display the same heroism in this project.'

The two looked at me with unreserved admiration. Njagathi's protruding eyes rolled delightedly. Johnny, the self-styled movie star nodded in a Lee Van Cleef manner. He looked disgruntled at being a spectator and not a spectacle as Kisinga praised me.

'This is the strategy,' Kisinga switched to the gist of our meeting, 'the bank opens at nine o'clock. The teachers start queueing long before the bank opens. The bank people have everything ready by the time the door opens.'

'We'll wait for a few minutes after the bank opens. Njagathi will be the driver. He'll park the car here.' He marked on the diagram. 'Johnny will be the first to enter the bank. Mingle with the customers and pretend to be one of them. Chuma will follow, carrying a bag. It isn't abnormal to go into a bank with a bag. I'll come last and stand at the doorway. I'll tackle the security guard at the door and any other intruder. Are you following?'

'We dig ya,' Johnny drawled, emulating a Negro star. Njagathi nodded lazily. I nodded importantly. Kisinga had made me feel important.

'Right,' Kisinga went on. 'Once we are all in our places, I'll give a signal to Johnny. He'll draw his gun and shout for everybody to lie down. Chuma will dash behind the counters, carrying the bag and wielding a simi. Hit anybody standing in your way.'

My intestines went cold. Johnny was also not

responding so well. He now wore an apprehensive look. I started doubting his courage. He could be a gangster in a movie, but not in real life.

'Johnny will fire two shots in the air and follow Chuma behind the counters. He'll cover Chuma while he empties the tills. I'll take care of the door and the customers.'

There was a heavy silence as each one of us visualized the part he was to play. Johnny stirred uneasily and forced a smile. Njagathi was cool and looked almost totally uninterested in what was being said. Kisinga assumed a kingly look. He was the leader!

'Any questions?' he asked with dignity.

The three of us exchanged glances. None of us had any questions.

'Right,' Kisinga said at last. 'Let's go and make merry.' Then he added, 'We shall steal the robbery car on Friday night.' We all walked out and strolled to the nearest bar.

It was a night of jubilation and extravagance. Kisinga recommended that I sleep with two girls to commemorate my initiation into the world of heroes. I felt dignified. A champion. A dangerous champion. Something to be feared. I noticed that I had even changed my tone overnight. I spoke with force and pride. My gait and posture had also changed. I was now strutting like a man of steel, feeling mightier than before. I walked with my head high and whistled heroes' songs. Yes, I was beginning to take Kisinga's lectures on reincarnation seriously. I was only Chuma outside. I had somebody else's soul.

But there was one problem. Though I had no fear over the robbery plans, my worry was Johnny. The accomplice who was supposed to be my shield during the snatch. It didn't take me long to notice that he

was a dreamer. A fanatic of fiction and movies seeking escape into his world of imagination. That made two of us. An odd pair of despondent creatures trying to cross the forbidden bridge. But what would happen if we walked into the bank and Johnny realized that we were not acting in a movie but were facing real danger? I kept wondering.

My suspicions were partly realized the following day. Kisinga took us to a remote location in the suburbs. He entered a hut which looked long deserted and came out with a canvas bag. 'Follow me,' he said. He led us to a waterfall and opened the bag. I froze at what I saw. A pick-axe and a knife were stained with blood. Human blood. But what gave me more jitters was the sight of guns. I had never been so close to a gun other than those I saw with the armed forces.

I examined the two death-causing machines with deep awe. So small, yet so powerful. A friend to anybody who ruled and who wanted power. For it was this same machine which made an army general a president overnight. It was the same thing that turned a tramp into a millionaire within minutes.

'This is the safety catch.' Kisinga was explaining the mechanism of the pistols like an army trainer among recruits. 'You first hold the gun this way . . . release the safety-catch, pull the trigger . . . ' I was watching Johnny. The street cowboy was shitting in his pants. He was tense and wore a distant look probably reviewing a scene in a movie he had seen. When Kisinga handed him one of the pistols, his hand shook like a pneumatic drill.

'It can be tricky if you are holding the gun for the first time,' Kisinga observed in a fatherly manner. He had noticed Johnny's panic. 'I had the same experience.'

Johnny managed to control his shivering hand and held the gun steadily.

'Shoot at that tree,' Kisinga ordered.

Johnny squinted his eye, levelled the gun and followed the trainer's instructions. 'Bang!' the sound was drowned by the roar of the waterfall. The gun nearly flew out of Johnny's hand. We could hear his heart thumping.

'Not bad,' Kisinga commended. 'Try again.' This time Johnny was in control of himself. He fired again.

'Marvellous!' Kisinga echoed. 'Unfortunately we don't have many bullets. But the aim of this exercise is not to make you a sharp-shooter. Just to know how to hold the gun and fire. We don't go to banks and use guns to shoot people with but to cause panic.'

Johnny lowered his gun and sighed with a grin. 'I feel great,' he mumbled.

Kisinga smiled at me. 'I've spared two bullets for you.' He handed me the gun. I repeated what Johnny had done but I tended to exaggerate in view of the fact that Kisinga had already dubbed me a hero. My muscles tensed at the knowledge that I was in contact with the weapon that ruled the world. I saw the little world in my arms. 'Bang!' The world was mine! I'll step on it the way it has stepped on me!

We sat by the waterfall and rehearsed the big operation. Then Kisinga disclosed the news: 'You haven't by any chance, read today's news, I suppose?'

'I never read newspapers,' I said expectantly.

'I didn't want to tell you until we'd gone through this,' he said. He took out a paper from his pocket and spread it before us. He pointed at a bold-lettered heading in the middle page. *Beach gangsters rob tourists.* My heart throbbed as I read through the context. The man I had clubbed had not died

but sustained a fracture in his skull. The woman was in an intensive care unit with a broken jaw. The police were combing the whole area looking for the villains.

'See what a hero you are?' Kisinga said. 'You have made things happen. You caused ambulances to scream in the streets, police sirens to wail, crowds of people to gather, doctors to be awoken at night ...'

It was because of her. Caroline was responsible for all those things. I wondered how much more I was going to do because of her.

Chapter Fifteen

We stole a car on the eve of the robbery. Kisinga pin-pointed a new Peugeot parked outside a cinema. Njagathi was an expert in car-thefts and it took him but a few minutes to open the door and start the engine while we stood guard. We all got in and drove away from the city where we exchanged registration number plates for fake ones. We were to drive straight to the location of the robbery and spend the night there.

Kisinga and Njagathi had all along taken it coolly. To them, this was routine. They had done this kind of thing so many times that it no longer carried any significance.

Johnny also pretended to be cool, but I could almost touch the solid tension inside him. Whereas he used to call everybody Amigo or Buddy, tonight he called us by our own names. He was in the middle of reality.

'Maze, what do you intend to do with your share?' Kisinga asked me, apparently to dispel the grim silence in the car.

I didn't know what to answer. I wasn't an optimist like him. As far as I was concerned, the plan could fail. We could all get killed in the attempt or go to jail where we would be tried under the Hanging Act. But now it didn't matter what happened to me. I had already committed a serious crime and that was enough to have me erased from the surface of the earth.

'I haven't made up my mind what I shall do with my share,' I said.

'And you Johnny?'

'I'll buy a horse.'

We all laughed except Njagathi. He had no sense of humour.

Silence befell us again leaving only the roar of the motor as we drove in the dark. I thought over what I'd do with my share if the plan really worked. I'd go into business: probably open up a bar or a nightclub. I would invite Caroline to see what I had made because of her. I'd name it Caroline's Bar and Restaurant. Who knows? I might grow rich and buy my own island. After all, I'd heard that Aristotle Onassis had had a rough beginning like me and had ended up a magnate. Aeroplanes, ships and islands. I too, could be like him and buy my own island. I'd name it Chuma. The biggest road would be named after Caroline. Why, I could even have her statue erected in the main square. Kahuthu would also have a share in the glories if he behaved. I expected him to behave when he saw what I had turned out to be. But then, did Onassis rob a bank to become what he was?

The strong headlights of the car penetrated the

darkness as we drove on in silence, each one engrossed in his own thoughts. Eventually we reached the small town which was the centre of a vast rural division. We drove along the dusty streets and parked the car outside a pub.

'We'll spend the night here,' Kisinga announced. 'Park the car behind the building where it can't be noticed by a wise cop. I suppose the theft has already been reported.' We got out of the car leaving Njagathi to drive it away and hide it.

The pub was crammed with merry-makers. We joined them and had a load of drinks. I walked over to the juke-box and looked for my favourite number. They didn't have anything to my taste. I wanted to play 'Where does a broken heart go,' or 'I'll die for you.' At last I saw an old favourite which rhymed with my mood. 'From a Jack to a King . . . ' I didn't know the wording but I buzzed along. Then I puzzled everybody when I played a Christmas Carol long before Christmas was due. 'Silent Night . . . ' They didn't know what I knew. A king was being born this night. A gangster king! It was a night to remember so I wanted to make the best of it. I wanted a woman with whom to celebrate. I approached one with two mountainous breasts.

