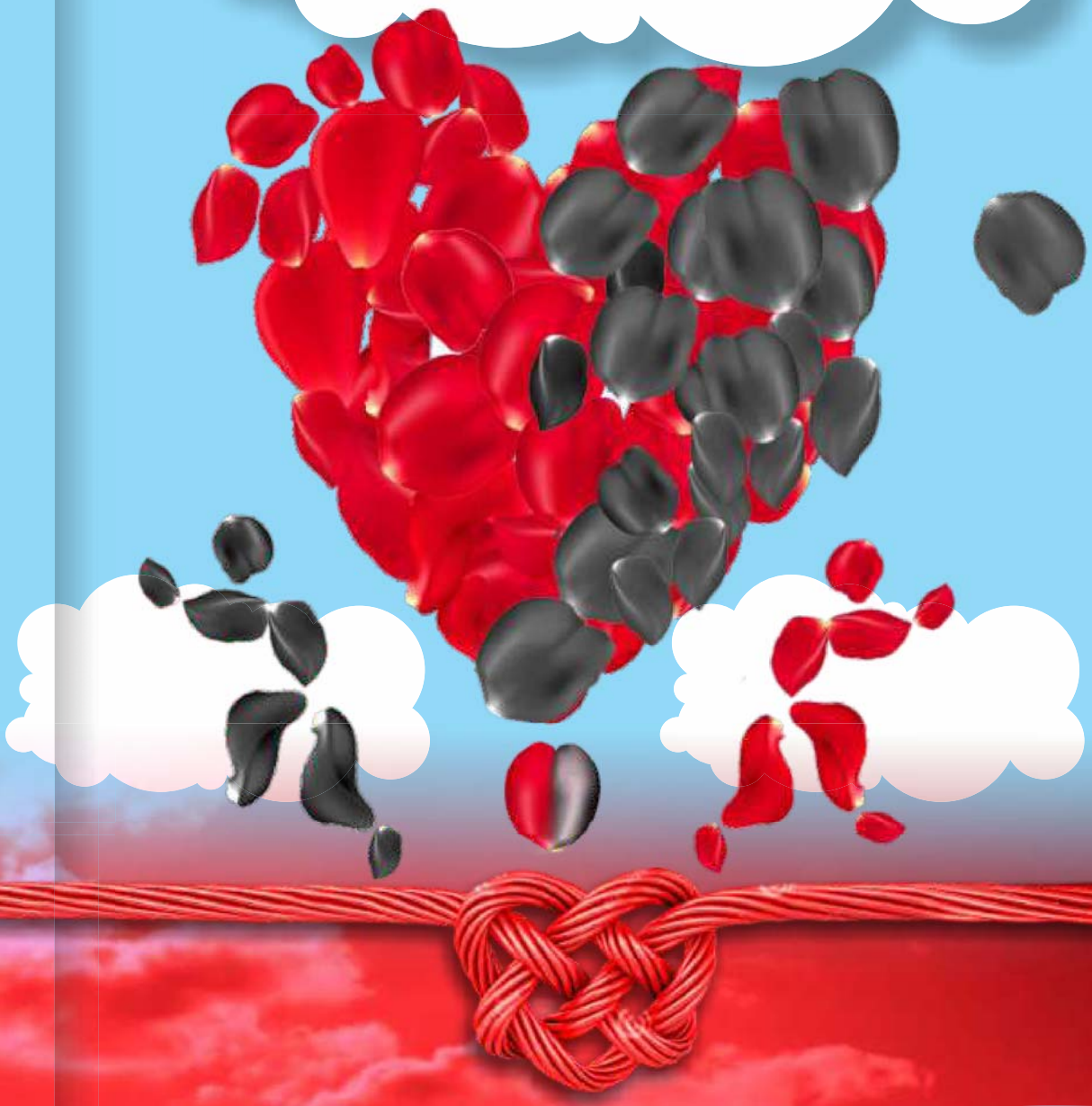
THE CLOUD BETWEEN



MIRIGO KINYANJUI

THE CLOUD BETWEEN

Mirigo Kinyanjui

The Cloud Between
First published in 2023

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ISBN **978-9914-49-893-6**

Editorial Services by Red Ochre Communications
Cover design by Newtoneye Wambugu

if not a love triangle
in the fuzziness of love
the lover between two lovers
surely must cloud the love
becoming the cloud between
in lament and love

- Gitura Mwaura

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CHAPTER ONE

DUOFOLD KIMWAKI WAS A CORPORATE EXECUTIVE in a successful foods company. Though ambitious, he was also humble. He could have afforded to build a house in an affluent neighbourhood in the city but opted to settle in his village in Kiambu County just outside Nairobi, where he built a house on his father's ample compound. He wanted to be close to his parents, for whom he also built a modern house for their comfort and that of his siblings—a brother and two sisters who were still in school.

He gave his parents and siblings all the financial support they needed, ensuring they lacked for nothing. He was happy that his young family with his wife Akumu liked the quiet environment close to his parents, who dotted on his two young children, Warrior and Binte.

Duofold was content with his life, and all was well.

This was until one evening when, as fate would have it, his dad, Hezron, went out to have a beer at the local village pub. Among the revellers at the bar was Fidel, an old neighbour who was back in the village after a long stay in Britain and who Duofold's dad had not seen for a long time. Though it cannot be said the two had ever been the best of friends, Hezron pulled a chair and joined the table.

As the evening wore on, and after Hezron had become a bit drunk from the many beers he had taken, it occurred to him to brag about his son, how Duofold, the fruit of his loins, had made good in the world and was now the rich and responsible son of his father. "Me!" had said Hezron emphatically, pointing at himself in a show-off manner.

"What do you have to show for your family, Fidel?" he demanded in his brag as if trying to belittle his neighbour. "You don't have someone responsible enough like my son to look after this wealth you have accumulated all these years?"

Another neighbour, Mwaura, who had just joined their table, was not happy with the way Hezron seemed intent on disparaging Fidel's family. Mwaura knew Fidel to be quiet and one who avoided unnecessary confrontations. Yet here was Hezron attacking their neighbour, who was too polite to answer back.

"I wish you knew, you fool!" suddenly shouted Mwaura, who, in his anger, was unable to constrain himself. "I wish you knew who the real father to Duofold is. It is Fidel, not you, Hezron. Who does not know you only married Florence to spite Fidel because you couldn't accept she was Fidel's girlfriend? Who does not remember the fight you two had before he left for the UK over that wife of yours?"

The table went silent, shocked at the outburst and the vehement manner of Mwaura's revelation, though the alleged accusations may not have been new to some in the group.

"This is uncalled for, Mwaura," Fidel harshly reprimanded his friend, somewhat uncharacteristically, for one of his quiet disposition. "I took longer in the UK than expected, so I do not blame Hezron for marrying Florence. And please let us not dig into the past. We reconciled and have since moved on. I think Mwaura, you need to apologise to Hezron."

Fidel's disappointment was palpable, and he spoke no more.

"What apology, Fidel?" Mwaura sneered. "That is the truth about Duofold. Hezron, should be slow in how he treats other people. His real son is that useless brat Falid who has taken after Hezron's stupidity."

This was more than Fidel could take. He could not hide his frustration and discomfort at Mwaura's insult-filled accusations. He paid the bill and left the two glowering at each other.

Hezron had, in the meantime, completely sobered up at the shocking revelation. Duofold had always been his pride and joy and could not believe what he had just heard. Unable to take it and suffer the shame he felt in front of his neighbours, he left the bar to confront his wife about the allegations. He wanted her to explain when and how it all got into the public domain, twisted as the allegations were.

"Florence, where are you!" he called even before he had reached the door to his house. "Is it true that I'm not Duofold's father, that it is Fidel who sired him?" Hezron demanded to know after finding his wife in the kitchen.

"I do not know where you got that information from, Hezron," she was calm in her reply. "Duofold is your son. And, after all these years, is this the time you have decided to bring up such a discussion, Hezron?" she asked, pissed off at what she deemed an unnecessary excuse to start a quarrel.

"Then who told Mwaura that Duofold is Fidel's son?" Hezron was now angry for the humiliation his uttering the very name Mwaura awakened.

"How can I know? I have never held such a conversation with him."

"And Fidel, when was your last conversation with him? You must have been in touch with him. The way Mwaura attacked me seems to suggest you still have a soft spot for the military guy."

The husband's anger was now turning into a physical threat to his wife, and Hezron was visibly trying to restrain himself from hitting her.

"When he left for the UK, I sent him a letter," Florence explained calmly. "But he never responded. I assumed he never received the letter. I had not married you then, Hezron. But that is now water under the bridge. We should not be discussing Fidel at this point in our life," she said, trying to dismiss the conversation as a small matter as she moved on with her chores.

Fidel had, however, received a letter from Florence. However, having been a primary school dropout, her English was so illegible and gabbled that Fidel had struggled to make sense of the letter. He thought it might have been better had she written it in Kikuyu, her mother tongue. But he had read enough to know that she was pregnant. He became aware she was now married to his competitor Hezron. He chose to keep it to himself and never speak about it in case it was him that had sired the child.

"Why did you not tell me Duofold is not my son, Florence?" her now furious husband was saying. He raised the walking stick he was holding and hit it on the table, scattering on the floor the boiled beans Florence had prepared to fry.

"Duo is your son Hezron," she tried to reason with him. "You brought him up and he only knows you as his father. You are his world. It can break his heart if you were to tell him such a thing. You are the only dad he has. He is a good and dutiful son who respects and adores you a lot. Someone misspeaking in a bar cannot make you destroy the goodwill you have for the people you love, my dear husband," she implored. This time she was scared and feared where this might lead.

HEZRON BECAME AFFECTED by the revelation of his son's illegitimacy in ways that might not have been expected. Unable to live with the fact of the illegitimacy, he became morbidly consumed with jealousy and bitterness that was difficult to understand.

It became a kind of insanity in which the disappointed Hezron became murderously insecure. He started plotting how to kill Duofold. He wanted to inherit Duofold's wealth before it was too late. This included Duofold's life insurance policy that Hezron was still signed as the next of kin.

Hezron conceived what he thought was a brilliant idea. He knew a witch doctor in Tanzania from the days he used to work there years back. He made plans and travelled to the country to seek the witch doctor's advice on the best method to get rid of the boy he now disowned as *Florence's bastard*. The shaman gave him a

concoction to spike Duo's drink. Hezron was assured the victim would be dead by the following morning after consuming the poison.

Hezron returned home from Tanzania a happy man. To proceed with the plan, he invited Duofold for a drink at the village shopping centre. He told Duofold the drink was to thank him for the support he had accorded the family.

The drink turned out to be quite merry, despite Hezron's murderous plot. His son could not suspect a thing. It was when Duofold went to the gents that his dad got the opportunity to spike his drink with the poison from the witch doctor. Duofold came back and finished his drink, unaware of what had taken place. Not long after, he was puzzled that he should be more intoxicated than usual, given the amount of beer he had taken. He requested to pay the bill and left together with his father.

He woke up to an unusually severe headache the following morning. He attributed this to a hangover after convincing himself he had overindulged the previous night. He drank water to rehydrate and decided to stay in bed a bit longer to see whether the headache would subside. Finally tired of the bed, he walked to the sitting room when he heard a knock at the door. It was his dad who stepped into his room.

"Good morning, son. I see your car is still parked outside; you aren't to work? Are you okay?"

Hezron was in a panic. Disjointed thoughts were swirling in his head at finding his son still alive: *The witch doctor had said death by morning; was it a lie? Did the witch doctor play a joke on me? Did he decide to save my son Duofold and yet charge me a bomb for the useless poison tablet?* His heart was pounding as he strategized on what to do.

"Hello, Dad," Duofold was saying, trying a smile that didn't come off. He felt weak. "It seems I can't make it to work; I've called the office to cancel all my engagements today. I guess I got excited and overindulged. I have woken up with such a terrible hangover. I want to rest a bit; This is not the first hangover I've endured." He tried to smile at his joke. "Thank you for the invitation yesterday."

"You're welcome, son. You are my best friend, you know! I was just checking on you, seeing how tipsy you were last evening," His father lied, forcing a smile. But he soon excused himself and left without taking the tea Akumu had served him.

Duofold began to feel quite uncomfortable and thought some fresh air outside might help. He eased his tall frame from the chair and weakly walked outside to a tree in the compound and spread a mat under its shade. After a while, he thought he was not feeling any better. His head was spinning and the ache seemed to have intensified. *Was it really the drink we took, or was there more to it?* A shudder of fear passed through him when he thought his drink might have been spiked. But he let the thought go.

Feeling exhausted from the scorching sun, he decided to go back to bed and take a rest there. His wife, Akumu, had all this time been keeping a close watch on him and observed him weakly walk to the house and helped lie on the bed. She covered him in a light bed cover and felt his forehead for temperature. He served him some painkillers and got some goat soup boiling as her husband drifted into sleep. She would serve him when he was awake. It was a sad day for his wife and children, who had just reported back from school.

When Duofold finally woke up, he seemed a different husband from the one Akumu was used to. He was sweating and hallucinating that he was being attacked. He was screaming uninhibitedly like a small baby. By this time, Akumu was quite alarmed. She had long cast aside everything to nurse and calm her husband down. She was at a loss for what to do to reduce her husband's agony.

When Duofold finally calmed down, he requested a glass of water and went back to sleep.

But it was fitful sleep in which he kept waking up hallucinating with all sorts of imagined attacks. "The ceiling is spinning and toasting things on my face," Duofold would shout gibberish, taking cover under the bed. Akumu nursed him the whole day with no improvement.

By evening, he seemed to have completely lost his mind and was raving and shouting all over the place. It was clear that he needed medical attention.

The whole family was in his house, including his crying mother. Hezron found a driver to help with Duofold's car and they rushed him to Mathere Mental Hospital in Nairobi.

THOUGH THINGS HAD taken an unexpected turn with the mental condition the poison seemed to have induced, it presented yet another opportunity for Hezron, who was still intent on actualising his plan. The vengeful hatred he displayed was difficult to explain. But so determined was he on carrying out his mission to get rid of Duofold that he convinced Falid, his biological son, to help him actualise his evil plan. To sweeten the deal and ensure the Falid's participation, he had dangled the promise to increase the inheritance he stood to gain. He would give him Duofold's potion of land, Hezron told him.

Falid warmed to the idea and helped his father to hire goons to do the job. The plan was to abduct Duofold from the hospital and do a clean job of eliminating him.

However, as it turned out, the goons' boss, Munene, personally knew Duofold Kimwaki in a way he could not overlook. Duofold had at one time saved Munene's life after a serious road accident. Finding him injured and in serious need of medical

attention, he had taken Munene to a good hospital and footed the hefty medical bill that Munene could not have afforded to pay. Duofold, however, had made it clear that the help he was giving was on condition that Munene change his ways and become a good man who would never again hurt innocent people. It seems that kindness had touched Munene, who had vowed to return the favour one day, if not particularly change his ways.

When Munene realised who the assassination contract was for, he hatched a plan to foil the assignment and still get paid for it. He would play along and, once at the hospital, kidnap Duofold as if to take him away and finish him off, then take bloodied clothes to Duofold's father as proof of job accomplished.

Munene decided to work alone on this one, and all went according to plan. He managed to carry Duofold through a window, put him in his car and disappeared into the night.

Munene tried to explain to Duofold the circumstances he was in once in the car. "Listen here, my friend Kim," Munene said to his passenger, who had remained compliant and silent all along as he drove. "I know you are not well, but I have nowhere to take you."

He was not sure Duofold, who did not respond and only looked at him blankly, comprehended what he was saying.

Neither was Duofold sure he could follow what he was being told. His mind was delusional and could not connect the dots. His usually quick mind didn't have the ability to formulate a response, nor was he sure he could recognise the person talking to him. He just stared, watching the strange man mouth words he couldn't comprehend.

In the end, conscious that what he was about to do might appear cruel to the man who once saved his life, Munene said with a hint of regret in his voice, "The streets will have to be your new home now, Kim. Your dad abandoned you."

He took Duofold to the Westlands shopping centre in Nairobi and led him out of the car to a spot by the mall near the roundabout. Typical of harried city passersby and people milling about the busy area, no one took notice of the two men.

"You are supposed to be dead; I was supposed to kill you," Munene said, repeating himself to drive his message through to his friend's hazy mind. "But I couldn't do that after what you did for me. This shall be your new base until God decides to redeem you from this predicament. I will be passing by every once in a while to check on you. All I ask you, my friend, is to remember to never go back home. You will be killed. Ignore the insignificant inconvenience you will go through in the streets and focus on what matters for your survival. But whatever you do, make sure never to lose hope. I believe that somehow you will get over this."

Munene picked a bag he had packed some clothes and helped Duofold dress up. He then gave him a packet of French fries and two sausages he had carried in the car. He noticed the second-hand t-shirt he had bought Duofold to change into from his hospital clothes had the words "Love over fear" emblazoned on its front. He took a moment to ponder the phrase and thought the coincidence prescient that it should so fit the circumstance. He interpreted it to mean that one could never die before God's appointed time.

Munene sadly watched Duofold as he picked his way on the streets, counting every stride he made. He kept pausing in his walk every second or two, like one trying to catch a flash of a memory. Munene wondered what his friend must be thinking about.

Poverty you can fight, enmity you can fight, and wealth you can create, but a loss of mental faculties steals all your power, Munene thought as he sadly watched Duofold disappear around a corner. He was sorry that he could not offer his friend any help.

"My one-time saviour Duofold is not well at all," Munene observed to himself sadly as he turned the car ignition. "I trust that God shall not forsake him," he prayed.

ALONE FINALLY AND walking aimlessly in the streets, a flash of self-awareness possessed Duofold's mind. A haze of memory emerged. He could visualise but not quite grasp the images or the feelings they evoked of his family. Yet he was lucid enough to think of focusing on his immediate circumstance. *The man said if I go back home, they will kill me*, he thought in that brief moment of lucidity. *Who wants me dead in that home?*

His thoughts clouded, plunging him back into the confused state of mind. He rested his tired body on the floor of a well-lit corridor before the drugs he had been injected with at the hospital finally knocked him off to sleep.

The devastated Munene passed through a cattle slaughterhouse and soaked Duofold's hospital clothes in cattle blood he procured at the abattoir. He then took them to Hezron as proof that Duofold was dead to collect the final payment for a job well done.

The following day the hospital reported to the family that Duofold had disappeared from his hospital bed. A search of the area yielded his bloodied hospital clothes, which were found placed by a riverside. It was presumed that the patient must have strayed out of the hospital grounds and was attacked by thugs, and his body was dumped in the river.

With this conclusion, it, therefore, came as no surprise when the river was scoured and a mutilated body was retrieved. Hezron and those helping him were convinced that it must be Duofold's body and led everybody to believe so.

News spread quickly that Duofold, Instar Foods Marketing Director, had died. Condolence messages by people from all walks of life flooded his Facebook wall praising him and saying how they knew him. Many extolled his kind heart. His office colleagues and associates in his business network recalled his diligence and industry with the products he developed and marketed. They regretted the loss of such a great marketer. Everyone, including his enemies and those eyeing his now vacant post at Instar, had a good word for him. People tweeted their respect from all corners of the world.

AS THOSE WHO KNEW HIM moaned his death, it presented the opportunity for the family and friends to meet again. A burial arrangement committee was formed. Someone remarked in jest how when a family member or a friend is in financial need, few come to help. But the moment the person was dead, money seemed to flow from all corners.

Family members and neighbours raised enough money for his funeral. Instar directors and his former colleagues footed the bill for the tents and the chairs. The in-laws from Kisumu were not left behind; they tagged along to mourn their beloved son-in-law Kim. The in-laws and their friends contributed enough to cater for moaners' meals and transport for those from upcountry who could not afford. His clients at Instar contributed to the coffin, but before they could buy the casket, a man named Ben dropped a receipt for the family to collect an expensive coffin. He said it was a contribution from him and other members of Duofold's golf club. The company that supplied Instar with marketing materials showed their solidarity by printing t-shirts and polo shirts with the deceased portrait that were so elaborate and expensive that it seemed like they had been commissioned for a fanfare event.

Everyone wanted to participate and volunteer something. Is someone's life more important to other humans at death than when alive? An elder wondered out loud as he commented that however sad the reality was, it was part of our daily lives.

The money contributions were channelled through Hezron's account so that he could decide on what it was to be spent. The account overflowed with donations as everyone wanted to prove themselves and their loyalty to their departed friend, Duofold. Hezron, despite being the evil cause of the whole tragedy, knew how to dramatically play with others' emotions and pretended such grief and loss that everyone felt terribly sorry for him. It was surprising that a bulk of all those who paid

tribute claiming how much they loved *the deceased* at the funeral never showed care or love when Duofold was alive. Many of their messages were still in his inbox, some of them hurling insults at him for late order deliveries and all manner of rude grievances, personal or otherwise. Now that he had passed on, all his false friends claimed to see were his good deeds as they paid him glowing tributes saying how much they loved him.

With the burial finally over, the father of the deceased quickly processed the death certificate, without which he may not claim his son's insurance payment. He had achieved his goal, which was to inherit all that belonged to his son Duofold.

DUOFOLD WAS NOW AN ESTABLISHED RESIDENT of the open street. With his death and burial a fact, he was erased from the living. But he didn't know this, and in the brief moments his mind was lucid, he would wonder why no one who knew him ever came across him in his new hood. He allowed that it was perhaps because he was now unkempt and covered in dirt for anyone to easily recognise him. He nonetheless would occasionally see some of the people he knew before his mental health deteriorated. They would always be on the road driving and therefore could not reach them. And sometimes when Duofold approached them, they would scamper in fear of the madman.

But he was now accustomed to sleeping rough and had come to understand that social rejection was part of street life. He was rejected everywhere he went by people he approached for shelter or food. Yet even though he imagined he was unkempt and dirty, he still looked young and had a certain sheen of respectability in his demeanour so that, at times, people could not relate him to his predicament.

He was disturbed that they occupied the same space with him, yet it was like they were in separate dimensions. No one seemed aware of his presence. When he spoke to them, they did not seem to recognise him or his voice. Display of deteriorated mental health seemed to evoke a kind of social blindness. It seemed as if the moment one lost their mind, they became faceless; people did not seem to notice them at all. Perhaps more so now that Duofold had supposedly died. He had become a dim recollection archived in people's memories. He was just a street resident and a nuisance with nothing to offer.

In moments when his mind was clear and he was able to think, he would recall how as Marketing Director at Instar, at times, he would not acknowledge his colleagues' presence, the same way the passersby on the street were ignoring him. Yet the colleagues reported with him at the same office for years. He thought this a great shame and promised himself to do better if he got a second chance. Yet in his

confusion and inability to concentrate, he perpetually viewed life from the sidelines with no hope for tomorrow as he walked in the dark looking for options. His days were all the same. He watched the days pass by through a lens of extreme fatigue, headaches, and paranoia. On some days, he was in a lot of pain and suffering to the point he would lose his sense of awareness and wet his pants.

It was a terrible state to be mentally handicapped with no one to soothe him. In most cases, when one loses his mind, the family is not able to cope with the chaos involved, and most likely than not, the victim becomes the child of the night, facing a lot of difficulties including confusion, hunger, and harassment from street boys and passersby. Mental illness is a lonely path and sometimes one is suicidal. Duofold pushed himself to survive in the difficult circumstances.

Nonetheless, he needed a miracle to get to the hospital and restore his mental health, but he was incapable of taking action by himself. Still, he occasionally would take a deep breath and let it out slowly, assuring himself that all would be fine with him in due course. It usually came in a flash of mental lucidity that he would feel determined to turn the tide. He would convince his soul that he could weather every storm that came his way until an angel of hope showed up. Still, the thoughts were too momentary to actualise. And so the illness kept Duofold enveloped from the world outside his mind.

THREE YEARS HAD NOW PASSED. Duofold now looked black with something that clung to him like soot. It was grime from a mixture of oil and dirt that stuck to his skin and hair that had grown into long ropey dreadlocks. It surprised many people that the mentally ill individuals they came across on the street were self-aware enough to apply oil on their hair and skin to repel insects attracted by poor hygiene, such as lice, bedbugs, fleas and all sorts of fly species.

In those moments of self-awareness, brief though they were, he had come to recognise that some days were good and others not so good. He, however, was paranoid most of the days. It was now in his mind that someone wanted him dead, so he did not trust anyone. He wanted to disappear forever from people until the day God would have mercy on him and reveal who his enemies were and what he did wrong to live like a hunted animal.

ONE OF DUOFOLD'S BOSSES at Instar Foods, Madam Liz, is back in the country. She is aware of what became of Duofold and has been despondent since. She was always fond of him and believed his diligence and talent assured him a bright future.

One day, as she is fuelling her car at a petrol station in Westlands, a mentally ill person comes to her open car window to borrow coins to buy something to eat. They lock eyes, and she thinks she knows who the person pleading at the window is.

"Good morning, Sir. What is your name again?" Liz tests him.

Duofold is in the grip of one of those bad moments when he is devoid of his sense of self when his mind is completely spaced out.

"My name is Beatles. I am hungry; give me something to eat," he replies, not recognising the lady before him.

Liz pulls out a packet of milk and a box of pizza she had bought to treat her children and hands them to the person. She watches him retreat and closely observes his walking style—his gait, whose unique signature in everyone can help identify a person.

She watches how he sits on a patch of grass and starts wolfing down the pizza. She closely observes his hands, height, and body structure. Everything about the person reminds her of Duofold. The name Beatles somewhat throws her off, but she seems to remember that the last everyone she asks seems to recall is that he was in a mental hospital at some point.

The pump attendant at the petrol station is concerned that Liz does not seem ready to drive off and make space for the next driver. She is lost in thought, unaware she might be causing an obstruction. The attendant realises this and lets her be.

"Is there a chance Duofold is alive?" she wonders to herself. "No one seems to have been allowed to view his body."

She looks again at the man, who is now sucking on the packet of milk. "Something is not adding up," Liz tells herself.

She asks the pump attendant where this guy, Beatles, is found during the day. The attendant explains that he is often seen early in the morning behind the mosque sleeping. He gives her directions to the mosque at her request.

"Is his real name Beatles?" she enquires.

"No, that is a nickname given to him by the taxi guys," replies the attendant. "He talks and dances for them a lot when in a good mood and thinks he is the Beatles, the famous British music group. No one knows who he is or where he came from. He has been around for some time now. He is a friendly guy, though, and the only madman in the area who remembers to say thank you when you help him. He is usually quiet and hates confrontations. Parking boys know this and tend to take his food which he leaves to them and quickly takes off."

"Thank you for the information. Keep an eye on him for me. I shall be passing by to see him. Please give me your phone number in case I don't make it in the next

few days. I shall be sending you some money to buy him food as I figure out how to help him."

"That shall be very kind of you, madam. If *Beatles* gets help and is taken into a good hospital, he might remember his people and where he comes from. I pray that a solution is found to end his pain. Some days he looks lonely and in deep thought. I've noticed he does not beg for food on such days. Other days he sits looking at people like someone yearning for a conversation, like one looking to claim his life back."

The way the petrol guy is explaining it, Liz thinks it sounds like depression. She remembers a psychiatrist once telling her that people do not fake depression; if anything, they fake being okay.

"Let us see what can be done," she tells the attendant. "There is nothing ordinary about a mad person, oh, I mean a sick person. Whether he is the man I think he is or not, I will offer to help. Character is how we treat someone who cannot reciprocate. I am willing to help this guy. What is your name again, young man?"

"I am Isaac, madam."

"I am Liz. Have some money and buy yourself some lunch too. Thank you for the information; you are a caring man. God shall bless you for your kindness Isaac."

"Thank you, Madam Liz."

As she drives off, she glances at the man, who seems to have finished eating and lies sated on the grass. *We are all here but only for a moment in this world. I shall do my best to help you soar higher than you can possibly imagine, handsome man! You deserve better. Hang in there.*

AS LIZ DROVE, she prayed that this was Duofold Kimwaki, or Kim, as everybody knew him by his shortened second name. She hoped it was him because he had not only been her close friend but, as his boss, nobody knew better than her how brilliant Duofold was and the potential in the young man.

A particular achievement for which he was recognised just before his disappearance stood out in Liz's mind. She remembered that morning of jubilation at the office after Instar Foods was announced industry winner for the unique health food formulations awards. She clearly remembered the words citing him as the person deserving the merit.

Credit for winning the recognition, the citation for the award read, *goes to Duofold Kimwaki, Instar's Head of Quality Assurance, who has developed a new processing method for a product that derives maximum nutritional value from the resilient amaranth grain*.

He had a reputation for the creativity and hard work he put into his job. It, therefore, was no surprise to many it was him that helped win the nutrition and brand recognition category.

Duofold not only helped introduce the growing of the Amaranth plant in rural communities as an income-generating initiative but enhanced its nutritional attributes and oversaw a marketing campaign that saw its product sales skyrocket. The company improved its credentials in corporate social responsibility helping poor communities and thrived from excellent returns on product investment.

Liz recalled that his many successes had led the Board of Directors to wonder whether he should continue as the quality assurance manager or be made managing director. They instead made him marketing director, in addition to his quality assurance duties.

His record of achievements at the company remained unbeaten, thanks to his diligence as manifested in the Instar award.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS QUITE DISTRESSING for Duofold's two children, Warrior and Binte, to witness their father's harrowing episode of mental illness. It was a dad they could not recognise. Akumu understood what they must have been going through with the confusion and fear that showed on their young faces. She, however, was able to comfort them, assuring them that their dad would be well soon.

After she had put them to bed that evening, she decided to go to her mother-in-law Florence to wait for Hezron and Falid to return from the hospital. However, as she approached her mom-in-law's house, she overheard Florence expressing fears about her son to someone she was speaking to on the phone. She sounded like she was in tears. Akumu heard her describe a quarrel with Hezron a few days before about his claims that Duofold was not his son. It also bothered Florence that Duofold, who was healthy only the day before, should suddenly fall ill after an evening out with his dad. She was also concerned that Hezron and Falid had prevented Duofold's own wife from accompanying her husband to the hospital.

The claim that the illness may have been engineered, let alone that Duofold may not have been his father's son, came as quite a shock to Akumu. It threw her into a panic as she wondered what it meant not only to Duofold but to her and their young family. Trembling with shock, she hesitated to knock on the door. She did not think she would be able to speak. She also thought it disrespectful to walk in and find her mother-in-law in such a disturbed and tearful state. She decided to go back to her house, tiptoeing not to be heard by her mom-in-law. She would see her in the morning when she and her mother-in-law were calmer.

Though she had not heard all the details, Akumu had overheard enough to be convinced her husband's apparent mental illness may have been due to a plot by her father-in-law. She switched off Duofold's phone and took their valuables and details of their joint bank accounts with her and walked in the dark to her friend Mercy's house. She shared with her what she had overheard of Florence's telephone conversation. Mercy agreed it did not portend well for her friend and her husband. Akumu left her with the valuables and documents and went back home. She,

however, remembered that she had put Duofold's wallet in his jacket in case the hospital may require his identity card and health insurance details.

Hezron and Falid got home late that night. Akumu, eager to know whether her husband had comfortably settled at the hospital, was early at 6 am knocking on the in-laws' door. She was surprised that her father- and brother-in-law didn't have much to report, only telling her that she had to wait until noon to accompany them to the hospital.

Akumu thought this strange and could not accept it. She took it upon herself to go to the hospital by herself immediately. She was her husband's wife, after all, and had every right to visit and know how he was faring after a night in the hospital.

A shock awaited her, however. Her husband was not in the room he had been assigned. His jacket and the clothes he had left the house in were hung in an open closet in the room. She inquired with the hospital attendants, but nobody seemed to know where her husband might be. She feared the worst as she removed Duofold's wallet from his jacket and left the hospital, and headed to her husband's nearest branch of his bank. She wanted to transfer all the money in his bank accounts and credit cards she had retrieved from the wallet to her account, which she successfully did.

Akumu then returned to the hospital, this time accompanied by two policemen. But more tragic news awaited her: She found her father-in-law and Falid holding a bloodied hospital gown that hospital staff said matched the one Duofold had gone to bed with. They explained that the gown had been found beside a nearby river.

Akumu found two other officers from the same police station she had got the policemen accompanying her. She overheard the officers accompanying her asking their colleagues why they had not already reported the incident in the Police Occurrence Book. The officers were concerned it amounted to duplication of work. Had it been recorded in the Occurrence Book, it might have avoided their accompanying the victim's wife to accomplish the same task.

Tears welled in her eyes, and she thought the bickering between the two groups of officers was misplaced, given the tragedy that had occurred. She started sobbing as she asked them, full of incredulity, "He killed himself then drowned; that is what you want me to believe?" Then pointing at her father-in-law and the nurses, she demanded, "Dad Hezron and your hospital staff, is that what you want me to believe, that he drowned himself naked? "

"The police are investigating what happened between the hospital and the riverside," Hezron tried to explain. "We are being advised to go home and await an update on their findings."

The police were now interrogating the hospital staff who had been on night duty as Akumu and her in-laws were released to go home. Anguished and inconsolable, she was not willing to take the same car with Hezron and Falid. She opted to take the bus, which meant her in-laws would be home long before she arrived.

TO THIS DAY, Akumu still fails to understand the incomprehensibly hostile welcome she found awaiting her when she got home from the hospital. She found the locks to her house changed and locked. She tried tracing her children Warrior and Binte in the compound and with their friends in vain. She would later learn they had been prevented by Hezron from going to her.

Her clothes were bundled inside a rough sack usually used to pack coffee, and she was told that was all she was entitled to in the compound. Falid then took the sack outside the gate and ordered her to get out of the compound before she was assaulted and forcefully evicted.

It was all very incomprehensible. Akumu went to the local administrative chief's office to report the expulsion from her matrimonial home, but nothing happened. The chief seemed reluctant to pursue the matter. As the situation escalated, Hezron claimed she was the one who killed her husband and wanted charges pressed against her.

In the tug of war that ensued of claims and counter-claims about who was the rightful heir, Akumu tried to revoke Duofold's will, which she now understood was at the centre of Hezron's hostility. But, as it turned out, the will was done before she was married to her husband. This fact seemed to enrage Hezron, who made it look like Akumu was a gold digger and not legally entitled to her husband's wealth.

In the end, Akumu was chased away and forced to leave her children behind. This was a strategy by Hezron to exclude Akumu from her husband's estate and deny Akumu the reason to make a succession claim to cater for her children's maintenance from insurance money she would have received.

Falid was gifted by his father Duofold's family house in Hezron's compound to occupy. After being separated from their mother, Duofold's children were moved to their great-grandmother's dilapidated and abandoned house.

AKUMU WAS NOT one to give up easily. She rented a small house at the Shopping Centre from where she would mount the fight to get her children back. She was under no illusion that it would take many months or years to get them back. All she knew was that she must prevail.

By now, Duofold had long been buried. Not able to do much about the ordeal with the in-laws and having no resources to match Hezron's abilities to convince everyone she was not in the wrong. And though she was not involved in the funeral arrangements, she was impressed that the burial honoured his cheerleader and love of her life. *Rest in peace, my love. We shall meet again when I join you in heaven,* she remembered having prayed immediately after the funeral with tears flowing down her cheeks.

All she was left with were memories of her husband, how they loved each other, and how they were a perfect match as lovers and in marriage. She remembered with longing how, even with the little they had in high school, their relationship was rich with fun and pleasure that still lingered fresh in her memory. They always knew they were meant for each other, and she recalled how the new husband gave her a full-year honeymoon when they got married.

"I do not want us to get kids immediately, my Akumu. I want to be the only baby you shall see for the next year as I build you a home in my village," she recalled Duofold telling her and the hug that followed. They were staying in a rented house at the time. Duofold enrolled her in short courses on cookery and later information and communication technology. He planned to start an information technology company and run it with her. With the courses, he used to tell Akumu she would be their children's teacher and chef. He bought her a laptop to help her research entrepreneurship and how to bring up a family.

"I want you to juggle running the company and doing your entrepreneurship research. You will be working for six hours a day, from 10 am to 4 pm," she remembered her husband telling her, and looking to the future, he would say, "I would like you to age gracefully with me, my darling Akumu. I adore you a lot, mother of my children. My clock shall revolve around you forever."

These were memories Akumu cherished. As she was unpacking her things in the new house she had moved into, she came across love letters Duofold used to send her. One of them read:

Hello, Lake Basin Princess,

I never knew love could be a silence in the heart that burns with a sensation that can't let one sleep.

TIME IS NEVER STILL when I am with you; when in your arms, I wish the day is forty-eight hours instead of twenty-four.

Your love has been the sunlight in my eyes. You are the only fantasy that rocks me to sleep.

No words can say what I feel when I am holding you in my tiny hostel bed.

Maybe you will never know how much I love you, girl,

But you can be sure I will be your paradise and your lifebook.

I will be the answer to all your soul and physical needs.

One day you shall be mine to keep; let this love be our guiding star.

Ninakupenda sana mpenzi wangu Akumu.

Yours faithfully,

Duofold Kim

True to the letter, Duofold kept his word. Akumu always felt protected and loved. He set aside a special time to be with the family that he never allowed to be interrupted by his busy schedule. He liked to do the school run for the enjoyment he derived, taking the children to school each morning and picking them up in the evening. When work tied him, and he was unable to pick them up himself, he never failed to send a driver to pick them up. He was a very attentive husband. At least once a month, he took Akumu out for dinner to try exotic Thai, Chinese, or Mexican cuisines and any local and foreign fare that struck their fancy. He always treated her like a hot girlfriend, not a wife.

Remembering these things, she thought about how Duofold was irreplaceable and how her soul was inseparable from his. She missed him terribly. The only pain she had to endure was her inability to take care of what Duofold cherished most—his children, from whom she remained separated.

The memories going through her mind of her time with Duofold were the happier thoughts. There were also worries. Rumours started circulating of her father-in-law having been involved in the disappearance of Duofold. And with a Tanzanian witch doctor being involved, as she came to learn, she became very afraid that she might be the next victim. She thought of the vicious Falid and how they might help execute such a plan. Being denied her children was bad enough, but being uncertain about her fate was more difficult to bear. And all because her husband had forgotten to change his will to state her as his immediate next of kin. She wished theirs had been a humble life that would have ensured the family remained intact, a family where a will would never have featured as it did now with the fatal consequence of losing a

husband and denying her access to their children, Warrior and Binte. She felt lonely and dreaded going through life nursing her wounds with no family to look up to.

"My soul shall search for you, Duofold, wherever you are just to feel your touch," she vowed to herself. "Those compassionate hands were more than anything I had ever experienced before."

In the meantime, her in-laws never relented in frustrating and sabotaging her efforts to reunite with her children. In moments of despair when she thought she might never see them soon, she consoled herself that the children would come to her when they were of age. She thanked God for the little she could do. Through their schoolteacher Mercy, she would pass gifts that often included a meal for their 4 o'clock break before they got home to the heartless indifference of the Hezron family. Akumu often knelt in prayer for the kids to hang in there until she found a way to reunite with them.

MENTION OF DUOFOLD MADE HER LIPS TREMBLE and tears came to her eyes. But Akumu knew she needed to move on even as she fought for her children. She also knew she needed someone incredibly understanding, someone like Floyd and his family, who never forsook her in her loneliness after eviction from her home. They gave her strength.

Floyd was the best man during Akumu and Duofold's wedding and was a long-time friend who was still single. After Hezron disowned Akumu, he offered her his hand in marriage. She consented to his offer if only to co-opt a sympathetic companion in her unrelenting struggle to have her children back.

It was a good decision. But while Duofold's death had been the talk of the town, Akumu's remarriage now became the new grist of the town's gossip mill. She confirmed this one day at a women's meeting in which she was a member. As soon as she had opened the door to a neighbour's house where the meeting was taking place, she knew she had interrupted a discussion by the sudden silence that welcomed her and the curious eyes cast towards her. She had no doubt the discussion had been about her departed husband and the remarriage. But she accepted that gossip was a normal part of life where, even in her case, people always had much to criticise and predict as they hoped to hear her side of the story.

She chose, however, to keep her story to herself. Instead, she pleasantly shook everyone's hand and thanked them for the support they had accorded her during Duofold's funeral. She knew the women understood her appreciation, being aware that, unlike men, it was not easy becoming a widow. Men were generally perceived more favourably when they remarried after losing their wives, while women's desire

for love after being windowed appeared looked down upon. It was as if the woman was expected to grieve forever, irrespective of their longing for new love to wade away loneliness and help them move on.

Most of the women in the group were also mothers and she expected they might wonder about the children. But what might she have said about them? That thought now, as always, bothered her. Binte was five years old and her brother Warrior was seven years old. She dreaded to think about the cruelty Hezron had shown them. She often wondered whether he had turned her children into beasts of burden, fetching water and grass for the cows, doing house chores, cultivating with their grandma Heron's land and picking coffee. She hoped not. Were they being given food, or were they being forced to cook for themselves? It was absurd to think the in-laws so depraved to so hatefully subject young children to cooking for themselves.

She could, however, visualise Warrior being his sister's keeper. They once told her how their uncle Falid would come home drunk and pass by their house to harass them. She feared the worst imaginable. She could see Warrior leading his sister to escape out of the house through a window before the uncle could get in.

"Where is your sister?" she could imagine Falid enquiring with evil playing in his eye.

"She slept at grandma's house," Warrior lies to the uncle cowering with fear.

The boy is given a beating. "Next time, do not let her sleep there. I shall kill you to follow your dad in heaven," the uncle warns.

Warrior, however, is aware his Uncle Falid would not dare to enquire from his mother whether Binte is at their grandma's. The boy is triumphant that he has saved his sister from the monster's wrath or even rape. After the uncle is gone, Warrior gets to a corner of the farm where the sister is hidden, shivering in the evening cold.

"Binte, he's gone. Let's get back to the house."

AKUMU WAS PLEASED to learn how his son took care of his sister. One day her children were walking home from somewhere when Binte fell and hurt her knee.

"Get up, sister. You fall so that you can learn how to lift yourself again." The brother had encouragingly comforted her, just like a maturing big brother would. Even the crying Binte found the statement funny as they both laughed as they headed back home.

"I cannot imagine we had such an affluent life the other day, and now we live in such poverty with no parents to protect us, Warrior," Binte said.

"At least we have each other, Binte, to comfort one another when things get out of hand."

Sometimes things would get out of hand on a cold night. The sister would snuggle closer to his warm brother as she pulled their blanket closer around her against the cold. The walls were full of gaps. They could often see rats foraging and chasing each other in the garden. They could also count the stars through holes in the roof iron sheets. The house was dilapidated, and though they could not quite articulate the thought, they'd wonder why it was still standing. It must have been very, very old.

"I wish Grandpa had taken everything and let us move with Mom," Binte might say. "At least we could be under the custody of our mom."

"Now, mom is married, so we have no fallback plan," the brother would express his doubts. "We need to grow up very fast and become independent of this family."

"I know, Warrior, but we have a long way to go; we are still children. We have more than ten years to get our freedom, teacher Mercy told me."

"We have to keep pushing on, though we have no idea how to redeem ourselves with our mother now married. I partly blame her for neglecting us, Warrior."

"If she had been genuinely aggressive, she could have won the battle to stay with us," says the sister. "She would have taken us from school and disappeared with us to Kisumu, her motherland. I am sure Grandpa Hezron could not have bothered to follow us. His interest was Dad's wealth, not us. That is not rocket science; mom should know how easily such a plan can work."

"You are young, Binte, but this suffering has made you mature beyond your age. That is a compelling thought to come from this young mind," Warrior points at her head.

"Warrior, these are life lessons; no teacher has a book to teach you how to live your life. You have to dig the info from all corners to filter the nonsense you do not need, brother dear."

"I concur with you, Binte, about Mom. If she tries hard enough, she can sneak us to Kisumu and continue with her life. No one can follow us there."

"Grandpa Hezron is just using us as his scapegoat, nothing else. We need to pass by her shop to request her to smuggle us to Kisumu. Life should be more bearable there."

"We can do that on Monday as we come from school. Warrior, deal?"

Binte is happy to come up with the plan.

"Yes, deal. But we keep our fingers crossed that we do not come across Uncle Falid on our way to see Mom. He has no other business in the evening but to monitor our movement, Binte. Because of this, maybe we should speak to Mom at her house as we go to school," the brother suggests.

They already have enough issues to deal with, so they choose to be obedient in school. Teacher Mercy, who their mother uses to reach them, is a young intern who

has shown keen interest in the two, especially Binte. She gives her tuition on the subjects she lags in. Binte and the brother Warrior appear to have no time to play with other kids. They have to finish homework first before they leave school in the afternoon. At home, there is no power at night. During the day, they are assigned chores to complete for their Grandpa Hezron and Uncle Falid as his children sit at home and watch the TV that belonged to the Duofold family. Some days they are lucky to be given a meal by their grandma when Uncle Falid and their grandpa are away. Other times, their Grandma Florence cooks during the day and hides food under their bed for them to eat at night. It is a very trying period for the duo.

MONDAY SOON ARRIVES, and Warrior and Binte pay their mother a visit at her home before they report to school. They calculated that, even if they were late for classes, punishment at school would be easier to deal with than the beating by the beastly uncle should they have decided to see their mother in the evening.

Akumu is very surprised to see her children so early at her house. She quickly serves them breakfast as they lobby her to run away with them to Kisumu.

"I had thought of that before," the mother explains. "But my parents in Kisumu were threatened by your grandfather Hezron. They cannot agree for fear of being victimised by your grandpa Hezron. You cannot go to Kisumu, my dear children." After a thoughtful pause, she adds, "We have to wait until your grandpa has squandered the insurance money paid for his son – your dad's death. Only then will it be possible to take you away from him? We all must keep strong until then. Know that I'm always rooting for you. I know it is very tough, but my hands are tied, for now, my good children."

Akumu sees them off, urging them to hurry before someone notices their presence and reports them to the beastly Uncle Falid. They are disappointed as they leave her compound. They go to school crying. They cannot believe their mother appears to have already moved on. How could she give up so easily?

But they are children and may not understand. For many mothers, ensuring the best for their children, including their safety, can be a matter of life and death to most women. Nothing would stop a determined mother from running away with her children if she so wished. The only problem is that culture can sometimes be so unforgiving and inconsiderate. Among Akumu's Luo community, children are believed to belong to the father's clan and must remain in the father's home. On the other hand, a Kikuyu woman would rather die than leave her child behind. Akumu hopes Binte and Warrior will understand one day why she should seem unperturbed with this stupid arrangement of marrying again in the same neighbourhood and

leaving them under her in-laws' care, no matter how inadequate the care they are receiving.

However, from that meeting with their mother, the children realised they were on their own. Though they were too young to articulate it, they nonetheless realised they would have to go back to the drawing board and develop a survival tactic. For now, however, they must leave their lives to fate and heartache.

The new family Akumu had started with Floyd consumed her attention, and she slowly let go of Warrior and Binte. Her new marriage meant that the path she had chosen favoured her more than the children in her first family. Her two children with Floyd were taken to a modern kindergarten as Warrior and Binte struggled in a public school. Human beings are all different in the way they relate to each other, be it a sibling, a colleague, or a friend; there are always strings attached. Some, like Akumu, love you because of the value you add to their lives. Others, like Duofold before his illness, are generous, assisting all who need help with no strings attached.

Others, like Hezron, shall take advantage of your situation before they can part with any support they may give. Others, like Falid, would rather see you die begging on your knees before they are moved by your need for support.

All these types are part of the larger society. People must find a way to live in harmony with them. Life, after all, has something for everyone. All people need to do is keep looking.

CHAPTER THREE

LIZ WOKE UP TO A HECTIC MORNING. Her company, SmartLink, has been struggling a bit lately. This is because her son Nate, who she relies on for advice and managing the business, has been busy at his university preparing to sit his final paper in a month. Now Liz has to juggle between the IT company, SmartLink and her other engagements. In addition, she is engaged in a bamboo planting venture she and Nate are trying to establish as a family project.

Adding to her responsibilities is a new one she can't ignore—the sick man she met at the Westlands petrol station she strongly believes is Duofold. It is a responsibility she feels is more urgent than any other. When life is involved, especially of someone close to her, she drops everything to help. She has consequently put everything else to a back seat to pursue Duofold's wellness. Despite the years that have passed since she last saw him, they remain birds of a feather in their passion for business. Liz always craved their platonic, business-oriented relationship that made Instar a winner believing it never ended.

She never spoke to anyone about coming across the man who resembles Duofold. All she cared about in the days that followed was to ensure that he had a healthy meal, however long it would take. Her aim, though, was to gain enough of the mentally ill man's confidence to trust her.

This was until one day a month later when the man refused the food and demanded to go with her. At first, the refusal caught her by surprise. Then she saw the opportunity this presented, and an enormous sense of relief washed over her.

Liz had always hoped this moment would come and had long planned for it. With trembling hands, she reached behind the passenger seat and pulled out a new shirt and trousers and, holding them for the man to see, she said, "I'll go with you only on one condition, you wear these clothes, and I take you somewhere to receive some help."

Duofold hesitated as if thinking about it but slowly nodded yes.

Liz called Isaac, the pump attendant at the petrol station and, handing him the clothes, requested he assists Duofold in changing into them in the men's bathroom at the petrol station.

DUOFOLD SEEMED CONFUSED and, despite Liz trying to engage him in small talk to keep him reassured, he remained quiet on the way to the mental hospital. It was the same hospital his friend Munene once helped him escape from. Treatment began immediately. However, none of the hospital attendants could recognise him, nor could Duofold remember ever having been admitted there.

Duofold began to respond to treatment almost immediately. Though the medication left him drowsy for some days to allow him to hold a sustained conversation, Liz visited him every day. She was the only family he had while in the hospital.

On the first day of her visit after Duofold's admission, she recited a prayer to him as he lay asleep from medication: "*Dear Kim, I hope you can hear me in your sleep. This dark cloud in your life shall pass. I promise you, my boy, you shall overcome it. We shall all be waiting for this battle to be won by you. Just wait for the sun to rise tomorrow, and victory shall knock on your door. God is with you, son.*"

She could never tell whether Duofold heard the prayer, but not long after, the patient began to feel signs of his recovery. It began as a sense of hazy self-awareness that didn't leave him. Before this, it used to be brief moments of mental clarity that left him almost as soon as they appeared. The relatively clearer mind he was now experiencing, though a bit foggy, seemed to hold. And realising he was a patient in a mental hospital, it occurred to him how he had always thought one must have abused drugs or inherited genes that brought on insanity. Though he was not aware of it, this was the first sign his thought process was gaining some coherence. But he would never have thought that one day he would be a mental health statistic. Yet here he was.

In the meantime, the hospital took him through a rigorous regimen of therapy and drugs. As his memory began to come back to him, he seemed to remember somebody picking him up from somewhere and sneaking him to the streets with a warning never to show up in his village, that if he did, he would be killed. Unable to recall any further details, he decided to stop pursuing the thought for the moment. It, however, haunted him that someone might want him dead.

The realisation that he had been unwell was quite unexpected and was quite frightening to suddenly confront its reality, how it had disconnected him from everything, and how he felt useless to do anything about it. He realised that his entire life, his family, his work, and his future were at stake. He, however, didn't seem to realise that he had already lost so much. He heard a familiar voice in his head say as if encouraging him, *"You are loved when you are born and even when you die, but in between, it is your responsibility to manage the best you can."*

Speaking to the psychiatrist handling the case, Liz learned that mental illness cases are different and that Duofold's healing cycle appeared to have been in three phases. The first phase was marked by denial, essentially because he had found himself in the hospital and he didn't think he had a problem. Duofold mentally refused to accept or acknowledge that he was sick. The doctor explained that perhaps it is because of this denial people or caregivers of a mentally ill person tend to assume he is not conscious of the surroundings. Pity and rejection follow, and people think that the mentally ill person cannot tell those who love him, his enemies and those that despise him.

The second phase in Duofold mental illness cycle was acceptance and treatment. The close attention Duofold received from the doctors and his boss, Liz, gave him hope that all was well. Though Liz thought the doctors did not seem definite about Duofold's full recovery, her faith was beyond the four hospital walls. Such doubts could have made Kim helpless and fatalistic, but Liz could hear none of it. She was not ready for just *any* outcome but total healing. She nonetheless had faith in God and the doctors leading Duofold through his recovery. Liz was certain that Kim would eventually be counted among those who had won a "heroic battle" against mental illness.

The third phase is what may be termed a miracle phase of his recovery. The pain, fatigue, fever, and confusion he had been experiencing had reduced significantly. Apart from confinement in the hospital and the frequent interruption by the nurse as they monitored his health, life was almost back to normal. His determination to get better paid a major role in his well-being. Credit went to Liz, who came to his rescue. Duofold was always happy to see her during her daily visits. He knew that he was in her custody, not only as his caregiver but as a friend. Life was looking up again. He was more optimistic about a bright future ahead.

His mind wandered to his workplace to the time when he was in employment. Now that his illness had robbed him of his job, he took it as an opportunity to take stock of what being in employment had been worth to him, whether it was worth going back to. He seemed to remember being a workaholic, and though appreciating

the need to earn an income, he was concerned about how it can take over someone's life, including consuming one's family time. The thought that occupied his mind at that moment went like this:

The haste in the workplace makes life seem like we sit on borrowed time, permanently on edge. We become estranged and alienated even from ourselves. Our thoughts and our words are no longer indeed our own. We live a life of fear and suspense, always worried about what others think or talk about us. We are permanently on stage to make an impression to be liked and approved by our spectators. We live a life of endless pretences. We are too psychologically terrified to think and act independently.

Duofold caught himself speaking these words aloud and reminded himself it was a conversation in his head, not with someone in the room because he was alone at the time. He thought this funny and smiled.

After these thoughts about the darker side of employment, he embraced the idea of starting afresh and cutting a friendlier and more rewarding path on which he could rise again. He could start his own business, however small, though he wondered how he might go about it without money. His mind was, however, still foggy, and he could not as yet fathom why he didn't have money. It suggested a gap in his memory that he still needed to fill. He felt sad that a chunk of his life had been lost.

The intensity of these thoughts seemed to have left him quite exhausted, for he suddenly felt drowsy and was soon sound asleep.

THE RETURN OF his full mental faculties was unexpected. He woke up one morning, and his mind was as perceptive as he could remember. It was as if he had been born anew. The fogginess that characterised his mind became as clear as a bright sunshiny day. He could visually and critically see through things in the sharp mind that had seen him rise to become a marketing manager. "My recovery made me extremely brilliant!" is how he put it.

He suddenly remembered his name. He also recalled every word Munene had told him about the circumstances under which Munene had taken him from this same hospital and left him in the streets. This left him overwhelmed with emotion.

Liz found him in tears when she entered his hospital room. Seeing the concern on her face, Duofold hastened to welcome her as he smiled and shyly wiped his eyes. It was a bit embarrassing for him to be caught weeping by the person he respectfully knew as his Boss Lady Liz, who he now perfectly remembered.

"Hello, Liz. Thank you for taking care of me," Duofold said in a halting voice as he composed himself. He got out of bed and stood up to give Liz a hug he last gave

her in the office years before. “It feels so beautiful to see you,” he whispered in her ear, “So beautiful to finally understand and say thank you.”

Liz was now certain that her friend Kim was back. He sounded confident. The intelligence and tone of speech that came through were of the person she knew. And just like during the first meeting at the petrol station, their eyes locked again, and she saw it; she was now beyond doubt that this was Duofold.

Her immediate reaction was to ask, "What conspired for you to be on the streets?" Instead, she asked, unable to suppress her excitement, “Hello, darling boy! You remember who you are and where you are, dear?"

"Yes, I do, Liz. I am in a mental hospital, I am Duofold, and you are my boss at Instar. Thank you for bringing me here," he replied with a hint of emotion in his voice.

So excited was Liz that it felt like Duofold was a long-lost lover. She gently pushed him back to make him sit on the bed and stood for a while, trapped between his legs. Then she recovered herself and took the guest seat.

In the intervening moment, Duofold thought that her taking care of him was the clearest indication his family must have abandoned him. He thought that he should tread carefully to know why this happened. He remembered that when his illness allowed while surviving on the streets, he had trained his mind to see the good in everything. He would count the early risers as they went to work and the late ones heading back home in the evening, hoping one day he too would stand to be counted going to work and back. He hoped for a second chance to be with his family and provide for them again. His attention was aroused by Liz's exciting tone.

“I am so happy you have your mental faculties back. You can now win any battle, my dear son. We give thanks to God." She held his hand as she used the other hand to feel his face to gauge his temperature.

"When you fall sick, Duofold, suddenly you become everyone's friend,” Liz said, recalling the tall, dark and handsome Duofold, who she dearly loved.. “I first got to know what might have happened through Facebook. Some posts claimed you were in ICU in critical condition; others said you were in a mental hospital. Most of the posts were, however, goodwill messages of people wishing you a quick recovery. Only to later hear that you were missing from the mental hospital and that clothes were found in a pool of blood near a river. I prayed that this should not be true. Then came the burial. It was the saddest day of my life losing you, first as a friend and as an anchor at Instar, having always been the one who brought the most sales keeping us

afloat. Even as I offered to help, I wasn't sure it was you or a twin brother, but I was determined to get you treated either way."

"Thank God for your kindness. Otherwise, I might still be out there in the streets." Duofold was touched that Liz had remained the same one he knew, with the sympathy she always showed others.

They spoke for a long time catching up. At length, Duofold seemed to remember something after hearing a phone ring somewhere within the hospital.

"My cellphone had a bit of cash in my mobile money wallet," he said, "maybe it still has the money if it has not been used or lost."

"We need to first find out whether the line is still available, Duofold; I can ask someone to help."

"You can use my identity card to renew my mobile line if it is still available. For some reason, I had my ID all this time. No one seemed to have noticed while I led the hostile street life. I guess it was given to me by Munene, the guy who rescued me from the hospital."

"I would like to know more about this Munene. And to see that you still have your ID card, God must love you. It shows how safe you must have kept in the streets."

"In the meantime, Liz, I request you to get me a house to stay in for a while when I leave the hospital. Just a cushion as I find my footing. I do not know whether that will be asking for too much, my dear?" Duofold scratched his head as if anxious his request might be declined.

"Asking too much? Not at all, Kim! I already have an unoccupied house that you can use," she said, adding, "I'm glad that you have your mind back and would be glad to offer you a quiet place to put your thoughts together again."

"Thank you, Liz. That's kind of you. Yes, I need to put my thoughts together to know where to begin.

Liz kissed his forehead as she assured him of her support. She left to confirm whether Kim's cellphone number was still registered under Duofold Kimwaki's name. She found that the number had been suspended but that it was still available for reinstatement to the previously registered owner. This made for very good news. She bought him a new phone and restored the line. She, however, purchased an extra line for Duofold to use in the meantime. He needed to keep the previous number offline so as not to interfere with his mission to discover what had happened to him. He would transfer his old contacts to the new line.

"KIM DEAR, HOW WAS YOUR NIGHT?" Liz asked the following morning, eager for an assurance Duofold had not lapsed back to his illness.

"Am as good as can be, Liz," he replied cheerfully.

Liz was also eager to tell him how he wanted him back on his feet. "I need to see my vibrant boy back in action soon. No experience goes to waste in life. What you went through in the streets was just another season in the sun. You must be renewed man now with renewed energy. You can still move mountains again; you are a hardworking man. I want to believe you will enjoy the fruits of your labour again, my son."

She said this as if referring to the package of fruit salad and yoghurt she had brought with her, which she opened and handed to him.

"Those are wise words of encouragement, Liz. They remind me why you were always my anchor, more so now in this situation I find myself," he gratefully said as he enjoyed the meal while looking over the new phone Liz had bought him.

When Duofold turned the phone on, it was full of emails, SMSs and social media messages from family, friends, workmates, and business colleagues. There were messages even from those he may have considered bitter rivals wishing him a quick recovery. It seems his sickness had brought everyone together. These messages were, however, in the past, and he could not respond to them. The untouched messages indicated to him that his wife Akumu must be the one with his old phone, which she must have switched off after he disappeared. It also meant that neither she nor anyone else, such as his father, Hezron, had turned the phone on since.

After he was alone later that day, he was satisfied that he felt much better. He promised himself to set the tone to get his life back. He admitted to himself that he needed to get stronger health-wise if he was to lead a happier and more fulfilling life each day going forward. He was, however, a stressed man about what had happened. He did not know how to respond to the harm caused thus far. His only concern was that he could not be sure his mind was at its optimum just, leading him to decisions that might cause more harm than good. He decided to rest and wake up refreshed to make rational decisions. "Ooh my God, what a life," he thought as he eased into a deep relaxing sleep.

TWO WEEKS LATER, he was discharged from the hospital and moved into his new home, well-groomed and ready to face life again. As he formulated a plan on how to unravel the mystery of what had happened without raising suspicion, he wondered who it might be that had wished him so much ill. He was not sure whether it was his

father, Hezron, or who exactly it was, whether working alone or with the involvement of the whole family.

After his supposed death, Duofold felt strange to think that the world went on without him, whatever his deeds, good or bad, might have been. He imagined that people he might have worked with, except perhaps Liz, might have forgotten about him as soon as he was gone. Some workmates might have been genuinely sad, while others must have shed crocodile tears after learning he was past tense—the kind of people who might have coveted his position at work and wished for his demise. He considered those kinds of negative people petty because even for them, no matter how good they might be at work, the time will come when they will exit, whether by sacking, resignation, retirement, death or any other reason. This led him to think about dependants and thought that no matter how workaholic one might be, the workaholic, himself included, must always be available for his family.

As the thought about family took hold in his mind, he thought that the young family he left behind must have terribly missed him. Even hadn't he survived this ordeal, he somehow knew they would always have had a permanent place in their hearts for him. He vowed to invest in his family relationships, though he was not sure who, other than his wife and children, counted as family to him anymore. He nonetheless wondered whether his wife Akumu, his son Warrior and his daughter Binte had waited for him. Had they had faith he would one day come back?

The thought of his children flooded him with the love he had for them, especially Binte, who traditionally represented his mother as the firstborn daughter. He had named her after the Swahili word for daughter, *binti*, for his love of the language. So did Warrior represent his father as his firstborn son and had named him so in honour of values Hezron had inculcated in him growing up, such as courage and standing on his own. When Duofold was a boy and had had a fight with his peers and came home crying that he had been beaten, Hezron would firmly tell him, "You are a man. You must learn to win your fights." This stuck with him in the battles that saw him succeed later in life. Thus, it was Hezron who inspired him to name his son Warrior.

Duofold was hopeful that they had not forgotten him and must have waited for his return. He also terribly missed his wife, Akumu. He looked forward to being the hero he had always been to her, his promise to her of his enduring love and protecting their family. He hoped to get one more baby with her to kind of bless their reunion. He vowed to work hard to compensate for the time he had been missing in action. He tried to imagine how the children would be excited to have their dad back. He

visualised the perfect family that would be forevermore. He felt very hopeful, imagining how it would all turn out to be.

His sense of hope was, however, dampened by how unpredictable life can be. Life does not offer a clear path nor guarantee a life of painless destiny. Some experiences are similar to horror movies; how a pure soul can be born assured of support to thrive, only for the goodwill to be poisoned by betrayal. Duofold felt sad about the turn of events. He was not worried about wealth, for he knew how to create it, but the uncertainty of the betrayal from home.

He decided to call Munene to catch up and find out what he could about the family he left behind.

"How have you been, my saviour Munene? This is Duofold Kimwaki."

"Oh, my God! Kim! How have you been, my dear friend?"

Duofold could hear in his friend's voice the surprise and joy at receiving the call. "I recalled what you said the last time when we parted," he said, "I remember you saying that I should wait for God's time. I've called to attest that God indeed sent his angel to rescue me. Is it possible to meet at Westlands this afternoon, Munene?"

"I am happy you made it, Kim. I have been a troubled man since, trying to trace you in vain. I couldn't find you anywhere. It made me wonder whether leaving you at Westlands only postponed your death by a few days. What a dawn! On my way to Westlands, right away, my brother to see you again."

Upon meeting, the bear hug they gave each other showed the joy each felt, infused with the gratitude each owed the other for saving each other's life. For Munene, it felt like he had met a brother he had abandoned in the wilderness to fight it alone against street thugs.

Munene didn't immediately have information about Duofold's family. He, however, disclosed to Duofold that it was his dad Hezron who wanted him dead.

Duofold took this revelation like a slap to his face. He couldn't imagine the dad he worshipped and did everything for could be the one to wish him dead. But why would his dad, who he trusted with his life before anyone else, want to do such a thing? The only thing he could think of was his wealth and anything financial that could benefit him. He had to find out, but he could no longer trust his father and decided he would move his family and make a home elsewhere.

Munene could not fail to notice the shock Duofold had received the information and patted his shoulder, trying to console him. Duofold, however, managed to control himself.

“Munene, I need to plan the way forward,” he said, trying to appear calm. "I need a current update on my family before I take any action. I am sorry to demand more of your time after you have already done so much for me.”

Munene understood the request to mean Duofold wanted vengeance on the person who could cause him so much pain. "Not to worry, Kim," he replied. "The feeling is mutual. I want to avenge you too, my friend. Hezron cannot be excused for what he did to a son who I imagine must have adored him as a father. I seem to remember you were great friends, too, despite being his son. I shall go to your home area and gather as much information as I can, then revert as soon as possible."

Munene finished his coffee and left, promising to keep it a secret, just as he had done after rescuing Duofold from the hospital.

After they had parted, he suddenly felt he could not wait to know about his family. This left him anxious as to what news Munene would bring. Were his wife and children safe, or they, too, had been killed?

He had to be patient, he told himself. He also understood there was still a long way to go before he could get to the bottom of the whole situation. This was coupled with the urgency he felt to get a job as soon as possible to be able to cater for himself and his young family.

No sooner had he arrived home from Westlands than Liz entered the gate. He opened the door for her. She had come to replenish his fridge as he dropped him some cash to help with his upkeep.

"How are you feeling today, young man?" Liz enquired. She sensed some anxiety in him but did not want to be too intrusive. He would tell if he thought it necessary, which is what he immediately did.

“I have just found out from Munene that my dad was my killer,” he said quietly, still in disbelief.

It was Liz’s turn to be shocked. She had never met Hezron, but she felt deeply betrayed by him that he nearly snatched his friend from her. For the first time since she could remember, she had no words with which to express her outrage. She also could seem to find the right words to console Duofold.

“So sorry to hear that,” was all she could say as she sat next to him on the sofa and held his hand.

"ONCE YOU DESIRE new outcomes in your life, you have to break with the old,” Liz was telling Duofold the next day following a discussion on how to move on. “And sometimes we have to be patient with ourselves, knowing that growth does not happen instantly.”

Liz knew she didn't have to say this to the intelligent Duofold, except that it was important to remember that mastering a new chapter in life was a process in the midst of which one may discover wings they never knew they had.

"Speaking of wings," Duofold interjected, "how is Instar these days?"

It surprised both that they had not discussed the company yet. Their attention seemed to have been so wrapped in ensuring Duofold's well-being.

"Oh, Kim, you could not have known," she replied, remembering Duofold had just emerged from his illness. "Instar went under, and we parted ways, me and the other director Mary.

"Sorry to hear that, Liz. I was so determined to keep Instar at the top of the industry when I was there. What happened?"

"Sabotage by the big fish; we had become too successful eating into their cake. But also because my partner Mary got busy abroad, and I got overwhelmed running it alone. But perhaps the biggest reason was your absence; it was your work overseeing product development and aggressively pushing sales that kept the company afloat."

"So sad to hear that, Liz. We need to look for capital very fast and revive the company. We can't let it go down like that. Instar still has potential, and I am sure it still has some goodwill in the market because of the popularity our products had previously achieved."

"I have a proposal, Kim. I started an IT company called SmartLink that I've been struggling to run. We can only revive Instar if you agree to be my partner at SmartLink. Then, we will channel the profits towards restoring Instar."

Duofold did not have to think about it and immediately agreed to the proposal. Information and technology were his specialities, after all. It had only been by chance he had found himself in the food Industry after a chance involvement in developing a nutrition formulation with Ben, a friend who worked in the industry. It was after the product became a big hit that Ben persuaded him to take a course in quality assurance and take the job at Nutribelt, the company Ben worked for, as he waited for an IT opportunity to open.

By the time he was finished with the course, however, the window at Nutribelt had shut, and he couldn't get the job. But Ben knew of a start-up company that could use him. That is how Duofold ended up at Instar, from where a deep friendship developed with Liz. It is because of this, having started the company from scratch, that Instar was so dear to him.

Duofold also knew Liz to be very selfless and that friendship came before profit, as her generosity in assisting him already showed. Making him an equal partner at SmartLink was just another example of her generosity. Also, what mattered was not how much investment had gone into SmartLink or whether Duofold had put in a

coin, but that he had long proved the right partner to drive a company as his dedication at Instar had proved. Duofold was grateful for the opportunity and was more than willing to help turn the new company around for his good friend Liz. And not just because she had rescued him from the jaws of death, but because she deserved it.

Within one year after sealing their partnership, SmartLink had become a company to reckon with due to the services it offered. They made enough money and achieved their goal of reviving Instar.

Liz, in the meantime, had gotten an opportunity to conduct international business intelligence in the USA following an invitation from a friend she had met in Istanbul. This meant she would be away for some time.

"I am not in a position to put in as much as I would like in Instar, my dear Duofold," she confessed to him. "My hands are full again, but I'm still very enthusiastic about Instar coming back to life. I shall be gone for a while. Do you think we need to wait until I come back, or can I hook you up with Mary to help you carry on? I've already discussed with her about reviving Instar, and she is very excited to work with you. She is happy your health is back."

"Of course, I shall be delighted to work with Mary. I know she was very dedicated and must have been very disappointed when Instar folded."

"Yes, she was disappointed. Remember, Instar was our brainchild, and we still have a lot of attachment to it. That's why she and I are thankful that you are not only back on board, but you have helped revive it."

CHAPTER FOUR

AS SOON AS MUNENE GATHERED enough information as he had been requested, he called Duofold and they agreed to meet at the same café in Westlands where they had earlier met.

"Your problems started after Hezron discovered you are not his biological son," Munene reported. "He says your biological father is Fidel, the rich former military guy. It also had to do with your wealth and, in particular, your life insurance policy which it seems you forgot to revoke his next of kin status and appoint your wife in his stead after you got married."

Duofold was astounded to learn this. "My wealth? My life insurance?"

"I am afraid so, Duofold. It appears your father's discovery brought out the greed in him; he always wanted to inherit you and probably thought you'd change your mind after knowing he is not your real father."

Duofold was shocked beyond measure to realise how weak and insecure his father must have been.

How could Hezron forget the beautiful father-and-son relationship we had shared? he wondered.

In any case, how many parents have raised children that are not their own and have reaped from them better than their biological children? Had Hezron wanted to know, Duofold would have told him he would not have cared if he was someone else's biological son. Hezron was the father he knew. He shared his parents' dreams and worked hard to make them a reality. He had built his father a house and could not have taken it back, nor would he have stopped offering Hezron any support he needed. Hezron's apparent insecurity, as shown in his cold calculations issuing a contract to have him killed, was too shocking to comprehend.

Even before Duofold could digest this, Munene gave him the next disturbing bit of news; how Falid took ownership of his home as a gift from Hezron. "That happened after your wife, Akumu, was thrown out. The children were left behind. Apparently, she remarried." Munene dropped the bombshell.

"My wife Akumu remarried? And my children are living alone in Hezron's home? This is too much to bear. How could she abandon them like that?" He asked in disbelief.

Munene shook his head sympathetically. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but that's what I found out. She married another man, with whom she now has two children. From what I hear, she rarely visits your children and is too busy with her life. She doesn't seem to care about their welfare."

Duofold felt a surge of anger and sadness. He had loved Akumu with all his heart and had trusted her to take care of their children while he was away. He had never imagined that she would betray him so cruelly and leave their children to suffer in poverty and neglect.

"What about my children? How are they coping?" he asked.

Munene sighed. "They are very brave and resilient, but they are also very lonely and scared. They have no one to look after them or protect them from Hezron and Falid's abuse. They have to fend for themselves. They eat what Falid decides, and that is usually not much. On many occasions, they survive on the handouts from their grandma Florence and well-wishers.

Duofold felt tears sting his eyes. He couldn't believe that his children were living in such horrible conditions. He wished he could hug them and tell them that everything would be alright.

"Was Akumu in cahoots with my evil dad?" he asked, but Munene had no answer.

Munene wondered how the information had got out about who was the biological father to Duofold. Taking up on this, Duofold could only see the information, if true, coming from Fidel, who was probably trying to humiliate Hezron. "And my so-called biological father Fidel, what was he up to risking my life to such an extent? What was he trying to prove? Where had he been to just show up and claim me after all these years?"

Munene had nothing more to add as Duofold continued, agitated, "I want to meet Fidel. He is one more enemy, and he needs to explain what he has done to clean the mess he caused; it terribly hurts me what has happened."

Munene gave Duofold a few moments to calm down before wishing him well and bidding him goodbye.

As he plotted what to do next, Duofold thought this must count as one of the worst days of his life for the shocking information he had received. What he had learnt was the most painful thing he would have expected to hear.

"HELLO THERE," LIZ called early the next morning at Duofold's house. She had brought him a traditional breakfast of boiled arrowroots with spiced sweet potatoes accompanied by tomato and diced eggs. The meal was still hot and tantalising to eat.

"I am well, Liz. Just pondering the way forward," he said as he went to the kitchen for some coffee to share with Liz.

"Thanks for the hearty meal. You have been such a mother to me," he said, clearing the table after they were done with food. He had briefed her on what he had learnt from Munene as they had breakfast.

Liz seemed eager to say something and talked at great length without interruption by Duofold.

Do not overthink, dear, just get started, she told him. *The most challenging job is the one that has not begun. I know how you feel, Duofold, but you have to dress and show up in that village. You cannot give up on your family. I shall be with you as you demystify this tragedy that befell you.*

Thank God you are still alive; you shall be able to turn the tables on those who thought they had finished you. Those with less luck than you never got such a chance; they are resting in peace somewhere in the graveyard. Lift yourself and face your new world. There is enough joy on the path you are going to choose. It will be different from the one you have been used to but shall be more rewarding.

There shall also be enough pillars to help you sail through any turbulence that may come your way. You had Munene, who saved your life, and you banked on him to do the groundwork on family background for you. You now know what to expect. You had me. I identified you and took you to the hospital for treatment. Now you have a successful business as a partner. You are not an employee anymore.

You have worked out this beach-boy physique; no woman can fail to notice you as you pass by. You have two beautiful children to raise, Warrior and Binte. Your hands are full of goodies. Embrace and move on, my darling.

After she was finished, Liz stood up and hugged Duofold.

"By the way, I had never looked at it from that angle, Liz," he said. "My pain is in the past, and I should not dwell on it to cloud my future. I should focus on the future I desire. A lot of milestones have been achieved already. I feel ready now to face my family one by one until I settle all scores and start on a clean slate again. I need to burn the bridges that led to the pain and disappointment as soon as possible and build new ones. My losses have strengthened my inner core. I can see a definite rainbow after the storm."

"Chinese are flooded in this country already; you can use them to build all the bridges you want after burning them with Hezron's," Liz rejoined, and they laughed at the joke.

"You have made my day, Madam Boss." Duofold said, adding, "The blacksmith is back." He was referring to a folk tale many in the older generation among the Kikuyu grew up hearing in the village. "Let me shake their world now." He said with a smile.

"That is the spirit, young man. I see you still remember the fable about the giant and the blacksmith."

"I was not born yesterday," Duofold replied, emphasising with a well-known idiom, "I have licked enough salt in this wilderness."

"Then you are not as young as I always thought, Duofold. You qualify to be my younger brother."

"But to be honest with you," Duofold said, "I only know that part of the tale. Remind me how the story goes."

Liz took a moment, then started narrating the fable.

Once upon a time, there was a blacksmith who lived in a forest with his wife. One day he went to the market to sell his products. He told his pregnant wife that he would be away for some days and that she should not open the door to anyone until he was back.

There was a hunchback giant who always emerged at night to roam in a nearby village. One day as it went back to the forest, it noticed a quiet and isolated hut that showed no signs of life. He admired the hut and thought of inheriting it from whoever had owned it. As the giant approached the hut, it called out in a sweet and pleasing voice.

'Hello,' it said, 'I am Lua from the land of Okoko. Kindly help me with some water to drink.' The blacksmith's wife came out with a calabash of water, unable to resist the beautiful voice. She was shocked to find it was a hunchback giant. She tried running back to the house, but it was too late; the giant managed to get in.

'Who lives with you in this house, Madam Pregnant?' The giant enquired in a deep, roaring voice that frightened the smith's wife.

'I live with my husband, the blacksmith," she said, shaking with fear. "He went on a journey to sell his ironware.'

'When is he coming back, Madam Pregnant?'

"I am not sure. He takes a long time to return."

'Then I shall be staying with you here. I will nurse you and the newborn baby. Then I shall make a meal of you when the baby comes of age. I shall also wait for your husband and kill him.'

The giant made itself comfortable. The blacksmith's wife gave birth to a baby boy. Every day, the giant brought food which it ate by itself, leaving only very little for the smith's wife. The giant was more focused on the baby than the mother. The son was strong and masculine, and the giant was keen to raise him as its child.

One day after gathering food from the forest, it called out to the woman to open the door as it always did each time it returned. The woman did not reply to the call, angering the giant for her rudeness and refusal to open the door. "Why are you so rude, as if the blacksmith is back?"

'He is not back; I am in bed. You can come in now.'

The giant got into the house and was killed by the blacksmith who was hiding behind the door. The husband and wife moved from the hut to a new home he had built his family on safer ground.

And that is the genesis of the idiom "the blacksmith is back" to describe something good happening to save a situation, Liz explained after she was through telling the fable.

"Wow, such a lovely story," replied Duofold, who, with a knowing smile, commented, "And, of course, I see a parallel where somebody I know was a saviour to one who knew nobody to call when he was alone and sick in the streets."

Liz gave a little laugh acknowledging the reference to herself as Duofold's saviour. "The tale is, however, my mom's version," she explained. "Different communities have their versions. Traditionally blacksmiths were successful and influential people in their communities, a kind of industrialist who was respected because of the knowledge they possessed on how to smelt metal that few understood. He was also physically strong because of the nature of his work which involved heavy lifting and hammering. His physical strength probably made him fearless, the reason why he chose to live in an isolated place near the forest."

"I agree, Liz; his story revolved around the idea of loyalty and keeping promises and patience even in difficulty as with the smith's wife, and strength and ability to conquer difficult situations symbolised by the giants."

"There you go, Duofold dear," she said as if she had been waiting for just this moment to remind him of his own strength to tackle what lay before him. "Where do we start today? It is early, and if we do not waste more time, we shall be in your village in an hour."

"Ooh, my. I love your style of doing things, Liz; you do not waste time. I shall go on my motorbike not to arouse a lot of attention. I shall park at the church compound and walk to my wife's shop to get her version of what happened." Then, showing some nervousness, Duofold regretfully added, "I, however, do not think it will be

appropriate to involve you, dear, at this stage. There will be a lot of emotion, and I will want to be by myself in the process of engaging with the family."

"Do that, my boy," Liz encouraged him. "It is true, this really is your call, and you know how best to untangle yourself. You know your family better, and an outsider like me might only get in the way. If you need a backup, call me. If you are ready, we are leaving the house together; no more procrastinating," she insisted.

Duofold put on a simple polo shirt with the words "Love over fear" emblazoned on its front. It was the same one Munene had dressed him after sneaking him from the hospital that night long ago. For him, the polo shirt was a good omen and still symbolised a journey of hope. Before he had decided on the polo, he had toyed with the idea of black jeans and a black cap as symbolic of facing his demons in the name of Hezron's family. But it would have darkened his mood, and so he decided on the polo that he so treasured.

He drove slowly, noting the changes he could observe on his way to the village – changes like the high-rise residential buildings that now dotted the landscape and the smoother, wider roads. When he reached the village, it looked leafier, and most roads had been tarmacked. Milk had become the cash cow in the area. He realised this after spotting two dairy plants.