'No Maze,' Kisinga interrupted. 'Women bring bad luck.' I looked at him defiantly. He was serious. Every business had a code. I shrugged my shoulders and left the woman in the middle of a bargain.

Kisinga had already made arrangements for our accomodation. There were some cheap rooms in one wing of the pub. We drank quietly until the bar closed.

It was a night of nightmares. This time I dreamt I was a cock and Caroline was a hen. I was chasing

her everywhere: on the pavements, in the bush, over the roof-tops. Then another cock emerged and a battle ensued. We fought and fought while hen Caroline watched closely. I lost the battle to the other cock. Hen Caroline strolled away with the victor. I died of exhaustion and reincarnated into a dog. A very small but mature dog. Caroline appeared again in the form of a bitch. A massive bitch like the ones used by police. It was the dogs' mating season and Bitch Caroline is very friendly. Wow! I'm too small for her. I can't . . . damn it! Another mighty dog comes along and chases me away. Bitch Caroline looks at me sympathetically and in our dog language says: Sorry, Dog Chuma. I offered myself to you but unfortunately you are too small for me. You'll have to do something about your size if you really want my company.

But how? I was born this way. A small dog!

Then don't blame me. Blame your Creator. Otherwise, look for a bitch of your own size. If not that, be born again. A mighty dog.

I woke up with a start. It was already dawn. Kisinga was already dressed. 'We'll have some tea and then do the final rehearsals,' he said.

We all dressed. I had to wear a long jacket to hide the simi. We were all smartly dressed. Kisinga was in a dark suit, Njagathi in grey and John wore an expensive leather jacket. Njagathi went out to the car and came back with the weapons. I slung the simi under my arm-pit and smothered the bulge on my chest. Johnny and Kisinga concealed their guns in their breast pockets. Njagathi was to keep a pick-axe in the car just in case of the unexpected. We went to a hotel and had tea. Then we all boosted our morales with quick puffs of bhang. Time started racing.

We went to survey the area. Typical of all country banks, this one was located on a row of shops facing the market place. It flanked a narrow road leading to the main highway a few metres away. There was no question of getting entangled in traffic.

Hours turned into minutes. Njagathi went to collect the car and parked it at a vantage point near the bank. Being a market place, the area started getting crowded with people. It was Teacher's Day. They came in large numbers and assembled outside the bank, their faces lighting up with wonderful thoughts of how they were going to spend their money, I couldn't help feeling sorry for them.

Seconds ticked away. It was 9 a.m. All eyes were on the bank's door. It opened slowly. A tall athletic guard took his position at the doorway. The first customer entered, then another. They started filing into the bank.

Our commander, Kisinga was standing a few paces away from the door, pretending to be reading a paper. Johnny was slowly pacing this way and that but his eyes were fixed on Kisinga. I was leaning against an electricity post like somebody waiting for someone. I watched Kisinga constantly. The first customer to be served came out of the bank. The lucky one. Kisinga gave the signal.

To you Caroline! I moved forward, feeling the weight of the bag in my hand. Johnny was leading, walking with quick paces. Damn him! The manner he was walking in was a self-betrayal. I saw a look of alarm jump into the guard's face. He made as if to lift his club and fumbled for it, but two things happened. Kisinga had already noticed what looked like a flop on Johnny's part and acted accordingly. He was on to the guard before Johnny could spill out

the whole plan.

'On your belly!' he shouted at the petrified guard and at the same time screamed at Johnny and me, 'Get it going!' I had a glimpse of the guard going down while at the same time Johnny shrieked at the customers, 'On your bellies!' then 'Bang, Bang!' he fired in the air. I didn't know how I reached the other side of the counters. I remembered stepping on still bodies scattered on the floor. I also noticed something amusing. One of the bank staff, in search of a place to hide his head had crawled right into a woman's thighs head-first. I was vividly aware of Johnny behind me as I emptied the boxes and stuffed the money in the bag. His breathing could be heard a mile away.

Bang! Bang! That was Kisinga's gun. I didn't know what he was shooting at. I had already emptied all the tills. Such a short time, yet it seemed like a million years. Let's go! Then something happened. Johnny was in a great rush to get out. He stumbled on the still bodies and landed on his nose. Bang! the gun went off accidentally. Somebody yelled in agony. I didn't hesitate to find out what was happening. I only remember seeing Kisinga dashing to help Johnny up. I thought I saw the security guard make a movement before I rushed out of the bank.

'What happened?' Njagathi asked as I got into the car.

'I . . . I don't know.' My throat was choked. We waited for the pair to come out. There was a stampede outside the bank. People were running this way and that. I had never seen anything like it. Then a stone came from nowhere and smashed into the windscreen.

'What do we do now!' I heard myself shouting.

There was a din coming from the bank and confusion in the streets.

'I think something went wrong somewhere,' Njagathi's cool voice wavered. Without warning, he shot the car forward amidst a hail of stones. It suddenly occurred to me that Johnny and Kisinga were in danger. And it looked as if Njagathi wanted us to drive off without them. It was treachery!

'Are we leaving them?' my voice rattled.

'It's the name of the game,' he said calmly. 'Never attempt to rescue a drowning friend if you can't swim.'

'But they'll be molested . . . they might even get killed,' I protested.

'So we join them in the death chamber?' he snarled.

It looked a very cowardly move. Leaving our comrades to the mercy of the merciless. But I saw the logic in Njagathi's decision. We were not in a position to know what was happening inside the bank. Waiting to find out meant only one thing: disaster for all of us. The invisible stone-throwers were already scoring hits. Neither of us was properly armed to retaliate. But Kisinga! My dearest brother Kisinga. Was I to desert him at the moment of great need? After all he had done for me? A notion told me to jump out of the car and face whatever danger there was. I would have loved to die side by side with Kisinga. But I was slow at making up my mind. We were already speeding along the highway.

Chapter Sixteen

It was in the front-page news. *Armed Gang Snatch Teachers' Pay*. There was a detailed account of the robbery. Now I knew what I had been seeking to know. Johnny had accidentally shot his own hand when his gun went off. The surprise had stirred up the customers including the security guard. Kisinga had probably thought that Johnny was being attacked. Upon seeing him stumble, he had rushed to help him and thus relaxed his hold of the security guard. The guard had taken the advantage and pounced on Kisinga from behind, wrestled the gun from his hand and applied his strength. Johnny's gun had flown out of his hand after the fall and the accidental shooting. He was reported to have gone wild, searching for the door in the opposite wall. The pair were lucky that the police arrived in good time to save them from being torn into pieces by the angry mob.

I put the paper down and sat back. Poor Kisinga! How would I repay him!

'It doesn't pay to worry over the dead,' Njagathi said.

I looked at him hard. 'You mean you don't feel sorry for them?'

'Would it help if I did?'

'I thought they were your friends.'

'They were. So what?'

'You don't show concern.' I was beginning to hate Njagathi. He had no heart for anything but money.

'Instead of worrying your head off,' he said, 'we'd better think of where to hide. We'd better see the lawyer and split.'

We had agreed to hire a lawyer for our captured comrades. It looked a futile idea, but it was just about the only thing we could do for them.

We were in a city hotel room where we had put up for the night after the dramatic robbery and successful escape. I didn't sleep a wink nor did the load of money in our possession have the expected effect. Kisinga and Johnny's fate kept us in suspense. Without Kisinga around, the world stopped moving. And to imagine that we had deserted them!

The take was bountiful. Nearly half a million shillings. Tax-free! That divided by two people minus the lawyer's fee was still something to boast about. How many top executives had ever set their eyes on such an amount? To people of my class, such a figure never existed outside a bank. But this was real. I was rich. I could walk into a showroom and buy a Mercedes Benz. I had already crossed the bridge of poverty. Yesterday penniless, today rich. Why hadn't I thought of this before? Why had I let myself be squashed by poverty while there was a short-cut to big money! She did it. Caroline had made me a hero when our paths crossed. I chose to follow her path because she couldn't follow mine.

Yes, there was this idea I had about running a pub or nightclub. I was still keen on it but not in a hurry. First I had to shake off the dust of poverty. I had to get assimilated into my new class. Anybody having over a hundred thousand shillings belonged with the elite, with people who mattered. Not the sort of folks who drank in those noisy pubs in the under-privileged part of the city.

We split the money that morning and saw a lawyer in strict confidence. Njagathi went his way, and I mine. I was relieved when we parted. I strolled

in the city, looking for the things I wanted.