After driving another ten minutes, Duofold realised he had just passed a home he recognised as Fidel's, his biological father. He made a turn, deciding on the spar of the moment to visit him first. He drove into the compound and thought the girl who opened the gate was a replica of his wife, Akumu. This surprised him a little, and the thought that immediately came to his mind was: *You mean the guy who married my wife is my best man Floyd, who, therefore, must be my brother if Fidel is my father?*

"What's your name, beautiful girl?" he asked as a small boy of about two years joined them.

"My name is Brenda, named after my grandma, and this is my brother Fidel, named after my grandpa." The girl was pleasant and quite well-spoken.

"Nice to know you, Brenda, and little Fidel. Who is home with you?" Duofold did not want to ask about their mother for fear of the unknown.

Brenda guided him to her grandpa, with the boy following them and curiously observing Duofold. He realised it was just the grandfather and the children in the homestead; he was babysitting the children. The kids were respectful and went to their mother's house to give the visitor space to talk with their grandfather.

For a reason he was never able to explain, he was overcome with emotion and tears of joy after setting his eyes on his biological father. He wondered whether he resembled the dignified and affluent-looking man in front of him. He thought he now understood why his dad, Hezron, was mad at Florence and Duofold.

Fidel hesitated a bit, but there was recognition on his face. "Duofold? Is that you?"

"Yes, Mr Fidel, it is me."

"Ooh, my son Duofold, you are alive?" Fidel disbelievingly said as he hugged him with tears clouding his eyes. "Thanks be to God. Have a seat. Where have you been all this time?"

So strange and unreal did it feel to Fidel to finally meet Duofold, more so because it felt like he had resurrected. He touched Duofold and closely inspected him as if to look for a blemish on his son's body and to confirm that he was not hallucinating. Duofold thought how the touching felt quite good and how he never would he have expected the welcome he was receiving from Fidel. With the warmth he had received, a feeling of love engulfed him. He thought that love was a gift given for free, but the reward was enormous to reciprocate, as now happened with his newfound father. He could not have imagined how special he must have been to his father, Fidel, not for what he could offer but for the mere fact he belonged to his newfound dad. That's all that mattered.

"Do you know I am the one who chose the name Duofold?" he said. "I told Florence if she gave birth to a boy, that should be the name. If I get a second son, his name shall be Floyd. When I came back from Britain, I found that your mom had named you as I had wished. My history with you, therefore, starts from far.

"Duofold, first, I must apologise for what happened to you. I hear it being told that I'm the one who told your father, Hezron, about you being my son. That is a cooked story. He was told by his neighbour Mwaura during an unfortunate argument in a bar. But the truth is though I regretted not wedding your mother, especially after finding out she was already Hezron's wife. But I blessed their marriage. I, too, got married, and there was no time to fight about what I had lost. I vowed to keep it to myself about you, not wanting to upset the life Florence was leading bringing you up – and see how successful you turned out, making their life comfortable before this evil act to kill you happened.

"Hiring goons to get rid of you is unacceptable. I did not mind the insults Hezron heaped on me that night at the bar; it is understandable the way he felt to discover the truth so rudely from Mwaura. But the evil way he reacted by hiring goons was more than I could bear. The turn of events made me very worried about your wife, Akumu, and the well-being of your children, Binte and Warrior. But things happened the way they did, and she married Floyd. Whether it was for love or convenience, it is not for me to say. All I can say is that I'm happy she married him, if only so that she could be near your children. I know it has not been easy for them, and I have been hoping to have your children with me here in vain.

"How can I help you start again, my son Duofold? You are my son, and I would like you to inherit from me. I now have two sons, Floyd and you. I know it shall not be easy for the family, especially now that your brother Floyd has married Akumu, but we can always live in harmony if we purpose to do so. If we knew you were still alive, no one have touched your wife. We ask your pardon for that, son. I agreed to her marriage with Floyd just to safeguard your interests. The woman suffered a lot, and Akumu did not want to go back to Kisumu without her children. I thought her being around would be in the children's best interest."

Fidel finished talking, and there followed brief silence in which each seemed engrossed in their thoughts.

Duofold sighed finally, like one who had a load lifted off his shoulders. "Dad, I'm okay with the decision you made," he said as he stood to hug his father. "Thank you for the goodwill and for accepting me. At least I now have a dad, if nothing else." After he sat down again, he said, "I look forward to building a relationship with you. I'm not here to break your family, and after the good welcome you have shown me, I realise I'm here as a son of this homestead. I will not ask you for anything. I have enough to cater for myself and the children, so not to worry too much about my upkeep, Dad."

Fidel nodded that he understood and appreciated what his son had said.

"From here, I'm headed to Dad Hezron's to pick up my children," Duofold explained. "I know it shall not be easy confronting him, but it has to be done. I know Mom will be happy to see me, which I doubt with Hezron and Falid. I expect they will not be keen on causing drama after all the damage they caused my wife and children. You can have my number, Dad, just in case because one never knows. Flash me back so that I save yours."

"Binte and Warrior are your children, Duofold. I do not think they can dare stop you from collecting them. My concern is their reaction when they see you back to them alive. But I agree with you. It is good to have your number because one never knows with one as erratic as Hezron."

Fidel saw his newfound son off with a lot of pride as he started his motorbike and disappeared down the dusty road. He was left thinking about how he would align the family again after first accepting Akumu to accommodate the incoming son and his children.

DUOFOLD'S NEXT STOP was not at Hezron's. He detoured to first meet the mother of his children, Akumu. He had not mentioned it to his dad Fidel because he did not want to leave the old man anxious about what a visit to Akumu might mean. Duofold,

however, missed Akumu beyond measure. His whole body screamed for the woman he had missed for so long. She was the only woman he had ever loved.

Akumu, who hailed from Kenya's lakeside city of Kisumu, had been his crush since high school. Akumu did not make it to university but would remain the love of his life. He loved her to the depths of his soul, as Duofold liked to say. She always whispered to him how she loved his dark skin. She was a fun girl and liked to joke that it could not have been possible that Duofold had been descended from the people of the mountains and not the lakeside where tall and dark men hailed from.

Akumu was pretty, too, which is how he pictured her as he rode his bike to her shop. It is said that some men favour women who resemble their mothers. This must have been the case with Duofold. The gap between Akumu's front teeth made him see his mother in her. He liked to marvel that the two "girls" might have been twins right down to their slightly plump body shapes. The only difference was that Akumu was a bit taller than his mother.

Duofold proposed to his girlfriend the moment he got a job after university. It didn't matter to him that Akumu was from a different tribe. He did it for love, to which both their parents consented. They decided to get married soon after the proposal. Duofold's clan performed all the rituals demanded of his girlfriend's tribal customs. They complemented them with Kikuyu rites to complete their customary marriage. The coming together of the two cultures, whose marriage rites were performed at the same time, made for an endearing ceremony for friends and neighbours in Duofold's village. For a long time, it remained the talk of the village how the cosmopolitan Nairobi couple tied the knot in the colourful traditional African wedding that brought together the two cultures.

HE PARKED THE BIKE and walked a distance to her shop. Munene had done good homework. And this being Duofold's village, he did not need Google Maps to trace the shop. He ordered a soda. She did not seem to recognise him, perhaps because he wore a baseball cap and had sunglasses. She was business-like but was quick to offer a friendly hello, as would be expected of her serving a passing customer who may or may never return. But Duofold turned to observe her in a way she may not recognise his profile.

She was friendly with customers, chatting and making small talk with those it was obvious were regulars at the shop. She was good at her work. Duofold was filled with admiration for her. He could not believe the woman so dear to him was now someone else's wife—and not married to just any man, but a stepbrother, Floyd, who also happened to be best man during Duofold and Akumu's wedding. It showed how life

can be complicated, how his heart was still where he left it with Akumu, who was now out of reach in another man's embrace – a man he deeply respected. If it was up to him, all he would have wanted was another chance to rock himself in her.

She attended to the last customer. He was left as the only other person to attend to in the shop. He stood up and slowly removed his cap and sunglasses. He introduced himself to her. First, she appeared shocked, and the next moment she was dashing from her side of the counter to him with a scream of joy that could be heard some distance away from the shop. Then they were locked in an embrace as both sobbed onto each other's shoulder. They could not let go of each other. She tightly held her husband as he held his wife of eight years and mother to his children. It felt like a rebirth. All the memories and ecstasies they had ever enjoyed between them came flooding back. They were in a hurry to have each other again. The shop had mattresses for sale, and one of them was made a bed in the absence of the marital one.

It was in the afterglow of their sated bliss that they realised what they had done. They instinctively tried to move away from each other in the harshness of their new reality that they no longer belonged to each other. Time and season had separated them for good. There now existed a valley between them that defied mediation.

This left them a bit strained with each other, though Akumu wanted to talk. She cried a lot as she explained what she had been through with Hezron, how their children were like Hezron's beasts of labour, like donkeys. She was not allowed to see them, though she sent them food in school through her teacher friend, Mercy.

Duofold listened without saying much and was not sure he bought into her excuses. "Time is not on my side, dear Akumu," he said. "I have a lot to accomplish before dusk. Take my phone number. I shall invite you to Nairobi; we have a lot to catch up on. My plan, for now, is to get my kids back. Everything else shall follow."

They exchanged contacts, and he was almost out of the shop when, at the door, he came back and planted a kiss on her forehead. He had mixed feelings; he was still drawn to Akumu, but at the same time, anger was eating at him, for she abandoned his children, Binte and Warrior.

But he left Akumu with her worries. She was concerned that she did not mention to him that she had remarried and to none other than Floyd. Yet it appeared she still loved Duofold. *Does he know I married our best man? How shall he feel when he discovers? Should I divorce Floyd and go back to him? Or is it too late?*

Though Akumu was happy to see Duofold alive, it had been the last thing on her mind. She now felt anxious and uncertain about her situation. She started trembling as if she had suddenly caught malaria, though it was fear of the unknown that had gripped her. Her mind became disoriented; she could not concentrate on her

thoughts. She peered through the door and followed Duofold with her eyes until he disappeared.

After she regained herself, she called her husband Floyd to notify him that, like in the fable of the giant, the blacksmith was back. Floyd was very excited at the news but also worried about the future of his marriage now that Duofold had shown up. He promised to be home over the weekend from Nakuru, where he worked, so that they may face this together.

Floyd felt that Duofold's return had put him in an awkward position. *How shall I convince my good friend I had no bad intentions to marry his wife, Akumu?* he worried. *How could we have been so wrong to believe that he was dead?*

This line of reasoning about whether Duofold had been dead or not was not helping matters. Floyd decided what was important was the situation had to be dealt with. And about whether to explain his intentions to marry Akumu, they would cross the bridge when they got there. Much was at stake, however. Changing his mind about being home by the weekend, he decided this was an emergency and should be in his house with Akumu that very night.

DUOFOLD'S STEP WAS PURPOSEFUL as he entered his father's compound. But neither Hezron nor any of the family appeared to be home. He entered the house that used to be his home. The first thing he saw was a portrait of his brother Falid and his wife hung on the sitting-room wall. He moved to the bedrooms, and they smelled dunk and had a gloom of desolation hanging over them. Memories of the warmth of his wife and children and how it used to be when he lived in the house haunted him. He remembered how he used to kiss his children good night in their bedrooms.

He longingly looked at his favourite sitting position in the sitting room, where he enjoyed reading the newspaper. He remembered how Binte would come and rest on him and how she would report to him her squabbles with her brother Warrior. Duofold could even visualise Akumu in the kitchen preparing breakfast for them.

But the house now looked uninvitingly dirty and unkempt. Soot from smoke coming from the open-plan kitchen had invaded the sitting covering the walls. It could also have been from the fireplace in the sitting room. During his time with Akumu in the home, they cooked with gas. The fireplace was for warming the room during the cold season with a store to keep dry firewood. Smoke was carefully directed under a chimney to keep outside the room. Remembering how neat it previously was, the fireplace now looked like Falid's wife had turned it into a kitchen. The firewood store had been converted into a goat shed. This was in deep contrast to Akumu, who kept the home sparkly clean. The smell from the goat shed filled the sitting room.

The gas cooker oven now served as a pantry to keep food, and the gas cylinder was some kind of rack for dirty shoes.

He saw a pamphlet-like document sticking from a high shelf with a part of a picture that looked familiar. He pulled it down and was shocked to see part of the picture was from an old photo of him adorning his burial eulogy. He nearly dropped it when he realised what it was. He, however, determined himself to read it. It felt strange reading about his death. Yet the eulogy was not much different from other eulogies he had come across. It gave a chronology of events from his birth to school and working life, recognised his young family and spoke about his good deeds to his wider family. A succession of thoughts occupied his mind as he read it, ranging from concern as to who it was that had been buried to wondering how it might have been had he showed up alive during the burial. Would the mourners have scampered in fear at seeing him, or would they have welcomed him?

He was curious to visit the grave that had everyone convinced he had joined the world of *ngomi* (the dead).

He wondered about his mother and walked to her compound after closing the house door of the house that housed his family for years.

When Duofold entered his mom's house, he found that nothing much had changed. The furniture was the one he had bought her. Though he didn't find her in the house, a pot boiling on a stove in the kitchen indicated she was not far from the house. He went to the cowshed to see whether he would find her there. He couldn't find her. But he noticed that his cows were missing, probably sold. He saw only two cows that belonged to his dad, Hezron, and they looked a bit neglected.

His car also must have been sold, and everyone seemed to be struggling again. Hezron must have finished all the money he tried to kill Duofold to inherit. The thought made sadness wash over him—sadness for them. He thought that giving someone a fish was indeed enslaving them. Had he taught them how to fish, they probably could still be making money. If his brother Falid had not followed his dad, he likely would have long left home in pursuit of a more rewarding path. By the time of the tragedy that led to his illness, Duofold had just enrolled Falid on a course that he had hoped would give him financial freedom. Now it was too late. He did not want anything to do with Hezron or his offspring.

He walked down a path to the family farm, and he came face-to-face with what might have been his death, the grave in which he was supposedly buried. It looked surprisingly well-groomed. Somebody must have been tending it, maybe his mom, who must have still been grieving. Just like a few moments before when he was reading his eulogy, he wondered whose body lay there and who might have been his

people. *Were they missing the loved one? Is the person's soul disturbed that his death was mistaken for someone else?*

The thought made him wonder whether the people who decided the stranger should be interred here felt any guilt. Duofold also wondered whether the masses that attended the burial genuinely believed it was his funeral they had attended.

Did his children visit the grave to salute the dad they were led to believe lay there? What pain must they be going through?

These were not questions he could answer. But he felt better pondering them because he was alive. His only regret was the deceit that was the root of it all, a deceit he could do nothing about. This made him sad, and only his tears could probably make him feel better. *It is hard to visit your own grave when still alive,* Duofold thought.

"Rest in peace, stranger, and may the space you now lie remain your own," Duofold mumbled to the grave. "This is no longer my home, perhaps we shall meet in the afterlife."

He straightened the cross, though it did not need much straightening on the well-groomed grave. He did it as a gesture of honour to the unknown man buried there, a man he thought his hero in the dignity in which the grave showed he was interred in Duofold's stead. He gave the grave a final glance and continued with his tour of the farm.

The farm had a stream passing through it that provided the family with water for domestic and other uses. He sat down by it and dipped his feet in it. He felt somewhat refreshed by the cold flow of the water. He wondered where the good old days went to, the days they lived in harmony and played together as a family. Duofold missed those happy times when he was younger and during his marriage with his children. He wished the clock of life could be turned back and erase this bad chapter. He wished his happy family back again. But, to paraphrase the proverb, he thought to himself, wishes were not horses.

After a while, he stood up and went to his late grandma's mud hut. It was as he remembered it, how run down it was when he had last seen it years before. Its two rooms could not have been described as fit for human habitation. The first thing he saw when he entered was the fireplace as it had been, as he could remember it with its traditional three stones when his grandmother was alive. But it now stood cold with two cooking pots beside it that stood empty and blackened with soot.

In one corner of the room was a small bench that could fit two people. Beside it on the floor was an empty basin. There was a small table that he imagined his children used for homework, and on it were items he could not immediately identify. He thought the place lacked the touch of a woman who might have made it warmer, homely, and more inviting. His eyes drifted to the fireplace again, and he wondered

whether the children cooked for themselves or whether they had had regular meals. *Where did they eat, here or at their grandmother Florence's home?*

Entering the bedroom, he saw that the children slept on the same bed that was his grandmother's. It had a worn mattress and a dirty-looking blanket. It did not seem to have been washed since his grandmother died. He lay down on the bed, looking up at the ceiling. He noticed a string attached to the wall where the children had hung their clothes. It was a pathetic sight. It brought tears to his eyes. He had never imagined his kids leading such a life. It was worse than he had imagined.

He heard the shuffling of children's feet outside the hut and quickly dried his eyes. A moment later, Warrior entered, followed by Binte. They were startled to find someone inside. They could not immediately tell who as their eyes adjusted to the gloom inside the hut, having come from the bright sun outside.

"Hello, Warrior and Binte!" Duofold greeted them, his voice betraying his happiness to see them. He saw that Warrior immediately recognised his voice, then his face, as he rushed to hug them. "You remember me?"

They looked a bit confused. Binte was wide-eyed, curiously looking at him, trying to remember. "I am your dad, Duofold," he said as he locked them in a hug. His eyes were moist as the children sniffed in a quiet cry of happiness that their dad was back.

He unpacked a packet of snacks he had carried with him. As they enjoyed the treat, he listened to their excited voices narrating to him their ordeal at the hands of their grandpa Hezron's family.

"We are so happy to see you, Dad. We thought you died, and now we belong to Uncle Falid and Grandpa. Who did they bury in the garden?" Binte asked, looking up at her father.

Warrior joined in, saying, "They told us that it was our dad, and we believed them." Then, changing the subject, he said accusatively, "They are so mean to us, and their children are not allocated chores like us." He paused, showing some sadness. "We are like their servants. As their children play, we are all over trying to complete chores. All our good clothes were taken by Uncle Falid and given to our cousins. Now we have these old ones you see on the string that are almost rags. They are also our Sunday best. Things have been tough for us, Dad. Grandma is the only one on our side, but Hezron is mean to her too. We do not know why."

Duofold listened, wanting to hear as much as possible to get a feel of the life they led. But Warrior suddenly stopped talking and said in a panic, "We need to feed the cow before Grandpa and Uncle Falid are back." Binte and Warrior shot up to begin their evening chores.

The fear in his children's eyes was disturbing for Duofold to see. "Not today, my children, you're not working," he said firmly, but in a tone that assured the children

that he was in charge of them now. "There is nothing to worry about, my children. It is like in that story about the one-eyed giant from where we get the saying, 'The blacksmith is back'. Do you guys know that story?"

"Yes, we know it. Our uncle Falid tells us not to talk back at him as if the blacksmith is back; in this case, you," Warrior said and appeared to relax as Binte moved closer to their dad.

"Come on guys, let's go to your grandma's house," Duofold said, standing up and leading them out, holding their hands on either side of him.

When they reached the house, Duofold was surprised to see the children hesitate to enter the kitchen. Then he understood the reason: It was out of habit; they were never allowed to enter the house, perhaps only with permission.

"Hello, Mom," Duofold called out.

Florence was startled. It sounded like a voice she thought she would hear again. "Kimwaki is that you?!"

"Yes, mom."

"Oh, my child! Oh, my child!" Florence said, wailing in disbelief. "My child, you are resurrected?!" She stood hesitating, scrutinising. "Yes, it is you!" There were tears in her eyes. "Where have you been all this time, making me wish to die before my time has come?"

She hugged her Duofold for some minutes, rocking him possessively side to side as if she would never let go. "We were told you died," she said, "but somehow, I never believed it. I prayed to God not to let me rest before seeing you or burying your body. I was not given the chance to view the body they buried. I concluded the person I planted in the ground could not be my son. And here you are!"

"God has answered your prayers, Mom. I am alive and kicking. I am happy to see you again, mother. I visited the grave and wondered whose son it is was buried there by these schemers."

"First, take a seat, my son. I was boiling some maize that I was planning to share with your children."

Duofold felt good seated across his mother with Warrior and Binte beside him. After the children had been given some boiled corn, they disappeared to allow the adults some privacy.

"I knew things had gone wrong the day your father decided you are not his son; it was the day he became hostile to me and has been since," Florence, looking distraught, explained. "Disturbingly also, he squandered all your wealth. He is now more broke than he had ever been. Life has not been the same for me too. I wished I had somewhere to find refuge and desert him and leave him with his children. They, too, have been so rude to me, almost beyond redemption," she paused and shook her

head. "There are also your children, Warrior and Binte," she went on, "though I have always wanted to, I have not been able to fight for your children. The best I could do was hide dinner under their bed for them to have something to eat. I feared one day they might disappear like you. Thank God we have come this far. And, my son Duofold, how have you been? Where have you been?"

"That is a story for another day, Mom. Thank God I have been kept alive. And now I'm back, not to stay but to pick up my kids. Thank you for keeping an eye on them," Duofold said, seeming distracted as he scrolled the contact list on his phone. "Did you change your phone number, mom?"

"Not yet; I am not in a hurry to get another line. My memory is letting me down to keep remembering another number. It is the same number you left me with. Why had you tried to raise me earlier?" Florence enquired, adding, "I had left it charging in the house as I rushed to drop my tithe at the church. I sold some chicken yesterday and wanted to give thanks to my creator."

"I just wanted to confirm your number," he said, then joked with a smile adding, "Your prayers must have been answered for the tithe you took to the church, Mom. I am back now for you too." Before Florence could react or understand what her son was getting at, Duofold said. "I can't leave you behind. We should be going now before the Hezron clan gets back. I do not want a confrontation with Dad and Falid."

His mother protested, saying, "You cannot go before they are back. Your dad Hezron and Falid need to see you and feel ashamed for what they did to you, Kim. Never give the devil a chance to feel like a winner. The harm they have caused you and your family shall be paid dearly by them before they leave this world."

"That is not important anymore, Mom. I have my children now; that is all that matters to me. We need to move on with life. We have much ahead to worry about than waste time with those non-starters."

As he was saying this, sounds of a commotion reached them where they sat outside Duofold's mother's kitchen. It was Falid. He could be heard harshly quarrelling with the children as they ran towards their father with Falid hot in pursuit.

Duofold rose from his seat and faced his brother, his anger rising. "These are my children, Falid; leave them alone."

Falid stopped short in his tracks, shock written all over his face upon recognising his brother. He was trembling as he turned without uttering a word and rushed in a hurry to get away, perhaps to get Hezron. It was evident he never expected Duofold to be alive.

Falid was confused and worried as he raced away. He wondered what the implications of Duofold's return would be. He thought his brother would take legal action. He wondered whether Duofold knew he was a conspirator to what happened.

Falid took out his phone to call Munene. He wanted to understand how it could be that Duofold was still alive after providing bloodied clothes as evidence. Munene was not picking up his phone.

In the meantime, word had already spread about Duofold's return, and neighbours were starting to stream into the compound bearing gifts. Some could be heard saying how it was impossible to believe and whether a ghostbuster could be found to determine the truth, for they had never heard of anyone resurrecting in their village. Most were, however, curious to judge for themselves how Duofold looked like since he disappeared and spectate at the happening unfolding in Hezron's homestead. It made for a very interesting spectacle for the villagers.

"We heard you are back," one of the neighbours said after being welcomed. "We came to witness, for we were told you died, and it was us who buried you some years ago. We all loved you and missed you a lot."

"You paid our children's school fees and let us borrow your car for hospital emergencies," another neighbour expressed her appreciation.

"We cannot pay back your kindness," said another. "We are happy for your children and your mom Florence that you are back. They have suffered a lot."

"God has answered our prayers," a priest from the church said. There was relief in the priest's voice as he added, like one stating the obvious, "We were hoping you would not leave Binte and Warrior in this compound, Duofold?"

FALID REACHED THE SHOPPING CENTRE and located his father. "Dad, guess who is back at home?" he said, still panting from racing to quickly make it to the centre.

"Who has come back home, your sister Baily?" Hezron asked casually, thinking it was his divorced daughter. And, not waiting for Falid to explain, he set off on a complaint reprimanding his son: "Having needy children like you is not the best way to pay for my sins. A parent educates children to reap from their fortune, not to keep pumping them with more support even after they have reached adulthood. I hoped to realise my dreams through you, my children. Yet all I get from you and your sisters is pain. It seems only my illegitimate son Duofold had a brain. The rest of you have been such a headache. You lack ambition or self-drive in anything you do." Then looking regretful, he added, "I wasted my hopes on you. I miss Duofold a lot."

"Snap out of it, Dad," Falid said, now angry at being reprimanded and unable to hold his irritation. "If you miss your illegitimate son Duofold Kimwaki, prepare to meet him. He is at home."

"Hee! What? Who is at home?!"

Falid, at first, did not answer. "Kim," he said finally.

"He is alive? A ghost or my son Duofold?"

After recovering from his shock, Hezron wondered out loud. "How—how do we face him after all the harm we caused him?"

In the three years it had taken to reach this moment, Hezron had always thought the fate that had befallen Duofold was sealed, that there would never be a backlash. But he realised this was the day of his reckoning. "I regret what Kim must have gone through because of what we did," he said, speaking to no one in particular. "I allowed myself to be led by greed for money and power. Yet the money is all gone, and I have nothing to show for it. I have no way to apologise to Duofold, my Kim boy. It is too late. I lost the only child who worshipped me. I am on my own now; this shall be the loneliest phase of my life. I am finished. I have no one left."

Falid felt belittled and, showing little respect for his father, he angrily asked, "What are we to you, Dad, if Kim has been the only child in your life?"

"You are nothing but ticks!" his father retorted. "You only seem to want to suck me dry until I drop dead. What value have you added to me since your brother Kim left? Why can't you be like him? Kim was always an articulate, smart, and kind child. He supported all of us without a complaint and had no time to be resentful on irrelevant issues as you and your sisters do."

"It is not me you should be telling this," Falid sneered. "Go and tell that to your son when you meet him; salvage yourself, sweet talker!"

Then Falid surprised even himself with the contempt he now felt for his father. "I never would have thought when push came to shove you would be against the decision you made back then—what a cowardly man. You were my hero, Dad, but from today you will be on your own. I will never follow in your footsteps, never again. You enrolled me in your schemes, and here you are now playing the angel. I am keen to see how you will handle that son of yours after the illusion you have structured in your head to justify your fatherly love."

Hezron was stung by his son's words. "You don't know me well Falid," he said. "I will shift all the blame on you, Falid, and come out looking pure as gold. Wait and see; let us go."

The threat surprised Falid, whose immediate urge was to walk away and never see his father again. But knowing what his father was capable of, he decided to follow him so that he may keep an eye on Hezron and defend himself against any accusations that may be made against him.

They walked home with neither of them speaking to the other. They were taken aback to find joyous and jubilant neighbours gathered at the compound to celebrate the return of Duofold. To their surprise, Munene was there, and so was Akumu.

Duofold's wife had come to drop clothes for the children so that they may not leave the place looking like beggars. She also wanted to steal a glance at the man her soul adored and worshipped, Duofold. The time they had spent together at the shop had been too brief, and she also didn't want to miss the drama that was sure to unfold in Hezron's homestead following his return. Besides, she had never set foot in the compound since the day she was thrown out with her belongings. And just like Duofold, she was shocked at how her former home looked unkempt from neglect.

She could not believe the mess when she entered the home she had built with her husband. Besides the soot that covered the wall, the floors did not seem regularly cleaned, and the poorly maintained furniture was full of dust. Leftovers from the previous evening were still in plates in the sink. Used cups from that day's breakfast were still lying on the table, and there were food crumbs all over the seats. In the bedrooms, everything was strewn everywhere. It was like a tornado had hit the place. The doors were marked with grooves from sharp objects someone had run over them. The wallpaper in the bedrooms was torn and peeled off in places. The paintings they had left were soiled. It made for such an awful sight that tears sprung into her eyes. She could not believe one could be that careless to so neglect a house they called home.

Akumu felt sad she could not turn back the clock or repair the mess. Having remarried, she accepted this was no longer her home. She heard more people streaming into the compound and could make out the familiar voices of neighbours she knew. She left the house so as not to be found inside by Mrs Falid. Though she was raging with anger, it was not a confrontation she wanted. She still could not understand how a family could live in such neglect, yet there was tap water to ensure the house was washed and kept spic and span. She felt that the pain and loss that she could feel standing in that house reflected on everyone flocking to the homestead. The only difference was that she suffered double, losing a husband and her life and home in that compound.

Hezron and Falid noticed that Munene was seated next to Duofold. This made it plain to see that Munene must have betrayed them in the assassination contract and that Duofold knew the truth. While Hezron realised he had no way to clear his name, he also knew he had no choice but to face the situation. Falid, in the meantime, had turned and disappeared from the compound.

"My son Kim," Hezron said shamefacedly once he reached him. The compound fell silent. Everybody understood the significance of the moment and strained to hear what he had to say. "I have let you down before God and men," he said and paused as if looking for the right words. "However, just like Jacob in the Bible, you have come too late; I have no inheritance to give to you, son. I have already bequeathed

my wealth to your brother and sisters. I have nothing to offer to you except regret." He paused again, unsure of what to say. "I hope Fidel, your biological father, shall spare you some inheritance. Take your children and leave in peace. I regret all that befell you. I hope you shall find it in your heart to forgive me."

Hezron did not wait for Duofold's response, who sat tongue-tied as he watched the man he called his dad relinquish his fatherhood to him in shame. Hezron left the murmuring crowd and walked to the house and took refuge in his bedroom. For the first time in his life, he felt evil and dirty. He felt that by remaining there, undue attention would be directed to his family, who, in his sudden realisation of his unspeakable deeds, he did not want to bear the blame. Still, he could not escape the villagers' harsh scrutiny, who thought his repentance to his son was too little and too late to gain their forgiveness. It probably didn't matter because Hezron knew his name was forever ruined. And, lacking in a better way to redeem himself with Duofold, he thought a quick apology the best way to go to slow speculations before he disappeared to his bedroom.

Seeing the way his father had walked away, Duofold realised there was little he could do, and there would be time enough to think about it. But neither could he ignore the attention he was receiving from everyone else around him. He gave himself to the warmth, love, and friendship of Mom Florence, his children, and the neighbours.

Duofold thanked everyone for taking the time to welcome him. When it came time to leave, he had a word with his mother, and they agreed that, though he wanted to leave with her, she should remain behind to sort out her affairs first. He would come back for her some other day.

But as Duofold was leaving with the children, he somehow did not seem surprised that his sisters and his brother Falid did not seem bothered that their brother was leaving. He thought it had to do with their father's inheritance which they did not intend to share. They were quick therefore to tell him he was not welcome back but were happy to let him take his children with him. "Stay with your brother Floyd in your father Fidel's home. That is where you belong," her elder sister shouted at him.

He left with a heavy heart. He was sad to see the family he worked hard to assist had turned their back on him. But he was not bitter, and neither was he a vengeful person. It was another reminder it was time to bid his villagers goodbye. He turned and saw his mother's sadness, but she stood proud, watching her son and grandchildren lead a new path.

CHAPTER FIVE

Duofold longed for the sun to rise after a long night thinking about events in the village the previous day following his return. The new day signified to him the beginning of the new life he now must lead. During their hot coupling with Akumu on a mattress at the shop, the reality of this had not quite sunk in. Now it did.

I am a bachelor again, he thought to himself as he prepared to get out of bed. *This is my new life now, in a nutshell. With Akumu now remarried*, *the family I thought I had is now broken apart and cannot be mended back again. The sooner I accept this reality, the better if I am to move on with my life without her.*

There could have been no other way of looking at it. The ties the remarriage had weaved were too intricate to untangle. Yet Duofold could afford to smile to himself at the irony that there could be a bright side to it, that Akumu was not exactly leaving him; she was still in the family—the family that Fidel had already welcomed him as a son.

This seemed to soften Duofold, and he felt that he could not blame anyone for moving on after he was already thought dead and buried. The other bright side of this was that Floyd had done what a loyal best friend could ever do, taking care of who he believed to be Duofold's widow.

Yet letting go of remained the hardest part for Duofold. She was so much a part of him, a part he needed as the mother of his children now that Binte and Warrior were back with him. The void he felt was deep. He got a bit emotional thinking about it.

He remembered how at the shop, Akumu seemed as troubled as he was that she now belonged to another. He could see regret in her eyes. He sympathised with her.

Even as these thoughts passed through Duofold's mind, he remembered he was to call Liz to update her on what transpired from his visit to the village to confront Hezron. He dialled her number.

"Good morning, Liz. Is it too early to call, dear?"

"Not really, Kim; it sounds like you are still in bed yourself," Liz replied with a smile that Duofold thought he could feel. "I did not sleep well, wondering how it

went when your people discovered you were alive. I could only imagine the drama you must have had to deal with, my dear."

"It was not a walk in the park," Duofold agreed. "But I have my children with me in the house now. Thank you for pushing me to do this the soonest.

"Did it involve a fight?"

"Not really, Liz; we only need force when we want to do something harmful; otherwise, love is enough to get everything done. It is the weapon I used."

'Yes, indeed, that was wisdom, my boy! Life is more fulfilling when we know how to balance and embrace its dualities. You have a new slate now, dear, that will come with its ups and downs, some good times and bad ones, like losing your wife Akumu to another man. Also, joy like you now have with your children. I am sure they are not leaving your sight."

"We've missed each other, and the happiness is mutual," said Duofold. "They kept me awake half the night with tales of what they went through and how they could not understand how evil and good could exist together. They had a lot of bad things to report about their Uncle Falid and Grandpa Hezron but many good things to say about their Grandma Florence. They are still asleep. Seeing them so peacefully asleep reminds me how things can quickly go wrong, how relationships are like electric currents. A wrong connection leads to shocks for life, like that between Dad Hezron and me. I am now looking for a better connection; I hope to get a wife soon that shall light up my life again."

"I concur, my darling Kim. As life unfolds, so do we follow its course. Not all the time we are able to predict what to expect. All I know is that you shall definitely find your footing. What was your ex-wife's reaction when she saw you?" Liz was teasing Duo.

"It was a horrible scene for both of us. We are still very hungry for each other; she takes over my being anytime I see her. We did not commit any sin to deserve the separation. It shall take some time to get used to the new life." Duofold paused after a distraction. "The kids are awake, Liz. Let me have some time with them. We'll touch base later. It is our first full day together, and we have a lot to catch up on."

"Sure, we'll talk later," Liz said, adding, "You can work remotely from home to spend time with your kids. Everything shall fall in place soon, Duo. Give my kisses to them."

"I will, thanks."

Duofold opened his arms to hug the children who were waiting eagerly for his phone call to end. He had allowed them to sleep with him in his bed to assure them things were now different as they unloaded to him the disappointments of their stay in the village.

DUOFOLD THOUGHT HE WOULD ALWAYS REMEMBER this as the day his house became a home, the day it sprung to life. It had to do with the excited noises Warrior and Binte were making in their new bedrooms, where he had ushered them after they left his bed. He watched them take in the newness of the large, airy room with their children-themed walls and beautiful floral curtains.

A short while later, he sought to assure them that things were different now and all would be well.

"I heard what you've told me," he had told them, "it was tough for you guys. But to be happy again, we need to let go of that suffering at the hands of your Grandpa Hezron and Uncle Falid. Let bygones be bygones. Be grateful for what we have now; we have each other—we have you, Warrior, your sister Binte and I. And we will always be great together. I will never leave you, and we have a beautiful future ahead of us."

He then hugged them and drew them closer to his chest. It was a new feeling for the children. They felt safe and protected, protected from ridicule and discrimination when they compared themselves with their cousins living next door in Falid's house, and from the feeling that they were being punished by being forced to tend to chores their cousins didn't have to undertake; and protection from the emptiness and hopelessness they felt with their parents absent from them.

The hut would always be at the back of their mind, but Duofold was thankful that they were alive to give testimony one day to the symbolism it held of the unhappy life they had briefly lived. Still, he thought the children had had it better than many in the village. They subsisted on the little their grandma could smuggle them or the few special dishes they got from well-wishers when they happened to be in the neighbourhood—but that day, waking up in their dad's house marked a new season.

Duofold left them in their new rooms and went to prepare breakfast. They would join him when it was ready.

Binte was wondrously admiring her bedroom, which was painted pink with luminous stars attached to the ceiling. Her room featured a fitted wardrobe. The only items that were missing were clothes and shoes. Daddy couldn't have bought them in advance because he did not have the Binte and Warrior sizes. On the dressing table were ribbons for Daddy's little princess to choose for her head. There was also an assortment of dolls and a trolley to take them for a walk, a kitchen, a bed and utensil toys. It was fun to be a baby again, for in the village, she was sometimes involved in real kitchen chores.

Warrior was having his best moments with toy trucks and cars in his room. He had no time for anything else. He could not be bothered by how his room looked so long as it remained the arena he was racing his machines. Little else mattered.

"Warrior, Binte," they heard their dad calling. "It is time for breakfast."

They emerged eager and more refreshed than they could remember.

"You like your rooms? Duofold asked cheerfully. "You shall spend the night in them tonight?"

"Yes, we like them a lot," said Warrior as Binte eagerly added, "We can't wait for nightfall to be in our new bedrooms."

The table was laid with foods that were not familiar to the two, except that they smelled and looked very appetising. It was also their first introduction to a fork and a table knife. It was fun learning to use them without fear that someone might laugh at their mistakes learning how to hold and use them. But they were quick learners, which left their dad quite impressed.

LATER THAT MORNING, they went out shopping. It was the children's first time at a shopping mall that was buzzing with people. Life in the mall seemed to move too fast compared to the village. They, however, seemed to cope quite well with Dad there to encourage them.

The whole afternoon was something of a fashion show, trying out new clothes and showing them off to their dad before packing what impressed them. They arrived home too tired for their dad to cook. But it was an opportunity to try something new—pizza, which Duofold ordered for dinner. Though it might have been one of the kids' best treats, they could only take a few bites. It turned out to be too oily for them to keep down. Duofold, however, knew they would learn to enjoy it in due course. He prepared some *ugali* with veggies for them. They snacked on bread as he prepared the meal. One day at a time, and things would fall into place at the Duofold household.

It was a weekend, and schools were due to close in another week. In the days that followed, Duofold organised online tuition to prepare the children for their transition from the public school they attended in the village to an international school in the city. The children were keen to learn, and their tutor was patient with them. They had audio and visual learning aids, which helped in retention and made the learning process easier, including with their homework. It was hard at first, but they quickly caught on. They aspired to be top students as they had always been in their old school despite the hardships.

Binte and Warrior were always respectful and honest and were quite easy to make friends with. This, in addition to their motivation to learn, helped them fit in in their new school environment. They seemed to adapt sooner than Duofold had anticipated. He thought that the period they had spent doing things for themselves had probably helped give them life skills that made them well-rounded and fast learners.

Their dad encouraged them. They would always remember when he once told them that even a teacher was once a student, how learning was like a bridge—a bridge that he, too, had crossed. They had promised him they'd be frequent visitors to that bridge called learning. By the time they were enrolled in the new school, they were as ready as the classmates they were going to meet. One could not tell they had come from a poorer educational background in the village.

One afternoon, after a hearty meal on a balcony at home with a beautiful view of a forest, they told their dad about their life in Grandpa's village and how they missed their friends there. They begged him to let them visit their old school to bid their friends farewell. This was not a request a father could refuse. Duofold called their mother, Akumu, to make arrangements with the school about a farewell bash. Despite the request being unusual, the school was very excited to host it, and everyone looked forward to receiving the Duofold family. It even attracted villagers who saw it as an opportunity to see for themselves the now famously resurrected Kim.

After the conversation with Akumu, Duofold thought to invite his ex-wife to see where her other children, Binte and Warrior, now lived. When the day came, he sent the kids ahead with a driver to be with their schoolmates. He would join them later. He also wanted to hear Akumu's version of what the kids had been through on their own at Hezron's Akumu was driving her husband Floyd's car, and they met at a prearranged location, from where she followed Duofold's car to his home.