This was not the time I could buy a shirt from any shop. This was a new Chuma with new tastes to match his grandeur. I walked to the exclusive Kenyatta Avenue shops and did some window-shopping. There was a men's shop with imported suits of remarkable magnificence. This was where ministers, ambassadors and other distinguished characters came to shop. I walked in and suddenly felt out of place. I wasn't untidy but my cheap clothes contrasted sharply with the specklessly dainty gentlemen around me. The proprietor eyed me with distaste but maintained the false politeness common with salesmen.

I pointed at a sumptuous French three-piece suit. The man looked me up as if assessing what was in my pockets. He pointed at the price tag.

'I've already read the figure,' I said rudely. I didn't like the way he was slighting me. To save him more doubts, I produced a roll of bank notes and let him see how much more there was. 'But first I have to try it on,' I said at last.

'Yes, sir.' It was my first time to be called sir. Funny world! This time you are kicked about, the next you are called 'sir'. And there is only one secret. Money!

'This way please.' The man ushered me to a cubicle. He even ignored another customer who wanted his attention. He waited until I had tried the suit on. It fitted as if it had been made for me. 'Gorgeous!' he squealed. 'As if the tailor knew you'd be the buyer.' He was touching me all over, making sure every part of the suit was in its right place and angle and making me feel like a king being dressed to attend a ceremony. 'Marvellous!' he cajoled. When I

had taken the suit off he looked at me with glittering eyes. 'Anything else, sir? I suppose you'll need a shirt and a tie.' I nodded importantly. 'Come with me, please.' I followed him out. He took me around the wide display of shirts and ties, pausing here and there to make a suggestion. I made my choices and returned to the cubicle. He came trotting after me like a dog following its master to be fed. When at last I came out of the cubicle, I was not the Chuma I used to know. I looked at myself in the mirror and froze with amazement. It hadn't occurred to me that clothes could make a gentleman out of a beggar.

'Maybe a hat could add to the splendour,' the man said behind me.

I liked the idea. 'Have you got a grey one to match?'

'Yes, sir.' He was again dashing here and there. I was now the centre of attraction. Some of the customers had forgotten what they had come for and instead stared at me with various reservations. Some looked at me with open envy, wondering how anybody could spend so much. Then there were those who looked suspicious. They smelt my cheap blood and puzzled over the question of how I had earned the money I was so loosely spending. The only person who didn't reveal his inner thoughts was the salesman. It didn't matter to him where the money came from so long as he squeezed a fraction of it off me. 'Try this one.' He handed me a showy grey hat with a stiff narrow brim. It fitted. 'Anything more?' He wasn't yet satisfied.

'Maybe later,' I said. 'How much?'

He added up the figures. It was a big amount but I didn't feel the pinch. A negligible fraction of my sudden wealth. I paid. He wrapped up my old clothes

tidily. I had a mind to leave them right there. I didn't want to be in contact with anything that reminded me of the past. Like a snake discards its slough on developing a new skin. But just to avoid embarrassment, I decided to take the clothes and dump them in the nearest bin. I walked out, followed by, 'Thank you, sir, come back again.' I wanted to visit a shoe shop.

I had finished all my shopping shortly before the lunch hour. As I strolled along the streets, I was constantly aware of my look of importance. It could be an illusion, but I thought everybody in the crowds was admiring me. My gait also betrayed me. I held my head high and assumed a leisurely walk. Then there was this panic coming and going. The uneasy feeling that I was being followed. My heart leapt each time I saw a cop or a police car. I tried to dismiss these imaginings and thought over what I would have for lunch.

I passed by a big hotel which was mainly patronized by local dignitaries and tourists. I was curious to know what went on in those places which people of my class only knew by name. I stood there undecidedly and then walked in. A rich atmosphere greeted me. The vast room was full of wonders: large tables with white table-cloths, immaculately dressed waiters rushing here and there, patrons of all colours chatting as they ate, soft music coming from nowhere . . .

'Good afternoon, sir,' a waiter had seen me stranded and came to my aid. He showed me to a table. I joined a trio at the table and struggled to feel at home. The waiter had his order book ready and I saw he was waiting for my order. My God! Everybody will know I am a fake. I don't know what terms they use here . . .

'Want a drink?' the waiter asked politely.

'Ah . . . yes.' I tried to be careful with my penny English. It was often I said 'Yeth' instead of 'Yes.' 'Cold Tusker.'

The waiter cast a puzzled glance at me and wheeled away. I looked at my table and avoided meeting the eyes of my company. The arrangement of forks, spoons and knives was nothing very strange as I had seen it at Kahuthus. Everything else was strange.

'Here is your beer, sir.' The man placed it before me. Another waiter brought a bowl of something that looked like soup. It was easy from then on. I copied what my companions at the table were doing. Then there was this girl who came whispering to me. She was politely asking me to take off my hat. The damn regulations! What has the filling of the stomach to do with a hat! I now knew why people were surreptitiously looking at me with hostility. They either doubted my table manners or doubted my right of being in such a place. I wished it was all over so I could walk into the streets and hide in the crowds. I gave her my hat and she reluctantly thanked me. I didn't enjoy the rich and expensive meal.

Once more in the streets, a haunting loneliness overcame me. All along, I had been fighting back the urge to go to Mombasa immediately. I wanted to get organized before seeing Caroline. My shopping list included several gifts for her but I wasn't satisfied with the collection. What could please a spoilt woman like Caroline who had had everything that was stocked in the best shops? What gift could surpass all that her father had given her?

But somebody had told me about women and clothes. There was never an end to their fancies.

There was one woman who fancied a maternity dress displayed in a shop. She urged her boyfriend to make her pregnant so that the dress would fit her. Caroline wasn't different from any other woman when it came to fancies.

I bought what I thought she would like and also for the baby girl. Our daughter or her daughter. It didn't matter. What mattered was that Caroline should change her opinion about me.

As it was Sunday, I put off the journey to Mombasa until the next day. This was because I couldn't be sure of seeing Caroline until Monday, when she attended the college. Then an idea struck me. I remembered that Kahuthu was a golf addict. He used to spend his Sundays on the golf-course and later relaxed in the Spears Club, a short distance away. Supposing I gave him a surprise. How would he react on seeing me in the club, dressed the way I was? The idea made me laugh. If nothing else, I thought, it would give him something to think about. Maybe he would soften up. It was a crazy idea but I decided to give it a trial. I went to my hotel room and stored everything I didn't want. Then I decided to look for a taxi to simulate a big shot.

* * *

This idea was only a chance. Possibly Kahuthu had changed his taste for golf or was out of town. I searched for his car among the conglomerate of them parked off the course. Sure as Christmas, his Mercedes Benz was among them. At that distance, I couldn't pick him out from among the other players. But I was almost sure that he would end up by going to the club. I told the cabby to drive to the club.

He was to be with me until I no longer needed him. We reached the club and had a surprise. I had been so ignorant to know that the club was for members only, most of them golfers. However, the manager was willing to arrange for a temporary membership on condition that we proved our importance. He had seen me lounging in the back-seat of a prestigious taxi and had obviously assessed my importance. I told him I was a businessman and the cabbie was my personal driver. He was hesitant but gave me the benefit of the doubt. For all he knew, I could be the President's son, wearing a disguise purposely. I called the driver and invited him to have a drink with me. There was confusion in his eyes, obviously wondering why I was so kind to him. I didn't know why either. Perhaps because the world had been so unkind to me that I couldn't stand to see the same thing repeated with somebody else.

We walked into the stately hall. The patronage was thin as it was the peak hour for golfers. Most of the people inside were foreigners in sports garbs and others in tropical suits. They hardly noticed our arrival as they were busy chatting in between sips of sodas and beers. I led the driver to a vacant table. A waiter came and we ordered drinks.

It was a long and boring wait. The driver, my only companion was not at ease with me. He obviously took me for a higher native and that ruled out chatting on equal terms. He didn't even dare ask what we were waiting for although he manifested it by his furtive glances at his watch.

Eventually the hall started filling up as the golfers came off the course. I kept my eyes on the door, expecting Kahuthu to enter any time. At last he came. He was fresh from the course, wearing those

funny clothes and the peaked cap affected by golfers. He was in the company of two gentlemen, one of them a common face in the newspapers. My heart raced faster as I watched the trio come towards us, chatting animatedly. All the courage I had forced in oozed out like air escaping from a pricked balloon. What the devil am I doing here? My aim in coming here had been to show off. Just to let Kahuthu set his eyes on me for a while. For him to see that I, too, could wear a three-piece suit and look like him. But now it looked as if I was going to have more than my share of fun. I realized it when I saw one of the three men point at our table. By an irony of fate, our table was the only one which could accommodate three more people.

The trio glanced at us the way important people behave before joining strangers at a table. They all suppressed looks of distaste at being among two strangers who would overhear their conversation. Fortunately, my driver had a taste for smartness and didn't look out of place.

It was nearly a year since Kahuthu and I had met. So much had happened within that time that I couldn't believe what I was seeing now. Although our eyes met a couple of times, it was clear by his face that he couldn't place me. There wasn't much change in my facial appearance but the way I was dressed and the hat on my head erased the Chuma he knew. After all, how could he expect his former miserable houseboy to be sitting at the same table with him!

A waiter came running and took their orders. They discussed golf techniques, a language I couldn't comprehend. My heart was still thumping and it was with difficulty that I held my glass of beer. I felt for

my breast pocket, hoping that the thick roll of money inside there would give me confidence. Nothing doing. It took more than money to win Kahuthu. I was shrinking back to the old Chuma. Far from the mighty Chuma I was before Kahuthu's arrival. I decided to get it over once and for all. I just couldn't walk out leaving my mission incomplete. I slowly took off my hat and placed it on my lap.

I wasn't looking at him, but I could sense his eyes on me. He was saying something to his companions when he stammered in mid-sentence and slurred in a shocked tone. I turned my head slowly, assuming a forced nonchalance. Our eyes met briefly. He was stunned beyond explanation. There was a glint of doubt and a murderous expression in his eyes. He was dead still and his puzzled friends joined in to stare at me. I wasn't enjoying the fun I had so stupidly cultivated. It could land me into trouble and I expected it to happen any second. The brute before me could take this chance to get even with me. I had humiliated him and his family. Better get out of this place before he comes to! I rose and beckoned the waiter. My fingers were conspicuously trembling as I handed him the money. I managed to say, 'Keep the change.' I saw him start, wondering how on earth somebody could tip him so generously. The change he was supposed to give me was nearly four times as much as my bill. I was already leaving the table, followed by my baffled driver. 'Thank you sir,' I heard him call after me. I didn't stop or turn to acknowledge. The affair had served the purpose for which it was intended. Kahuthu had something to think about. Might probably have a nightmare.

Chapter Seventeen

I was strolling on the sun-roasted streets of Mombasa trying to figure out the best way to approach Caroline. I wanted to surprise her, but not throw her into a panic. She was bound to wonder how I had suddenly come into a fortune, and guess. Supposing I told her I was in a kind of racket; one of those get-rich-quick rackets? Smuggling maize and sugar across the border? That was less unsavoury than robbery with violence.

It was late in the afternoon and I expected her to come out of the college within the next hour. I had already hired a room in a luxurious beach hotel and left my property there.

Shortly before the college closed, I took a taxi and drove over there. We waited for a while in the car-park. The students started coming out in small groups. Then I saw her. I experienced the same ecstasy that always seized me when I set eyes on her. She was in a flowered midi which stretched tightly above the waist so that her breasts stuck out sharply and emphasized her elegance provocatively. Her long black hair stood up naturally and was smoothly trimmed. She walked in a kind of drift and hardly turned her head until I called out.

She saw me standing by the big car and paused doubtfully. We looked at each other like two statues erected face to face. Just as when I had met her on the ferry, she looked alarmed, her inner eyes focusing on something distant. I had a mind that she wanted to turn her back on me and glide away. But she came towards me. She was hesitant and perceptibly curious. She looked at the car and then at me.

The look of curiosity faded from her eyes and suspicion jumped in. But I noticed a flicker of admiration as she looked at my expensively tailored apparel.

'What happened?' I broke the silence. 'You promised to meet me the day after we met.'

'I didn't come.' There was a frightening harshness in her voice.

'Why not?'

'I didn't want to.'

'Why did you promise me then?'

'To get rid of you.'

'We have met again now.' I was looking into her eyes. 'Do you still want to get rid of me?' She tried to say something but faltered.

'Sorry for giving you surprises,' I said. 'I am sure you won't mind joining me for a drink in a quiet place.'

'No,' she protested. 'I must go home.'

'I know you must go home.' I suppressed a rising panic. 'I haven't forgotten that you are a mother and under somebody's care. I won't keep you longer than necessary.'

She was thoughtful. Her eyes again roved over me and asked many silent questions. 'Have you hired this car?'

I nodded casually. There was a burning curiosity in her eyes but for reasons best known to her, she refrained from asking questions to satisfy it.

'I've got to go home,' she repeated.

'But first we must have a little chat,' I said firmly. 'After that, I'll drop you near home . . . I mean because you won't like being dropped right at home.'

'What is there to discuss?' she asked flatly.

'A lot. I want to give you a report of the new

development. For instance, I was with your father. We drank at the same table.'

Her eyes popped out. She looked at me as if I was a bird wearing shoes. 'You were what?'

I smiled wryly. 'We can discuss it in a better place than a college's parking yard. Just get into the car and save time.'

The mention of her father had excited her. She was anxious to know what the devil I was talking about. She dragged her feet as if they weighed tons and got into the car. We sat in the back seat. I told the driver where to go.

It looked too strange to be true. Caroline and I were sitting in the back seat of a big car like an ambassador and his wife. She kept her eyes away from me. When I closed up against her and put my hand on her shoulder, she repulsed me. This I had expected. Caroline and I were still strangers to each other.

'Tell me about my father,' she said anxiously.

'There is no hurry,' I mumbled.

She shot me a look and turned her head away. Nothing more was said until we reached the hotel. It was her next surprise when she saw our destination. The driver got out and opened the door for us. Caroline looked frozen inside, disbelief and fear printed on her face. She dragged herself out of the car and looked at me inquisitively. I smiled at her and paid the driver.

'Let's go.' I led her towards the reception desk. She didn't move. I turned to face her. 'What's wrong with you?'

'I'm not coming in there,' she said stubbornly.

I couldn't hide my anger. 'You mean to tell me that you agreed to come all this way just to get

yourself stuck at the doorway.

'I've changed my mind,' she said in a weak voice. I sighed with rage. 'Stop behaving like a kid,' I snarled. 'What are you fearing?'

'Nothing?'

'Then?'

'I simply don't want to go in there with you.'

I forced a smile and assumed a pleading tone. 'Caroline, you don't know how disappointing this is. I know what you are thinking and the cause of your fear. You are wrong.' I didn't know what I was saying. It was hard to tell why Caroline was behaving like this. Perhaps she guessed what I had done and didn't want to be associated with me. Maybe she thought I would do her harm or rape her. 'Have you also changed your mind about learning what went on between your father and me?'

'You are lying,' she said.

'I'm not,' I almost shouted. 'I'll prove it to you once we are settled.'

We were standing directly in front of the reception desk. People were beginning to turn their attention on us, wondering what the argument was about.

'We are making fools of ourselves,' I said. 'Come on and we'll get it over.' I started moving without looking to see if she was following me. Once in the reception hall, I looked over my shoulder and saw her look around, apparently aware that she was presenting an odd spectacle. Then she slowly followed me. From there it was easy. I took my keys from the reception desk and climbed up the spiral staircase to the second floor. She followed like a reluctant sheep being dragged on a rope. I opened the door and politely ushered her in. We walked into the luxurious double-bedded suite.

She stood near the door as if paralysed. I motioned her to a seat but she ignored my offer. Her bewildered eyes jumped from one corner to the other, in apprehension. I let her please herself and called room service.

'Tell me about my father,' she suddenly said. It looked as if that was all she wanted to know.

'We met in a golf club,' I said. 'We sat at the same table.'

'Was that all?' she asked when I didn't continue.

'That was all.'

She bit her lips. 'And that was all you wanted to tell me?'

'A bit of what I want to tell you.'

'What do you really want to tell me?' she asked ironically.

I crossed over to the bundle at the corner. I picked it up and gave it to her. She looked at it but didn't take it.

'Take it,' I offered.

'What is it?' she asked suspiciously.

'Open it up and see for yourself.'

'I don't want it,' she rasped.

I felt like strangling her. Before I could compose myself, the waiter came and found us standing there.

'Eh . . . what would you like to drink?' I asked her, trying to control my voice. She shook her head. I decided not to persuade her lest the waiter noticed the ugly climate in the room. 'Bring me a full bottle of Vodka,' I told the waiter. I wanted to drink my head off.

'Ice and Soda?' the waiter asked.

'No, just the bottle and a glass.' As he left, I saw Caroline look at the half-closed door as if contemplating an escape. 'You are not my prisoner,' I said

sarcastically. 'You are free to go any time you want. But first you must open up that parcel. If you don't like the contents, I won't force you to have them.' I was only playing for time. For the waiter to come back and leave us. It had suddenly occurred to me that Caroline was going to be a disappointment. I had no forgiveness left in me. Not after today.

I decided to open the parcel for her, and spilt the contents out on the large bed. Her eyes followed my movement blankly. She looked at the heap. An assortment of dresses, negligees, bras, pants and all. The waiter interrupted us before I could see her full reaction. I took the bottle and paid the waiter. This time I was careful to lock the door after him.

She looked at the heap of clothes with a mixture of wonder and contempt. She didn't take a step to inspect her gift. This was the final blow.