The home was a revelation to Akumu. She could not believe the guy was now wealthier and more affluent than when he disappeared from her life. Neither could she believe she was no longer the woman to take care of Duofold and the children. It was hard for her to accept that circumstances had drifted them apart. Being a reader of the Bible, she thought to herself that even if the Book urges a good example by showing kindness to unkind people and forgiving those not deserving of forgiveness, Akumu had her serious reservations. She could not feel kindness nor wish to forgive her former father-in-law Hezron and his children for the harm they caused her, more so for cruelly forcing her down the painful path of losing Duofold.

Standing in Duofold's house, a succession of thoughts raced through her mind: *I have lost my soulmate, Kim, and now I am the cloud between two brothers—Duofold, my ex, and*

Floyd, my new husband. How did fate conspire so improbably to put me there? How did I end up marrying the two brothers?

Sadness engulfed her as she fought back tears so as not to alarm Duofold.

Had I remarried to another man and not Floyd, I would have long packed and got back with my Kim. It's too complicated now having kids from the two brothers. It is something I must live with.

She acknowledged that she had to live with the tangle of her relationships – Duofold and Floyd, sons of her father-in-law, would remain uncles to her two respective sets of children with each of them, even as an ex-husband was now a brother-in-law.

Her only concern was whether this entanglement might break Fidel's stable family as it happened with Hezron's.

These thoughts were, however, momentary and went through her mind as Duofold welcomed her into the house. The first thing she noticed was the new portrait with the three lovely people she once knew as family. It broke her heart that she was missing from the picture; it felt as if it had been deliberate that her face had been left out and that their life was moving on without her. Her eyes clouded with tears as she passed her fingers over the portrait.

She removed the portrait from its hanging on the wall and held it in her hands as she was shown Binte and Warrior's bedrooms. She was impressed by how modern and well-organised they looked with everything in place, just as she made for them when they were younger in their former home in the village. Only this time, she had not been involved in the buying of the items and setting up of the rooms.

Seeing her distress, Duofold reassuringly patted her back and gave her a soft kiss on her cheek. He then took her hand and led her to the bedroom after placing the portrait back on the wall.

"I always thought you and I would share this bedroom till death do us part," he said dreamily. "I bought you these clothes to change your wardrobe. Now that you are here try them on and see which ones can fit you and take them with you. If you had any doubts, it is to show I still hold you dear in my life and that it shall take me a long time, if ever, to replace you in my soul."

After this, Akumu composed herself and started a fashion show for Duofold's enjoyment. She tried on the clothes as Duofold rested in the bed to admire his erstwhile soulmate's curves. The clothes perfectly fit her. They brought out her beautiful curves, turning him on again—a lustful tension built between them in their longing for each other.

"Wow! How did you know my sizes, Kim?"

"You are the only woman who has ever been in my life. How can I fail to know your size?"

"Even shoes, Kim?"

"Yes, that is how special you are to me, Akumu."

Duofold was already too hungry for Akumu after seeing her naked in front of him as she cat-walked to admire her new look. Also, the thought that he had lost her to another man added to his desire for her. They were both too horny to ignore the moment. They locked and explored each other, this time without a reservation, unlike at the shop. It was an intense thirty minutes of pure ecstasy, one they hoped would not end in a pregnancy. It made for such a refreshing moment after a long dry spell, especially for Duofold.

"Thank you so much. These clothes shall be a reminder that I belonged to a man who treated me like a queen." Akumu kissed his lips. She enjoyed her time with Duofold. Though it did not last long, she thought it was very rewarding.

"Most welcome, my queen Akumu."

They packed the gifts in a box and put them in her car. They noted it was still early, at 11 am.

"We now need to have a candid talk on the way forward for the kids and us," Akumu said as they had a snack.

"It is with great pain I let you go, Akumu. Our history goes deeper than family; we are great friends, my sweet lady. I feel like we were a couple in another life. It is so unfortunate that a twist of fate separated us. The irony of it is raising our children together apart. This shall be a good excuse to see each other more often. Just know that I shall forever adore you. Treat you like my wife, with respect." Duofold was emotional as he was saying this. "I shall be happy to provide for you whatever you desire, even if we are not going to share a marital bed anymore," he assured his ex-wife. "I hope my return shall not make my brother Floyd jealous and give you a hard time. I shall find a caring wife soon if only to assure him I didn't come back to take you from him. As it is, therefore, I am starting over; I am back to the drawing board, and I hope I shall get a woman I'll have by my side for life. Either that, or neither you nor I shall find peace within ourselves and our families."

The mention of a possible other woman broke Akumu's heart. She thought how lucky the woman shall be to replace her. She wondered whether the new wife would love or sideline her children, Binte and Warrior.

Once Duofold is married, should I request to have my children back in case they are mistreated by his new mistress? Akumu's heart was racing in her motherly instinct to protect her offspring.

The anxiety she felt for the children got her sobbing. She wished Kim would consider her coming back, even if it meant leaving the other children with Floyd.

Duofold and his children were her preferred family; the second family happened on the rebound. She said nothing and sobbed, and somehow Duofold understood.

"It is not easy for me, either, Akumu darling," he said. "We have to be strong, for it is the reality we must live with. What we decide is what shall shape both our families. It may take us time to forge a way forward, but it is the only way."

Duofold let this sink in before surprising her with what he said next. "Your husband Floyd is working in Nakuru," he began. "The first thing I did was to get you a shop for electronics for you in the town. You always had an eye for IT, and I thought it was a well-paying business to start you off. I wanted you out of the village, not to be ridiculed by villagers about what they probably think is a double life you are leading. Nakuru is close to Nairobi. You can visit Binte and Warrior and me as you come to buy stock for the shop. Nakuru is also closer to your parent's home in Kisumu. The shop is set, and two technicians are already running it as they wait for you. Everything is under your name. You shall make new friends there, my dear. I hope it shall impress my woman."

Duofold drew Akumu closer and gave her a passionate kiss. She responded hungrily. It made her forget she may never have Duofold alone to herself again.

"Tell Floyd it was your idea to move to Nakuru to distract you from all that has happened around you. The other option would have been to ignore Floyd and still have you back in my life. But this would create wounds and result in unpleasant words between families. We shall also make our loved ones suffer more, mine and your children with Floyd. They should not be dragged into this quagmire. At least our children have me. Your family with Floyd is younger and needs you more. I hope you do not find me being too fast and drastic in making the decision, my darling Akumu."

"Not really, Kim. You are just being you, sharp and quick, trying to fix things. I never looked at it from that angle, but it works for me perfectly. I am sure Floyd shall embrace the arrangement too. He would want me miles away from you. I hope life shall be kind and not slap you with an unkind and irresponsible woman. I wish I was the one, but I have been overtaken by events. Life has to continue, with each of us on a different path. I'll work on what we have discussed as soon as possible. How often shall I be seeing the children, Kim?"

"Perhaps every last weekend of the month, I could be dropping them to Nakuru on a Friday and back on Sunday evening. They are siblings with Floyd's children and need to hang out together. During holidays they will be spending a week with their grannies in the village to keep them in touch with our culture and be with their village friends. Kisumu grannies' visits, I leave that to you to decide."

"That is so kind of you, Kim, to remember my parents. I'll take them all to Kisumu as soon as a window opens, perhaps when schools close. I hope you won't

mind the short notice on this one. My parents must be eager to meet them. It's been a long time since they saw the children."

"You are welcome, my dear—anything for you, my Akumu."

"One more thing," he said as he passed Akumu a house key. "This box holds the key to the Nakuru home I bought for the woman I've always adored. The house is fully furnished; just move in with nothing but the clothes of your family. Your village home will probably make a place for vacations or when you are in town for business. I hope to meet Floyd today after the kids' event."

"Yes, I expect he'll be here. He said he couldn't miss attending the event. He is usually home on weekends."

"That is good. I shall be honoured by Floyd's presence," Duofold replied, trying to remember where he read a quotation that said *family faces are magical mirrors; looking at people who belong to us, we see the past, the present, and the future*.

He looked forward to seeing him. And knowing what he knew now about Floyd being his brother and not just a friend, he thought the quotation could not be truer. The quotation was a kind of reality check.

"We better get going, Akumu, lest we be late for the party. You can drive ahead. Let's meet at the school." Duofold kissed her on the cheek as they hugged and walked her to the car. He was holding her hand as he swung the heavy briefcase on the other hand. He placed it in her car boot. As he locked the boot, he thought that had Akumu been still his, he would have gotten her a more feminine car.

Duofold reached into his pocket and gave her some pocket money. She drove off, still unable to reconcile her love for Kim and the reality that he must forge a new path without her. She was, however, happy that he had returned alive and the children would be well looked after. But separating from Duofold left her so stressed that she feared she might develop stomach ulcers.

Why is this happening to me? Akumu asked herself yet again. *I cannot believe I am the fool here; I should have taken my time, like five years, to see how things would unfold before marrying Floyd. How many are like me to be so impatient to board a vehicle merely to escape their current situation only to regret it later? Fear of the unknown has misled many humans. I hope it is a lesson I shall always remember. I should have seen this coming all along. My instincts had told me Kim would be back one day. My desire to cushion myself made me impatient. I needed someone to replace him, to love me and shoulder my burden. Now I regret my selfish move.*

Akumu decided to pass by her home and found that Floyd had already arrived to be in time for the event.

"Welcome, home, my dear Akumu," Floyd was happy as always to see her. "But where are the kids?"

"I dropped them at the venue to have a moment with Duofold's children and interact with their agemates as I ran some errands," Akumu replied. "I'll have a quick shower, honey, and then I'll change and we go."

Akumu put on a dress that Duofold most admired when she had tried it on and hugged her panting with desire for her. The dress made her feel younger like she was back in her twenties. She noticed it had the same arousing effect on her husband, Floyd. He was not as romantic as Duofold, but he showed more interest in her than he usually did.

"I have not seen you in that dress before, dear Akumu. You look so good in it. Is it new?".

"Thank you, honey. I shall be buying such dresses now," she replied, making a mental note to be careful where she kept the box with gifts from Duofold for Floyd does not raise an eyebrow. Having to hide stuff felt weird, like in her days in high school. In those days, when a man bought you a new dress, you had to make up a long story to explain to your parents where you got it from. However, Floyd was not the kind of guy to surprise you with a dress or keep count of how many were new. Only that this time it was by chance he seemed to notice the dress was new. Akumu thought the competition was beginning to kick in now that Duofold was back.

DUOFOLD HAD BOUGHT ENOUGH FOOD. Though the school had offered to prepare it and probably ask some parents to help, Duofold had insisted that he would pay for caterers to leave parents free to enjoy the event. The festive air about the school event promised to be like none other. Parents from around the village were surprised to be welcomed with packed snacks comprising sweets, a packet of biscuits, juice, milk, and bread.

"This is too much," some of them commented. "Being here to see the children so happy is joy enough," they said.

What many agreed on was that it was a party they had never experienced before.

Duofold had hired enough tents to host the entire village as a live band entertained them.

This, however, was Binte and Warrior's big day. They had woken up early with anticipation and had rehearsed speeches they were to give. They had ensured gifts they had asked their father to buy for their teachers and friends were loaded in the car. They especially wanted the children who previously shared with them the little they had to get the gifts. It was a special day for them too.

The school had received Warrior and Binte with honour like VIPs. Their schoolmates could not believe these were the nearly destitute kids they schooled with

who now looked polished and spoke fluent English. Warrior and Binte told them about their new school and how it had more foreigners than locals, so the only language spoken was English, which had helped them become fluent. They shared with them photos of the new school and their new friends. They also had a photographer for the day and made sure they took photos of the former school, the village, the stream where they once fetched water, their grandpa's compound and the house they lived in that belonged to their great grandma.

"Memories are made of this," Warrior said, repeating a phrase he had heard on television at home as he and his friends followed the photographer taking the photos.

Binte, in the meantime, was explaining to their friends how she and her brother were so happy that their dad had allowed them to be with the people they had known all this time as part of their big family.

With Binte and Warrior in the lead, children from the school who knew Duofold ran to receive him when he arrived for the event. Duofold greeted the children in his mother tongue as he cheerfully spoke to them, wanting to know from which families and the village they came. The children, in their turn, mobbed him, wanting a personal handshake. It was the school's headmaster who rescued him as he enjoyed the attention he was receiving from the children. He was ushered to sit with local dignitaries.

As was a must in such school events to show off their talents, the children sang and danced for the guests. This was before the live band took over the entertainment as the party kicked off with a sumptuous meal.

Binte and Warrior gave a speech and a vote of thanks to the school fraternity and well-wishers and to everyone who assisted them when they needed support. To Duofold's surprise, Falid's children were part of close friends to receive gifts. Without letting Falid know, they used to help Duofold's children with their chores. They didn't like how their cousins were treated by their dad Falid and grandpa Hezron.

Mercy, their former teacher, who used to take care of Duofold's children and give them extra tuition, got a special gift from Binte. This did not surprise their father, who was curious to meet the teacher his children seemed to like so much. He was also curious because, knowing that their dad was single and available, Binte used to lobby for Mercy to be their new mom. Warrior was happy with the suggestion. As they shopped for her gift, Binte chose a red dress and a red floral coat. None of the teachers in the school was left out; they all got a gift.

During the event, Binte made her dad dance with Mercy to the song *Lady in Red* by Chris de Burgh, a favourite of Duofold that he often played in the house. Duofold was happy to oblige if only to thank the teacher for shaping the positive attitude of Binte and Warrior. First, they invited their dad to present the award to teacher Mercy.

Then they asked the band to play *Lady in Red* as Duofold helped the Teacher of Honour, Madam Mercy, into the red floral coat and handed her the dress. And honouring his children's request, he hugged and danced with her to applause from the guests.

After the dance, Duofold invited her to a seat next to him. He wanted to hear from her how Akumu had supported the children in his absence and the hardships they encountered. The special gift to her and their close talk led many at the event to wonder whether she was his future wife to take the place of Akumu.

After the event, he was approached by a well-dressed man. He moved to the side to hear what the man had to say.

"Excuse me, Kim. My name is Tito. I hope you are not planning to take away my woman, Mercy. We have been together for six years, and I am about to take dowry and ask for her hand in marriage sometime this year."

Duofold was taken aback by Tito's approach. He did not reply immediately and instead thought to himself: Though I might have entertained Binte's persistent lobbying about teacher Mercy, *I have not seen anything in common between her and me. She is pleasant and very good-looking, but nothing close to what I am looking for as a wife to replace the dynamic Akumu. Mercy has a small body, and she is too timid to contain my preteens, Warrior and Binte. It will not be easy raising them, especially now that they already show their independent spirit with their assertiveness, especially Binte.*

"Young man," he finally said, "thank you for checking with me. The show was for my daughter, and I only obliged her request to dance with her teacher. I am already engaged to another woman," Duofold said, though it was not true. "I have no intention to take your Mercy. She is a pleasant woman, and I'm glad she is taken already. You deserve her, and I love it you are fighting to keep her by your side. I value that, and I actually do owe her for the kindness she showed my children. She gave them hope during a tough time in their lives, and I would like to pay back her kindness. Therefore, should you need any kind of support, I'll be very happy to assist. And Mercy had already told me she was planning a wedding and was expecting a baby. Congrats, brother Tito."

"Thank you, Kim, for understanding. I am trying to protect my territory as a man and also as an expectant dad. I will confess I was jealous a bit; you looked too good together that I feared my wife had a change of mind," the young man said, smiling.

"I can assure you and Mercy that you are now family to me. We have been united by my children. Whoever cared for them, like Mercy, I shall forever be indebted. I apologise if I made you uncomfortable, Tito."

"I'm pleased to hear that, Kim. My heart is at peace now. Thank you for remembering to honour teacher Mercy for her dedication. I know she was very

committed to bettering Warrior and Binte's lives. I used to add a little more to the house budget so that she could carry some food to school for them."

"It's good to know that, and it's a pleasure to meet the man who cares for my children's cheerleader. Thank you, Tito." Duofold hugged him with a pat on his back. "Should you ever need anything, I'm your brother, Tito. I would be happy to pay back your kindness too. So get in touch. Mercy has my phone number. I only want you to promise me one thing: To take good care of her and the new one on the way."

They laughed at this as Tito accepted the challenge to always be the hero to win battles for Teacher Mercy.

"Being a friend to your family Duofold is already enough reward to Mercy and me. I pray that you find a good caring wife too, like my Mercy," Tito bowed in a show of respect to Duofold.

It was a bit awkward for Duofold, though he tried his best to manage the conversation with Tito. Duofold would have to experience more such encounters as he tried to replace Akumu and get another woman by his side. The event ended well despite this little hiccup that almost threw him off balance.

After Duofold bid Tito goodbye, he had a brief emotional encounter with his brother Floyd and promised to join them at home for dinner with the Fidel family as soon as he cleared with the school headteacher.

The headteacher gave him a list of things the school would like him to consider donating. He wrote a cheque for the purchase of the items and promised to visit the school again.

It was time to leave with his children to join his newfound family, the Fidels.

CHAPTER SIX

THOUGH DUOFOLD LOOKED FORWARD to the dinner at the home of his father, Fidel, it was with mixed feelings. If Fidel's home could be likened to a wrapped package of treasure, it was like accepting it in a soiled wrap paper that tarnished its appeal. The reason was that it was the home that had claimed the woman he still adored and could never again own. Yet the reality was that this was also the home he truly belonged. Audibly sighing as he buckled on his safety belt, he had to accept the package as it was; the home was now his, being Fidel's newest member of the family. He drove the children to their other grandfather's home without another thought.

When they arrived, Duofold was surprised to discover that Binte and Warrior already knew their way around their mother's house. They mingled and entertained themselves with their step-siblings and seemed to gel quite nicely with them. This is because they sometimes sneaked from Hezron's compound to pay Akumu a visit, where they interacted with Brenda and her little brother, Fidel Junior.

Fidel was very pleased to see Duofold and stood beaming as he vigorously shook his son's hand. As they exchanged greetings, his other son suddenly appeared.

"Come here, my brother Floyd," Duofold called and hugged his brother as they joyfully slapped each others' backs. "I've missed you."

"I am also quite happy—should I call you brother Duofold?" They laughed at that. "Yes, really happy to see you alive, my best friend. And, if I should confess, not so happy that I married your 'widowed' wife, Akumu."

There was some emotion in Floyd's voice which nearly cracked, but he recovered quickly. Perhaps the feeling in his voice was because he was sorry for Duofold's losing Akumu to him or fear that he might lose his wife to the returned former husband. Either way, no one took particular notice of it as Fidel marvelled at his two sons' obvious friendship and proudly led them to the sitting room.

After Floyd had ensured his new brother was settled in the house with his dad, he excused himself to pick up Akumu, who had left earlier to close her shop.

Duofold's stepmother Faith was a pleasant woman who had by now come to terms with the reality that Duofold was her stepson. It had initially bothered her that he was the offspring of her rival Florence, with whom she competed for Fidel's

attention in their youth. There was also the sense of betrayal that Fidel was a player to have left the two women pregnant before he went overseas. But she had vowed never to question Fidel about it, thinking it was not worth it to upset the relationship Duofold was building with his newfound dad and the family. She acknowledged that Duofold had already suffered a lot and, as she had put it, did not want to add salt to the injury.

She joined them from outside the house, where she was finishing with some chore to give Duofold a warm welcome.

"You should have come to see me sooner after you returned, Duofold," she said in mock accusation after they had exchanged greetings. "Remember, you are my son too. I know you are a frequent guest at this house, and I have served you a meal so many times, but I want to see more of you. Feel at home, Duofold, now that you are a family member."

"Thank you, Mom Faith. And it never ceases to amaze me you always look younger and vibrant each time I visit." Duofold said to bring a smile but also drive the conversation away from the direction his stepmother appeared to take towards his roots.

"Me? Young? You tease me, Duofold!" Faith protested as Fidel joined in the laughter and light-hearted banter that followed.

Floyd was soon back with Akumu just as the family was about to sit for dinner.

Akumu dashed to the kitchen to help her mother-in-law serve the food, having already released the children to their games. The kids had already had their dinner.

Soon, everyone was seated at the table as each took in the significance of the occasion—the official welcoming of the new family member, Duofold.

Akumu made sure she sat on the same side with Duofold to avoid eye contact across the table, though they occasionally kept throwing side glances at each other. After the meal, however, Akumu had to excuse herself to keep an eye on the young ones in her house as they went to sleep.

Duofold took the initiative to begin the conversation about his welcome to the family and began by thanking his dad Fidel for accepting him as his son. To avoid any awkwardness that may arise about his former wife, who was now sister-in-law, he said evenly, "I would like to congratulate my brother Floyd for taking Akumu as his wife after everyone believed that I had died. You saved her a lot of shame after the humiliation of being kicked out of my matrimonial home with her. You saved her a lot of anguish and maybe death. Had she pestered my now stepdad Hezron and his family about remaining there, it is entirely possible she might already be past tense by now. I know things are complicated, and it may not be easy to fully come to terms, but it helps that we have accepted the situation as it is."

Faith was gratified to hear this and hoped Floyd had likewise accepted the situation as it was, even with Duofold's return. She had always been anxious about her laid-back son, Floyd, who she often felt was not always forceful enough or strong enough to accept tough situations. She recalled that it was for this reason she had been at the forefront of brokering Floyd's marriage to Akumu. It was only a mother's concern, which did not diminish the fact that it was the attraction between Akumu and Floyd that made the marriage possible in the first place after the supposed death of Duofold.

Duofold continued, "The decision I have arrived at may not favour each of us, but I believe it shall offer us a new bearing to forge a united and harmonious family going forward."

For some reason, expecting to hear the worst, Floyd suddenly lost his appetite. And the worst he could imagine was his wife choosing to get back together with Duofold. He worried that Akumu never got over Duofold, mentioning his name at every possible moment. Floyd could not imagine losing what he already had: the warm-hearted woman who, despite his fears, still accorded him love and affection. This realisation of her unfailing warmth towards him calmed his worries a bit. Still, Akumu was the cloud between them. He folded his arms on his chest to hear what this decision Duofold was saying he had arrived at.

"As things stand, Akumu is still my wedded wife," Duofold said, "but I feel my brother Floyd deserves her most, more so because they have a young family together. I have no intention of breaking up the new family they started. I need not tell you that I have been in that situation and can attest to the dreadful experience. No one wins in such a situation. We need not repeat it except support Akumu and Floyd. Their boat left the dock long ago when little Brenda arrived, followed by Junior. Though the boat left me a bit lost in the deep seas, I still have my kids, Warrior and Binte. The rest shall fall in place as we move on.

"Akumu and I have already agreed on the details of how Warrior and Binte's time will be shared between us, including when to visit with you, grannies. I still feel very possessive of her, and I hope Floyd will forgive me for saying I am concerned about Akumu's well-being, given the changed perceptions of her in the village after my return. We agreed that she should join Floyd in Nakuru as the dust settles. Her shop can be inherited by our mom Faith. It is not a must, Mom, only if you should find running the shop convenient for you. Before my misfortune, Akumu had done IT, which can be well-paying as a line of business. I took the liberty to open a shop for her in Nakuru as well as buy her a house to kick-start her new life as a farewell gift.

"As I have said, I hope you'll forgive me for doing all that without consulting you. I hope my gift to you and your wife shall not hurt your ego, Brother Floyd. You shall

accept my gift as my brother and as the friend I have always had. It was the least I could do for the people I love so dearly. You have been my best friend, Floyd. If I marry again, you shall be my best man again, but only if you promise not to take my wife again this time."

They broke into laughter at the joke, releasing tension at the table.

Floyd stood up from his seat and embraced his brother. "We have not only been friends but turned out to be brothers. I now want to believe our relationship as brother or friend is stronger in that we married the same woman," he said. "But that was precisely why I married her: to shield my friend's woman from the pain of destitution. She is one woman I would never like to lose. I've become too dependent on Akumu. You remember very well how bad I was at dating. She has been my teacher in this arena. If you were to take her, I would have been left with nothing, Brother Kim. I, therefore, find your decision quite profound and will forever be indebted to you."

Floyd, who was often emotional, already had tears, perhaps of gratitude, forming in her eyes as he said this.

"We are family now, Floyd," replied Duofold as he patted his brother Floyd's back. "I owe you a lot too. We now share your parents, so consider it even and say the debt has been paid. We are all beneficiaries, including our mom and dad. Let us stick together going forward."

Mom Faith stood up to express her gratitude for how things had turned out, emphasising how the family loved and appreciated Akumu. She said her heart had rested that Duofold did not come to claim her back. It would have broken her heart, let alone her son's. It would have caused the family a lot of grief. Faith was thankful that Akumu was not in the meeting. She feared issues discussed at the meeting had she been there might have caused her anguish. But this was because Faith was not aware that Duofold had already discussed the issues with Akumu.

The children insisted they were not going to bed without saying their goodnights to the grandparents. They trooped into the house and changed into their pyjamas for the night. Duofold was also too tired to drive back to Nairobi, also because he would have had to drive back alone.

The arrangement had been that Duofold and his children were to sleep at his dad Fidel's house. But Floyd objected, saying he wanted the honour of hosting his brother. They also could not ignore Warrior and Binte, who begged to spend the night with Brenda and her brother at their parents, and so it had to be.

As the evening wore on, after the children had left, Duofold narrated to his new family about the life he had led on the street during the three years he had disappeared. Everyone was fascinated and disturbed to learn hardships neglected

mentally ill people go through. They were impressed he managed to survive the illness and life on the street.

It was a memorable first night for everyone. For Duofold, however, it also proved a sleepless night. He could not imagine his soulmate Akumu in bed a few metres in the next bedroom with his best friend and brother. He could help to feel a bit jealous and deeply missed her.

Still, the symbolism of it was not lost on him how the house they slept with her with Floyd in the next room symbolised they remained together yet apart in their new family. He put it more simply, describing it to himself that if Duofold's life when he had Akumu as his wife can be called a world, and the current one when she is married to Floyd another world, then she was of two worlds now united under one roof. He hoped her being two would never overwhelm her to lose her balance.

He, however, allowed that what had happened had already happened, and he had to move on and discover what the future held for him. It nonetheless did not stop him from having a hard-on, especially being conscious he did not have anyone to hold. It also didn't help he thought he could smell Akumu across the wall. It was probably his imagination, perhaps because of the flings they had earlier that day.

His seeming obsession with Akumu in the next room only ceased after his mind wandered to his other dad, Hezron.

He remembered the moments they had spent together as son and father, how Hezron had encouraged him to do well in school and rewarded him whenever he topped his class, and how his father had been his role model all along.

Hezron was at the time working with the post office and would come driving the office car at home. He seemed to favour Duofold and would give him a ride to the shopping centre for a treat. They remained close, and when Duofold grew up, he ensured that his parents never lacked for anything when he gained good-salaried employment. How the close father-son relationship turned, and Hezron betrayed him with the murderous act that led to this night he slept at Floyd's puzzled him.

Finally, exhaustion from the children's party during the day and dinner with his new family that evening began to assert itself. And, still unable to answer the puzzle of what turned his father into the evil act, he drifted to sleep.

Duofold woke up to the whistling of the farmhand attempting a popular tune as he milked the cows at 6 am. It reminded him of when he owned cows and got out of bed to help his then farmhand. He remembered those early mornings feeding his cows and confirming the amount of the day's milk for sale before leaving for work.

He got out of bed and went in search of the whistling farmhand outside. As he took in his dad Fidel's well-constructed cowshed, he counted six fine pedigree cows known for the great amount of milk they produced. The farmhand assisted him with

his dust coat and gumboots. They finished milking and took the milk to the dairy collection centre. When they got back, he found Dad reading the day's newspaper on the veranda.

"Good morning, son! I see you have a thing for cows to wake up so early," greeted Fidel. "Farming can be great fun. I imagine your hands must have grown soft from easy city life, or did you try them at milking?"

Duofold laughed at this showing the milking jelly still on his hands. "Yes, guilty as charged, Dad. They are a bit numb from milking. It has been quite some time."

He excused himself to wash his hands. "What are you up to today, Dad?" he asked after rejoining his father.

"Not much really. Why?"

"Can I take you with me to my house to see where your son resides? I shall drop you back tomorrow as I pick my children," Duofold offered.

"I am easy, son," Fidel looked surprised and delighted at the same time at the invitation. "I have no plans for the weekend, and as age has come, I rarely go beyond the shopping centre. Besides, it shall give us a moment together without many ears around us. I am sure you have a lot of scores to settle with me, and we have a lot to talk about, Duofold."

"Yes, but more so to bond, Dad—to bond with a son you must have thought you had lost. We need to get more acquainted," Duofold smiled at his dad.

As they had breakfast, they talked briefly about Hezron and what became of him.

"What a loss. My dad Hezron had been such a good father," Duofold was saying and took his time to explain as Fidel listened without interruption.

"I have never understood what happened to him. But that is now water under the bridge. My only concern is my Mom Florence. Another concern is that my return seems to threaten Hezron's other children, Falid and the sisters. For mom I can do something about and have been working on a strategy to get her out of that home. It has been difficult for her since my incident. It now seems that it had never been easy for her all through my life, and that she had kept strong for me and my siblings since we were children. My dad Hezron was always a self-centred man and I guess mom had to be careful with him if she was to get enough support from him to raise us. Yet to outsiders and us children thought Hezron the epitome of love, the perfect dad and husband."

Duofold finished speaking and looked at Fidel somewhat helplessly to show how he could not understand how things had turned with his other father.

Fidel took the cue. "I do not know what got into Hezron," he said. "I had always known him as a stable fellow in our youth. I guess after the truth came out about your paternity his fears got the best of him and wasted all that he truly loved and nurtured,

which is you Duofold. That was unlike him. It was that vagabond Mwaura that turned the demons on Hezron."

Duofold was aware how Fidel had expressed his happiness to a neighbour or two about his return and how he would shield his newfound son from Hezron should he try his wicked schemes again. He was open, saying how Duofold would inherit him alongside Floyd and how proud he was for his two sons.

They were interrupted by the children, who were already up. They were looking for Duofold, wondering where he had gone. They entered with excited commotion as they rushed to say hello to him and their grandpa.

Duofold was drawn to Floyd's children, Brenda and her brother Fidel Junior and allowed himself to wonder whether, had things not turned the way they had, they might have been his own. He thought of their innocence and beauty as Fidel Junior jumped on his lap, innocent about the thoughts going through his mind. But Fidel Junior is like telling him; *pick up your pieces and forge another life. Your wife is now my mum and my dad's wife.*

Duofold gave in to the endless uncles Junior was calling him and joined in the fun by tickling the delighted youngster. He saw a lot of his brother Floyd in the boy, and a now familiar wave of his admiration and sadness at losing their mother Akumu passed through him. *Even misfortunes sometimes come with their blessings*, he thought.

After breakfast, the kids were thrilled to be left behind, though Binte was a bit clingy. She seemed worried her dad might leave them for good. But Duofold was quick to assure her he'd pick them up as he brought snacks she had requested him to buy for her and the children.

He went to say a quick bye to Akumu and saw that she looked a bit low and had puffy eyes. He concluded that, just like him, she must have tossed and turned on her bed the whole night as she probably imagined how they rocked and rolled together as a husband and wife—the fun that never dimmed in their marriage, even after the kids were born. Their love was constantly renewed, and nothing had a chance to come between them. Now as her brother-in-law and her ex, he imagined the reality must kill her, which probably explained the puffed eyes.

Duofold gave her a knowing smile, and she responded with a similar smile that she, too, understood how his night might have been. And, as she walked him to the car, she seemed to have telepathically received the message on his mind in which he was telling her "You are on my mind, beautiful, and we are in this together."

IT WAS A COMFORTABLE DRIVE, in which dad and son felt content in each other's company. Duofold didn't say much as Fidel entertained him with stories about his

time in the army and life in Britain. By the time they got to the gate to Duofold's home, he thought he now better understood his father.

Upon opening the front door, the family cat was anxiously meowing as if to ask, "Where has everyone been?"

He put food in her feeding bowl, but that was not what she wanted. She wanted to rub herself on his leg as if seeking to be assured she would be included in the trip next time. The dog was in the large backyard chasing butterflies.

Fidel was impressed by his son's lifestyle. He spoke little as he settled in, admiring the large portrait of Duofold and his children that hung prominently in the beautifully furnished sitting room. He thought that the only thing missing was a woman of the house in that portrait to make it look whole, something he hoped Duofold would rectify soon. He wondered how it might have turned out had he married Duofold's mom Florence instead of Faith. If anything, he thought, it might have prevented the misfortune that befell Duofold. But then again, he may never have had Floyd, who he also loved very much. And when you put Akumu and the four grandchildren in the picture, he thought that he probably gained more than he might have expected.

But he wondered were it not for him allowing Akumu's marriage into his home, whether she may not have waited longer until Duofold came back. Having been embraced by Fidel's family played a significant part in her accepting her to marry Floyd. He became thoughtful as he wondered whether he might have done better.

“Have some tea, Dad, as the chef sets up the gazebo for us,” said Duofold, snapping his back to the present. “I bought you some clothes that I would like you to try on.”

Fidel opened the bag and started admiring the clothes. "They look of very good quality," he commented. "The shirts are fine, but I suspect the trousers are a bit longer than my old legs. Where can I try them on, son?"

He was guided to the guest room. He sat on the bed and moved his hand over the blanket. "I love this kind of blanket a lot, Kim. I had a similar one back in the day when I got my first salary in the army. We used to have subsidised shops. They were called AFCO, run by the Armed Forces Canteen Organisation, thus the acronym. They sold cheap and very quality stuff. That is where I bought a similar woollen blanket. I wonder whether those AFCO shops exist today. Where did you buy this one? I would like to buy it for your mom."

"Which mom?" Duofold asked, smiling. "Remember, I have two moms, one who is called Faith, Mother to Floyd and the other Florence, who is now called Mama Falid."

"I didn't think you had a sense of humour, son," replied Fidel with a laugh. "I shall buy for both your moms; they gave me great sons."

"Lucky man," replied the son attempting at more humour. "Two women at the same time, as this man mourns losing one..." He pointed at himself and raised his hands in mock frustration, adding to the laughter.

But Duofold had a surprise. "Do not worry," he said, "I already bought them for you—there are the blankets on the dressing table. See which one suits your bed; the other one shall go to Hezron's wife."

"Do not mention the name Hezron to me again," said Fidel fiercely, taking Duofold aback. "After what happened to you, I have wished I could have moved Florence from that beast, Hezron. I feel very sad for her. She was such a beautiful girl, but today she is a shadow of the woman I knew. She has lost weight and looks very frustrated. She looks ten years older than her age."

Duofold was surprised by the sudden outburst, especially after the laugh they had shared. But it seemed like frustration that Fidel had suppressed for some time. I'm saddened Florence seems to have lost the joy of life," he said. "Her life now only seems to revolve around the cowshed and her kitchen. When you were younger, she used to be a trader. She used to sell farm fresh vegetables on market days. "

"I know, Dad, " Duofold said like one who understood. "That shall change, however. I have made her a small house in my backyard. Try on your trousers, and then I'll show you her new home. "

It was Fidel's turn to be surprised about the mention of a house in the backyard, but he said nothing. As Duofold walked out to let him try the new clothes, he remarked to himself how welcome the idea of Florence relocating from the village was to him. His mind was soon occupied by the clothes, and he took his time trying them on as he admired how they fit in the full-length mirror.

Seeing how long he was taking, like someone dressing for a hot date, Duofold cheekily imagined Fidel was probably planning to date Florence again once she was out of Hezron's home, hopefully for good.

Fidel finally emerged wearing one of the trousers. While the waist fit fine, he was right to doubt the length, which was two inches longer. He had grown shorter with age. The days Duofold used to visit his home with Floyd, his dad was almost his height, almost 6 feet tall.

"These are well-selected colours and materials, " Fidel commented. "The design is great. Length is no issue; I have a tailor who can fix it. Thank you, Kim."

"I must have taken after you, Dad, your sense of style. Even your home, which is so well appointed and maintained, looks like an urban home transplanted in the village. You also have income streams, not like my dad Hezron who seems to panic at the thought of his son Kim not providing for him."

"Do not forget half of my youth I spent in Britain, Kim. I love a beautiful home, manicured fences, and flowers. Everything in that home was well thought out before beginning construction. I designed all the structures in person, from the cowshed to Floyd's house. My wife, Faith, has not always been very particular with detail, so I keep a gardener to ensure maintenance. Akumu added flavour by maintaining the homestead. "

"We are gifted differently. At least Mom Faith does what she likes best. She is a social being. She is not an introvert like my mom Florence."

Duofold said this as a joke, which Fidel seemed to agree with. But Duofold did not really want to discuss his stepmother, Faith.

"Do you reckon Kim?" The way Fidel quizzically asked it made them laugh. "You can now show me where you plan to house your mom so that I see whether it is a place I shall be able to sneak to say hello to her."

Fidel seemed serious in what he had just said and walked with some heightened anticipation, his face aglow.

"Boys will always be boys, eh, dad?" Duofold teased his dad, seeing that he still seemed to have romantic feelings for his mom.

I am tickled that Fidel still has vibes towards mom Florence, Duofold thought with amusement. *I wonder whether she feels the same for him. Both are in their sixties; when do romantic feelings end, or do they linger till death?*

As if reading his thoughts, and in reference to both their feelings for former lovers now out of reach, Fidel said, "l was snatched by my woman Florence by time and season, same as happened to you with Akumu. I hope this ends with us and shall not extend to the next generation. One never recovers fully from lost love."

"Akumu is safe with Floyd, Dad. He is a good man. We thank God she is still family. I have chosen to live with gratitude. When you are thankful for what you have, you are rewarded with more. I now have my children back. Someday, I shall get another wife and more children, hopefully. To find another Akumu will be a matter of time. Do not worry too much about this son. Everything shall fall in place. In God I trust."

Saying this, Duofold opened the gate to his mother's new compound, which had flowers tastefully planted around it. A green parasite plant grew over the entrance and extended to the fence. The house was built on an incline so that only the roof was visible from the gate.

"It is more private than I expected," Fidel commented. "Such an elaborate kitchen, and well equipped. I like the sitting room, especially the rocking chair. When you get babies, and I believe you will get them because you are still young and very

eligible to beautiful girls that God will bring your way – and when you get the babies, I can see your mom Florence happily rocking them to sleep in it."

"Duofold agreed with his father. "I expect she will be very busy with my kids," he said. "But along with the house, it is also about improving the quality of her life. Every human being desires to change for the better, and I am sure she will be up to the challenge. But again, there is no hurry. It is her needs that will guide her. When the kids are here and mess with her TV to see cartoons, she will learn how to return her soap dramas on the screen."

Fidel thought this was very profound, and he gave his son a high-five. Then, still thinking about the babies, he said, "You are still young, Kim. God shall bless you with a beautiful girl to marry. Keep yourself in the market. They'll soon start parading themselves to you. And seeing what you have been doing," he added with admiration, "I like how you have been able to juggle between all of us; your children, Mom Florence, work, my family—I don't think it has been easy, but you have delivered."

A moment later, they took a seat in the new house, and Duofold explained to his father about his illness and his recovery in detail and where he was working now. He would later discuss the illness and how he recovered again later with the whole family. Soon it was lunchtime. "I smell *nyama choma* from the gazebo," he said as an acknowledgement of how time had passed, "let us go and celebrate our day together."

"Not so fast, Kim," his father said with a sly smile, "I have not seen your mom's bedroom. That is the heart of this tour, the grand finale."

Both understood what he meant, and they laughed as often do young, virile men narrating an erotic joke. They were easy with each other, and this was the moment Duofold realised Fidel would be more of a friend than a father in the enjoyment of each other's company. There had been hints of this during his friendship with Floyd before Duofold's disappearance when he would visit their home and chat with Fidel. The only difference was that he was now part of their family.

"This bed is for one person Kim. Are you sure I shall be sleeping in your guest room while Florence turns and tosses in this bed alone?"

"That is for you and her to decide," replied Duofold. "I will not be involved in that love triangle, Dad. I have mine to worry about, and it has caused me enough heartache. If you have the energy to have the two women at this age, you are a blessed man. It should be fun, though, for her too. She is a lonely soul. Dad Hezron looks contented with his life, but Mom, not so much."