Unable to control my rage, I grabbed her hand and hurled her to the bed. 'You bitch!' I roared. 'How can I spend my money to buy you a gift and get no appreciation!' She fell on the heap of clothes and was about to scream when I quickly cupped her mouth with my palm. She struggled to free herself but I pinned her firmly across the bed. I saw terror in her eyes and relaxed my grip. 'I don't want to harm you,' I said. 'If you scream or try to dash out of this room . . .' I didn't complete the sentence. Now aware of her physical weakness against me, she submitted and lay still, gasping and panting. 'I want to go home,' she whispered.

'You won't,' I said. 'I wanted to keep my word, but not after the shame you have brought upon me.'

She struggled upright. 'I must go home,' she was almost crying.

'No.'

'What do you want to do with me?'

'Stay with you here.'

'What!'

'Just that.'

'What right have you to hold me here?'

'I still consider you as my runaway wife.'

'Your what!' she nearly jumped.

'Don't tell me you've forgotten that I lived with you as man and wife.'

'That was that time. Forget that you ever knew me.'

'I've given up trying to forget. In any case you are to blame for all that's happened.'

'Why me?'

'It was you who started it. Remember that night when you came to my room and eventually followed me home?'

Her female ego was attacked. 'I might as well tell you now. I never felt for you more than I felt for the rats in your house. I didn't come to you because I loved you. I pitied you and that was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life. I felt sorry to see you lonely and rejected. I came after you not because I wanted to live with you. I was only curious to know how you people lived up there. Why, you were an outcast among us.'

I stirred uncomfortably. 'So you came to do research on me?'

'Something like that.'

'Very interesting. The institute which sponsored you must be very mean. You carried my child, saw me contend with your father in court, made me steal and go to jail . . . all because you were curious?' I gulped a mouthful of vodka straight from the bottle. 'You lie, Caroline. You don't want to admit

that you fell in love with your father's servant. I don't blame you. They say love is blind. You gave me your blind love until its eyes started to see. We are both to blame because I, too, didn't heed the possible results of such love. Now I know and you know.

'The way I see it, I'll be the ultimate loser in the gamble we started together. Of course I'm aware that you lost your virginity to me and mothered an illegitimate child. That is nothing compared to the loss on my side.'

'What do you stand to lose?' she said curtly.

'I've already lost and will lose much more. I lost my own self after I lost you. A double loss.' I swallowed a succession of mouthfuls. The spirit was gradually taking effect. 'I came here with a view to mending up the differences between us. To get started once again. This time a different start.'

She shuddered. I cut her short. 'I have enough capital to start a medium business and see to our welfare. We could live together and legalise our marriage . . .'

'On stolen money!' she interrupted. At last she came to the subject.

'What a conclusion!' I snapped. 'It's your belief that a man of my kind can't have money unless he steals. Only people like your father can make legal money, eh? Let me tell you they are the worst thieves . . .'

'You can't say that . . . ' she started to protest.

'I'll say it a hundred times,' I interjected. 'If I am a thief corporal, your father is a thief general.'

'How dare you!' she shrieked. 'My father is not a cheap tramp like you. You thought I would accept this rubbish from you!' she motioned at the heap of clothes, still intact on the bed. 'Boasting with

stolen goods and living in an expensive hotel! Whom did you want to impress? Not me. I'm no longer the kid you used to know.'

I was at a loss for words. The insult pierced right where it hurt. I picked up the clothes and started tearing them into pieces. I had to use a pocket knife to finish off the job. She watched me, stock still. I stood away from her and stared at the tatters on the floor. It was now clear that Caroline had hardened against me. After all the anguish she had put me to, jail, violent robbery and all. I had done all those things in an effort to have her, to close up the gap between us. Now there she was so near yet so far, repelling and mocking me. She saw it coming and covered her face with her hands. The smack reverberated in the room. She flopped backwards with a shriek of pain. I waited for her to scream for help but what she did was sob hysterically. 'I've a mind to kill you right now!' I raved. 'That's what I should have done. Kill you so that I'll never see you again. That's the only way I can get you out of my system.' I was on her, ripping her clothes into tatters until she was stark naked. Maybe she had taken me seriously and feared that I might murder her. She neither struggled or complained at the way I was handling her. She was like a log throughout.

'Today I'm in command,' I gasped at last. 'We'll spend the night here whether you like it or not. Tomorrow you may go to your heavenly bungalow and bury me. Now I know it's all over for us. Tonight will be final.'

The only response I got was a cold stare. It didn't bother me. I drank the vodka slowly and thought about nothing in particular. After losing her, which I was now sure of, nothing mattered. The world stopped moving.

It was late at night when my drinksodden mind registered a rustling sound. I dragged myself up and at first fell in confusion. It took a couple of seconds for my mind to clear, and I realized where I was. I felt for Caroline in the bed. She had vanished. Then I saw a dark figure at the door. Before I could get up, I heard the click of the lock turning. It was Caroline all right! Damn me! I hadn't secured the keys. Too drunk to take precautions. I was out of the bed when she opened the door and I dashed out. I ran after her. The corridors were deserted as everybody had gone to sleep. She screamed as she ran and I called after her. Then it happened. I had just caught up with her on the spiral staircase when she slipped and fell headlong. She let out a horrifying shriek as she somersaulted to the first landing. I dashed there and bent over her. I wasn't alone. People, nearly all of them in dressing gowns or pyjamas converged around me. I was transfixed there, neither turning my head, nor answering the barrage of questions from the bystanders.

Caroline lay still, dead or alive. I was too paralyzed to find out which. One man, noticing my helplessness, knelt beside her and felt for her pulse. I looked into his face to read the verdict. I saw a glint of hope register. 'She can be saved,' he announced. A commotion ensued as people offered first aid. Somebody rushed to call an ambulance.

I recovered my presence of mind. The effects of the vodka oozed out. I was in a hot spot. The accident entailed police attention. I was already on the wanted list and there was always the chance of one crime leading to another.

I took advantage of the commotion going on as people asked this and that without getting answers. I stood up and rushed back to my room, brushing against confused people along the corridors. I locked myself in the room and hurriedly packed my personal effects. There wasn't much. Only a small box containing a few clothes and the loot. Till now I hadn't thought up a safer way of keeping the money, so I had been carrying it with me.

The throng of hotel guests kept packing in the corridors, some returning to their rooms while others rushed to see what it was all about. I pushed through them and descended the staircase. I reached the scene and found a couple of people administering first aid to Caroline. I pushed past them as if the matter didn't concern me.

'Hey, you . . . ' I heard somebody calling from behind, 'That's him . . . ' I didn't pause or look behind. I was now on the ground floor, I dashed past reception and into the car-park. To my dismay, there was no taxi in the ranks. The drivers had already gone home with the approach of dawn. I traversed the park and broke into a run. The din behind me died down as I quickened my pace. 'Hey . . . you!' somebody was running after me. It could be one or more people. I looked behind me and saw three dark figures running towards me. The area around me was open and I deemed it impossible to shake the pursuers off unless I beat them on the run or hid before they could reach me. I opted for the latter. I dived into a tuft of shrub and crouched. I could hear the pursuers' footsteps as they approached. Somebody with a foreigner's accent spoke in broken English. A native replied. I raised my head a little and peered. I could make out the shape of a man in watchman's uniform and two

other people. It appeared that they suspected I was hiding nearby as they had already stopped running. There were several tufts around but they seemed to be concentrating on the spot where I was hiding. It seemed that they were determined to catch me with the obvious motive of handing me over to the law. I had to make good my escape or face what was coming. I leapt out of hiding and ran blindly. A wild burst of shouts followed me and echoed across the buildings a short distance away. I made for the buildings, hoping to get cover before they could catch me. The pursuers fell back as I zig-zagged and dived behind the first building and then ran on. One incident made my hair stand on end when I collided with a mongrel around a corner. The dog was as surprised as I and he took off with a howl. We confusedly fled in the same direction before he was swallowed up in the dark. I halted to take a breath. Lights appeared from several windows as the sleepers woke up to investigate what the commotion was about. I heard the faint voices of the pursuers and knew that I had already beaten them. But I didn't know which way to go or what part of the town I was in. I moved on to nowhere in particular.

Chapter Eighteen

avoiding the delicate part.

'This time you are in real trouble,' he said with a sigh. 'You should have listened to your friend's advice. Now it's too late.'

'I've not come for consolation,' I said quickly. 'I know the game is over or soon will be. But while I've the time I have several arrangements to make. You might be the last person I'll talk to before they catch me.'

'Then you better make it fast.' He was nervous. 'They might come any time and I'd rather not have them associate me with you. They have been swarming in the whole division making enquiries after you.'

They had been faster than I had expected. But it still beat me how they had connected me with the incident. My guess was that Kahuthu or somebody who knew about me and Caroline had somehow given the police a clue.

I was still in the dark. Whatever had happened to Caroline remained a puzzle. I didn't want to think about it but the thoughts kept criss-crossing in my mind like swords clashing. My only prayer was for her life. God save her!