This was frank talk between two men. A stranger listening to them may not have thought of them as father and son as they walked to the gazebo.

"Chef, can you serve what is ready?" asked Duofold. "We are hungry. Get to the house and bring a bottle of whisky; we need to be happy today as we celebrate the first day out for this dad and his son."

"Do you have a beer? I'd like that, Kim, if available. I quit the hard liquor a while ago; it became too strong for my system as I aged. I now take three social beers just to keep others company," Dad Fidel explained as he removed his cap.

"If there is none in the fridge, I'll send for some."

The chef confirmed they had enough bottles of beer from a previous party.

Fidel took note that the starter was pumpkin soup, followed by a well-done steak and some boiled potatoes. Some marinated chicken was going on the barbeque grill.

"I haven't enjoyed this in a long time," he appreciatively commented as he enjoyed the meal and downed his beer.

After they had finished with the meal and were lazing in the cool gazebo, Fidel said, "Kim, my relationship with your mother is similar to your Akumu. However, back in the day, a girl was not as fortunate as today. Many fathers, who always made decisions in their homes, believed the girlchild did not belong to them. 'They shall get married one day, and the wealth shall benefit the family they will marry into,' they would say. After Class Seven, the last grade in primary school then, many of the girls would drop out often for lack of fees. If one happened to be a bright student, they were lucky and would be sponsored by the missionaries. Your mother was among the unlucky ones. His dad behaved like many illiterate men in the village, despite being the administrative chief overseeing our area. He simply refused to educate his daughters. I used to eye the girl as she tended her father's shop back then. We became friends with Florence, and soon we were the talk of the town. Other boys were eying her too, especially Hezron, with who I had a physical fight one day when I found him escorting her from the shopping Centre.

"And who won the fight?" Duofold was eager to know, his excitement not unlike that of a boy rooting for his hero in a boxing match, only this time the match was between his two heroes – one former, Hezron, and the other current, Fidel.

"I won, of course. It was not a fierce fight. I had to defend my territory, and, of course, Hezron knew he had crossed the boundary and was quick to retreat lest my group of boys mob him. It is a shame. However, he had the last laugh; I lost the woman to him in the end.

"It happened that as our love was reaching its height, I was sent for a military course in Britain. I had bedded her only a week previously, with the promise to marry her after I came back. I was, however, abroad for seven years. That was a very long time for someone to wait, especially in those days when communication was difficult. Those were the days of handwritten letters, which one had to take to a post office

which was not near, and one had to walk a great distance. The only person who sent me a letter from Kenya was my father. He did not know my relationship with Florence, so he had nothing to report about her. Again, I was shy to ask about her. I sent a letter one time through the local primary school postal address. She responded and told me she was expectant. I sent another one to request her to wait for me, but she did not respond. Either the letter got lost, or the school had changed the address, which was not likely. But I guess by then, she had already gotten married for fear of being disowned because of the pregnancy. Getting a child out of wedlock was a serious matter those days. The community looked down upon such a girl, who risked being disowned by her parents for dishonouring the family. When I didn't hear from her, and after my course came to an end, I accepted an official posting at our High Commission in Britain. That is how I spent seven years abroad."

"When I came back, the first person I looked for was your mom, only to discover who she was married. At the time, Hezron was away a lot as he was working at the Post office headquarters in Nairobi. And so I took the opportunity to visit Florence at their home to understand how she ended up marrying my rival. She took me through her ordeal, which, though it also had to do with the pregnancy, was probably worse because her father wanted her to marry his colleague, a much older man, who frequented their home. She warmed up to Hezron, who she felt was a better bet, and took off to live with him in Nairobi. She was willing to wait for me, but she had no way of knowing I would ever come back and marry her. She thought I was silent because I had gotten another woman and married abroad. She was tearful, saying I did not respond to her letter. But I did respond to her letter, Duofold. I sent two more letters asking her to wait for me.

I wish I had retained the letter I received from your mom. I struggled to comprehend what she meant, though what she was trying to say.

"I commend you, Dad. Were it me to read, she could have waited for eternity for a response. I am certain you could not make head or tail of what Mom Florence meant. Even a shopping list she writes in Kikuyu I still struggle to understand.

The two men laughed at this.

"I suspect Hezron hid or subverted the letters I sent Florence, especially being an employee at the post office where he could intercept the letters. All along, I had thought it was the school address that had changed. However, with Florence married to Hezron and his family, a chance never availed to get together without being found out, which would have been disastrous for her.

"There was nothing we could have done with two babies involved. I wished my love Florence all the best and moved on. I accepted that we were not meant to be husband and wife. If this had happened, then it would have been God's will; and that

it did not happen. I presumed it was God protecting us from something. Putting it to God was a way to comfort me as I looked for another bride. It was when Florence got her second child that she relocated to the farm. Until you became old enough to support your parents, it was your mother who toiled her back and took care of your family.

"I was posted back to the country as a pilot with the Kenya Air Force for the better part of my life after I left Britain. When I retired, I just wanted to have a quiet, discreet life. I had amassed enough wealth to sustain my family."

In the pause that followed, Duofold enquired, "Now that I know you are my father, how come Floyd and myself are agemates? Is he not your biological child, or did you have the two women from back then? What really transpired, Dad?"

"Floyd is my biological child. I am not an angel. I was home alone one day when his mother came to pick up a parcel from my father's house. It was a few days before my departure to Britain. I persuaded her to come inside for a few minutes and showed her my photo albums. That is how she got pregnant. I discovered it when I came back from Britain. I did a DNA and confirmed that he, too, was my son. After verifying this, I married Floyd's mother." He paused briefly, then commented, "Youth is a time of relationships and romantic chaos. It seems to me things have changed; your generation seems very well-behaved, and you have no scandals yet."

"I can assure you, Dad, there will be enough scandals before I find a perfect madam to replace Akumu."

They laughed at the way Duofold had expressed his defensiveness as they opened yet another beer.

"Cheers, Dad!"

"Cheers, Son!"

"I like your frankness in how you got your two sons. Many parents play so innocent; they make younger people feel like having a relationship with another woman when married is such an abomination. But the reality is that it is very hard for many men to date only one woman, even when married. Some liken men's urge to the king of the jungle who can father cubs with as many lionesses as there are in the pride. They blame religion for demonising it, yet sex is a happy creation of God. In some African communities, men are entitled to as many wives as their wealth. Today you have to beg for sex for days, and if you dare find relief elsewhere and your woman finds out, you shall never hear the end of it."

"This is what I believe, Dad. One man, one woman, is not practical. We are left to admit our sins every week at the confession box in church as we can't seem to help to indulge the natural urge, however much the church may condemn it. We just have

to live with it, it seems. Except there are those of us without a wife—Does it mean I shall only find relief in five years when I find myself a wife again? I don't think so."

"This thing about sex is a mystery," Fidel commented, "no one can answer for you; the answer is within you. It probably works for the married women alone, not their men, Kim. A man is a hunter, and hunting never stops and will not stop because of age or religion. That is why Muslims give a man a window to marry at most four until they can settle down. Anyway, this is for men. To a woman, she must be the only bean plant in your cornfield, yet she cannot sacrifice for your sexual needs."

The way Fidel put it made them laugh.

"For sure, Dad, sex is a wilderness. You cannot even say a harmless hello to a lady neighbour. The wife will complain forever, claiming you got excited merely by looking at the neighbour. The wife accusatively wonders why you did not marry your neighbour instead before wooing her. Women can be complicated beings. It is an art we learn to co-exist with them in our homes. Silence and endlessly saying sorry seems to be the magical approach to calm them. Women are always right."

"With Akumu, I used to switch off the phone at the doorstep. I only put it on in the morning when I left the house. Otherwise, the friction it caused between us was not worth the trouble. She better risk missing a step and trip rushing to see who is calling my phone. You get home in a good mood only to find someone waiting to quarrel about a lady that hugged you in town two months ago and claimed to have been your classmate. No dinner that day, for you shall find her in bed by seven o'clock."

"It seems you have not become a husband until you have gone through such," agreed Fidel. "I used to snack before I got home, just in case. Hugging women back then brought me a lot of fights with my wife, yet it felt so good. Our circle was small, so I was always being caught red-handed."

"It is the same even with our generation, Dad. If you do not take a snack on your way home, it might prove your unlucky day."

The two men were getting a bit drunk as betrayed by their frank talk, but it was a man thing, and they were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

"I fantasise about your mom Florence a lot. She was very romantic back then. What's on her mind today; can she awaken romance again?"

"I fear she may need a refresher course, Dad. She seems docile and not in charge anymore. She needs something to look up to that shall put her on track faster, poor mama."

The happy men laughed their hearts out as they staggered to bed later that evening.

FIDEL WOKE UP AFTER 8 AM. At first, he was not sure where he was. It had been long since he slept away from his usual comfort zone, his home. He found that his son's home could be another zone just as comfortable. Still, it struck him as a bit strange to have felt so contented that he had not called home to check whether the day's milk had been delivered to the dairy, which was usually the first thing he ensured each morning. But this morning, for the first time since he could remember, he let it be.

Let others manage the farm. I, too, am entitled to a holiday. Other family members should take charge; let's see how they will manage it. He thought as he sank deeper into the cosy bed.

He, however, was soon out of bed. He shaved his stubble and took his time soaking in the bathtub. This reminded him of his time in Britain, especially during winter when he would take his time soaking in a warm tub.

Finally dressed and feeling fresher than he had in a long time, he found Duofold finishing his cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Dad. I was hungry, and you did not seem in a hurry to have breakfast."

Duofold poured his father a cup of tea; Fidel never was a coffee person. "I hope you slept well?"

"I have not slept better in a long time. It has been a while since the sun found me still in bed. That tells you. We should be doing this more often, son. I shall make a point of visiting Floyd, too, in Nakuru. Sleeping here made me realise village life should be given a break every once in a while."

"Floyd's house and mine are your homes too. I bet Warrior and Binte would like that idea very much." Then, seeming to remember something, Duofold asked, "Or perhaps I should give you a cup of chicken soup. I had boiled some just in case you woke up with a hangover. There's also some beef spiced with pepper. I don't remember who told me spiced beef is your favourite."

"Who snitched on me? I love hot beef, especially when I am recovering from a hangover. Put this tea aside, and I first take the soup. It is very thoughtful of you."

"Most welcome, Dad. I feel honoured to have you here. You can also take some more time to rest. Two hours will be good; then we step out for a late lunch as we shop for Mom Faith. I am sure it has been a very lonely night for her without you. "

"It has been long since I was away from her. She is the one who tends to go visit, leaving me at home. It seems when men reach my age, they do not get many invitations. We become the housekeepers as our women gallivant from one place to the other—to church, weddings, women groups, visiting relatives, and so on."

"Thanks for the warning," said Duofold with a laugh.

Fidel went back to bed. He had left the table after breakfast feeling drowsy and was soon asleep. Duofold at first wondered whether he was unwell. He checked his temperature and found it normal. It must be the heavy breakfast, he concluded, and the "holiday" without the mooing from the cows or wife fussing about or children calling out with their good mornings. It was Fidel's "me time", in which Duofold imagined the chirpy birds outside must have soothed his dad to sleep.

Leaving his dad to rest, Duofold decided to go shopping to save time. He shopped for Akumu, too; he had not forgotten her taste. He was also careful not to forget Binte's favourite cake. He thought with a smile how it was not easy to shop for women. They seemed to have a way of making one feel something important was forgotten even after they had written the shopping list themselves. He drove back home and found his father hadn't left the bedroom. He entered the room to find out what could be the matter, only to find his dad on a James Bond movie, looking thoroughly entertained.

"I worried you were unwell, but here you joyfully are with the movie," said Duofold. "I had planned for lunch out, but I bought takeaway food to give you enough time to rest. And I see I was not wrong. You look quite happy with yourself indoors."

"I am on vacation here. And you are right; I am having a lot of fun. The house feels more like a hotel than a home. And, since you mention food, I am famished; if you could hurry with it."

"It must be the movie; already you speak like James Bond," Duofold teased his amused dad. He thought how it must not be easy for Fidel to enjoy a movie at home with his grandchildren all over crisscrossing in the house. At other times the TV is taken over by his wife for her soaps. A man may buy everything in the house but often never for him to enjoy. That is why his football has to be watched in the pub. Home TV is for women and children.

Fidel cleared the bedroom table for space to dine. His new clothes and those he wore the previous day were neatly folded on the sofa for packing. He had a sense of order, just like a former military man should. He was not one to clean up after. Duofold laid the food on the side table along with some wine.

As they were eating, Fidel confessed that the movie had left him with a craving for more.

"I will do better and treat you to a 3D movie in a cinema theatre," Duofold promised.

"3D, what is that?"

"It's an experience that makes you feel as if you are inside the movie."

"Oh! That would be interesting. I needed you in my life for such tech updates. Spending too much time in the village can easily disconnect one from the rest of the world. You do and see the same things every day with little change."

It was a bit late by the time Fidel was ready.

"Unless you want to spend another night here, we must get going so that I am not too late to pick my clan back to the city."

"My home is your home too, Kim. You can sleep there and come back tomorrow."

"I wish I could, but the visit is overdue for my kids. Akumu needs some privacy, too, to ponder where to start with her relocation. No one has had some time alone to fully adapt to the new reality. I am sure Akumu has a lot to settle before her departure, and Mom Faith has to adjust too. Your presence back home is critical."

"That is so true, son. Now that everyone knows what to do, I am sure we shall all settle down soon. I am also happy Floyd, for the first time, shall be living with his family. Floyd's kids, I fear, are getting too spoilt being brought up by their grannies."

"It's also about time Floyd enjoyed the welcome of his kids from work each day," said Duofold agreeing with his father. "It's a good feeling."

Duofold took his dad's bag to the car and held his hand to usher him into the vehicle.

It was such a profound experience for the old man to bond with Duofold, who was more open and easy-going. Floyd was not as warm; he had since childhood been a bit distant. He was often brisk to the point of responding in single words like yes or no. He was never one for small talk or jokes. After saying hello and checking how his dad had been during his weekend visits, he quickly left to be with Akumu.

Duofold drove his dad slowly as they discussed politics. They found the children at the gate. It seemed their Granny and Duofold had taken too long, and they were impatient. Binte was the most excited to see her dad. And as soon as the children opened the gate, she was the first inside the car as they all piled in, leaving no one to close the gate.

It was left to Duofold to close it with a smile after he had parked the car. He could afford to spoil them, he thought to himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BACK AT THE HEZRON'S COMPOUND, Falid's children were narrating to their family how their uncle Duofold had thrown a big farewell party at school for his children. They had never attended such an event at their school or even in the village.

"It was very exciting," Falid's son explained. "There was even a band playing music, and there were many treats. I spared a piece of cake for you to taste, Grandma," he offered.

"Thank you for remembering me," Grandma Florence replied, "but I'll let you enjoy it."

The gesture by the grandson, though innocent and well-meant, only served to sadly remind her of the pain Duofold had passed through. The memory provoked in her a stronger emotion than a happier one, now that her son was healed and successful enough to afford his children an affluent lifestyle that the big farewell party signified.

The drama that had attended his son's return as the circumstances that had led to his disappearance became public left Florence too depressed to face people in the village. She even stopped attending church services. She led a hopeless life, unsure whether Duofold would ever return to see her after the hostile reception from Falid and his sisters.

Her children were another cause of distress for her. She recalled a day she had failed to notice Falid at her kitchen door as she was distracted cooking with onions stinging her eyes. She realised too late that he had been trying to get her attention. Falid, acting out his impatience with her, had rushed into the kitchen, lifted the pot from the cooker, and tossed it outside along with the food she was cooking.

"How many times do you want me to call you, Mom, before you respond?" Falid had disrespectfully shouted at her, demanding of her, as if he was a toddler who thinks their mother's attention an entitlement.

That was the day Florence knew she had brought up monsters—monsters that had deserted and neglected her. It was bitter to think that the wasted onions had cost her the five shillings she did not have and had got them on credit from the friendly

vendor at the market stall. She was yet to pay the vendor. Falid did not apologise despite seeing his mother so tearful and distraught from the disrespect he had shown.

Duofold, however, had not forgotten his mom, and his delay in visiting her had nothing to do with his siblings' hostility. It was the heavy schedule at work that was too demanding to spare time; juggling family and a new business had proved not an easy task. Yet the mention of a family to juggle was an overstatement. He often lamented to himself that life for him had taken the form of a commute from home to work, often starting early till late in the night and back again.

The promise he had made to his mother to live with her still stood but had taken longer than he had expected to effect. But it had become urgent to have his mom close by to keep an eye on his children but also free her from Hezron, who was probably using her as bait to draw Duofold back. She deserved to own her life now that her children were grownups.

He could imagine her days dull and merging onto one another without Warrior and Binte to take care of as she did when they lived by themselves. He could see her in his mind's eye seated alone in the shade under the canopy of her granary gazing in the distance as she listlessly passed the time.

But Duofold soon made the decision to get his mother, and the day to bring her to his home arrived. For several days after this, all he seemed to think about was her. Duofold, who could be sentimental at times, would think how she had been a great mama to him, how no one had dared harm him from the womb through his childhood to when he left home to live by himself, and how she still carried him deep in her soul. He gave her credit for guiding and moulding him into the man he was.

He thought there was no way he could ever repay her except salute and accord her respect as his mama. He would take care of her as she aged, if only as a token of appreciation for her unconditional love over his lifetime.

Going to pick her up felt like a second homecoming—a sort of pilgrimage to Hezron's homestead that filled him with excitement.

"*MWARĨ WA CHIBŨ* – CHIEF'S DAUGHTER," Florence heard a familiar voice call out to her from outside the compound, and when she squinted her eyes to look, she saw it was Duofold.

Her old legs could not sprint fast enough, meeting him halfway in the compound. "Oh, my son, you have remembered me! I've missed you terribly. How have you been? Come in. I was just preparing a cup of tea."

"I am not here for a cup of tea, Mom. I have come to pick you up as I promised, remember?"

"Where are you taking me, Kim? I am content now that you are looking after the children and are all happy. I would not wish to cause more trouble to your family, Kim."

"Neither can I imagine you living with the sadists that attempted to kill your son, Mom. I want to take you to your new home. You shall not live in this misery one more day. They need to taste their own bitter medicine when they find you are no longer at the beck and call to cause you misery. My only worry, Mom, is that I might have taken too long to come for you. So please pack. I am leaving with you," Duofold firmly said as he tried to assure her with a hug.

"But you know your father; he has been very strict with me of late. He needs to be informed that I will be living with you for good. He wouldn't allow me to pack and leave just like that. And this is not to say he will agree to the arrangement at all; it will only cause heated arguments for nothing. And if you ask me, I am too old now and should let you be. I am content with this life as is."

"What you are describing is the distress Hezron will cause you and is what the law calls domestic violence. Your wellness is not about Dad. It is about your dear life, Mom. The guy has a lose wire somewhere and can kill you without a blink and convince the world he is not responsible the way he did with my 'death'. If it will take the police to make him free you from the fear you live with, then so be it. Just pick your handbag and your identity card; everything else, including your clothes, we shall buy. You need to move on and leave the memory of this home behind you."

Duofold's mother was indecisive, unable to gather the courage to leave as her son was getting impatient with her.

Finally, Duofold dragged her to the car and guided her into the back seat. But just as they were about to leave, Hezron and Falid walked into the compound.

Duofold warned them even before they could open their mouths. "I am here to pick my mother. She will be living with me. If that will be a punishment to you, it will be the least of punishments I could unleash on you. I do not wish to open Pandora's Box; you know what I mean. So, if you will, pave the way."

This was the first in his life he had ever threatened his father, Hezron, let alone Falid.

Duofold knew his father and brother had lived with guilt since he was "resurrected" and therefore had no moral authority or power to stand up to him.

They watched him buckle Florence, who sat calmly in the car and didn't say a word as they observed the vehicle zoom away at speed, covering the duo in brown dust they were left busy brushing off their clothes.

They took it with great shock and disbelief that tables could be so suddenly turned, with Duofold ordering and shutting them up.

Duofold, in the meantime, had left his children at Fidel's home to visit their cousins that weekend and was passing by to pick them up. He, however, did not want to enter the compound to avoid Florence meeting with Fidel's wife, Faith. It would have been awkward for the two women who once shared the same man to meet when they hardly spoke to each other. Another important reason was that Duofold now belonged to the two households and could not afford to be seen to prefer one mother over the other.

He, therefore, had requested Akumu to tell Binte and Warrior he would collect them at the gate. Only Akumu got to say hello to Florence as she helped the children into their dad's car.

It was already dark as they approached the city. This was only interesting to note because Florence amused her grandchildren, telling them she had not seen so many lights in a long time, which was true. She told them that though the lights dazzled her eyes, it uplifted her spirits to see how beautiful the city was with the multicoloured neon lights and electronic billboards that brightened the whole place.

When they arrived home, Binte and her brother were eager and over themselves with excitement to give their grandma a tour. They took her to all the bedrooms, the kitchen, and the gazebo and ended the exploration in the guest room where she would spend the night. Then they sat down for dinner. Looking at her grandchildren now, she remarked to herself how radiant and happy they looked compared to when they were neglected and forced to live by themselves.

"It was a sad time," she thought aloud, without the intention to be heard.

"What?" Duofold asked.

"It was a sad time when the children were half starved, and I would hide food for them under their bed. I prayed that they should grow up and one day avenge themselves for the cruelty they received from Hezron and their Uncle Falid."

"All that is behind us now, Mom," said Duofold, his expression directed at the children to assure them. "We focus on what the future holds for us."

"We are happy to have you, Grandma," said Warrior, with Binte nodding in agreement. "We were worried about you. Thank you, Dad, for rooting for our grandma."

"I had to Warrior. My mom is my heart; she is my heartbeat, you might say. I love her very much."

Binte, too, had something to tell Grandma, "I will make sure you are happy here playing with our dog T-Jay and the cat Wajohn."

"Indeed, I will," replied Grandma with slightly exaggerated delight for the benefit of her granddaughter. She interestedly watched Binte invite T-Jay and Wajohn to eat with them.

The evening ended splendidly, and the children were falling over themselves to escort their grandmother to her bedroom for the night.

Duofold was now content and decided not to go to work the following day, a Monday. He thought the day would be better spent introducing his mom to her new environment and helping her settle down. To make up for not being in the office, he went through urgent emails in a room in the house he had converted into a home office. He sent out pending schedules that required his approval for his staff to start the week before he went to bed.

It was midnight before he retired to his bedroom. But unable to sleep immediately, his mind turned to Akumu for the umpteenth time, how he still yearned for her, to hold her and kiss her and make love to her.

He, however, soon drifted to sleep, only to wake up in the morning and find the children had joined him on his bed and were sound asleep. It had become a habit, which he allowed because he knew it was out of their still lingering fear or nightmares that they were alone by themselves again.

He decided to let them sleep, and as he was getting out of bed, he wondered what the unusual noise was coming from the kitchen and opened the bedroom door to check. "Already awake, Mom? And prepared breakfast too?"

"Good morning, Kim. I only made tea; these other foods are different from what I am used to cooking."

"No worries, Mom, you shall be able to cook them soon."

Puzzled at what the chef was doing, she asked, "Why is cabbage being put between slices of bread by that man; why can't we eat them separately as we serve at home?" she asked her son, having been too polite to put the question to the quiet chef who she was seeing for the first time.

"It is called a hamburger. It is not the cabbage you use back home. It is lettuce and is put together with meat and other stuff. You need to taste to appreciate. Have a seat. I'll serve you to taste, Mom."

"Yah! It is not bad at all, quite tasty. What did you call it again?"

"It is called a burger."

"Bugger, the swear word we used back in the village telling other children to 'get lost, you *faga*… bugger'?"

Duofold couldn't suppress his laughter, much to his mother's confusion. "No, that one—it is short for a hamburger."

Getting the joke, Florence laughed at herself, saying, "Who knew? But that *faga* or whatever you call it is very tasty. Tell him to pass me another one; my appetite is quite good today. Perhaps it is because it is someone else in the kitchen cooking."

"Perhaps so; food tends to taste better when others cook for you, especially amongst people you love, and I would also think perhaps it is because you are less stressed away from the anxieties Hezron caused you.

The children soon joined them and were all over their grandmother with excitement. It was as if they had expected to wake up and find her gone.

"Good morning, Binte! Good morning, Warrior! You slept well?"

"Yes, Grandma," replied both in unison.

"Me too!" she told them.

"Once you are done with breakfast," Duofold announced, "we have a ceremony to open grandma's house."

"What do you mean to open my house, Kim? How can that be? You want to mean the room I slept in?"

Duofold said nothing but smiled at her knowingly. "Let us go, my people, if we are done with breakfast."

The children had known there had been a building being constructed, but they had been instructed not to go near it. So they all followed, very curious to see what house their dad was referring to.

They entered a magnificent compound with a beautiful small house that was designed to look like a castle. They ran to pop balloons that were arranged above a ceremonial red ribbon pinned across the door to the house.

"Here, guys, take these scissors to cut the ribbon so that we officially open Grandma's house!" Duofold shouted at the children who had run ahead.

"Grandma's house!" they obliged, and everyone was all smiles as Binte got the honour to cut the ribbon.

Taking in the house and the compound, Florence was speechless. A house of her own is more than she had expected. She expected that she would live under the same roof as her son and grandchildren. But this was something else. The door swung open, and Florence was now in her sitting room.

She took a seat as if to test the sofas, then moved to the kitchen, noting how modern it was. There was a gas cooker, which she already knew how to use, the crockery comprised some of the best plates and cups, and the pots were kind of *sufurias* she had never seen—the type with Teflon-like lining inside them.

She opened a door that appeared to be leading outside but led to a laundry room and, beyond it, once she stepped outside, a kitchen garden with vegetables and spring onions waving in the breeze.

"At least I have a garden here to pass my time," she commented appreciatively. "Did you remember to buy implements such as a *panga* and a *jembe*?"

"Yes, I did, Mom. They are in the store."

She entered the store by the side of the kitchen to inspect what garden implements could be missing.

"Thank you," she said, "everything I might need, including a hose to sprinkle water in the garden, is there. You seem to have thought of everything."

They left the children outside chasing and counting butterflies. Duofold and the mother got back to the house and went straight to her bedroom.

"Why such a big bed Kim? I don't need such a size. It will be too cold," Florence complained. "A small one would have been adequate, just enough to wrap myself in a blanket, and that would be it."

"What of the day your grandchildren will want to spend the night with you, or Aunt Rose pays you a visit?" Duofold asked amid whoops from the children as they jumped up and down on the springy bed.

"Yes, you are right," she agreed. "I should think a guest would want to spend the night, in which case," she suggested, "you might have to put two beds. The room looks big enough to fit two."

'This is your bedroom, Mom, not a guest wing! Learn to live a luxurious life *Mwarĩ wa Chibũ;* you deserve it, Mother! The deprived lifestyle at Heron's house has made you forget to enjoy what life offers you. When you have a flow of guests, they can spend the night in my house or put a mattress on the sitting room floor. For once, you need to be a selfish woman and love yourself. You have been serving others for too long until you have forgotten to have your '*me-time'* mama.*"*

Duofold paused to see how she had taken it, and she seemed happy with the arrangement in the way she smiled back at him.

He continued. "And don't let the kids bother you too much worrying about them. They'll mostly be my responsibility. But, of course, you can have them anytime you want; they are your grandchildren, after all. But I want you to rest easy and have your privacy to watch a movie or listen to music."

"You mean watch a cinema? Or what do you mean a movie," Florence didn't seem to understand.

"Goodness me!" Duofold was surprised. "And what did you use to watch on TV at home in the village, Mom?"

"That TV belonged to your dad to watch the news, Kim; nobody else could touch it. I didn't even know how to operate it. In any case, where would I have gotten time for such things? I had the farm to attend to, cows, and house chores," Florence paused before adding, "In the evening, I had a radio in the kitchen; it was good enough for me. The sitting room is for Hezron and his guests. I rarely set foot there, only when I am serving him food. And in case you are wondering, if he needed to

discuss anything with me, he would find me in the kitchen or outside by the granary where I liked to sit to enjoy the morning sun."

"No more worries, Mom. Now you have your own telly—news, music, and movies are all there. Warrior will show you how to operate it."

Duofold wondered whether to tell her what he wanted to say next in case she misunderstood it. "And don't worry too much about movies; when your soulmate Fidel visits, you can invite him to watch a cinema with him."

"What? Does Fidel know about my moving in with you?"

"He slept in my house last night."

"Did you show him this house?" there was a hint of eager anticipation in her voice. "What were his comments?"

Duofold could not believe the excitement she tried hard to suppress, nor the questions his mom was asking him. Did that mean she was still in love with Fidel? It was unmistakable, he thought to himself, and love never ages. He saw it in Fidel and now in his mom; they are hungry for each other.

"I wish I was here to offer him tea," she said. "I have a lot to unburden with him. When are you inviting him again?" Florence demanded to know.

"You have to settle down first, Mom," he said with a laugh seeing the eagerness in his mother. "You have to know your kitchen first so that you can cook him a hearty meal when he comes around."

"Sorry, son, to bother you with such nonsense. But the mention of him takes me back ages. And perhaps it also has to do with this new environment; it has awakened a part of me I thought had stopped functioning. I do not remember the last time I missed anyone's company. The last companions were Binte and Warrior. Otherwise, my days had been dull and all the same varying little in their tiresome routine. I rarely visited people or had people come to visit. That's why I feel so hopeful now that I am here."

"That was the idea, to give you space and allow you to do anything your heart desires. You can now invite anyone and everyone," Duofold said.

His mother turned and gave him an unexpected hug as she held back tears. "Thank you very much, son, for making me live again," she said. "I never thought this day would ever come; it's a dream come true. It is probably an exaggeration to say that bringing you up was hard work, and it has now paid off. Hard work, as they say, is like a flight of stairs. It is not as fast as the lift, but it comes to rest. It has brought the opportunity to release my pent-up anger, as well as do away with the memories that kept draining me to allow a chance to build new connections." She was now at ease.

"That is the spirit, Mom. Change is a powerful healer. By the way, I told you not to carry anything, even your clothes. That is because I have already bought some for you. They are in the wardrobe. Nightgowns are folded in the drawers. I shall be waiting in the sitting room to see how they look on you."

The children were now back in the house from the garden and overheard about the clothes.

"Yes, Grandma, we are waiting for your fashion show," shouted Binte.

They went to her wardrobe to help her match the clothes and sat with their father to wait for Granny.

She emerged from the bedroom, her face radiant as she hesitatingly showcased what amounted to a new dress code that changed her appearance from the old lady she previously looked like in her old clothes to a younger, fashionable granny. She loved it, and her joy was indescribable.

She faced the small group of her admirers who applauded her with hand claps and cheeky whistles from Warrior. Duofold imagined her transforming into a polished and attractive woman after a month of living in the city. Her catwalk was not too bad, either. She looked very happy with the makeover that included her new home.

"Today, dinner is on me, people. Your chef can cook you lunch. I am not coming to your house again," she joked. "I need to begin settling down; Binte, bring me my bag from your house. I need to transfer my documents to the new bag I found in the wardrobe. I feel like a queen with a castle to myself," Florence said, resting her legs on a leather pouffe.

"I know that feeling, Mom. Enjoy the luxury; it is yours to have. And in the upper drawer," Duofold said, pointing, "there is some pocket money for you. I forgot to tell you. Binte and Warrior shall walk you out the gate to show you where to buy tomatoes and bread in case workers in the main house are not available."

"That can be done tomorrow, my son," she said. "I have all I need for now. You are excused so that I can start my day."

"You are sending us away too soon. We have not gotten enough of you, Mom."

"I thought you had a busy day ahead and needed to step out a bit, Kim?"

"Not really. Today was set aside for you; it is your day with me and the children," Duofold said as he sat on the new rocking chair and started rocking in it.

Forgetting about what she had inquired about his son's day, she said in surprise on seeing the strange chair rocking, "Ooh, that is how it is supposed to be used? Wouldn't it give someone a headache rocking so much in it?" She seemed suspicious of the chair and firmly said, like one who would never change her mind, "That chair I will leave for you. I do not need that seat."

Her reaction greatly amused Duofold, especially when he remembered how Fidel was excited to rock in it. "Perhaps you cannot teach some old dogs a new trick," he thought to himself with a smile.

In the days that followed, Duofold was glad he had been right to invite his mother to stay with them. The children were recovering faster from their previous anxieties and had stopped being clingy to him.

He, however, had noticed they didn't seem too comfortable with their mother, Akumu. They did not seem to want to stay in her house long after their time with her was up. This was despite their closeness with Brenda and her brother, Floyd Junior. It was an indication the children could still be coming to terms with the hurt they still must have felt from their mother's previous neglect of them.

It was, however, not all bad. Though Akumu was comfortable with her new family, she was quick to try and emotionally reconnect with Binte and Warrior. Duofold put this down to his having come back and rescued the children from Hezron, something she had no power to do. For that reason, he insisted the children must visit their mother as often as possible. The last thing he wanted was for the children to turn against their biological mother or develop a negative relationship with their future stepmother. He, however, knew time would heal any lingering hurt in the children, especially with their grandmother around.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DUOFOLD HAD ALWAYS ASSUMED that when Hezron had claimed the life insurance payout after his presumed death, his father had also claimed his plot of land and the rental property on it. He was certain that Hezron had either transferred the property to his name or sold it. Duofold reasoned that three years of his presumed death was a long time, and if he could not gain back the lost time or the land, neither did it make sense to open a sore wound for the arguments and distress it would cause. He decided to cut his losses and move on.

"Property, after all, is just property and can be replaced," Duofold had told himself.

The thought, however, later occurred to him it would be the right thing, at the very least, to confirm the ownership status of his property in order to have closure on the matter. This he could only do at the government Lands Office which he dreaded for the chaos and long queues it was known for. But he was determined and took a seat in the busy hall. He whiled away the time browsing and answering emails on his phone as he waited his turn.

He had not sat for long when he heard someone call him by his nickname Kim. Looking up, the person didn't look familiar. "You seem to know my name. How're you?" he replied pleasantly.

"My name is Joe," the man said. "I'm a parent at your children's former school. I enjoyed the farewell party you hosted. I've just seen you and thought to say hello, also thank you for the books in the school library. You have been the talk of the village since. We felt honoured and appreciated to get such as bash. We hope to see you again."

"Most welcome," replied Duofold, happy to know that he touched people in the village. "It was my pleasure to uplift my village school. I was impressed by the school's performance; I hope they maintain their grades. I found the head teacher quite focused on running the school, and I hope it shall do better with the support I was able to offer."

"How can I help you, my brother?" Joe inquired. "I work here."

"I am here to confirm the ownership status of this property." Duofold handed him a copy of the title deed. "If you can kindly assist, I would appreciate it."

Duofold resumed his browsing as Joe disappeared into the corridors. He was back in fifteen minutes.

"The property is registered under your name, and everything appears in order," Joe reported. As a person from Duofold's village, he knew what it was about when he added, "You need to put a caveat on it and, if possible, take charge before your dad Hezron and his lawyer start messing with it. I understand they have started subdivision to sell plots from the five-acre land. Fill out these forms. I will file the caveat and protect your file from interference."

This was better news than Duofold had expected to hear. "Thank you very much, Joe. I will head there right away to claim ownership of the land to remove doubts from anyone who has been eying it."

"I wish you all the best, Kim. Have my number in case you need my help."

"I shall do so, Joe. Thank you for the assistance. Have a good day."

Duofold immediately called his lawyer and asked him they meet at the property site with instructions to bring a contractor. They arrived almost at the same time. After mapping the beacons indicating the boundaries, the contractor, who came prepared with the necessary materials, started putting up a perimeter wall around the land. He had already put a sign boldly declaring the land not for sale.

This put an immediate stop to Hezron's ambitions to sell off Duofold's possessions he may have been in charge of as per his son's will, which was now revoked.

It turned out that Hezron and his lawyer had already collected payment deposits from prospective buyers. Duofold could not have cared less what it would cost Hezron and his lawyer to refund the payments. It was the height of contempt that they should still be selling the land even after Duofold was back. In making sure they got what was due to them, Duofold decided their greed was the best weapon to work with by letting their greed consume them.

Duofold was happy with the day's accomplishment and was back to the Lands Office to complete the final act, which was to officially transfer the property to Akumu. Before Hezron claimed it, she was the one collecting rent from developments on the property. He sent her the details by phone.

Her excitement made her share the great news of the transfer with the Fidel family. Floyd soon called to personally thank his brother Duofold on behalf of his wife, Akumu. Floyd, however, requested the property be registered jointly under him and Akumu on the title deed. Though Floyd didn't explain it, Duofold thought it was so that they could secure a loan to further develop the place, which was a great idea.

Another reason to make it a joint title could have been to just let Duofold know there existed no boundaries between Floyd and his wife. That, however, was not on Duofold's mind, having long made the decision to let his ex-wife retain the property and do whatever she wanted with it. He called Joe at the Lands Office to amend the title deed as requested by the couple.

Duofold would always remember this as one of his best days. And, with what he had set out to do accomplished, he headed home to see how his mom was faring with the little ones.

It was four o'clock when he arrived. He found them at the gazebo enjoying a serving of chicken pizza the chef had prepared. He was amused to find his mom wondering about the strange snack when she asked him, confused, "Why on earth would one cook a chapatti and place meat and veggies and a lot of oil (cheese) on top of them? Why should the chef be so lazy not to cook the food separately, chapati and a stew instead of this funny mixed grill?"

It seemed Florence had been waiting for Duofold to express her displeasure, but she was not done. "Last time, it was the *faga* (burger) with cabbage, meat, and tomato put together between the bread. Today he has messed up perfectly good *chapati* with oil and chicken on it. Instead of giving us the pineapple he had prepared, he added it to the messy bread. I am beginning to doubt his skills. He is a lazy cook who does his thing in a way that puts me off!"

Duofold was patient as she spoke. "Have you tasted the *messy* bread, Mom?" he asked.

"I have no desire to," Florence said adamantly as she suspiciously eyed the chef. "I shall show him how the food should be done. He is no good at all. Where did you get him from? He is so annoying. I can't stand him."

Duofold was tickled by the way his mom was reacting to the new things she was having difficulty understanding. His laughter caught the attention of the chef and the kids, who wondered what could be so funny because Duofold rarely laughed this hard. It was a good thing the chef did not understand their mother tongue.

"Mom, taste a piece first and then tell me what you think."

Duofold gave her a slice of the pizza, which she ate half-heartedly in small bites. The expression on her face was of one expecting to be disgusted by the food. However, after she was finished, she took a second piece. The expression on her face was now one of confusion and surprise at what she was eating. She has never come across cheese, let alone taste it.

"What is this food, Kim? I would never have thought it would be so tasty. I like it so much already."

"It is called a pizza, Mom; it is an Italian food. That is why it is not done the Kikuyu way. I should introduce you to eats from other communities to appreciate the beauty of other cultures' foods."

Florence said no more, and, accompanied by Duofold and the children, she ate her fill and followed it with a cup of tea.

The chef somehow understood what had taken place and followed them with his eyes to see whether the grandmother had enjoyed his pizza recipe that day. So far, so good, the chef decided.

"I accept my ignorance and need to get used to these new foods, Kim," Florence laughed at herself, not least because of her uninformed perception of the chef and his work. "I am such a goat in all the new recipes. I hope to know some of the recipes so that I, too, may surprise you on some days. This transition of the chief's daughter to these new things I am learning is not easy, but I shall keep improving, son. But who would have known I'd taste such food were it not you to thank for it?" she observed as she contentedly picked her teeth.

"I look forward to the surprise you will cook, Mom," Duofold said encouragingly, but he looked ready to leave. "I hope you guys will manage by yourselves for the night. I have to go and might be back late. Have the kids in your big bed."

"No problem, Kim. We do not need to eat more for the day. We are full of that *fiza* (Pizza). We shall have another meal tomorrow."

Duofold kissed the children good night, and as he was stepping out, his phone rang.