The memory haunted my mind like a ton of rock. I still saw her by my side in the hotel bed, silently succumbing to my beastly demands while unknown to me she was plotting to escape. She had failed in the attempt and landed both of us into trouble. I saw her face at the moment of shock as she slipped and rolled down the staircase. The face of somebody looking death in the face and afraid of it. Then the horrifying cry of agony before crashing and then lying inert.

'It's a pity I can't see my mother unless I risk bumping into policemen there,' I said. 'She'll perhaps

understand if I send you there.'

Zakayo nodded.

'I'll entrust you with the keeping of my money until such a time as my fate is known,' I said.

Zakayo was a clean citizen and I expected him to refuse my request. He grinned expansively. 'If anything, you have really earned the money. It might cost you your life.'

'I know,' I conceded. 'That's why I came all this way. If they catch me or hang me, the cause for which I suffered shouldn't go unrewarded. As the proverb goes, "The sower is not always the harvester." I was inspired to labour for this money by an accident in life's race. It didn't serve the purpose for which it was intended, and I am not free to cherish the fruits of my struggle.'

'I intend to go into hiding but one never knows how long one's luck will hold out before getting caught. I'd rather be coming to you when I need money. You may invest some of it in your business with me as an absent partner. If I meet my end, you have my mother for a partner.'

He was uneasy, probably obsessed by the idea of keeping such a huge amount of money. He belonged to the class that never counted a figure beyond one comma.

'I can't imagine it,' he mumbled. 'It almost makes me believe that a Saviour has once again been born of a carpenter.'

'Don't you remember telling me that Joseph was a carpenter like you yet became the father of Jesus? Luck has come your way in strange circumstances. Now I won't have to pray for cholera to break out here and boost your coffin industry.'

He wiped his brows emotionally. 'I now believe

Jesus can come in different forms and shapes. You can rest assured that your money is in safe hands. I suppose you would like to give your mother a portion?’

‘Of course. I leave the decision to you.’

He looked at me with those meek eyes which loudly said how sorry he was to see me go into the face of danger and uncertainty.

‘So long.’ I shook his reluctant hand and walked out. I was on the constant look-out for danger as I walked to the bus stop. In a small town like this one, where folks never caught up with modern fashions in clothes, I stood out in the crowd like a giraffe among the smaller animals. I saw old faces and looked the other way each time I came across a close acquaintance. I had already made a name for myself in my home-town. My encounter with Kahuthu and the subsequent events had sparked off many tales and controversies among the people who knew me, and curiosity among those who didn’t know me. As a result, I had noticed strange faces staring at me speculatively and fingers being pointed at my back.

Now I was in a different form from what the people around this place had known me. Now and then I spotted a familiar face glancing at me with expressions of doubt and recognition. I passed by to avoid salutations. If the police were that much after me, the chances were that I would not make it out of the town if I was recognized by several acquaintances. I had made the mistake of going there in broad daylight. But then I hadn’t known that the police had come this far, over four hundred kilometres away from the scene of the crime.

I reached the bus stop without incident. There

were several *matatus* waiting for passengers to the city, the place where I intended to hibernate. I had already made decisions on my uncertain future. There was only one business a man in indefinite hiding could do. Commit more crimes. As I reasoned, the crimes I had already committed constituted the most severe sentence that any earthly judge could pass. For all I knew, Caroline could be dead. That was a murder case carrying the harshest sentence. If they caught me and hanged me, I mused, the verdict would be the same as when I didn't commit more crimes.

I had just got seated in one of the *matatus* when I saw a tall man in dark glasses approach in quick strides. A cold shower in the blood froze me to a stone. I suddenly recalled seeing the man somewhere before. I had been locked in the local police cell twice and by this time I knew their faces. A single look at him and I knew what he was up to. Behind him strode two more familiar faces.

He leaned over the window of the vehicle and grabbed my coat sleeve to make sure I didn't bolt. 'Don't force me to be rough,' he said with undue politeness. 'We need you at the station.'

I knew when to fight and when to submit. The manner in which the three detectives stood manifested what would happen if I acted hero. It wasn't wise to be manhandled or shot in public. I didn't protest or show disgust. Looks of surprise followed me as I slid out of the vehicle with the detective's hand on my coat. One of his comrades joined in and handcuffs were clicked onto my wrists.

'I'm pleased at the way you co-operate,' the leader boomed. 'I must also commend you for your artistic style of disguise. We nearly had a fight among ourselves on the question of your identity.'

'What have I done?' I asked for the sake of it.
'Maybe you could tell us,' he said with a chuckle.
'You know much more than we do.'

I didn't want to start an argument. They shepherd-
ed me through the dusty streets towards the police
station. I had a feeling it was to be my last walk in
the streets. Perhaps the last time to be among the
crowds before I was cut off from freedom.

Chapter Nineteen

Caroline was not dead. I learnt that in the preliminary
hearing of a case in which I was charged with
attempted murder. The judge cautioned me not to
plead as the charge against me could be amended to
murder if the patient died. She was still in hospital
under intensive care. If she died, I'd be tried for
murder and most likely be hanged. If she lived, I
had a chance to live. So, once again Caroline's life and
mine were intertwined by fate. Both of us would
either live or die.

But something happened before Caroline's fate was
known. One afternoon, a detective came to my cell
and showed me a photograph in the back page of a
newspaper. I gaped at the photograph and betrayed
my feelings to the watchful detective. I saw him grin
with satisfaction.

The heading read: *Two charged with armed
robbery*. I stared at the photograph featuring Johnny
and Kisinga being escorted from the court by police-
men. Johnny's left hand was bandaged; the one he

had accidentally shot. He looked so distressed and pathetic that I couldn't recognize him at first glance. Kisinga wore a bold smile like the hero he was.

'Do you know these people?' the detective asked, looking at me hard.

I swallowed a lump of dry air. It was a mystery how they had come to connect me with the crime which I had committed nearly four hundred kilometres away.

'No,' I said flatly.

He smiled mischievously. 'Weren't you among them in the robbery?'

'No.'

He left without another word. A short time later, I was put in a police car under heavy escort. I knew where they were taking me. To their headquarters for interrogation.

Who could have tipped them off? I kept wondering as we drove towards the island. Johnny or Kisinga or Njagathi? Or maybe they were acting on mere suspicion. Somebody could have told them that I was into big money shortly before the arrest. They could have checked on the robberies committed around that time and worked on that basis.

But I didn't care. If there was trouble coming, I already had it. The agony of being enclosed in this hellish custody had already hardened me. Then there was this constant suspense, brooding over what would become of Caroline. The crime for which I was being held in custody carried much more punishment than the emergent one. I was morally finished. What had I to lose if they charged me with a thousand more crimes?

The two beefy policemen, one on either side of me kept glancing at me speculatively. I guessed they

must have heard the tales about me.

'This girl you wanted to murder . . . ' one of them started to say.

'Who said I wanted to murder her?' I snapped.

'The charges against you.'

I kept mum. He knew better than to pursue a topic I didn't want to discuss. The car pulled up outside the headquarters and we got out. They took me into a vast room and the leader motioned me to sit on a chair against a large table. All but the tall man who had come to the custody room left. He sat on the other side of the table and took out a pad of statement forms. He read out three names: Kisinga, Njagathi and Johnny.

'Do you know these people?' he asked coolly.

'I told you I don't know them,' I said.

He mentioned the date of robbery. 'Where were you between nine and ten o'clock?'

I pretended to think. 'I can't remember.'

He chuckled. 'I've reasons to believe that you were involved in the robbery.' He showed me a signed statement. It was Johnny's signature or it looked like it. The stupid street cowboy! I cursed. I wasn't surprised if he had betrayed us. He didn't look the type who could brave a police torture.

'I don't know him and I don't know about the robbery,' I said boldly.

He put the statement forms aside and stretched up. 'It's unfortunate that you are not co-operative. Maybe you don't know, but let me warn you. This kind of crime carries a mandatory death sentence. Your co-operation could be taken into account and most likely please the judge. We could also use you as a prosecution witness and perhaps even set you free.'

Set me free! I thought. He seemed to forget that I had a more serious case pending.

'Thank you for the offer,' I said. 'But I've come to tell you because there is nothing to tell.'

He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. 'For all matter, I've no choice but to force the truth out of you.'

I knew what was coming. They would torture me. But I had already been tortured, both physically and mentally. The sense of pain no longer existed in my system. I vowed not to yield.

It wasn't until three weeks later that I met Kisinga in the courtroom. He looked shocked when our faces met but we hardly more than glanced at each other. We were escorted to the dock. Our handcuffs were removed and we sat next to each other. Johnny was not with us. I guessed the reason. He most likely had pleaded guilty in a previous hearing and had been already sentenced.

Zakayo had hired a lawyer to represent me in Caroline's case. I was surprised to see him again in this case. Zakayo must have been working day and night. I saw him, my mother and other relatives among the audience.

Our names were read out. We stood up and faced the owl-faced judge. As for Caroline's case, the judge warned us not to plead as the charges carried a mandatory death sentence. The small Asian who was my lawyer stood up, followed by Kisinga's lawyer. The lawyer, who apparently had been informed of the new case at only a short notice asked permission to confer with his client before the proceedings. The judge objected on the grounds that the case was not being mentioned and a date would be set for an actual hearing. Kisinga's lawyer complained that

client was being held unlawfully as the prosecution had failed to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that he had committed the crime. He added that it was unfair for the law to hold somebody prisoner for three months before trial. The prosecutor contested that there was enough evidence to put us on trial. He opposed bail on grounds that investigations were still going on as not a cent of the stolen money had been recovered. He said he would call ten witnesses. The judge mentioned the date of the hearing.

We were handcuffed again and escorted to the prison van. I felt a bit relieved to know that I was going to be in the same premises as Kisinga. It was history repeating itself.

We met that evening during supper. Kisinga looked overjoyed.

'Maze, I now know I have a brother.' He hugged me passionately. We discussed our experiences since that fateful day in the bank. To my surprise, he wasn't offended that we had deserted them at a critical moment. He said he would have done the same under such conditions. He was even delighted when I informed him that the money I had shared with Njagathi was safe. It was partly a lie as I didn't want to tell him what I had done with the money. We discussed Njagathi. Kisinga said he didn't care what Njagathi did with the money so long as he didn't get caught. All the curses were levelled on Johnny.

'That silly Judas!' Kisinga spat. 'I should have thought twice before putting him in it. Nearly killed himself and almost got me killed.' He cursed again. 'The poor bastard pleaded guilty on the first hearing. He mentioned the whole lot of us.'

'Where is he now?' I asked.

'I don't know. He was transferred from here when he pleaded guilty. I guess they have already sentenced him or the police are still using him.'

Till now I hadn't told him about Caroline's case. He assumed that I had been arrested just because of the robbery. I guessed that he was deliberately waiting for me to mention her. I told him what had happened.

He stared at me for a long time. 'You mean all this happened because of the same woman?'

I admitted it. He shook his head vigorously. 'What a mess! Your chances of ever getting out of the prison alive are very slim. Pray she doesn't die. If she dies the law will never know that you didn't actually intend to murder her.'

'I don't think it makes much difference,' I said to console myself. 'I am already charged with a crime which carries the death sentence. If they hang me on this, they won't hang me again if she dies.'

'I bet they won't hang us,' he said. 'They don't take this hanging decree that seriously. About one case in ten of armed robberies.'

'We could be among the unlucky few who get hanged,' I observed. 'I tend to think the world doesn't have any bright patches for me.'

'And that's why you sign your death warrant today as if you do not value your life?'

'Are you afraid of death?' I asked.

'I don't like thinking about it. I love the earth, the sunshine, the women, the beer and whatever else can't be found in a grave.'

'Well, I remember you telling me that life doesn't leave the earth upon death. That reincarnation stuff.'

'I know that. But what if I become a thieving rat in my next life? No women, no beer, just yowling.'

stealing and running away from cats.'

'Even rats make love to their women rats and like it,' I remarked.

'Come to think of it,' he said. 'Supposing I become a rat in my second life. What will you be?'

'You are the teacher,' I said.

'Now I know what you'll be. A moth.'

'Why a moth particularly?'

'You know the nature of a moth? That flipping insect that flits around a source of light and ends up being burnt or dies of exhaustion? That will be you. See what Caroline has made you do. Struggle endlessly to have her but finally lose her and lose your soul!'

'I'll remember that.' Our supper time was over and the warders were screaming at us to go back to our cages.

I would have enjoyed remaining in Kisinga's company, but I was taken away the next morning. I had no idea as to where they were taking me until I was transferred to a bus.

'We are taking you back to the coast,' the officer enlightened me. I got it. I had two cases in two different jurisdictions. In the capital I was to be tried for armed robbery. At the coast, I was to be tried for attempted murder or murder, depending on the latest developments. Life was becoming really interesting.

Chapter Twenty

At last we met again. Caroline, her parents and the unwanted lover. Caroline was wheeled into the courtroom in a wheelchair. Despite the mess she was in, her enchanting beauty seemed to light up the room. I couldn't locate the damaged part of her body as her lower half was concealed under a flowing gown. She cast cold glances at me several times and sent electric shocks through my system. She looked withdrawn and wore a distant look, obviously pondering a bleak future in a wheelchair. I felt sorry for her. The woman who had violated the ethics of society because of me. The princess who had inspired importance in me and finally made me a gangster. And now, the disastrous results for both of us.

Kahuthu waddled in, followed by his wife and a couple who I suspected were Caroline's custodians at the coast. His hostile eyes met mine. They spoke a lot about what he actually felt about me. If eyes were bullets, I wouldn't have left that courtroom alive. But there was more than hate in those eyes. There was fear and defeat in them. I had conquered him in one way and lost in another. Every victory has a sacrifice.

It came as a surprise when my name was called and the charges read out. I wasn't being charged with attempted murder, but with wrongful detention and rape. I realized what had been going on. In hospital, Caroline had been too ill to explain what had actually happened. Upon recovery, she had told police the whole story. If she had died before making the statement, the truth would never have come to the surface. I'd have been tried for murder.

My lawyer stood up and contended with the

prosecution and the judge. He gave a brief history about me and Caroline.

'Maybe the court is not aware that the complainant was once a wife to my client,' the lawyer proceeded. 'And it can be argued that she is still his wife as there is no record to show that they were legally separated.'

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kahuthu fidget uncontrollably. Caroline didn't stir. The judge looked surprised. Apparently he didn't have the inside story.

'Objection,' the prosecutor protested. 'It's true that the defendant once lived with the plaintiff but not as man and wife.'

'Your Honour,' the lawyer pressed on. 'I'd like to draw the court's attention to another court case in which my client and the complainant were mutually united against a disgruntled parent who happened to be the complainant's father. On the question of matrimonial validity between the two, the fact that they lived together with the full knowledge of either parents suffices. After all, Common Law validates marriage when a man and woman live together as these two did.'

The judge scrawled something in the file under his nose.

'Your Honour,' the prosecutor disputed. 'This argument is immaterial in the sense that the court is not hearing a civil marriage case, but a criminal case in which the defendant is accused of wrongful detention and rape.'

The judge noted the assertion in the file.

'Your Honour,' the lawyer retaliated. 'The two cases are intertwined in the sense that my client cannot be charged with raping and detaining his own wife. The prosecution has failed to prove that my client has no claim to marital relations with the

complainant. Given that background, the court should consider the complainant as a runaway wife. For that matter, what the prosecution calls wrongful detention and rape should be viewed as a mere family squabble.'

'Your Honour,' the prosecutor debated. 'The law would be failing its purpose if the case was treated as a mere family squabble. This is a case in which the accused used excessive force upon the complainant and fled to evade justice. The fact that he ran away proves he was guilty of what he had done and reveals a premeditated ill motive.'

My lawyer sprang up again. 'Your Honour, the information provided by the police does not include what happened before my client and the complainant went into the hotel room. There is no report of a physical struggle from where the two met before going to the hotel. The obvious conclusion is that the complainant followed my client of her own accord and later got engaged in a scuffle.'

The case was adjourned.

A month later, I was sentenced to four years imprisonment. The judge had taken into account all the information provided by my lawyer. The main point in the ruling was that I had committed a crime (the judge was convinced it was an accident) and fled instead of reporting it to the police.

Two weeks later, I was convicted for the armed robbery. The judge was fair in the trial. He took into consideration the fact that nobody had been hurt in the robbery and I was a first offender. He gave me seven years and Kisinga nine.

My lawyer kept on with the fight and reminded the judge that I was already serving another sentence. The two sentences were merged to run concurrently. As it

happened. Caroline's case was overlapped by the other case and was therefore dead. She would go unavenged. The Law is strange.

* * *

Time did it. The wounds at last healed up, leaving only a few patches of fading scars. Those years in the maximum security jail served as medicine to cure a broken heart. The world had ceased to exist and the clocks had stopped ticking.

I was completing my third year in jail when rumours started smouldering. It was said that the President was once again to decree the release of ten thousand prisoners to mark the National Day. We waited in suspense, wondering who would be favoured by the decree.

The rumours at last materialized into truth. The list came. I was among the ten thousand! Poor Kisinga was not. His unbecoming conduct in jail must have been the reason.

I was going back to the world I had loved to hate. The world of Caroline and Kahuthu. But now it was all over. The one element that had made me loathe the world had vanished with time.

We packed our few belongings and said good-bye to jail. Kisinga was on the point of tears. I nearly cried myself. We shook hands and I promised him a share of the loot when he came out. It was to be many years unless there was another parole which might favour him.