"Hello, Madam Liz. Good, you called; I was just about to call you. You have a window this evening I buy a glass of wine?"

"Hello, Duofold. I cannot say no to the invitation. It's been a while since I shook a leg, and, as you know, today is ladies' night. I look forward to it. Find me at the usual joint."

Duofold was eager to join Liz for the night out and was a bit frustrated by traffic, which was back-to-back. It was the end of the month when people were a bit liquid and didn't seem in a hurry to get home. Many of the drivers were causing the jam crisscrossing the city from one corner to the other in search of fun.

The pub was packed when Duofold arrived. He tried locating Liz in vain. He called her number, but there was no response. He sat at the counter and ordered a beer. There was live soccer on the screens, and Duofold joined in the football excitement around him. It was the popular English Premier League teams Manchester United and Arsenal going at each other. Though he was rooting for Arsenal, it had been disappointing of late, but it was his team, and he was a diehard fan.

He wondered why Liz was taking long to return his call. He checked the phone and had three missed from her. He must have been too engrossed in the match to have heard the calls. He called back, and she picked on the first ring.

"Why are you not picking up your phone, Duo? Where are you, my dear?"

"Sorry, madam boss, there is too much noise, and I got caught up in the football match on the screens. I did not hear the ring. On my way to your table now; I can see you. This place is so full today. It is not easy to trace someone."

He took his opened beer with him to join her. He found Liz with her co-director, Madam Mary.

"Hi, Duofold. How many lives do you have, young man?"

"The Last I heard, you had died a mysterious death. When did you resurrect?" Mary sounded a bit tipsy; it was unlike her to be so direct.

"What a way to welcome someone, Madam Boss Mary?" Duofold replied, trying to be as polite as he could.

He placed his hands on boss Mary's shoulders, lifted her to stand, and softly kissed her left cheek. She picked the scent of his cologne. Her heart skipped a beat, and she was surprised that her whole body responded with a pleasurable burning sensation. Her attention was glued to Duofold for a minute before he pushed her aside to greet his other boss, Liz.

Liz stood up and demanded a hug too, which Duofold obliged. He opted to sit opposite them so that he could better read their faces.

Liz opened the discussion. "I called you here so that we agree on the way forward for Instar. My co-director and I have resolved to sell fifty per cent of Instar shares to SmartLink International Limited and give four shares to you as a gift for agreeing to kick-start Instar again. Mary shall be working with you as the CEO of Instar. You will be the managing director to oversee operations from production to the market. If that is acceptable to you, let me know by tomorrow. My flight to the USA is in three days. The ground check is done, and as discussed, the factory shall be set up in the warehouse we identified with you last week. I took Mary there today, and she was impressed." Mary nodded in agreement as Liz continued. "I hope you still have her phone number. I gave her your number too."

"Nice to meet you, Madam Mary, and thank you for agreeing to work with me again."

"Does that mean you accepted the offer already, Duofold?" Liz asked hopefully. "If that is the case, let us sign these documents and continue with our drinks."

There was excitement about the deal they signed the memorandum of understanding. It was a very fulfilling moment for Duofold, who now owned the company he loved.

"Thank you, ladies," he said. "I shall not be able to take too long, for I am *baba na mama* at home."

"What do you mean your wife left?" Mary enquired. She did not know that side of Duofold's story.

"She got married when I disappeared. But that is a story for another sitting madam."

"I am so sorry, Duofold. Do not worry; you are still young and shall find yourself another bride," Mary was sympathetic.

"I believe so, Madam Mary. It is not easy for a man to manage the home with the young ones to look after. Good night beautiful ladies. See you tomorrow in the office."

The ladies followed him with their eyes as he walked in what looked like slow motion until the darkness claimed him when he stepped out of the pub.

DUOFOLD HAD ALREADY scouted the team to work with and had emailed them the schedule for the first day of office. Everyone was allocated their duties, and by noon each of the team members had been installed in their workstations. The directors arrived at 1 pm after, having stayed out late. They were ushered to their executive office suites by the new receptionist, a well-spoken young lady. The directors' office suite had a self-contained bathroom and a small bedroom for noon naps if needed. Attached to the suites was a small boardroom. Duofold's office was adjacent to Mary's office and was separated by a glass window that was glazed only enough to see through. Mary was fine with it so that she could steal a glance at him once in a while.

"Duofold, are you sure this office opened its doors today?" Madam Mary enquired.

"Yes, Madam Boss. But work had already started; I had to do some market intelligence to gauge clients' appetite for Instar products before production. So far, so good. The sales team is already in the boardroom finalising the marketing strategy. Most welcome, ladies," he gave them a bow and excused himself to join the sales team.

The directors took this as a good sign. It was a sign that he was in charge. He did not ask for nor need guidance to do his job. Production had already started, and the first ten orders were being processed.

He found the sales team had already allocated themselves operation zones. "We have five sectors in Nairobi and five others upcountry. It is time now to test the cars," Duofold invited the directors for the exercise.

They received keys for the branded fleet of company cars in a brief ceremony that flagged off the sales team to their first day out in the field.

"What a wonderful day! Instar visible and out there again!" Liz whooped with delight as she grabbed Mary's hand in jubilance.

Duofold walked to the factory floor to confirm everything was running smoothly. He found the directors in the kitchen waiting for the chef to prepare them a meal. He helped the chef quickly prepare the food, and soon he and the directors sat to share their first meal at the Instar plant.

"Being 'mother' to your children must have made you quite a good chef, Duo," Liz commented.

"I've always been a foodie. I like cooking and trying out new recipes, so I am a regular in the kitchen," Duofold replied, jokingly adding, "I have cooked you enough times, Liz. I am offended it is only now you are noticing my culinary skills."

"Of course, your cooking has always been great. It is that 'mother' part of your skills that is new," Liz replied, laughing at herself for what she knew was a lame excuse. "But perhaps Mary has a comment; it is another reason for you to bond in what will be a great team of you two working together."

Mary agreed. "*Mukimo*, salad, and pan-fried chicken. I have not been served this combination in a long time. It is such a hearty meal." She paused a moment to break a meaty chicken wing, then enthusiastically said, "And, yes, Liz, I and Duofold shall definitely make a great team to grow the company; I see that he has not changed. He is still the same hardworking Duofold from the old Instar. I see him nodding in agreement. So watch this space."

"I know you guys are trailblazers. I cannot wait to be back and find business roaring again and winning awards."

"How long will you be away in the States?" asked Duofold.

"Three years. It feels like such a long time to be away."

"If you are as busy as I imagine you will be, that will be a short time; time flies when you are busy," Duofold was saying as he served them dessert. "The only condition when you return is to come back with more business."

"I had referred Ben of Nutribelt to a client from the East. Keep in touch with him; there might be an order coming through soon. They cannot do the kind of formulations Instar does. I hope to tie you to another account or two."

"I shall check with Ben ASAP, and, of course, we look forward to more accounts from your end, Liz."

They took some time forecasting and discussing work schedules before Duofold begged to leave. He left them to discuss other matters as directors of the board. Duofold wanted to be home before dinnertime. He had started the day very early, at

4 am. Though he had spoken to his kids later that morning, they must have been anxious to see their daddy back.

He found the children at their grandma's. They were watering vegetables in the kitchen garden. He observed how natural they looked at it. Perhaps it was having grown up in the village that made them look so good tending the garden. He also observed how it was Binte dominating the water sprinkling by insisting on holding the hosepipe that drew the water from an outside tap. Like parents from time immemorial, he wondered where children got their character and personalities, whether they were born with the traits that defined them.

Binte was usually a soft-spoken girl and seemed to care more about things that concerned her. She liked keeping her room tidy, neatly arranging things in their place in her bedroom. She, however, neglected misplaced items in other spaces like the sitting room or the kitchen and other rooms, leaving them scattered where they lay without caring to neatly arrange them as she did in her room. The rule in the house was that the children must clean up after themselves after a meal. But she did not seem keen to clean her cup and plate or even volunteer to remove dishes from the dining table. And when the family went shopping, she seemed to only care about picking items on her list. She did not like to share things with her brother unless pushed to. Duofold hoped it was a phase she would grow out of.

Duofold said hello to his mother as the kids abandoned their watering to salute their dad. The grandma was happy to get rid of them so that she could finish her garden work before it was dark.

Duofold escorted the children, who were excited to see him, to their house. But the issue of their different characters was still on his mind. He did not think Binte might have picked it from him. He was not sure about Akumu, seeing how she got married, leaving the children alone without appearing to fight too hard to have them live with her. Thinking about the mother and his daughter, the saying about an apple not falling too far from the tree came to his mind, but he didn't dwell on it.

Warrior was the opposite of his sister. He was always happy to share and help with chores that came his way. He, however, seemed unable to keep tidy. He often left his room a mess—bed unmade, pyjamas and socks lying about on the bed, trousers hanging halfway out the wardrobe, or a shirt dropped at the door on his way in or out. He did not like being at home. By the second week of moving in with their dad, he had made friends with boys his age in the neighbourhood and would be gone for hours with them to play football. Duofold had wondered whether it would be a good thing to discourage him from the boys. He, however, remembered that it is through such socialisation of the rough and tumble of boyhood that they become men ready to hunt one day.

Duofold acknowledged that Binte needed a woman figure—a role model to look up to and guide her. He had already noted that, though he often found them at the grandmother's, she had of late seemed to avoid the granny's house so as not to be allocated chores. It was the kind of behaviour observed in teenagers, yet she was years away from becoming a teen. He dreaded the day she would reach that age when no one would be able to tell her anything, as happens with many teens. It was tough to be a parent, he thought, especially as a single dad.

He remembered when his mother once told him there was no blueprint for parenting. She said that whether someone is well-organised or clumsy, life often turns out fine. Duofold, however, believed there should be room for shaping children. Being very particular with everything he did, from housekeeping to office work and even relationships, he did not think there should be room for clumsiness in his house. The children must learn to plan and be well-organised. He did not want his children to end up disorderly and unkempt like his brother Falid and his wife.

He thought this while recalling the day he went to collect his children from the village and entered his former home in the village which Falid now occupied. He remembered how it was something of a pig stay with dirtied walls, unmade beds, dirty utensils in the kitchen, and heaps of unwashed clothes—these were a damning sign of a disordered life whose habits he couldn't contemplate his children acquiring.

He found his brother's disorganised habits awkward because Florence had inculcated in her four children the value of responsible self-reliance, ensuring that they did their cooking for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It seemed that at Falid's house, one came from the dirt of a garden straight to bed without a care, yet they were both brought up by the same parents with the same values.

It was up to Falid ensure order in his house if it was his wife to blame. Either way, he dreaded to think both may have been the only role models for Binte and Warrior. Duofold nonetheless admitted to himself that he probably needed some parenthood training if he was to style up his two children to lead a responsible life even as they grew up.

WORK FOR DUOFOLD STARTED EARLY in the office with the sales team, where they delivered to him their previous day's reports and deliberated on their plans for the new day. During those meetings, he often eyed the salesgirls to see whether he could spot a good match for him. He, however, acknowledged they were young and inexperienced to run a family like his if getting married ever became a possibility with one of them. His preteens could send a young, inexperienced wife packing. The office

girls, however, stirred his manhood, but he could only allow himself a joke or two with them.

After the meeting with the sales team, he visited the production area, where he conversed with the supervisor, Gerald. Duofold always left satisfied that everything was moving smoothly, which he credited the supervisor.

His working relationship with Madam CEO Mary was excellent, as had been predicted. They complemented each other well, seeing the company flourish.

Then came a day when she invited Duofold for lunch at her home. He arrived at noon on a slow Wednesday, the day of the lunch appointment. He already knew the place. It was a well-appointed company residence located in a leafy location a few kilometres from the office. She lived with her son. A gardener and a nanny were housed in servant quarters separate from the house within the large compound. Duofold, being a lover of pets, saw no trace of a cat or a dog. The closest thing to pets was the birds he could hear chirping in the trees dotting the well-manicured compound.

He thought the way Mary had received him was unusually warm and suggestive, which contrasted with the serious business-like boss she was in the office. She was dressed simply, though in a manner Duofold thought might be judged seductive. When he walked in, he wanted to first update her with news that Instar had won an important bid to develop a children's formula for Nutribelt, the company Liz had mentioned before she left for the US. Now, with the unusually warm and laidback welcome from Mary, he was not so sure. He decided to go with the flow.

If it was what he thought it looked like, it was a surprising, if pleasant, development. And Mary was quite elegant in the way she did her thing. The table was elaborately laid for two, complete with a lit red candle. She was alone; her son was at school.

It also turned out she was a great cook. It was clear she had taken her time to prepare an assortment of sumptuous cultural bitings and starters that included the Indian cuisine tandoori chicken as the main dish. It was prepared in a way he had never tasted before. It made a great companionable meal with her. The sumptuous meal was the icing on the lunch invitation in which she had been sending an unmistakable signal to Duofold: That she was interested in starting a relationship with him. From there, one thing led to another.

Duofold told her about his two children and how he yearned to find someone special to take the place of Akumu.

Mary was fine with it, she told him. Duofold was satisfied. She had passed his first litmus test, which was acceptance of a relationship despite him having children.

He soon invited her and the son for lunch at his home to meet his kids and their grandma. He did not mind her even if she was seven years his senior. He was ready to take in her son, who was older than his children, and they would both take care of the three kids together.

THE FIRST BUMP IN THE RELATIONSHIP appeared after the visit to Duofold's home. His mom did not think she was good enough for him. She felt Mary was way too old for her son. Florence thought he should keep searching for his madam perfect.

Duofold tried to play it down. But the mistrust between the two women was mutual; Mary had her reservations. She did not like the idea of seeing her mother-in-law every day. She was also not comfortable with Duofold's mom living in the same compound in what was also going to be her backyard.

Boss Mary was also not a children person. To her, the son was enough of a burden. Taking in two more would be asking too much of her.

"I have no problem seeing you, but it will be best if we live separately," Mary suggested to him one day. "That way, you have the freedom to your lifestyle Duofold. Some days you spend at my house, some with your family. After all, you have your mom fill the gap for you with the children when you are here with me."

If Duofold insisted she had to be at his house, she wanted him to move his mother to a different location. And, of course, this did not gel with Duofold, who cared deeply for his mother and could think of her away from him.

It struck Duofold as strange that Mary should want his family to change for her sake.

The third change she was demanding was more heartbreaking. She wanted Binte and Warrior to be enrolled in a boarding school and only have them home during school holidays.

This boarding school issue was unacceptable to Duofold. If Mary found his children a burden, that only she was entitled to Duofold and no one else in the picture, they could not be compatible. The children were his life; they made his life whole. If she did not want to be around them, she was in the wrong relationship.

The boarding school suggestion felt so insensitive to him that it stunned him into silence; he could not find the words to reply to her.

And so he went about his work that day without speaking to her and left the office early. He didn't bid her his usual loving goodbye. His kids came first, and there was no compromise on that.

She may pursue her own path, Duofold thought to himself as he drove home. *I am not a blind follower. I make my own path. But she and I are on parallel paths that can never meet. She*

is looking for a part-time partner, whereas I am looking for my children's mother and a soulmate. I cannot afford to have a mistress to be visiting at the expense of my children. I have to be with the children now: Their childhood is a passing cloud, and one day they shall not need me and move out of home to make their own lives. For now, I have to be there for them. Their mother abandoned them, and I am not about to be such a reckless parent too.

Duofold's relationship with Mary could not last under such circumstances. He would have to break up with her; let her keep searching for a different partner as he looked for a mother for his children.

She was very unhappy with the stand he had taken. She tried to make the argument that they could remain together as Duofold looked for a wife. He could not accept such an arrangement. If he was to continue the affair with Mary, where would he get time to look for and date another woman? Even if it was possible, how could he cater for two demanding women simultaneously? How?

He left it at that, never again to revisit the issue with her.

Mary started to realise Duofold was not a pushover. He was a shrewd man who could not be easily swayed. She started to inquire how he made his money to afford his lifestyle, which seemed more expensive than what Instar paid him. Duofold found this unnecessarily intrusive and was not about to discuss his personal business affairs unrelated to Instar.

His refusal to discuss it was a sign of how things had broken down between them, and this seemed to annoy her.

"Who do you think you are to disappear from office when you feel like Duofold?" she angrily demanded one day. "Yesterday, you were not even picking up calls after you left."

"Sorry, Madam Boss, I had a late meeting," Duofold was respectful, though not intimidated in his reply. "I got home tired, and I had the family waiting for me. Is there a problem?"

Before she could answer, her good friend Linda walked into her office.

"Hello, guys. Duofold, you are back? Where have you been all this time?" This was the first time Linda was seeing him after a long time. She didn't seem aware of his disappearance or that he had *died*. "I have been looking for you everywhere. We have an unfinished mission."

"What was the mission, Linda? I am all ears. Pass by my office when done with Madam Mary." He excused himself and left the two friends.

"Sure, Duofold; I am passing by your office," Linda watched him leave with a certain hungry look in her eyes.

Duofold suddenly turned around and went back upon remembering he had another meeting. "I will be stepping out in thirty minutes for a meeting, Linda. I hope you shan't be too long, dear."

"Just give me your number Duo. I shall touch base later."

They exchanged contacts, and Duofold excused himself again.

He left the office for a lunch meeting with the accountant of a supermarket chain that had been delaying payments due to Instar. Nelly, the Instar representative handling the account, had reached her end with them. Duofold discussed the way forward with the accountant and decided to have a beer after they had concluded. He was not in the mood to go back to his moodier boss lady. He reasoned that the beer would help while away the time before he headed home to be with the children.

His phone rang. It was Linda.

"Hi, Duo. It was a pleasure seeing you earlier today. I have a party this weekend. Would you mind gracing the occasion? I miss you a lot, and you know that," Linda said, tightening her grip on her phone as if she feared Duofold would turn down the invitation.

"I do catering, Linda," he replied. "Why don't we also make the invitation a business proposition to showcase my services to your friends?"

"You do catering? That is your business then this weekend," Linda sounded surprised and relieved at the same time. "That is good to know; it's something we've been struggling with. I shall organise with my office too to be giving you events to manage for them."

"Brilliant. See you on Friday at 7 am to visit the site. I hope that will not be too early for you, Linda. Remember, I have my other work at Instar."

"No worries, Duo, I will make it quick. It shall be a busy day for me too, darling boy."

"See you then. I hope you have not changed residence?"

"Not yet, but now I have a guard dog."

"You've always had one as far as I can remember."

"I mean, I got a husband."

Duofold laughed at being caught so suddenly with this bit of news. "Wow! I didn't know. How does it feel to be a wife? I miss the days we could spend a whole night on your couch."

"It was a season Duo that is over now. But that can always still be organised elsewhere."

"I look forward to that elsewhere, Linda."

"It was a pleasure seeing you earlier at your office. You owe me once we settle pending issues, Duo."

"No worries. Let me know when, but it has to be next month. This month I am back-to-back."

"I am easy. Next month it is. Have a good night, dear Duofold."

"Cheers, Linda."

AS HE DROVE THROUGH THE GATE, he saw what he was now calling his clan before him in the expansive compound. He could see his mom with her needles knitting a sweater that he imagined was probably for Fidel. The children were running after the ball, competing with the dog T-Jay before she could get hold of it. They did not notice he had arrived. This gave him a chance to freshen up before joining them.

A text message pinged on his phone. It was a complaint from his boss lady going on about how incompetent he had become. "*You are a Casanova*," the message partly read. "*You tell my friend Linda you are leaving, but don't bother to tell me. You left though you knew I had not finished with you. We have enough field officers you can send. I wonder why you leave office. In the future, I don't want you out of the office unless in my company, blah, blah, blah,"* it went on and on. He deleted the message; he had no time for such.

Duofold worked late that night to beat the deadline on a prospective project with the World Food Program, or WFP, as it was better known. Then he dropped everyone in the office an email letting them know he would not be in the office that morning as he would be pitching the project to the organisation to supply Instar products to the Horn of Africa. It was an important account he had to take personal charge of.

Mary, however, failed to see the email and waited the entire morning for him, annoyed that he had not replied to her text message the previous day. She tried calling, but he was in the middle of his presentation and could not pick up the call.

The presentation had taken longer than Duofold had anticipated. His nutrition formulas, which went under the tagline "*Unique, Ready to Eat, Healthy, and Tasty*", attracted a lot of attention with the many questions that followed. It was an Instar moment to showcase its products to the maximum. He had earlier sent samples to the panellists to taste, and apparently, no other company came close to the quality of the Instar product. Instar won the tender. The supply duration was capped at ten days. This meant he had to work overtime to meet the delivery deadline. He quickly called the production manager to organise a plan for the order before closing the office.

Midnight caught him and the production team at their workstations arranging procurement schedules and aligning the work shifts to ensure delivery would be on time. He was too tired to turn on his phone and left the office half asleep.

The following day Mary was in the office by 6.30 am. She had from Duofold's Personal Assistant that he had left the office late the previous evening at midnight. He did not show up until 11 am that morning. He was still feeling beat by the intensive work he and his team had put in. But there were still two more weeks of similarly long working hours.

Mary saw Duofold's car pull to the parking lot from her restroom and walk to his office, only to find him not at his desk. Yet his phone, which he never left without, was on his desk. She inquired from his Personal Assistant about his whereabouts and followed him to the production area.

"I need to see you," she told him. "Everything else can wait. Follow me," she ordered.

"Not possible at the moment, Madam Boss," he responded. "We have a very tight deadline, and the factory floor computer is down. I need to do repairs on it."

"What are all our engineers doing?" She demanded.

"This is an IT issue whose repairs we outsource, and the only technician that can handle it is available three days from now. I am already in a dust coat, as you can see; this has to be attended to now."

Duofold left her and hurried to the room housing machine backups and began repairs. Two hours later, the computer was restored. He went out with the staff who had helped with the repairs to treat them to a celebratory lunch for the accomplishment. They took their food outside the canteen. Their dirty overalls were still greasy and dusty, and they did not want to mess the canteen seats, as they were going to check whether the machines were functional after the repairs.

Mary came looking for him again, but he had already returned from lunch. She called him to her office. "You should not leave and go out to lunch with subordinates; you should respect yourself," It was more a complaint than a rebuke.

"Are they not human beings, Madam Boss? Besides, the lunch was to boost their morale, and there is nothing better than reaching down and lifting people under you up," Duofold replied. He wanted to add that she should keep her comments to herself. He also would have reminded her that these were the people who put bread on her table every day.

Instead, he asked, "What is so urgent is that you have bugged me the whole day?" Seeing how her expression changed, he added, "I only want to discuss work-related issues with you, nothing else. I have no business discussing anything else with you."

"Check your Dropbox and give me all the reports I have requested from you," she angrily replied, more to assert her authority than show her helplessness at how things had changed between them. Yet she had many unsettled personal issues with

him that she had been waiting to vent from days earlier. "I am finding it challenging to cope, yet I, too, have work to do."

"Shall be done, Madam Boss," Duofold said and left her office.

He collected his car keys and went to school to pick up the children to take them to a hair salon. Warrior needed a haircut, and Binte needed her hair done. Away from the office in the happier company of his children was an afternoon well spent.

He responded to his boss's emails that evening and called it a day. The emails Mary wanted him to address turned out to be nothing urgent, just normal stuff that his assistant usually handled for the team; they had nothing to do with boardroom issues.

The next morning found him early at Linda's compound at 6.30 am to check the site with his team. He left them to work on the decorations as he followed up on the WFP order. This was the date for the WFP delivery. The trucks were loaded, with the whole WFP team was there to flag off the caravan.

Madam Boss Mary was in the meantime all over, dishing her business cards to the WFP Country Director and other VIPs. They seemed surprised to meet her and wondered why she had not attended the bidding process.

"I have a very competent managing director here, Duofold," Mary boasted to them. Yet this was the same boss who berated Duofold on email as the most incompetent person she had ever had to work with.

Feeling disgusted, Duofold went to the office to process pending orders for the week.

When Mary got back to her office, she kept calling Duofold's office network phone now and then, asking what he thought about petty stuff that even a clerk could directly respond to.

He was so angry with her that he did something he had never done before: He removed the receiver from the desk phone so that it would ring engaged if someone in the office network called. He thought this necessary to allow him to concentrate as he finished streamlining the system in time for other orders after the WFP project.

It was, therefore, not surprising when she stormed his office to complain his phone was engaged while she needed to liaise with him.

Duofold respectfully asked her to put any issue requiring his attention on email, and he would deal with it. She was becoming a pain. He wondered how he ever thought they could live under one roof, let alone work together. He was in a state of desperation.

He left his desk to work in the general office to concentrate on what he was doing to finish on time. He also needed to be early the next morning to assist his chef in preparing morning snacks at Linda's place.

DUOFOLD HAD HIS BREAKFAST at Linda's house to make sure all went as planned. And as he was about to leave after supervising the food preparation, Mary arrived. It took him by surprise, though he should have expected to see her, being Linda's close friend.

Boss Mary called him to where she was seated with her girlfriends.

"What are you doing here, Duofold? This is my friend's event, and it is a working day for you," she humiliated him in front of her friends, who included Linda. "Can you go to the office and avoid my social circles? This is the last warning. If this happens again, you shall lose your job. Do not cross my path again."

"Linda, can I see you for a minute," said Duofold.

"She will not see you," retorted Mary. "You are my junior, and I have ordered you out."

His clashes with Mary at the office had come to this. It shocked even the girlfriends the way she was addressing him.

They wondered what kind of wrong he, as her junior, could have committed to the boss that could not be forgiven. They would have expected that when colleagues meet at such an event, they would be curious to know why and who invited who. In this case, Duofold had been officially invited, despite Linda, too, being his close friend.

If Mary had cared to know, Linda and Duofold would have known each other from a different social circle. She was dating his good friend Ben. Even after she parted ways with Ben, he and Linda continued being friends. Theirs was also professional, as they occasionally traded accounts with each other's company. Duofold only came to know Linda was friends with Mary that day she found him at her office at Instar.

But these were details he was not going to tell Mary. In the end, he laughs it off, joined by his boss's friends there, as he makes a joke about Mary's order that he leaves the party.

Duofold nonetheless excused himself. And though he remained invited to attend, he did not come back to enjoy the party.

The event was colourful, however. Some guests said it was extraordinary. Duofold's Italian chefs did a magnificent job. Many guests expressed their interest in engaging them. Mary, too, expressed her interest, though she had no clue the company belonged to Duofold.

Duofold had started his day early, so he went home. He needed the rest, especially after that humiliating encounter with Madam Boss at the event.

He, however, could not find sleep. The children were away visiting with their mother. And though he would have liked to say hello to his mother Florence and have a chat with her, he did not like disturbing her on weekends to allow her privacy, especially now that the kids were out for the weekend too.

He dressed up and left the house.

CHAPTER NINE

DUOFOLD LEFT THE HOUSE with Mary on his mind. He was thinking of the ruined relationship with the Bossy Lady. Life had not been easy with her personal frustrations with her sabotage at work. But if things felt difficult, there was light at the end of the dark tunnel. This light was the optimism he felt with the successful delivery of the WFP tender, the first such account with a major client since Instar's revival. It was a good achievement, and it deserved a beer to celebrate. It is the thought of this that slightly eased his mind off his boss for the moment.

He had arranged a party for the production team the previous day for working around the clock to deliver on the WFP tender. And after Madam Boss ordered him out of Linda's bash, he had a few hours to kill before the day was over. Joining the production team would be the place to enjoy the beer.

Duofold had made the invitation to the party by email and copied Mary, but he didn't think she had seen it. Boss Mary was never too keen to keep up with office emails. Even if she had seen it, she probably had better ideas on how to spend her weekend, which started on Fridays, than spend it with her "workers," as she belittlingly referred to them, Duofold included.

When he arrived at the hotel hosting the party, he called Gerard, the production manager, to direct him to the hall they were enjoying themselves. Gerard informed Duofold that Instar marketing teams had decided to invite themselves and join their production colleagues at the party. Only Duofold and his boss Mary were missing from the party.

Distracted by these thoughts, he tripped on the kerbstone as he left the parking lot. And, trying to hold on to the nearest person on the street, they both fell together to the ground. The person turned out to be a beautiful young woman who looked of Indian descent. He was afraid he had badly injured her. He helped her up, profusely offering his apologies. Seeing she was a bit unstable on her feet, he carried her to his car. He excused himself to dash and pick up her shoe, which had slipped off where they fell. Duofold felt her penetrating gaze on his back as he rushed to collect the shoe.

Something stirred in him, and he felt, rather than thought, that she had the credentials he was looking for. It didn't matter if she was already taken. He would try his luck with her. A day with her would likely more than rouse the man in him.

"Are you okay, dear, or do we rush you to the hospital?" he asked.

She shook her head, "No."

Duofold appeared unconvinced and massaged the lower part of her leg. She did not seem in any sought of pain. There was a spark of interest in her eyes as he said, "Sorry, I have not introduced myself. My name is Duofold. You?"

What a handsome hunk of a man, the young lady was thinking. *I like his lovely deep voice and his touch on my leg. Is he owned, or can I make him mine? I wouldn't mind spending time with him. I am ready to be led wherever he may lead.*

"I am Yasmin," she said. "What a way to meet. I am so sorry to have tripped you, Sir. I was a bit absent-minded. I shall be more careful next time."

Her politeness in taking the blame endeared her to Duofold, making him curious to know her more.

"No, dear, it was my mistake. I was on the phone and did not look where I was stepping. And I fear I ended up hurting the most beautiful lady I have ever seen," he apologetically said as he fitted Yasmin's foot to the missing shoe.

They both felt the interest they had in each other, but none seemed ready to come out and say it. There followed an awkward moment of silence.

Yasmin spoke first. "I am okay, Duofold. I should get going," she said as she got out of the car. "I am heading home. It was a pleasure meeting you."

Though she felt something for him, she thought it rude to appear to impose herself on him.

Before she could walk away, Duofold held her and said, "Wait, dear, I could drop you off where you are going. I'll also give you my contact just in case the fall turns out to be serious—you never know, you may have broken a bone in the fall and might need urgent attention."

After seeing some hesitation, Duofold offered, "Better still, I am going to my company event a few streets from here. You can accompany me if you are not in a great hurry, and then I will take you home. I will understand if you don't want to; only that I feel I owe you, and I feel bad when a woman is hurt,"

He said this facing her and holding her hands, which Yasmin reciprocated. But the invitation was what she just wanted to hear. Her mind began to race with a stream of questions. *Who is this guy? Is he married? Who is he dating? How can I win him for myself? He is handsome and so well-spoken. I feel so comfortable around him.*

"It is okay if we will not take long," she replied. "Mine is a strict family; I wouldn't want to pick a quarrel with my parents."

"Great," Duofold said as a sense of relief washed over him. "We'll take just enough time to tell whether the fall caused an injury that may need to be attended to by a doctor."

They walked the short distance, and when they reached the entrance to the hotel lobby, she seemed a bit hesitant, like one waiting to be guided. "After you," Duofold ushered her in.

"Thanks," she said, adding, "I hope I don't feel too out of place. How will you introduce me to your colleagues?"

"As my wife? I hope you wouldn't mind that, Yasmin," he replied and hoped she would get the hint.

"Are you not married, Duofold?"

"I once was, but now I am single."

"What happened?"

"That is a story for the day you will agree to marry me," he gave her a suggestive smile.

Yasmin was speechless.

As they walked in, everyone in the hall turned to watch their entrance. They looked the perfectly matched couple – very confident and holding hands as if they had always been a hot item with each other.

"Will you stop staring at my wife too much, guys? You'll make her lose a step!" Duofold said with mock indignation, eliciting a chuckle around the room. "Her name is Yasmin Duofold."

Everyone clapped at the introduction as the ladies went to introduce themselves to Yasmin more personally.

"Nice to meet you!" the ladies excitedly welcomed her.

"'You look lovely, Yasmin," said one of the Instar sales ladies, as a colleague echoed her.

"This guy has no time for other women," said another. "Now we understand who stole his soul."

"Congrats, madam," they said. "You have taken good care of this dude."

"Thank you so much, ladies." The round of excited compliments caught Yasmin by surprise. She surprised herself to realise that her role for the night as their boss's wife should feel so natural. She basked in their attention and, in what might have been a boast, took the opportunity to emphasise to them how Duofold was taken by none other than Yasmin Zahid.

Duofold watched how his members of staff were enjoying themselves. He joined Gerard at the counter to pay the added bill after the marketing team invited themselves to the party.

All was fine, Gerard assured him. Duofold had no problem with the sales team joining the party. Except that the increased bill was not factored in to include the sales team, which would make Boss Lady scream at him from the top of the table as if his rank did not entitle him to make a decision without involving her. He nonetheless, decided it was fine if the team became part of the party. After all, Instar had, since restarting operations, not held a thanksgiving party for its staff for their hard work setting the company rolling on a successful note. The party, therefore, presented as good an opportunity as any for Instar to show its appreciation. It also presented an opportunity for them to mingle freely with their boss Duofold.

On his part, Duofold found it great fun hanging out with the guys. Some were the old staff from before Instar went under, and they had much to catch up on and compare notes to make the new Instar a success.

Yasmin had already blended in and was no longer in a hurry to leave. Duofold realised this when he went to the table at which she sat to pick her up. It was an opportunity to know her a bit better. He asked her to dance, and they both had a good time, leaving the venue after midnight.

It, however, seemed she was not used to staying out late, as she had fallen asleep as soon as she got into the Duofold's car. This presented a problem because he could not wake her to give him directions to her parent's home, and neither did it seem appropriate to drop her there at the late hour. Duofold instead found himself being protective of her, even as he admired her in her peaceful sleep. She was the kind of a woman he would want for a spouse.

As they arrived at his home, he was still toying with the idea of her as a wife. *But only on one condition – she shall love my children, Warrior and Binte. Period!* Duofold thought himself with finality.

"How did I get here?" She asked, waking up suddenly to find herself being helped into an unfamiliar home. "Where am I?"

"You are at your future husband's home," Duofold answered matter-of-factly, like one who had already decided. Yasmin smiled and followed him to the house leaning on his shoulder.

They took a quick shower, and Duofold lent her one of his t-shirts to use as a nightgown. They slept with the bedroom door locked, the very first time Duofold had ever locked it. He had forgotten his children were visiting their mother for the weekend. It was, therefore, just him and Yasmin.

As he turned to give her his body warmth, he was grateful that his boss Mary threw him out of Linda's party, landing him with this beauty with whom they already seemed to have been buddies for years.

Duofold woke up to find she had been up long before him and smiled to himself, imagining that she had already searched the house for any hint of another woman's scent or clothes in his wardrobe. She gave him a soft suggestive kiss, and the rest followed. He was certain that they were now engaged forever as they fell back asleep exhausted.

"Yasmin, we go do breakfast. It is the chef's day off."

As Duofold guided her to the kitchen, he showed her his children's portrait, pointing them out by name, "This is Warrior and Binte, my little queen."

"Where are they today?" asked Yasmin.

"They are at their mother's for the weekend."

"Are you still in touch with their mother?"

"Yes, but she remarried."

Yasmin's heart skipped a beat hearing this, but, seeing how he was so open about it, she quickly understood there was no competition with the remarried wife. She, however, still felt a bit insecure and wanted to know more to be certain.

"Why did you divorce her?"

"I did not leave my wife; fate separated us. She got married and has two other children now. This is a story for another day when you choose to be mine, Yasmin. Are you dating, or are you free to mingle, my dear?"

"I was dating, but I am free again, Duofold."

"Good. So we are two souls ready to find each other?"

Yasmin smiled, moving closer to him, and pecked him on his cheek.

"We can talk more after we nurse our hangover," Duofold lifted her to sit on the kitchen counter as he prepared breakfast.

"Very elaborate kitchen, I see," She complimented him, seeing how experienced he seemed with the many details he delicately put into the meal he served her. After breakfast, they went back to bed.

Duofold was woken up by his cat scratching the kitchen door to be let out. She must have been locked in by mistake. When he got back to the bedroom, Yasmin was already awake.

THEY KEPT IN THE HOUSE much of Sunday before Duofold realised how the day had flown. His time together with Yasmin had proved too short, despite spending the day together.

"I am in love with you already," he said. "I'm reluctant to let you go. But we need to get ready; so that I take you home; not that I am sending you away, but I have to pick up the children before it is dark. Tomorrow is a school day for them."

Yasmin became tearful. "I hope you did not misunderstand me as a careless girl. Things moved too fast. I am so sorry, Duofold."

"Stop it right there, Yasmin! I believe that this was a preordained moment for us to be together. Everything happened naturally. If you look back at some of the best times you have ever enjoyed, they have probably been spontaneous. When you remember this, you realise how important it is to seize the moment. I know yesterday you told me you had to leave home to nurse your frustrations. But this is now not just about you to blame yourself; it is about us, and I love how things have unfolded. Your boldness yesterday in choosing not to go home early even though you wanted to has birthed the fulfilling moment we have had together. Whenever you are going through something, it is unplanned for moments like these that turn out to be blessings making you forget your pain. It is a beautiful beginning."

This seemed to calm her. And as he finished saying it, Yasmin was curled under the arms of Duofold's big body. Making her feel the warmth and protection.

"Thank you, Duofold, for everything. It's a new beginning for me for sure," Yasmin said with relief in her voice.

"Friendship isn't about whom you've known the longest. It's about who walks into your life and says, 'I'm here for you,' and proves it."

"Thanks, Duo. I shall take a quick shower, and we'll be out in a few."

"I shall take a shower with you to scrub your back, Yasmin." He carried her to the tub. Another hour went by.

Her clothes were all sweaty from the previous night's partying. She tried on Duofold gym clothes; they were oversize, but at least they were clean and would do. After all, she was not going to another party to need better-fitting clothes; she was heading home. They dressed up and left.

Duofold did not want to separate from Yasmin; he could not think of dropping her somewhere to take a cab. He had to do it himself. And as he slowly drove her while engaging in small talk about nothing in particular, he noticed how comfortable she was. This was not the anxious Yasmin of the previous day, who seemed in a hurry to go home for fear of her parents.

They soon arrived home, and Duofold noticed the fine house set in a grove of trees that looked like a small forest. He thought it looked better than his own wooded home. The compound had rare indigenous trees and featured an elaborate car park.

The house featured a balcony from which one could see an approaching vehicle, so Duofold car was in full view of Yasmin's parents as it drove in. Her parents were seated on the balcony enjoying the afternoon sun and gladly received Duofold and their daughter Yasmin.

"Hello, guys? Most welcome home," Yasmin's dad shook hands.

"My name is Duofold. I am Yasmin's friend. My apologies for dropping her off today," he said with a smile.

"I am Zahid," said the dad, who struck Duofold as a well-polished man.

"You're most welcome, young man. You are excused by us. Have a sit we offer you something to drink. You could also have lunch; food is still on the table," said Yasmin's mother as she directed Duofold to the dining room, followed by Yasmin. "Please serve yourself."

They served lunch and went out to join the parents. Duofold put just a little food, explaining that he would not take long as he had an urgent matter to attend to. He knew enough to know that such first meetings take long as people got acquainted and to expect being grilled by the parents with a barrage of questions: *For how long have you known Yasmin? Has she been a good girl? I presume she spent the night at your place; had you fought because she left in a foul mood yesterday?*

Duofold had to lie; he did not want them to know their meeting the previous day was their first encounter. "I am sorry, I did not know things were that bad," he replied, adding, "Two axes in a bag can't help accidentally bruising one another every once in a while. My apologies, but now we are okay."

"What do you do for a living? Do you live in this city? Where is your family?"

My God, Duofold thought to himself. *I have to leave now; these questions can be answered another day. I should excuse myself.*

"Yes," he replied, finishing his food, "I work and live in the city, and my family comes from just outside Nairobi. However, I will come another day. For now, I request you to excuse me for I have to leave now. Sunday is a short day, and I have a few errands to run, tomorrow being a working day."

"That is in order. You are welcome here anytime time Duofold." Yasmin dad responded

He kissed Yasmin on the cheek and got in the car. He zoomed off in a bit of a hurry to pick up the children. Time was running short, and they also had to pass by the supermarket to do some shopping, ready for school early in the morning.

"Yasmin, I see you have started dating again," asked her father, looking impressed. "I am happy for you, my girl. I hope it is serious this time. You tie the knot soon."

"Thank you, Dad. Yes, he is a good man. I feel a bit tired. Can I go rest a bit?"

Yasmin, just like Duofold, was not ready for the grilling.

"You are excused, dear. Go rest."

I did not want to be bombarded with questions just yet in case I betrayed myself. We just met yesterday, she went away thinking to herself.

She thought it unbelievable how Duofold had covered for her so well. She was frustrated that things were not working in life when she left the house the previous day, and now here she was on what turned out to be her luckiest day. Her aimless walk out in the streets was not aimless, after all—being there at the moment she did when Duofold tripped amounted to her "showing up" when most needed. There's nothing like *showing up*, she thought, excitement filling her.

She sat on her bed admiring photos they had taken together with Duofold the previous day. She was feeling in love as if in a fairy tale. She could not believe it was happening to her, living a dream she had always dreamed. To believe in dreams, she thought, was to believe in possibilities; this was her new lesson.

After losing her first love, she allowed herself to lose hope and did not attempt to fall in love again. She had given up even before she had tried. She did not allow anyone to tread anywhere near her until she met Duofold. She agreed with him and could still hear him say, *"Friendship isn't about whom you've known the longest. It's about who walks into your life and says, 'I'm here for you,' and prove it."* The directness in which he had put it, speaking calmly without bravado and daring her to see him prove it, she had no doubt he would be there for her.

DUOFOLD'S THOUGHTS TURNED to his many responsibilities as he drove to collect the children and suddenly felt overwhelmed by the weight of it. He not only oversaw management and production at Instar but ran the two other firms, SmartLink and The Catering Company. He also had Warrior and Binte to bring up, which demanded his close attention, in addition to making the time to physically be with them as often as he could. There was also his mother, who was yet to get the hang of city life. Another obligation was Akumu, with whom he had agreed to brief every other time about how life was taking him along with the kids. And now there was this new woman in his, Yasmin.

Before he had time to wonder how he had been able to juggle these responsibilities and how he would accommodate the new one with Yasmin, he was already at the gate to his father, Fidel, and was driving into the compound. He was met by a happy chorus of the children shouting Dad and Uncle from Floyd's children in their excitement to see him. *If they only knew what was weighing on his mind,* he thought as he disembarked from the car.

He hugged the four of them together as he handed them chocolate and some sweets he had bought on the way. He watched the children run off excitedly to compare and share the snacks. He joined Akumu and his stepmother in the house, who he found watching a TV programme together. Akumu had taken to spending

time with her mother-in-law bidding each other goodbye, this being her last week at Fidel's compound before she relocated to Nakuru.

"HI KIM, WHERE DID you leave your dad?" was the question that greeted him from Mom Faith, surprised to see him alone. "Fidel left yesterday to see you."

At that very moment, even before he could absorb the surprise of what his mother had just informed him, Duofold's phone started ringing. It was his Dad Fidel.

Seeing who it was, he excused himself to take the call, thankful that he now would have an answer for his stepmother Faith.

"Hi Dad, where are you? Just got home, and your wife is asking where I left you. Kindly take a taxi and come to the shopping Centre, then take a bike home. I shall tell Mom Faith I left you at the shopping Centre to see someone. Next time come in your car, Dad."

"That is in order, son. I should have thought of calling to let you I was at your place. But each time we checked your house, you were not in. I had no idea you came back last evening."

"Yes, I did, though I came in very late," Duofold replied, somewhat fascinated his father had gone to spend with his mother. "Come to think of it, Dad," he said, "perhaps I also should have checked with you first before storming your compound."

"No problem, we are men. Your Mom, Faith, shall not take me anywhere. That, too, is my home, and I shall come whenever I want to. Just collect the children and leave the women alone."

"That will put me in a spot with Mom. But that's okay. All the best Dad."

Duofold went back and told the lie that he had dropped off his father at the shopping Centre on the way to collect the children.

"I was told your Mom Florence moved in with you. How is she keeping?"

That was another uncomfortable conversation with Floyd's mom.

"She is fine. She left yesterday to visit her sister Eunice to avoid being left alone at home, now that the children had come over to visit their mom, Akumu," he told another lie to shield Faith from the truth that her husband and his mom, Florence, were together in his home.

"She seems to be greatly enjoying city life," Faith observed before observing self-pityingly, though it might have been a joke. "Better her she must visit somewhere every weekend as some of us are left to face these walls alone every day of our life."

That elicited a laugh. "That is by choice, Mom," Duofold said, "you have a daughter, me, and now Akumu is relocating to Nakuru. All these are homes you can visit anytime you want."

"It is a joke, son; I am lazy-bones. But you are right; I should start visiting too. You will pass my regards to Florence. When is she coming back?"

Duofold pretended not to hear. The day seemed full of questions he had no immediate answers for both from Yasmin's parents to now his stepmom.

"I must get going now," he said, removing the car keys from his pocket. "The kids have a bit of shopping to do for school tomorrow, as I pick Mom on my way. Give my love to Floyd."

They both came out to see Duofold and the children off. Akumu seemed a bit unhappy. It appeared she would have liked a private moment with Duofold, which her mother-in-law sensed and deliberately denied them the moment by hanging around them until Duofold left the compound.

WHEN DUOFOLD AND THE CHILDREN finally got home, they passed through his mom's house. He wanted to see whether she would mention Dad Fidel's visit. His mother looked happy and radiant. She said nothing. The visit would be her untold secret. He found her expertly fiddling with a smartphone that Fidel had bought her. She had long abandoned her feature phone, which she later gave to Duofold's elder daughter, Baily. She had a lot of leftover rice and chicken after entertaining Fidel. They enjoyed the meal before Duofold went to retire and bed the children.

Duofold woke up to the morning he seemed to like most, which was driving the children to school. He bid them goodbye after dropping them off and paused a moment to watch them walk to their classes. He noticed Binte's uniform was short again, and so were her brother's trousers. After the one-month school holiday, they had grown taller. But to Duofold, it felt like they had grown overnight, with their clothes suddenly looking small on them. He felt proud to note the milestone. He made a mental note to buy them new uniforms, including shoes which he thought must be hurting them by now as their feet must have grown as well. He would look into it over the weekend; his week was tight before then.

He made it to the office just in time for the weekly planning meeting with the sales team. However, just as he was about to enter, his phone beeped.

"Hello Linda, nice to hear from you."

"Hi Duo, I am already here to see you, dear. Are you in your office?"

"Come right in."

"How have you been, *Someone's Wife*?" Duofold teased her. "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Now that you are taken, I feel cheated. But I can't help that. You made it just in time; I was about to relocate my office to the first floor. Before you ask why, you saw what happened at your party with my boss. I want

to keep a respectful distance. Let's keep the details for later. But, speaking of which, how was the party? Did my people do a good job?"

"Oh yes, they did, Duofold! The event turned out great; everyone was very impressed. I even got you some orders for the month. I hope you will not be overwhelmed."

"I am in my element the busier I become, darling. So long as I put a smile on a client's face I will be happy to oblige, no matter how many they are. Bring the list so that I start planning for the events."

"What do you mean the event was hosted by Duofold's company?" Mary demanded. They turned around, surprised. They hadn't noticed her approach and that she was at the door eavesdropping.

"I am here to see Duofold today, not you, Mary. If you can, please excuse us," Linda said jokingly and in a friendly tone. She agreed with Mary to talk later out of the office.

At that very moment, however, the sales team was in Duofold's office requesting he joins their meeting, which they were about to conclude.

Duofold asked to be given a few minutes to finish with Linda and would be joining the team. To get more privacy, he led Linda to the corridors.

In the meantime, as Mary was heading to her office, she overheard some members of the team saying something that made her stop to listen.

"Did you guys see Duofold's wife?" Stacy, a member of the team, was saying. "She is such a knockout, pretty and down to earth. I loved their moves on the floor as they opened the dance for us." She stopped to demonstrate the dance moves to the team. "They are such a perfect match."

This was news to Mary.

"What was this party Duofold and his wife were dancing for you?" she asked Stacy.

Then, unlike the boss she was, greatly surprising the team, Mary snatched Stacy's phone as she showed the team photos she had taken of Duofold and the supposed wife, Yasmin.

Madam Boss sent those photos to her phone and headed downstairs to confront Duofold. He found him showing Linda his new office.

"Who gave you permission to move your office downstairs, Duofold?" she demanded. "Linda, you need to go. This is time for work. I have stuff I need to discuss with Duofold."

Linda excused herself and felt the deep hostility between her two friends as she left them. Duofold did not have to tell her, especially after what she witnessed during her party, but she saw why he was moving office.

"Who is this woman you go flashing to the workers?"

"Confine the discussion to Instar matters," Duofold told Mary once they were alone. "I owe you no explanation about my private life Madam Boss."

"It was a company party," Duofold said calmly, "and nobody was told who to or who not to show up with at the party, Madam Boss."

"This is the lady who replaced me? I meant nothing to you, Duofold? This is why you are provoking me from every angle to see my reaction?"

"That is not the case," he tried to explain. "We are not compatible; we were not meant for each other, and there is nothing I can do about that Madam Boss. You are always going on about how I am your junior in age and rank at the office. What I need is a wife; you are looking for a man to submit to you, to your demands. We agreed I am not that man. My life carries with it baggage I am not ready to shed for your sake. I'm a man. I do not want to submit to my boss for a wife. I am the head of my family, and that shall remain, no matter the woman in my life."

Mary ignored replying to this. She instead aggressively asked, again going out of context, "Who approved the budget for the party?"

"It is within my mandate to appreciate my staff when they do a good job. I circulated the email about the party, but it seems you were too busy with friends to read it. That is not your docket, Madam Boss."

"I am not buying that one. You will pay for that event from your pocket, not from company coffers to entertain your women, Duofold!

"Release my two per cent commission earned from the two accounts I have just delivered, accounts that have already made Instar break even," he replied, showing some irritation, as he added, "Pay and I will then be happy to foot the bill for the company party, although that is also subject to discussion. You are also not the final authority to company affairs."

"Why do you have a side hustle operating a personal company when you are already an Instar employee?"

"Do not cross the line, Madam Boss. If I have failed Instar in any way, let me know. I have the freedom to engage in any business I wish during my free time. You can sack me if you want, but I am not your servant. I am here to revive the Instar you brought to its knees."

"You want to prove you are a better manager than Liz and me, Duofold?"

"No one is proving any point here. I am in it to make money and add value to our industry. If we have nothing else to discuss, Madam Boss, I have a lot to attend to right now."

"I am very disappointed in you, Duofold. I told you to keep off my circles, and this morning, I found you again with Linda. You already have another woman. Why flirt with Linda? Of all people, why choose my friend?"

"Linda is my friend too; she had come to drop a cheque for the catering service at her event. You cannot control who I can or cannot meet or do business with, Madam Boss. Learn to respect people. Stop making a fool of yourself. Also, stop harassing other ladies because of what you still think is our relationship, a relationship that has died a natural death. We are not meant for each other; we only have a job to do together, remember!"

"You have zero respect for me, Duofold. Why must you show the whole world you are done with me? What is the big deal in you running your home and seeing me once in a while? You killed what we nurtured together without notice or signs you were quitting, simply because younger women have popped out from hell knows where. You think I should let other women take you away from me without a fight? We shall see who wins in this game," Mary threatened and abruptly walked back to her office.

DUOFOLD WAS LEFT FEELING DRAINED after the confrontation. He buzzed his secretary to tell the sales team to meet in his new office. Though he was feeling exhausted, he pulled himself together to present the picture of his usual vibrant self to the team. But still thinking about Mary, he wondered how people ever managed difficult affairs, especially with colleagues. He would never again attempt office affairs.

He greeted the team jovially, asking them whether they enjoyed the party and whether it was worth it. They said they found it rewarding; they felt rejuvenated and looked forward to good sales in the new month. His plan for the day was to visit their product outlets with them. It was going to be a long day. He asked them to first go have breakfast he had ordered for them at the cafeteria.

When he got to the café, he found everyone busy in a corner making calls as they ate their breakfast. They were organising merchandisers to arrange Instar products before they visited the outlets. The day would turn out to be the one the company registered its highest sale ever.

By the time Duofold got home, the children were already in bed. He passed by their bedrooms to check on them. Warrior was sleeping across his bed over the duvet and was almost slipping to the floor.

He thought sleeping the way Warrior was spread on his bed was what freedom felt like. It was the kind of freedom he desired too. He remembered how Akumu

once commented that, if it was up to him, he might have wanted to have their bed for himself for to sleep as he wished, whether he fell on the floor, snored, or farted—and to owe no one an apology. He left the Warrior's door a bit open to allow fresh air for these very reasons.

He found Binte sleeping with her teddy bear, and both are well-tacked. She was his peaceful, beautiful princess, and her room smelt fresh with scents of her oils and her special bath still hanging in the air. The freshness made him wonder how Akumu was able to accommodate him in their bedroom when he would come late stinking beer and sweat. This thought reminded him to shower when he got to his room after the hot, dusty day.

HE DIDN'T SLEEP VERY WELL THAT NIGHT. And as days went by, he feared he was losing the urge to work at Instar. He felt like breaking his agreement with Liz to revive Instar and walk away. It was difficult working with her partner Mary. He was discovering a troubling side of Madam Boss in which she seemed to hate couples by the way she harassed any two people of the opposite sex walking together in the office corridors. It was like she was Mother Superior in a Catholic nunnery or monastery to enforce celibacy vows.

Duofold, however, decided not to slow down or get discouraged by Madam Boss; he decided to go about his work without apology to anyone. If his interactions with Boss Mary amounted to failure, he would embrace it as a valuable lesson. What he could not do was risk the Instar products he had introduced to the market. While some products had burned Instar's fingers, others were doing quite well.

And, speaking of failures, Mary seemed to overlook that knowing which product worked and which to trash took testing the market. *Was that rocket science to know?* Duofold wondered. If not, why send an email that seemed to lay blame on Duofold for the products that didn't pass the market test? It amounted to laying company liabilities to his account.

Duofold was determined to make a difference. He, however, realised Liz was not copied in the email and ought to have been included. Mary not appreciating his work was the same thing as the company not appreciating the staff he oversaw as well. Yet motivating staff, especially the sales and production team, was a company responsibility. It was them who were the fuel to the business. They often worked late burning the midnight oil as the rest of the staff merely clocked their work cards from eight to five pm.

He would send Liz the email if only to keep her in the loop. He also wanted to assure her he would keep taking chances if the company they had revived was to

survive. It was up to him to take ownership because, after all, he had as heavily invested in it as Liz.

Despite the satisfaction he felt defining the future of Instar, the love-hate relationship with Madam Boss was threatening it all. He could not let that happen, not on his watch. Duofold saw himself as the engine that ran the business and had to keep it going despite Mary's urge to punish him for crossing the line with her.

CHAPTER TEN

DUOFOLD TOOK THE MORNING FLIGHT from Nairobi and was seated at a meeting one-and-a-half hours later in Mombasa. On the plane, he sat next to a pleasant lady with who he struck up a conversation. She, too, was attending a meeting in the coastal city, she explained to him.

Duofold trip to the coast was to make a presentation on behalf of Instar, which was among a closed list of organisations bidding for a tender award. He was surprised to find the lady on the plane was a panellist in the same meeting he was making the Instar pitch. All went well, and the panel seemed impressed by his presentation, though the lady showed no recognition of him. Duofold, however, thought he caught the lady's eyes all over him; she seemed more captivated by him, if not by his presentation.

Having already been known to the lady, it was as if he had already pitched it to her on the plane though he had not. Yet because of this, the presentation felt to Duofold like an elevator pitch in which it took him only thirty minutes to beat the other bidders and secure Instar the lucrative three-year contract to supply ready-to-eat food for a programme the County Government was running.

After that, he had a lot of time on his hands before his flight back that evening.

He went to a new swanky tourist hotel somebody had recommended to him. He wanted to take a dip in the seawater. It had been a while, and he knew a good swim was not only great for the skin but the immune system. It also helped reduce anxiety, speaking of which he thought of his new lady Yasmin.

He didn't seem to get her out of his mind. As always, he wondered whether she would make a good mother for his children. He also had still not quite gotten over his experience with Madam Boss Mary. The experience always lurked at the back of his mind as a reminder of how bad things could get.

A splash in the ocean made him feel a lot better. *The beach makes me forget my worries,* Duofold soothed himself as he tried a backstroke. And as the seawater flowed over his body, the pleasure he felt was like poetry: *It feels as good as newfound love,* he thought, giving himself to the ocean. *Just a tide picking me and flowing with it.*

After the swim, his breathing felt easier and was surprised that his bowel movement felt much better. He then took a shower to wash away the dirt and sea salt from his body.

Now refreshed, he felt a bit hungry, as a good swim tends to make one. He settled himself on a beach chair to order a hamburger and some coffee. His thoughts turned to his newfound love Yasmin, and it struck him that he may not have much time on his hands after all.

It occurred to him to go back with something special from Mombasa as a gift of his appreciation for Yasmin; their friendship. This would take time doing the shopping. He quickly finished the meal and called for a cab.

A ring was just the sort of special gift he had in mind, and he found it in a jewellery shop that also had something else he was looking for, which was a beautiful set of expensive necklaces and earrings he came across that the attendant told him was made in Sweden. It was just the kind of gift she would like. He took measurements for the ring using his little finger, which he had long noticed equalled the size of Yasmin's finger that would fit the band—a gold ring crowned with a sparkly jewel.

To Duofold, the sparkly ring symbolised the burning fire in Yasmin he always wanted to keep aflame. She promised the world he desired a woman with the qualities he was looking for. She was unlike the Marys of this world, who he thought of as "*the not-quite*, *the not-yet*, and *the not at all"* type of woman that threatened to perish his heroic soul in the lonely frustrations of a life without a dependable woman. He deserved the life he wished to live and must win it.

He remembered his Dad Fidel in his wisdom once, reminding him never to be afraid to start all over again. He agreed with Fidel, but this time the lesson to start afresh would be from his own experience after what he'd been through with Mary. He hoped Yasmin would live up to his expectations.

Duofold felt his shoulders suddenly go heavy as somebody hugged him from behind. He turned in surprise. It was the lady from the plane. She was on her way to the airport and was looking for a place to have a bite. She wanted a place offering authentic Swahili cuisine. Duofold confessed he was not very conversant with Mombasa, but she had an idea where to find such a place. This, Duofold understood, was an invitation to join her. Within no time, they were having the meaty pilau dish cooked in coconut, popular with Kenyan visitors to the coast.

"My name is Mary, now you know," she told him. "But do not worry, Duofold, about my liking you. You are a great man, and we did not award you the tender because of your looks. The Instar food samples were earlier presented to us by a sales lady from your company, and we were all in love with it. I was hoping your company would show up, as we were not supposed to single source bidders; it was supposed

to be open bidding through an advertisement in the newspapers. The invitation of the two other companies today was in case Instar didn't show up. So, thank you for showing up, Sir."

"Pleasure to know your name, Madam," he avoided acknowledging her by name because it reminded him of the Madam Boss. "I had no idea you had encountered Instar products already. I was travelling but had the urge to introduce our food to this county when I saw the advert. I sent a representative – her name is Stacy – who I thought would not do a great job. I am sure she was hesitant to engage with an institution such as yours fearing she would not make a good sales pitch. But I'm glad she proved me wrong. This was her sale. I will make sure she gets a good commission. Thanks for mentioning this to me, Madam."

He shook her hand in a show of thanks, which seemed to make her open up about her secret admiration of him.

"Were it not that I am married," she confessed, "I would have fought the woman in your life and made you my man, Duofold. You are so handsome I have no idea how to hold myself after today's encounter."

"Oh no, you are taken already, Madam? No worries, we are now friends, and we shall do a lot of business together. I will be sending you an incentive for considering Instar."

"That incentive arrangement would work perfectly, for I am nursing a two-year-old at the moment, but due to a happy accident, I have conceived again. In six months, I shall be a mother of three. I hope I get a girl this time. My boys are a nightmare breaking everything in their way."

"What! You must be going through a lot, my dear. I wish you a girl, too," encouraged Duofold.

Mary looked at her watch. "We need to hurry not to get held in traffic with all the road works going on in this city," she urged.

They were boarding the same flight, and Duofold hailed a taxi to the airport.

As it turned out, Mary was right about the roadworks, which had caused such heavy traffic that they had to resort to using *boda bodas*, the popular motorbike taxis that ply the city. They took the *bodas* despite their dread of them, which, as they feared, seemed to recklessly swing from the right side of the road dodging traffic, missing oncoming cars by a whisker.

By the time they were dropped at the airport, Duofold and Mary were very frightened and angry for endangering their lives that they almost didn't pay the *boda boda* guys driving them.

YASMIN HAD NOT LEFT her bed the whole day, and it was not because she was unwell; she did not know how to break the news to Duofold about her former relationship and the devastation it left her. She feared that should he know the truth, it would be the end of the beautiful relationship that was already blossoming. Her fears played in her mind like a self-repeating video clip—the shock on his face at knowing the truth followed by disgust as she looked on shamefaced and in tears watching him end the relationship. But she realised her fears would not solve anything and that it was best to confront them. And the best way to confront the fears was with the truth. She knew enough to realise that lies did not always stay hidden; they tended to come back at you in the future when least expected.

She wondered whether Duofold planned to have children with her. Would that be a stumbling block for them becoming a couple when he learned the truth?

She cried often that day. And, confined to her bed the whole day, her parents began to get concerned. It troubled them that she wouldn't tell them what was bothering her.

The following day her mother called Duofold, asking him to pass by. Yasmin was unwell, she told him without elaborating.

The call came when he was just dropping the children at school. He decided to go see Yasmin immediately; he had no reason to wait until later. In any case, he missed her. It was also convenient because Yasmin's home was not too far from his children's school.

Within five minutes, he was hooting at her parent's gate. "Hello, my sweet pie," he greeted a calm-looking Yasmin when he entered her room. "Your mom just called me. Lovesick?" he said, trying to cheer her up.

"Duofold, you promised to be there for me no matter my shortcomings."

"Promise me too," he replied lightly, with a smile, "promise that you shall be my children's mom and will always love them no matter my shortcomings."

"I love them already. They are my children and the only children I might ever have. I will do anything that will make you a happy husband, Duofold."

Duofold felt relief wash over him. The way she said it seemed to confirm his hope she was the woman he was looking for.

"Yes, I did promise to always be there for you," he said.

She, too, felt a deep sense of relief wash over her. Her heart quickened with excitement.

The excitement was mutual. Duofold warmly hugged and gave her a long kiss before making love to her. In the heat of the moment, it did not occur to Duofold that they had not locked the door, especially because, in his cultural tradition, it was

considered the height of bad manners and disrespect to bed a daughter of the family at the suitor's prospective in-laws' home.

After she recovered, the act having happened too spontaneously, she took in a deep breath at the sudden relaxation she now felt and opened to Duofold about herself. She held nothing back and narrated the horror that had been her previous relationship.

"I am Indian-Eqyptian," she began, "Indian courtesy of my mom and Egyptian from my dad. I am not fully Indian as you probably thought."

Barot, my ex, was Indian. We loved each other a lot, but his parents had another girl in mind other than me for their son—a girl from a wealthy family in India they wanted him to marry. He protested against it and informed them I was pregnant with his baby and that I was the one he wanted to marry. He told them I was his choice and was not going to agree to an arranged marriage. I was at the time attending the same college as him in Britain.

During our summer holidays, his parents invited us to Singapore, where they were residing then. Though I was supposed to be heading to Kenya, I agreed to the invitation to spend the holiday with Barot. They seemed a normal happy family, and his parents were warm and happy to see us. We did have a good time.

I, therefore, had no reason to suspect anything bad happening, and I've always wondered why it happened. I suspect it was Barot's mother who laced my food with something that caused me to seriously vomit and lose consciousness.

I woke up in the hospital. The doctor informed me I had lost the baby. My uterus appeared to have been inflamed. I did not understand how despite the doctor's explanation and there was no one else to talk to, not even my boyfriend. Barot and his parents had already left for Europe. The doctor tried to explain that they had been unable to cancel their flights to wait for me to regain consciousness. But I was left alone in a foreign land. They, however, had left my passport and air ticket to Kenya, my parent's home.

I did not know how to communicate this to my parents. They, however, insisted I tell them what was wrong, seeing that I cried myself to sleep each day. It left me little energy to face the pain and dejection I felt after that relationship. I killed myself in my head a thousand times before I met you.

I am a lawyer by profession and was determined to sue them, but I did not have their full names, except my boyfriend's, nor was I ever able to trace him or his parents thereafter. My emails went unanswered while his phone was switched off.

After consultations with colleagues, I chose not to pursue damages. I left it to God to avenge me.

It, however, left me infertile; I'm now not able to conceive. What happened to me is not something I can wish even on my worst enemy.

I hope you give me a chance to love you, Duofold. I have all it takes to raise Warrior and Binte as my own children. Maybe this is how God wanted it for me.

The memory of what she had gone through was difficult to narrate, yet Yasmin saw hope and dignity in Duofold. She was wiping her eyes when she finished.

Duofold remained silent for a moment as if trying to absorb what he had just heard. Then he folded his fists and was consumed with such murderous rage as he never thought he was capable. He wished to meet that Barot face to face and strangle him. Yet her story somewhat sounded like his with the poisoning by his dad Hezron in a grudge that could have easily been discussed and resolved.

Did the person want to kill Yasmin by killing the baby in her womb? What would have been so wrong to accept her as a daughter-in-law? Duofold wondered to himself. *It is enough to make one lose faith in humanity.*

"I am so sorry, Yasmin. I can accept that one is never perfect in everyone's eyes, but Barot and his parent must be a very mean family. Life has many challenges, but this one must be among the worst to face alone, though I realise your parents shared in your pain. Accept my love for you as the first step towards healing and restoring your peace of mind. Where is the guy now?"

"I hear they live in the UK now. I believe it was a well-planned thing, or who in their right mind would leave a sick girlfriend in a hospital bed unconscious in a foreign country and change their phone number?"

Yasmin didn't say it aloud, but she believed in the saying that *what goes around comes around*. She believed Barot's family would pay for it one day. She saw it as a class issue that they seemed not to want an average person like her to propagate their genes. Her wish that, if anything, they should have left her innocent unborn baby alone brought tears to her eyes.

Duofold, as if reading her mind, was able to see what she must be going through and tried to calm her.

"I am here for you, girlfriend," he said. "We shall do everything within our ability to make you a proud mother again. I believe you will get a baby one day to hold it in your arms and suckle him. I seem to think it will be a boy," he smiled encouragingly. "I'll ask around for a good gynaecologist to look into it, no matter what it shall cost. Even if you never get a baby, you'll forever be my beloved wife. Ask your mom to cook us dinner tomorrow. I will come with my kids. It will be an opportunity for us to warm up to each other; your parents and me with my children as a family with you in the picture. I'll be asking for your hand in marriage soon. I now realise how lucky I was to have bumped into you."

This made Yasmin smile, remembering that evening at the parking lot. Being Duofold's wife was what Yasmin cherished the most. She could already visualise the day the kids would become independent and go their ways, leaving her and Duofold to age together, God willing.

As Duofold hugged her before he left, he wished he was in a position to change some of her past. He hoped her night would be calmer now that he had assured her to always be by her side.

As he got into the car, he thought how, just like him, Yasmin must have gone through a lot. They both now had another chance to lead a better, more fulfilled life together. He foresaw it as a great adventure opening new chapters as their life unfolded before them. He started the car and headed to the office.

A car hooted behind him flashing lights, signalling him to pave the way. He didn't realise he was too slow. Then he noticed the light traffic on the road and realised it must have been mid-morning after the morning jam had eased. He checked on the rear-view mirror and paved the way. Then a thought entered his mind that there must be a reason the rear-view mirror is made small and the windscreen large and open. Still thinking about Yasmin, he saw a lesson in this, how like life, the windscreen symbolised a clear view ahead without dwelling too much in the past, to only look back at what needed to be seen. Her pain, just like his, was in the past. He appreciated her frankness about her painful past with the former boyfriend's family and her trusting him enough to tell him about it. He recognised it as a key first step to her healing process.

HE ARRIVED AT THE OFFICE and was met with mock displeasure by his friend Ben. "You have wasted my morning Duofold," he said, pretending anger. "If I knew you were not starting your day here in the office, I would have attended to other urgent matters." He said this, perusing through his phone without looking at Duofold.

"My apologies Ben; I got caught up in an emergency I could not ignore. I missed you, buddy. How is Nutribelt?"

"I am here for business. Or why would a man miss another man, Kim, if not business? You have nothing to offer me as a man. If anything, this hunk body of yours makes us lose our women to you. Linda is married, and yet every conversation I have with her these days, you don't miss a mention. No offence, though. After all, I met her through you. She only warmed up to me because you were married and chose to be just a friend, not my woman. But that aside, Duo, I am keen to know whether you got another woman, or we should help you in the search."

"Ben, you must have a loose wire somewhere and need a psychiatrist. You tell me you are here for business, but what I hear you talk about is women. You swing from one side of the pendulum to the other. You have not changed much, have you? And, yes, I got someone. I'll invite you to meet her. She is as beautiful as Akumu; her name is Yasmin. She has warmed up to my children. I hope this shall be my final marriage.

Otherwise, I've come to realise it is very easy to end up a bachelor. About my hunk body, I have no apologies to make. Do more exercise and take less beer. Better yet, make money for women to ignore your looks, Big Ben."

"I prefer the second option, buddy; let me make money. With it in the pocket, women will follow me with their eyes blind. You know, Duo, some of us are not dogs as some women say of men. We are kangaroos, hopping from one relationship to the other."

They left the office laughing at such ribald jokes as they headed to a café after Ben suggested they discuss business over coffee.

Ben was the Managing Director of Nutribelt Kenya, a company Instar closely worked with. He explained to Duofold how the infant formula Instar had done for them was drawing a lot of attention. The attention was such that a Saudi food company wanted to come to Kenya and meet the company behind the product. They wanted a similar formulation for relief food supply to drought-hit areas around the world. It promised to be a huge order. Ben quoted 40 per cent more than Nutribelt previous order by Instar. The client was fine with the price given by Ben.

"I hope the order covers your costs, Duofold, and a commission for your friend Ben." He was leveraging Instar for a tidy profit for getting the company a good order.

"How much are you looking at, Ben?" Duofold was happy to pay his friend Ben for the business opportunity to Instar. Whatever commission Ben would ask, Duofold was ready and willing to pay. After all, the account Ben gave to Instar was a big boost to the startup company after it went under.

"Just Two per cent, Duo. The volumes are good, something enough for my retirement. I can't work like a donkey for Nutribelt all my life. This experience needs to be channelled somewhere else now."

"I shall give you the two per cent commission. I do not want to bargain so that you grow wings to leave Nutribelt."

"Thank you, Buddy. It will be more than enough," said Ben.

"I look forward to the day you shall be bold enough to open your own setup," urged Duofold, who understood his friend. "You have the potential to thrive, and you are still young to absorb the mistakes that will be sure to happen along the way. I can always be a partner in it, Big Ben. And thanks for the heads-up. When is the Saudia group likely to be coming?"

"I'll surprise you this time, Duofold. I have been flapping my wings. Now I am ready for take-off. In a fortnight, the Saudi guys will be here. They are already in Africa mapping areas to donate at least fifty per cent of the consignment they are buying. There will also be a business for transport logistics to deliver the consignment. If you are able, it is yours for the taking."

"I'll skip the delivery offer for now. I do not understand the workings of logistics too well and would hate to burn my fingers. It, however, can work for Linda; they have a logistics department that I have been hiring trucks from."

Ben was on the phone as Duofold was saying this. "I have just forwarded to you the email we exchanged with the Saudi team," he said. "Read it to appreciate the work ahead. In the meantime, let me call Linda for the transport job. I need my commission too. She may have refused to be my woman, but she can warm my pocket instead."

He browsed his phone's address book. He seemed to have lost Linda's number, which Duofold was happy to give him.

"My goodness!" Duofold exclaimed after reading the email. "The order they are asking is enough to feed this country's population for a whole year, Ben. This will be huge for Linda, too. I can't let you eat that commission alone," he teased. "You will have to buy me a beer when you get it. I will have earned it for pointing her to you, plus I've also given you her phone number."

Ben couldn't help a chuckle. "That is why I've told you I am retiring from Nutribelt after this Saudi account, buddy. You, therefore, better do a good job on it, and you shall have earned that beer when Linda comes through on her delivery. But I've dealt with her before, and she is stingy paying goodwill, which adds to your work to follow up with her if you are to earn the drink."

"Agreed," said Duofold laughing. "This calls for a celebration. Do you know a place we can raise a celebratory glass of wine over lunch as we listen to jazz?"

"Let's skip jazz for today; let's do Japanese cuisine."

"Japanese sounds good, then I'll start on the order right away to source raw materials. Call Linda and put her on the speaker so that we close on the logistics."

Linda was happy to hear from both and was pleasantly surprised at the size of the deal. She would send the contract for Duofold to sign, much to Ben's relief. He did not want conflict-of-interest issues arising at work with any business related to Nutribelt.

It turned out to be a working lunch, for as they discussed strategy while eating, Ben identified a cargo ship from Brazil that was ready to deliver soya beans to Instar. He also learnt from his network of contacts of a delayed consignment of maize in a Japanese vessel that was time-barred and docked in Mombasa. The owners of the maize cargo were looking for a market to offload it at very attractive terms of thirty-five per cent below market price. Falling on such an opportunity was one of the reasons Ben had suggested the Japanese restaurant, whose owners helped negotiate for Instar. And Ben, always the good businessman, again negotiated a one per cent commission on the deal.

The purchase documents were sent by email, which Duofold would print, sign and stamp once he was back at the office and send them back. The rest of the materials for the Saudi order would be sourced locally. It was a fruitful day both for Ben and Instar.

AS BUSINESS WAS FLOWING IN, Instar was also gaining back its name and was already attracting broader international attention. Even as Duofold was closing on the Saudi deal, Instar had already been invited to a global food safety festival in Israel. Madam Boss Mary had already travelled there to represent Instar. It was a break she needed away from the office after what had happened between her and Duofold. However, neither of them had dared to report the misunderstanding between them to Liz; it was a personal matter between two lovers who had fallen out and had nothing to do with Instar.

Boss Mary had already been away for two weeks and was not responding to Duofold's emails. He was worried this might delay the Saudi order, which needed to be fast-tracked. Decisions needed to be made and approvals completed before the Saudi team was in the country to sign the contract. With Mary away, Instar didn't have a second signatory to free funds to purchase the raw materials required for the order. He had to bring Liz into it, despite the understanding that she should be allowed to concentrate on her work in the US. This, however, was an emergency, and not acting on it would amount to sabotaging Instar because of the huge amount of profit involved. He got hold of Liz, and they agreed to fund Instar through SmartLink International, which Duofold had the mandate as an alternate signatory in the absence of Liz. The problem was solved.

The consignment was paid for on time, and the cargo was offloaded to a warehouse in Mombasa as they waited for the next available cargo train ready for shipping from Mombasa to Nairobi, where Instar operations were based.

Everything was ready by the time the Saudi team arrived. A sample of the product was already on display as Duofold gave a presentation and sampling of the food. He also gave the team a tour of the factory. This impressed the Saudis. They signed the contract and authorised a bank transfer of a fifty per cent down payment to begin production.

The order was so huge that Duofold had to recruit a bigger workforce to meet the timelines. Gerald worked round the clock and had to open a special wing dedicated to the Saudi order while ensuring regular orders did not fall behind schedule. It fully occupied both Gerard and Duofold, who found little time for love, family, or any other business.

It concerned Duofold that he was not finding time to be with the children or Yasmin. He requested she moves in from her parent's home and takes charge of the family. This was an important milestone, which greatly excited Yasmin to be invited back to be part of Duofold's family. She loved the family and was an attentive caregiver. The children welcomed her and were happy to have a mother figure sooner than they had anticipated. She was friendly and sensitive to the children's needs. For the first time since they reunited with their dad, they did not mind that they rarely saw him as he worked day and night. He only went to the house for a change of clothes and was out again back to the office. The only family tradition he maintained was a morning kiss to the children before leaving for office, as Yasmin happily assigned herself the official driver to take them to school and back. It would be a full month when Duofold would flag off the Saudi shipment that family life would return to normal.

Madam Boss finally returned after her long business trip to Israel. And still having not yet checked her email, she was unaware of any new developments at the office. She was, therefore, surprised to not only find this huge order from Saudi Arabia but that it had already been contracted while she was away. Perhaps more surprising to her was that the first consignment was being prepared for delivery that very day she reported to the office.

Duofold was not yet in the office; he would arrive later, having slept late overseeing the final details of the order. But in Mary's devious mind, she saw the order as another opportunity to frustrate Duofold and take credit for the project.

Duofold had already prepared a well-appointed tented area where a small party in honour of the Saudi team would be held before they flagged off the first caravan of the consignment.

It was a fine sunny day with a few clouds idly sliding by against the blue sky. Duofold arrived in the office and was on hand to welcome the client with an elaborate lunch and introduce them to Madam CEO.

No sooner had he finished talking when, to his surprise, boss Mary explained how she had been away only to come back and discover a problem with the contract. The contract, she said, had to be revised and signed anew. The price given to them was unrealistic and needed to be revised upwards by ten per cent. Otherwise, she was cancelling the order.

Duofold tried to explain to Boss Mary that the costing had been above board and reflected market rates. He asked her to reconsider. Boss Mary would hear none of it as she rudely walked out on Duofold and the clients.

Duofold apologised and begged the clients for some time and requested them to make themselves comfortable as he sorted out the issue.

"Is this woman a devil or what?" wondered a senior member of the Saudi team. "Who does she think she is to display such arrogance to us? Were it not for you, Duo, we would cancel this order as she demands."

This was embarrassing. Duofold regretted that such important clients should witness such stupidity. "Do not worry, Hussein," he said, "It is not over until it is over. I'll be back with documents for you to sign in a few minutes."

In yet another surprise, he found Madam Boss had already left the office for the day. He was told she had left for the countryside, most likely to present gifts from Israel to her relatives.

Duofold was done with her. He decided he would never consult Mary on any future projects, beginning with this one. From now on, it would be his way or the highway for Madam Boss Mary.

Duofold prepared a new contract under SmartLink International. The formulations in the product the Saudis were flagging off were patented under his name. It was only out of his goodwill and the respect he had for Liz that he allowed Instar to use the formulation. Not always keen on details, Madam Boss had no idea the formulas did not belong to Instar. She was also not aware SmartLink had financed the order. The only thing Instar contributed was the brand name and packaging.

Madam Boss Mary may also not have been aware that of SmartLink's ownership, which had 100 shares, Duofold owned 50 shares and Liz the other 50 shares. And of Instar's 100 shares, SmartLink owned 50 shares, and both Liz and Madam Boss Mary owned 23 shares each, or 46 shares. Duofold owned the remaining four shares in Instar. This meant that because of SmartLink's ownership, Liz owned a combined 48 shares in Instar, and Duofold a combined 29 shares ownership of the foods company. Therefore, with Mary's minority ownership of 23 shares, Instar did not need her vote to make a decision. Once the truth came out about her trying to pull the plug on the Saudi order without involving Liz, Duofold did not think it would endear her to their senior partner Liz.

Duofold apologised to the client again as they signed the documents. They were impressed with his professionalism and wondered why such a talented man like him could work for such a person as Mary. They could not have known it had little to do with the office; that Madam Boss Mary was like a lioness with bruised ego; that she was acting out her power to demean the man who thought he could quit a relationship with her whenever he felt like it. But this didn't matter. The order now belonged to SmartLink, though processed by Instar.

Duofold bid the clients a good night and paid for their hotel accommodation to make up for the day they had wasted as he sorted out the logistics. They were happy with him and said they looked forward to working with him in the future.

After bidding them goodbye, Duofold entered the office to clear his desk. He noticed a sealed envelope addressed to him. The message it carried was the last thing he might have expected: It was a brief letter on official Instar letterhead informing him that he had been dismissed from Instar with immediate effect. It was signed by Madam Boss Lady.