At the prison gate was a mammoth crowd of the released prisoners' relatives and well-wishers.

'Welcome back to the free world,' a voice said from behind. I turned round like a released spring. My

heart stopped beating. Caroline was standing there supporting her shrunken body with crutches. I was speechless.

'Are you surprised?' She sounded many years back. It was the same question she had asked on the day it had all started.

'It's now my turn to run after you,' she said mockingly. 'You don't expect me to run fast with these,' she motioned at the clutches.

I looked at her for a long while. It wasn't like her. She looked ten years older and underfed. I got it. Caroline was severely handicapped. In that state all her chances of a prosperous future were ruined. Above all, no man would look at her twice.

'You loved me when I was healthy,' she said softly. 'Would you love me when I am unhealthy?'

The words came like a sting. For a while I forgot the misery she had caused me and looked upon her with pity. Those eyes which used to look at me with passion were now full of sorrow and begging.

'Caroline,' I gasped, 'you were the cause of all this. I didn't expect to meet you again after what happened. I've been in jail because of you . . .'

'I know,' she said. 'I've been thinking about it all the time. We often discuss it.'

'With who?'

'With my parents. They think it was their mistake to defy the rulings of Destiny. This would not have happened to me if they were wise in the beginning. They wisened up when it was too late.'

'And now?' I asked.

'The damage has already been done to you, to me and to them. Father says he is willing to forgive you for the ugly incidents you involved him in.'

'He did worse things to me,' I reflected.

'He's sorry.'

I felt like laughing. Here was a brute who had tormented me. And now that his daughter was an invalid, he wanted to make peace with me. He just wanted me to lift the burden off his shoulders. Caroline was already a burden to him. And it would seem that he was willing to throw the burden onto me. Probably because I was responsible for her woes or simply because I was her last chance. History repeating itself. Caroline had first come to me because I was the only man within her reach. And now she was coming again for the same reason. I was the only man she had a chance with in that state of health, and because they knew she was already engraved in my heart.

No! I had promised myself to bury her and pretend she never existed. Never to look at her or even mutter a word to her if we accidentally met. Oh God! Give me strength to put her off!

'Leave me alone, Caroline,' I hissed. 'You gave me more than it takes to hate somebody. I stole, robbed and nearly got hanged because of you. You stood up against me and stated clearly that you never felt for me more than you felt for the rats in my home. You saw me charged for raping and detaining you . . .' my throat was choked with resentment. I started walking away to evade her.

'Chuma . . .' her wailing voice followed me. I paused impulsively, forced to do so by the strange compulsion in her voice. The cool appealing voice that rang notes of memory deep into the past.

'I know how you feel,' she said. 'It wasn't my fault . . .'

'Whose fault was it then and what difference does it make?' I interjected. 'I got the punishment and you

didn't lift a finger in protest.'

'Imagine what could have happened if I sided with you like the previous time,' she reasoned. 'Who could have taken care of me when I was in such difficulties?'

'Your difficulties are not yet over,' I said. 'Let her whom you didn't want to offend take care of you.' I started walking away. Actually I was forcing myself to leave her. Just to display my ego. But right inside, a strong magnet was pulling me back to her. I started cursing myself. Where is my will-power? Can I possibly break the vow I had solemnly and justifiably made! Everything looked vague and unreal. Despite the repellent mess Caroline was in, I still felt attracted to her. Just like Kisinga said, I was like a moth, flitting around a source of light and getting burnt. Only this time the source of light was not as bright as it used to be.

I expected her to call after me. She didn't. Probably out of vanity. She still had some pride left after her charm was washed away. That made two of us. Neither of us wanted to be the easy-come. I wanted her to call to me, beg me and apologize. She didn't. I didn't want to pause or look behind. But the temptation swelled up as I walked away from her. At last I couldn't hold out any longer. My will-power collapsed. I hesitated and looked over my shoulder. She was still there, poised on her crutches like an orphan in the cold. I was rooted to the spot, memories cascading and pity overflowing. I offered myself to you, not because I love you, but because I pitied you. The words chirped in my mind. There was substance in it. I hadn't deserved her love, but her pity. It was my turn to pity her. I lost the battle. I started walking back slowly. I stood before her and we

looked each other in the face.

'I know what you are thinking,' she said after a deathly silence. 'That my father wants us to be reunited because he can be rid of me. You are wrong. My parents love me more than they've ever done. But they know that fatherly love is not enough. I'm lonely.'

'So they don't mind me being your companion?' I asked curtly.

She ignored the irony in my tone. 'They think you have earned the right to be my companion . . . if that's the right word. They know you were not a born thief or gangster and reason that if you took all that trouble for my sake, you can do anything for me.'

What an expensive way to impress reluctant parents, I thought! And what a prize for all those efforts! A cripple.

She was looking at me, waiting for my decision. My mind was in torment. I knew that on that moment pivoted my future, depending on what decision I made. I pondered a future with a cripple. I'd have to wheel her around, undress her, and put up with heaven knows what other inconveniences. All in the name of love or pity. I didn't have time to think or consider my observation. She was already in my arms and I responded with passionate embraces. 'Chuma, let's forget the past and live afresh,' she muttered.

'Let it be.' I agreed. We broke off our embrace.

'Carry these crutches for me, if you don't mind,' she said.

'And how will you walk?' I was not merely surprised. I was flabbergasted. Caroline was comfortably standing without her crutches. She smiled wryly.

'I stopped using them a few months ago,' she said. I stared in disbelief. 'You mean all this was pretence?'

'It was a test. I was testing you.'

I stood like a fool. Speechless.

'It was like this,' she said. 'You went to prison and I went to a worse prison. A prison of gossips and accusing fingers. My father's eminence in the public eye was the cause of it. The adverse publicity they gave the case nearly broke my father. His daughter was an object of ridicule.'

'I might as well tell you that it wasn't my wish or my father's to take you to court. The affair only revived an old heartache and put the family into yet more ridicule. But things had gone too far before the case could be stopped.'

'You can't imagine how much misery I suffered after the case. I had to hide from people to evade questions. I lost friends and the will to live. That delayed recovery and my parents viewed this with deep concern. I was already an outcast.'

'It was mother who put sense into father. For your information, mother could have solved the problem long before it developed into such proportions. She used to argue that my chances of ever meeting the kind of man my father wanted for a son-in-law were ruined after I carried your child and the subsequent publicity. However, she never revealed her feelings until recently. You'll be surprised to know that my mother used to send me relief when I was living with you.'

'What!' I was shocked.

'It was strictly a secret between mother and me,' she said proudly. 'Mother knew I couldn't survive on your earnings. She devised a method of sending me

money without you or my father knowing. She made me swear never to tell you lest you sheer off from the responsibility you had assumed.'

A puzzle was solved. I had all along wondered how Caroline had lasted with me that long. I had been too preoccupied to think where meat and butter were coming from more often than the available money could allow.

'We could have survived without you stealing,' she said. 'Only I didn't want to tell you until the right time came. But it was too late.'

'You really toyed with me,' I grunted.

'That was not all,' she said. 'Mother wanted to advance us a lump sum of money to help us get settled in a business with a promising future. This too was a secret between her and me. She wanted a candid report on your capability. That too came when it was too late. You were already in jail.'

It dawned on me that Caroline had a far deeper personality than I had ever realized. A genius of some kind. 'You amaze me,' was all I could say.

'But the main reason why my father ultimately softened up is because he believes it is not yet over between us. He has been obsessed by the notion that more and uglier incidents will recur once you are out of jail.'

So I had conquered him at last! I thought proudly. But then I had suffered my own casualties. 'By the way, how did you know I'd be paroled?' I hadn't thought about it.

'I was merely taking a chance,' she said with a secretive grin. 'It was my mother's idea that we should know well in advance if you were to be released or not. There was fear that you might come out with ill motives and make a mess.'

'Far from it,' I said. 'I had my future well defined. It didn't include you or your family. But now ... it's well ...'

'Let's go,' She led the way. She walked with ease but I noticed a slight limp. She led me to a car parked across the road. Inside was a young girl about five years old. 'Meet your daughter.' She pointed at the kid. I couldn't believe my eyes. My estranged daughter had grown up with the charms of her mother. We looked at each other and she smiled.

'Hallo daddy,' she pattered lovingly.

'Hallo daughter,' I took her in my arms. We were no more strangers to each other.

'Before I met Caroline, I had never dreamt of achieving anything beyond a bicycle and probably a tin-roofed slum. Now I was thinking of cars, bungalows, servants and whatever else Caroline missed by changing sides . . .'

But for a poor house-boy who has fallen in love with the beautiful daughter of his civil-servant master, the path to riches is not easy. In desperation Chuma moves from petty crime to a world of gangsters. It is only after much heartache on both sides that the two lovers are united.

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