The letter did not shock Duofold so much as it annoyed him. He was bursting with anger. He packed his bag and headed straight home. He needed a rest. Tomorrow would be a demanding day.

He took a shower, three tots of whisky, popped his head into the children's bedrooms to see if they were asleep, and went to bed.

He found Yasmin half-asleep. "You will forgive me," he said softly to her, "I left you with all my house chores managing my children alone. Do not worry, dear; this is the last busy week, my girl."

Yasmin curled herself into Duofold's warm body without a word, and it felt like heaven for both of them. Their bliss was cut short by the alarm clock at 5 am, which Duofold had to obey and prepare for office.

DUOFOLD WAS OUT OF THE HOUSE BY 6 AM. He drove to work thinking how the production team had done a great job. The event had also gone better than expected. Aside from him and Mary, who nearly messed it up, none of the Instar staff knew there had been a problem. Duofold handled everything in the boardroom, skilfully managing the issue.

Although Madam Boss Mary was back from the village the following day, she stayed away from the office for the next five days and was unreachable by phone or email. If Duofold had been able to read her mind, he would not have been surprised by what she was thinking. By keeping away from the office, she wanted to make the Saudi team desperate to come to her on their knees, begging for restoration of the contract.

As this fiction took hold of her, she visualised how the Saudi sale would be hers to manage after sacking Duofold. She wanted to exaggerate the production costs and keep the money for her retirement. This was the most lucrative sale Instar had ever made; taking it would make her instantly rich. She felt she had toiled for the company for far too long and did not think it had a future without a passionate trailblazer like Duofold, who she had already dismissed.

She was of the mind to run the company down after finishing with the Saudi contract, everybody else be damned.

I have my ambitions too than donkey for Liz as she gallivants from one continent to the other, Mary told herself.

On the morning of her return to the office five days later, she checked her emails to plan her day. A shock awaited her. She could not believe she was now Haman in the Bible, the antagonist who built the gallows to hang Mordechai, only to end up losing his own life.

The email she was reading informed her that a company resolution had been passed to dismiss her with immediate effect for trying to sabotage an important account. The email stressed how her behaviour had threatened profits that promised to turn around Instar's fortunes. It was at this moment she realised she was a minority shareholder of the Instar and that Duofold, who she thought dispensable, had more shares than her. She had not known he was a co-founder of SmartLink, making his shares at Instar much more than hers. Combined with Liz, they did not need her to transact company business.

She rushed to the office to quickly clear her desk before secrets of her underhand dealings during her tenure as CEO was unearthed by the two directors.

She was too late. She found that the premises were no longer branded Instar but were now emblazoned with the name and logo of SmartLink.

At first, she thought she was lost until she realised what had happened. She was informed by the guards at the gate that they had been given instructions not to let her in until Duofold was back from a meeting.

What a change in fortunes, Mary thought to herself bitterly. *A few days ago, I was the boss here; today, I am nobody and have been locked out.*

It was a harsh reality check for her to imagine how people must feel when overthrown from leadership and employment in an office coup, just like she had planned to do with Duofold.

The reality of it seemed to sober her; she began to question her motives as she sat in the car unable to decide whether to go or wait for Duofold.

I feel so bad about myself now, she told herself. *Am I possessed or what? What was on my mind when I was plotting this nonsense?*

She admitted to herself she was not thorough with details as she always believed she was. She blamed this on the blindness of her hate. She began to appreciate how a desire to destroy someone could very well turn out to be her own downfall, just like Haman in the Bible.

I brought this misfortune to myself. One can never win by using a wrong to make right another wrong, she reprimanded herself.

Then her thoughts turned to Duofold, how he always was polite to her despite belittling him as a mere employee and junior to her, as happened at Linda's party. She

wondered whether he cared for what she was now referring to as her "dramas". He also gave it to Duofold that he caught her most unawares with the coup he had pulled.

MARY WATCHED DUOFOLD DRIVE past her into the premises, and she suddenly felt envious of him. Perhaps because of her new circumstance, she thought he looked prosperous. She knew he had accomplished quite a lot, even though she could not tell how much. Instead, what seemed to consume her now was the envy she felt, how she seemed to have now lost what she had imagined she would acquire.

Duofold asked the guards to let her in.

"Follow me to my office Madam Boss," he said with such seriousness as Mary could not remember ever seeing on his face.

She entered his office and was handed her dismissal letter. He asked her to pack her belongings. For the first time in her life, Madam Boss found herself in an awkward position where she might be forced to beg forgiveness to keep her job. She had no money in her account; her bills were catered for by Instar, and she had been issued a company visa card. She had overspent in Israel, hoping to siphon money from the company, especially after coming upon the Saudi account.

"Madam Boss, if you cannot be a bridge to connect people, do not be a wall to separate them." Duofold felt compelled to say this. "You had no reason to turn down the contract Instar had worked so hard to deliver to the Saudis. If you had no intention to pay me for my effort, the least you could have done is acknowledge it; you could have been the light to brighten the good deed as a company. It was a collective effort. Your dark side, Madam Boss, led to this, to the ugly outcome of your dismissal. Instead of helping water the business to grow, you became a pest to destroy what we had worked so hard to deliver. It was as if you were not a beneficiary of this company.

"We are not sending you home empty-handed, however, as you seemed to have planned for me. Like everybody else in this company, you deserve dignity and consideration. We have transferred the company house in your name and have given your son a full scholarship in school. We have also arranged a package which we shall give you upfront and deduct from your dividend at the end of the year. I wish you well in your future endeavours. Only let's not cross each other's path soon."

Duofold handed her the signed paperwork awarding her the farewell package.

"Thank you very much, Duofold. This is a lesson well learned. I hope to be more considerate next time. I wish, though, I was allowed more time to continue working here. I guess I overreacted on our relationship breaking up, but I've learnt my lesson."

"No need to worry. This has nothing to do with you. You cannot change the course of the river, my dear. Your character is you. The only thing people can do is learn to accommodate you and your shortcomings. I tried where I could, but the river swelled and broke its banks. Whatever we have discussed here is the overflow. Otherwise, Instar is here to stay with or without your input. Take your official car too. We do not need it now."

Duofold left Madam Boss packing her belongings and went for briefing meetings with the sales and production teams. He would write an email later to let the staff let know of Mary's exit from the company. He would inform them it was her wish to leave the company for personal reasons and leave it at that. Otherwise, nobody in Instar other than Duofold and Liz knew there had been a problem. The guards might have guessed it, having been instructed to stop her, but it didn't matter.

When she was done packing, Madam Boss quietly left the premises.

HUSSEIN STOOD UP to give a vote of thanks. "Duofold, we are proud of your professionalism and dedication to your work," he began, beaming towards Duofold, who was standing by his side facing the audience. "We are also proud of the way you served us. You reminded us how humility can win hearts—you went beyond your call of duty and won our hearts. Your effort helped us further our humanitarian work. Please accept this as a token of our appreciation. May Allah always remember you and your family."

Hussein handed Duofold a gold medal on behalf of the Saudi team. The medal showed a man holding a map of the world on which was written "I am the print". The vote of thanks and presentation of the medal was done at an international investors' event in Cairo, Egypt. The medal was the highest honour that could be bestowed by the event organisers. It was also one of the most expensive to ever be awarded to an individual. The recognition was a boon, attracting the attention of interested equity investors at the event. They wanted to know more about his work with the possibility so that they could invest in his company.

This availed the opportunity to introduce SmartLink IT innovations. The inventions included an automatic trolley, of which there was a ready market to replace the handcart, normally referred to as *mkokoteni* in Kenya but also commonly used around Africa. The electric trolley, going by the brand name Coten, ran on a battery charged by wheel rotations as it moved about. The more it moved, the better and longer it kept the charge.

The vehicle's unique charging system impressed the investors as an environmentally friendly and clean energy solution that not only promised to ease the

work of porters but increase their productivity. The trolley could also be converted into an electric three-wheeled rickshaw that could carry up to four passengers plus their cargo. It was hailed as a practical and low-cost income-earning solution for those at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

By the end of the event, three investors had pledged to put money into SmartLink, which was already being hailed as one of Africa's most promising startups.

Liz, who was at the event, could not hide her pride in her business partner. She walked up to Duofold and gave him a proud embrace. But realising the cultural environment in which the event was held, she was quick to apologise to the Saudi team in case they were offended. However, whether Liz had embraced Duofold or not was the least of their concerns. They were already quite impressed that she was Duofold's partner. They wondered why she was not more visible running the business. She explained her work to them, and they showed much interest. By the time she was finished, she had connected them with a client in the oil business in the USA.

As they got to know each other better, Duofold opened up to them, and they were quite touched by his story and how Liz saved his life and career. They extended to her a lifetime two per cent commission from the USA account she had linked them. The money would be part of her corporate social responsibility kitty to assist the needy in Kenya.

"I wish I was doing more to contribute to the business you have been channelling to Instar and SmartLink, dear Kim," Liz commented after the event was over. She looked disappointed with herself.

"Consider these your inventions as well, Boss Liz. They are not just my own; you made them possible. You not only gave me back my life but welcomed me into your company which became the springboard to where we are now. I am you, Liz; we are two sides of the same coin – you are heads and me tails. However small you slice a lemon I will help make the lemonade. I am that to you, my darling Liz."

"You flatter me, Kim, but you have always been my beautiful boy. You now give me a reason to come back and help you run one of the two companies."

As Liz was saying this, he wondered how she had been able to work with Mary all those years, beginning with the original Instar before it went under. Maybe it had to do with the power of opposites, negative and positive, attracting one another and somehow managing to work in harmony. Liz had an even and considerate temperament, while her partner Mary appeared the very opposite with her near-sighted self-centredness that she could let an opportunity slip through her hands in her greed.

"I miss a cold beer, Liz. It has been a long since we had one together," he said, thinking how if Liz was younger and he had met her back in time, she was the woman he would have liked by his side as a wife. But as things stood, her children were almost Duofold's age, yet she looked young enough to be his agemate. She was a pleasant and business-minded entrepreneur, just the kind of person he needed as a business partner, if not a wife.

"I miss one too, Kim," she replied.

They held hands and walked to a joint nearby. For the first time, Duofold opened up to Liz about his relationship with Madam Boss Mary. He narrated how he fell into her trap and how fascinated he was by her cooking, her intelligence and her well-ordered life. He found her well-informed about global issues. After going through her SWOT analysis on Instar, he thought she was the perfect senior partner when Liz was away to move the company forward. But this was before she started being petty with her behaviour towards him.

"I, too, was disappointed," Liz said, "but Mary was a good business partner when we were together. She has her weaknesses like any other human being, but her strengths as an organiser and strategic planner can be profound. She is, therefore, not a person to easily ignore. Still, what has happened has already happened, and you have put Instar back on track. Change, as you know, does not happen when circumstances are good. It happens when we decide to improve our circumstances, which you handled perfectly, dear. There was nothing wrong with you two trying a relationship, only that it is sad that you two did not gel. But there is always someone for everyone, and I hope she finds her person."

"Provided one keeps in the dating scene," commented Duofold, and the way he put it like a secret joke between them made them laugh. "I guess my need to turn things around at home and office was more pressing. But, so much about me, Liz; how is your family? Are you coming back with me to Kenya?"

"I should come back immediately. Instar and SmartLink have grown to a point they've now become too demanding on your time. We need to recruit people to help in management. You got another lady after Mary, or are you still out in the woods, Kim?"

"I am happy to report that I do, a very beautiful and dedicated girl. Her name is Yasmin. I do not know how I could have managed the children without her in my house. It has been hectic with the work that has been coming in, especially with the Saudis. But she has never complained about my frequent absences; she just took up the role as if she has always been the biological mother to Warrior and Binte. They are not clingy anymore." Duofold momentarily paused as he remembered something and added, "Which reminds me, I was to request you to assist with dowry issues for

her. I want your advice on these matters, what goes on, who should be present, who to keep off and things like that."

"I'll be honoured to assist you," replied Liz. "It will be helpful if you could find out from Yasmin's family what their dowry traditions demand and sorts of gifts to give the family so that we are respectful of their culture."

"That's a good point. I'll find out from her father."

"But I am amazed, Duofold, how within one year you have been able to achieve all that? It makes me admire your youthfulness and energy. You have not only shaped three companies single-handedly, including your catering business, and managed to lose a girlfriend and got a wife and settled your family. Now, that is impressive!"

"I am as mesmerised as you, Liz. But luck is on my side; the best is hopefully yet to come. I hope the trend continues as it is; I still have much to offer. This is just the beginning." Duofold paused, wondering whether to add what seemed so obvious but said it anyway. "Our dreams are possibilities," he went on as if it was something he had rehearsed. "With a focused mind and hard work, we can make every dream come true. It is, therefore, not forgivable never to attempt to give up even before trying. To achieve, one must first believe in themselves, which is how I was able to rise, with your help, of course. And when your mind is set free, it begins to see opportunities; it becomes innovative. That's why I'm saying I still have much to offer."

"That is true, Kim. I guess your desire to turn around after you recovered from your sickness was more pressing. You have been articulate and persistent; there was no time to gamble, Kim. The food formulations you came up with for Instar did you and the company proud. It has not been easy work, but I thank God it was well rewarding, Kim." Liz said but was not finished just yet.

She continued. "Never restrict yourself by putting limits on your mind. You can achieve anything if you believe you can. You had your setbacks but were able to overcome them, unlike many who encounter setbacks that derail their life's journey. That, however, is how life is," Liz observed.

Then, changing the subject, she said, "We need to decide who runs which company between Instar and SmartLink so that we free our hands to concentrate on our personal affairs. We can discuss this when we get home. Cheers, my dear. We came here to celebrate, not to be in a boardroom meeting. Let's get to our hotel and continue this party there. We do not want to get too drunk far away from the bedroom."

"I agree, Madam Liz. It is always a pleasure to be around you."

They called a cab to the hotel, where many delegates at the event were also booked. They noticed Duofold, who had since become something of a star attraction after the award. They had a thousand questions for him, especially the ladies. They

wanted to know whether he was taken already and, if so, whether he minded a sideshow. He danced with them the whole night as Madam Liz dragged her feet around with other elders.

The party continued until morning. And, despite their flight back home being that same morning, neither of them slept a wink. There was not even time for a shower; they needed to check in or miss the flight. Madam Liz took quick carrot soup not to travel on an empty stomach. Duofold did not seem hungry. *I am not bothered to have a cup. I am the stud of the town,* he thought to himself with amusement, *busy hugging ladies as they take selfies with me.* It was time to leave.

They made it to the airport just in time and found boarding already in progress. Madam Liz boarded half asleep as Duofold took care of their belongings. She reprimanded herself, reminding herself age was catching up and should stop behaving like a teenager. Age, despite what she liked to say, was not just another number.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"YASMIN DEAR, YOU FORGOT US and left home for good?" This was her mom Femi's first question when she opened the door for her daughter, who had passed by after dropping Duofold's kids at school. "Not even a word to tell us you arrived where you were going?"

"Hello Mom," they hugged in greetings. "Happy to see you. Yes, it's been a while. Where are your son Girish and daughter Phyllis? Just saw Dad pulling out of the parking bay. I tried to avoid him. I know he must be very mad at me for disappearing from him. He said he is dashing out shortly and should be back soon."

"Incidentally, he has been more worried than mad at you—worried about how you've been coping with the sadness that still hung over you even as you left the house. But I see you are vibrant and quite happy. Duofold must be the healing pill that we parents do not have in our first-aid box." They laughed at this, further easing the mom's mind that her daughter was past her sadness.

The mother was right. Not even Yasmin expected to find happiness so soon and get back her smile and sense of purpose in life.

"How have you been, my girl, Yasmin?" she asked but didn't wait for her to answer. "Of late, I've been having this fear that I'll catch the empty nest syndrome very soon for you being away and everyone else preferring to be out of the house most of the time. I am not sure what is up with your sister Phyllis. She has been planning to move out, and maybe she is dating too. You need to check with her for me. She does not like opening up to me as much."

"Phyllis is just being discreet," replied Yasmin, "when the time will be ripe, she shall break the news to you herself. I think her silence means she needs her space. Otherwise, my hands have been full. I may not have the time to watch over your daughter Phyllis; that will be a tall order. I'm a mother now with two kids, and keeping the home has been quite involved. Duofold has been quite busy at work, but he's been treating us well, being home when time allows him."

You do not have someone to help with the chores, Yasmin?" Femi asked and, looking at her daughter, thought to herself that Yasmin must be quite pampered. Or why should she complain about being overwhelmed?

"I have a live-in nanny and an occasional chef who comes when I need him. I prefer to cook for the family. The chef takes over on weekends so that I can have time with the kids. It is such a loving family; the kids even call me mom—they are very warm children. Even when we fight, they come back to me with an apology. I am contented in my role as a mom," she waited for Femi to say something.

But her mother seemed distracted with something to immediately reply. Yasmin saw it as an opportunity to break the unexpectedly good news.

"Guess what, Mom," she said, "We visited the gynaecologist amid Duofold's busy schedule. I am seventeen weeks pregnant! He also married me." Yasmin was so excited reporting that she did not wait for her mother to reply. She opened her phone photo gallery and showed it to Femi. "Here are photos of our civil marriage ceremony as we exchanged the rings at the Attorney General Chambers. I am officially married. Sorry I did not involve you immediately. We had a lot of travelling to do, especially to India and pending hospital bills to pay. So it was sudden, as I had to be legally married to him as required by his health insurance policy to facilitate the clearance of the bills. My passport now reads Yasmin Duofold."

"When did all this happen, Yasmin?" Femi asked, shaking her head with a mixture of surprise and happiness for her daughter. "You left here only a few months ago, and you have accomplished all that? All I can tell you, my girl, is to always remember that a pretty face shall one day get old and that nice body shall change and sag. But a good woman shall forever be cherished for her deeds. Be the best you can be to the Duofold family so that your old age will kindly remember you and honour your aged self. But I am very proud of you, and I can see you are already practised in motherly skills. Keep it up and keep your man close. A good man is not found at a market stall to choose and pick. If anything, other women will be hungry to take your man for their own ends. Be the best in his arena, Yasmin."

"I hear you, Mom. But you haven't heard the whole news yet: I am carrying twins."

Her mother was overwhelmed with emotion, and this was the first time her daughter had seen tears in her eyes since she could remember. She never expected her daughter to carry a baby again, let alone carry two after her ordeal with Barot. *This Duofold man must be quite something magical. Thank God we did not mind her being gone for so long. It has paid off well for our family,* Femi gratefully thought to herself as she cast a fond eye at her daughter.

"I can't believe you will be a mother soon, my girl," she said, exclaiming, "Thanks be to God!"

Phyllis, Yasmin's younger sister, emerged from her bedroom sleepy-eyed, having slept for only two hours after arriving home from night duty. She was a doctor and

was in time to receive the news first-hand. Since Yasmin moved out, Phyllis had been trying all possible methods to help her sister conceive in vain.

"How did you do it, Yasmin?" Phyllis asked. "I have been consulting a few doctors for you who were of the opinion it is a bit complicated, a close to an impossible procedure. We had tried to reach you for a consultation but in vain. Thankfully, you were too busy to be reached, as is now evident," she commented with admiration. It was a great achievement.

"Thanks to Duofold and technology," replied Yasmin. "With artificial intelligence, many seemingly impossible procedures are now possible. We flew to India, where they seem to excel in medical solutions. I was there for two months and had him flying in to be with me now and then. It has been a very involving procedure; I cannot wait for my babies."

Girish, their brother, walked into the house and joined them. He had a green thumb in his passion for gardening. He was in the garden overseeing the planting of special seedlings he had received from a friend. Also, it was the rainy season, and weeds and flowers were growing quite fast. The garden needed weeding and the flowers pruning.

"Wow! That is great news, sister," he whooped, embracing Yasmin. "I am so happy for you. That can only mean I will be an uncle soon, to twins no less."

Girish was quite overwhelmed by the news, especially when he remembered how the sister often cried on his shoulder for comfort after the tragedy that had befallen her. It passed through his mind yet again how he must avenge her should he ever come across Barot. Girish, too, had attended the same college as Yasmin and Barot in the UK. He had found Barot very likeable. He still didn't understand what changed the man to be so cruel to his sister.

"No, Girish," said Yasmin snapping him out of his thoughts, "you will not be an uncle. You are already an uncle. Duofold is already a dad of two—a son named Warrior and a daughter named Binte; I'm their mother now. They are my children too, and so are you by default their uncle."

"You are Duofold's second wife?" Girish was surprised. "Kim looks so young; I would never have expected him to have a family."

"He divorced his first wife, who is now married to his brother. Ours is a kind of soap opera family. His looks are deceiving. I initially also thought he was younger than me."

"What a love triangle," Girish shook his head. "How did all that happen, and why? He does not look like a violent man to batter his wife, or is he another Barot?" He did not wait for an answer and went on to ask, seeming irritated, "How did Duofold lose his first wife to another man? And how unfortunate are you, Yasmin,

to be married as a second wife and yet look so contented with the idea? Is it that you lost some of your pride in the incident with the silly boy Barot?"

"Eiish," Yasmin protested, "give me a break, brother! Barot was the vaccine that gave life to my first baby Girish. At the same time, he chose to be a virus that terminated the same life he gave. Instead of making us each other's keeper, he opted to fall into his mom's trap like a fool."

She, too, was angry at being reminded of her ex. However, after she had calmed down, she suggested to Girish, "Anyway, sit with Duofold to know why he lost his first family. It is a very sad story, though," she said, hinting at Duofold's even more horrible ordeal. "He is your brother-in-law and an easy, down-to-earth guy. You need to hang out with him to appreciate the kind of man he is: loving, caring, and a power to reckon with."

"I cannot have such a discussion with Duofold," Girish protested. "That would be rude, Yasmin. Whatever he went through sounds very personal and very serious—the stuff of movies. Yet he looks too calm and collected for one to imagine he has a story to tell. Your experience and his experience make you two birds of a feather; you understand each other. Keep your marriage tight."

"You won't know until you speak to him, perhaps over a drink," said Yasmin. "Speaking of which, you guys are welcome this weekend for lunch, the whole family. Duofold has a surprise for you."

"A surprise better than news of your pregnancy?" asked Phyllis trying to make her sister tell more, though Yasmin didn't.

Phyllis does not press her sister to reveal more about the party. She instead feels inspired by her to get someone to settle down with, too, hopefully soon. As the thought takes hold of her, Phyllis thinks she has been too comfortable living with her parents and needs to move out and have some time alone to organise her life. She now did not seem to like that their mom still took care of her, just in the way she did since they were young. A man in her life would be a welcome challenge so that she could flap her wings with kitchen skills which were still very wanting.

"Maybe it shall be a good surprise: just show up," Yasmin cut short Phyllis' thoughts. "I need to get going. I have a clinic appointment today," she announced, thinking about how she was still trying to get used to her prenatal responsibilities. As she stands up to leave, she looks forward to being in line with other expectant mothers, an experience now more valuable because she never thought she'd ever join such a queue.

"Can I come with you, Yasmin?" an eager Phyllis asks. She feels protective of Yasmin now that she is pregnant. But she is also curious to accompany Yasmin and read her medical reports to understand how she managed to conceive.

"Not today, Phyllis. Duofold is checking in with me. Thank you for the offer. Hold it for next month."

The particular clinic appointment was special to Yasmin, and the only welcome person was the father of her twins. She wanted him to see their movement on the scan. As happens with many mothers-to-be, watching the movements would also be a profound experience for Duofold.

"Before you take tea with Mom, I'll be ready to go with you. I have invited myself, dear sister. I will be sensitive enough to give you and your Duofold the privacy you deserve as I wait my turn," Phyllis insisted as she headed to her room.

"It has been a while, after all, since I had mom's tea," she said, giving in, then turning to her mom, she said, "I'd very much like to have the tea Mom, as I wait for the self-imposing Phyllis to get ready."

"Of course, dear, I must have been too overcome with happiness to see you that it escaped me to offer you something to eat. Come in, dear."

They went into the kitchen, where the mother rustled up a quick breakfast. Phyllis was soon done preparing herself, and the two sisters left. Girish was long gone for Yasmin to say goodbye. He had no time to hang around family. He had a busy day ahead and needed to be out before traffic decided otherwise.

THE DAY YASMIN HAD INVITED her folk arrived. It, however, started on a rainy note, with the Duofold family waking up to a downpour that seemed full of thunderstorms and lightning. The weather forecast the previous day had predicted a lot of sun, and they looked forward to a bright day. Now they all stood on the balcony watching the dark skies, wondering how the day would turn out.

Then suddenly, out of the blue, Binte and Warrior started singing a nursery rhyme to chase away the rain.

Rain, rain, go away,
Come again another day
Mama has an event, and it must be a sunny day
Rain, rain, go away…

This seemed to amuse Duofold, who said laughing, "You can't change the ocean or the weather no matter how hard you try, so it's best to learn how to sail in all conditions."

"I believe in psychic powers," Yasmin responded, saying, "We can tap them to save the day from the angry clouds."

She then proceeded to cheer on the kids as she entertainingly joined them in chanting the nursery rhyme.

Duofold left them to take a bath. He took his time in the warm tub as thoughts took over his mind about how the day would turn to be for Akumu. He still had a spot for her that never seemed to fade despite Yasmin filling the vacuum Akumu had left in his heart with the love he had for his new wife. After some time thinking about it, he dismissed the lingering feelings for his former wife by concluding that, *Akumu started the game... I am the one to finish it, and I deserve Yasmin.*

He came out of the steamy bathroom to find Yasmin had laid for him a set of clothes he had not seen before. They looked new. He smiled to himself, thinking how he had other ideas on what to "recycle" from his wardrobe to put on for the event, only to be surprised by the power of a woman. Yasmin had shopped not only for Duofold but the kids. Duofold could imagine Warrior trying on his outfit as Yasmin fixed Binte's hair.

Duofold was happily surprised to suddenly see rays of sunlight piercing through the bedroom windows. Though he was not a believer in psychic abilities, he welcomed the sunny day. He hoped that Yasmin's event should be as bright and shiny as a sunny day.

The event promised to be a big occasion in which her parents and Duofold's parents would be meeting for the first time. It was also the first time Yasmin's parents were visiting Duofold's home and came bearing gifts. Her siblings Girish and Phyllis had already been regular visitors and would once in a while sneak into her house for a drink. It helped them bond with Duofold and the kids as well.

The get-together was held in the garden. Femi and Zahid were very excited to be at their daughter's home. Yasmin gave them a tour of the place. Zahid and Femi liked the architecture of the house and admired the details added to the room Yasmin planned to make the bedroom for coming twins, their first grandchildren. The expected newborns' bedroom was attached to the parent's bedroom. The children's room already fitted with furniture fitted, where their beds were well laid out and drawers swelled with baby clothing.

They generally appreciated the layout of the place and were impressed to learn that Duofold's mother lived within the compound with them but in a separate house in the form of a small beautiful house, just enough for Florence but big enough to host her chosen guests.

Binte and Warrior were excited to host their new set of grandparents. They were well-mannered and treated the elders with a lot of respect. Femi and Zahid were impressed that Duofold's children loved their daughter as their own mother, which she gladly reciprocated.

The two children were busy ushering other guests to the reception, where the Italian chefs from Duofold's catering company had prepared an elaborate meal. This

time the chefs were careful to include *mukimo,* a popular Kikuyu dish comprising potatoes and green bananas, beans, maize, and vegetables mashed together. The chefs included it in the menu not to offend Florence, serving other exotic meals but not her own.

Duofold's dad Fidel and his wife Faith attended the event too. Fidel was dressed in cowboy attire, complete with a huge Texan hat and boots, a popular fashion statement of elderly affluent Kikuyu that they complemented with a walking stick. His wife, Faith, was dressed in African attire with beautiful matching headgear to complete the fashionable look. She was happy to showcase herself to Florence, her old rival. Before the event, she had been curious to see how Florence must have transformed since she became an urbanite.

Florence did not disappoint. She knew Faith, wife to her boyfriend Fidel, would show up, and she was well prepared. She had requested Fidel to personally come and help her buy a dress specifically for the event. Not only did he help her with the latest dress code, but gave her a complete makeover. She looked like a modern lady and now boasted a commanding language with some English vocabulary words learnt from her grannies, Binte and Warrior. Yasmin had also been kind enough to put her mother-in-law on TV soaps that keep her on track as to what was fashionable.

Duofold's brother Floyd and his wife Akumu and their children also attended. Akumu displayed a good sense of style, making sure to wear one of the outfits Duofold had bought for her. What she did not seem to know was that many men hardly remembered the gifts they gave a woman. It seemed that once such men made their score, they forgot every tool they used to pin a woman.

Hezron and Falid's family were invited but had their reasons not to attend.

Liz graced the occasion, too, and came with her husband and children. Everyone was curious to meet the woman who brought Duofold back from the dark world of mental illness, as many now knew. Duofold raised awareness about it in the village about how being mentally ill and on the streets was as good as a death sentence. No one seemed to take responsibility to feed or care for the sick should a street person or family become unwell or felt cold and hungry. They were often abandoned to their fate. If lucky as Duofold was, a saviour might come along, and life is restored.

Akumu and Yasmin were meeting for the first time. Duofold and his children Binte and Warrior never shared photos of Yasmin with Akumu. Duofold thought it best to keep it that way until the right moment, which to him happened to be this occasion. He thought that the two women meeting in person would be more meaningful than seeing each other through photographs. For this reason, he had asked Binte and Warrior to always leave their phones behind when visiting their mother to avoid the temptation of showing the pictures or being asked by her to

show them. It had now become a tradition not to carry their phones with them when leaving the house, which was good as it helped them pay more attention to physical interactions with their cousins and those around them.

The meeting of the two women was characterised by some form of mutual anxiety, as Akumu tried to size the woman that replaced her, even as Yasmin was curious about the woman who could not wait a few years to ascertain her husband was dead and would never to return. At the same time, Yasmin was happy that Akumu had jumped boats, which gave her a husband and an opportunity to become a mother.

Akumu liked the woman she saw. Yasmin had sharp brown eyes, long natural hair and well-manicured nails. She had eyebrows that looked almost artificial and wore simple lipstick to complete her natural look. She wore a shapely Indian sari that closely hugged her body, exposing her pregnancy. Her shapely body made Akumu envious. She appreciated Yasmin's youthful beauty. She was slightly taller than Akumu, with every part of her body being proportional, despite the pregnancy.

Akumu found Yasmin very pleasant and perceived her as a person who was in charge. Binte and Warrior were all over Yasmin, asking for anything and everything. Akumu admired this, especially because she had failed to do the same when her husband Duofold had disappeared.

"I am so sorry about what befell you and Duofold back then. I thank God you both moved on, and life has been kind to match you with new partners despite the loss," Yasmin told Akumu.

"Oh, thanks, Yasmin. I am happy for Duofold and my children, Binte and Warrior. I can see you are soon bringing more blessings to the family. Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Thank you, Akumu. I am carrying twins. A boy and a girl."

Seeing how Akumu seemed lost in thought after their brief conversation, Yasmin quickly ushered her to join the rest of the family.

Once inside, Akumu made further observations of how Yasmin, Binte and Warrior seemed to be in a good relationship. Akumu was impressed that, despite not being their biological mother, Yasmin paid close attention to the children and comforted them at the hint of any of them being upset by something. The children would walk around and come back to Yasmin, not even to Duofold, who Akumu remembered the children previously clung to.

Watching this, she felt a tug at her heart and was probably a little jealous to see the close bond the children had formed with Yasmin. She also could not fail to notice the fondness with which Duofold looked at Yasmin. She watched the pride he displayed sitting next to his new wife in his stunning African attire. He looked content and well taken care of.

The surprise at the get-together was Florence's daughters Ann and Baily, who were dressed in identical attire to their mother. They looked like a well-off family. Everyone appeared to have been well taken care of by big brother Duofold.

Akumu allowed her children to give her a tour of their home, having not visited the home since Yasmin had taken charge. Her last visit was the day the children held a farewell party at their former school in the village, which was quite a while. She felt intimidated at the now tastefully furnished home. Yasmin was no ordinary girl. The house fittings were unique and elaborate in the large sitting room. The children's bedrooms had since undergone a makeover that emphasized their affluent life. This somewhat provoked in Akumu a mixture of feelings that included guilt and relief—guilt that she was never there for them when they needed her and relief that they now led such a sheltered life. Tears sprung to her eyes, and she quickly fought them back. She was not sure whether they were tears of joy, guilt, or jealousy.

After she was done with the children, she sought out Yasmin, and they had a long heart-to-heart talk. Yasmin narrated her ordeal, too, and how she met Duofold. Akumu was happy for them, though she still had deep feelings for Duofold.

BEN, WHO WAS THE MASTER OF CEREMONY at the event, called the meeting to order. "We thank God for this day," he said. "We had looked forward to it with great anticipation. This is the first time Yasmin and Duofold's parents are getting to meet and know each other. First, however, there is a special someone I would like you all to first meet. She will introduce herself, but she is the person without whom this occasion may not be taking place. She is the person who rescued Duofold from the streets."

Heads started turning to see who that could be. The person Ben was referring to, dignified and well-dressed in an expensive looking floral dress and matching designer mid-heel shoes befitting her age, stood up. She looked much younger than her age.

"Greetings everyone. Thank you, Ben, for giving me a window to greet these two great families. My name is Liz, partner, mother and good friend to Duofold. I know you are all curious to know how I identified Duofold in the wilderness of our Nairobi streets where everyone runs away from parking boys and mentally ill people we all find a nuisance. All I can say is where there is will, there is always a way. Deep in my soul I did not kill Duofold even after seeing his face in the obituaries page of the newspaper. He has been my Muse appearing in all the little things I did, including in business. I missed the boy; I missed tapping into his energy such that in some situations I would shed uncontrollable tears, trapped in sadness that never relented. All I knew was that he was out there somewhere, and I often looked at strangers'

faces in the hope of finding my boy Duofold. Maybe Duofold was my twin from another life, or a husband."

The guests caught the joke, eliciting their laughter. Liz went on to narrate her encounter with the mentally ill person who turned out to be Duofold asking for a meal at the Westlands petrol station she was fuelling her car, and what transpired thereafter including following up on his welfare with Isaac, the station attendant.

"I knew it was him the moment our eyes made contact and neither could I mistake his walking style the moment I saw him walk with the snack I had given him," she explained. "In my eyes, he was not just lost but the guy I sought after deep in my soul. Whether I was sent by God, or whether it was my strong desire to have him by my side that I found him, I have no idea. What I can say is that he fought a good fight in making full recovery. He filled perfectly the gap I needed him to fill in my businesses, and today my family and his are all smiles for the synergy I have with Duofold. When you want to succeed, ride on others, as you allow them to take the wheel to drive you around, remembering also not to make them your donkey. That way, the rider shall get to see the world through the service, as the money you make takes you to all the destinations you desire.

"Duofold is my family too and shall forever be. Yasmin and family, I can assure you, Duofold is selfless and gives all from his soul. You have a good man for an in-law.

"Yasmin, my husband and I are also parents to you. When you need us do not shy away. I am a woman and has been on the marriage train longer. I could give you a tip or two when lost. Akumu, we thank God you are still family. Nothing happens without God's eye on it. There is much you desire between you and Duofold, but now you need to let go. You two are co-parenting and remain family. Respect your boundaries despite the pain that come with the separation. You are also my daughter, and I shall keep rooting for you too. Duofold's parents and family, as always I shall be indebted to you for this great soul. Thank you all."

Liz sat down to a round of appreciative claps from the guests.

"Thank you very much Liz, that is one inspiring speech you have given to start us off. Now let me invite the man himself to greet us before we invite his dad, Fidel."

As the Master of Ceremony was speaking, Akumu was watching how Duofold tenderly looked at Yasmin as they conferred on something. She felt such admiration for them that it somewhat left her feeling very lonely and lost. She liked Duofold's African attire that made him look dignified and authoritative. He stood up and planted a kiss on Yasmin's cheek before picking up the microphone. Watching this, Akumu was left tormented to think that that kiss would have been hers just a few years before.

"Thank you, Ben. And thank you Liz for your very kind words. I, too, treasure our friendship and you will forever be family to me and Yasmin. Greetings, everyone. Thank you very much for attending this special family get-together. It is in honour of my newfound love, Yasmin. I know I owe her family a lot for giving me their daughter for marriage. I also held this event to honour Zahid, my father-in-law, and my mom Femi for their blessings to us. I also know I jumped the gun when I wed Yasmin without your consent. Let me assure the guests here that I didn't elope with her," Duofold said to chuckles from those who knew what happened. He, however, went on to explain the circumstances involved. He mentioned work and kids involved. He was, however, careful not to mention the fertility treatment in India and the matter of health insurance that required Yasmin first becomes his wife to claim medical benefits. This could have bruised Yasmin's ego and his to some extent.

In his thoughts, he wanted to say, *I had made up my mind on Yasmin, babies or no babies*, but he didn't say it and instead continued with his remarks. "I hope to make a good husband to her and be a loyal son to her parents, Zahid and Femi. Yasmin has been a good mother to my children, which endeared me more to her. And now we have twins on the way—one of who we have already decided will be named Junior, after me, for the gratitude I feel that God gave me a second chance. The girl will be named Femi after her grandma, whose name means love. Thank you, everyone, for making it to this beautiful occasion. May God bless you."

Dad Fidel stood up to introduce the family. "Yasmin, welcome to our family. This is a great day. I got to meet with my in-laws. And to them, I want to say that we shall adore and love your daughter as our own. She has served me food several times, and I can attest to her great cooking. Her love for the children makes her a very special woman. She showers them with lots of love and care. I pray to God that this shall last for Duofold and Yasmin to grow old together and be the grannies we are today. I take this opportunity to introduce my wife, Faith, her daughter Ng'endo, my son Floyd and his wife, Akumu."

He went into much detail, introducing Duofold's mother, Florence, and his two sisters, Ann and Baily. It was a meaningful event, bringing together family members from both sides, including Duofold's sisters – Hezron's daughters, with whom they had parted as enemies but were now reconciled.

Falid continued: "Duofold has two dads, and one dad is not here with us today; Hezron and his son Falid, pardon us for that. We hope you shall be able to meet with them in due course. Binte and Warrior are kids to Duofold and Akumu. Fate separated them, and this gave your daughter a chance to be part of this family. We thank God for everything. It is beautiful to have diversity. We shall do our best to harmonise our past with the present and the future. We also look forward to receiving

the new members of the family in a few months, Junior and Femi. My two sons shall have four children each, two from one woman and two from their wives. It was all planned by God. For us, it is just to accept and move on. Thank you very much, my in-laws. We also had a gift for Yasmin's parents, but that will be after the introductions. Take the floor, Mr. Zahid."

The in-laws were intrigued by the story and saw hope and fortitude in it that Duofold's families from both his fathers were happy again. They felt their daughter had got herself a good and well-balanced man.

Yasmin's dad, Zahid, stood up. "Thank you, Fidel, for introducing your family to us. This relationship is too good to be true. Within months, these people had moved in together as husband and wife. Yasmin took over Akumu's duties without supervision at all. She had not taken care of a family before, but we are surprised at how she has embraced her new life and bonded with Binte and Warrior so well. I wish you all the best, Yasmin and your love, Duofold, and we look forward to the new members of the family that you are carrying.

"My family is not as elaborate as Duofold's. It is just us in this country—myself, Femi and our three children. The larger family is in our ancestral land Egypt. That is my land of origin. But I have been in this country for much of my life. My parents relocated back to Egypt a while ago. I chose to be a Kenyan. So, we are all my brothers and sisters. My wife, Femi, is Kenyan-Indian. I wonder whether she has ever gotten a chance to visit her descendants in Gujarat," everyone saw the joke, and there was laughter.

"On her side is my second-born and only son Girish. He is still single, and we are forcing him to mingle soon, so if you have a girl not taken, we shall be happy to pay the dowry for her," there followed applause and whistles, to which Girish flashed his father a sly smile—a smile that seems to ask, "*What the hell are you saying, Dad?"*

"This is Phyllis, my lastborn. It seems she is soon getting out, also. There is a man who has been a frequent visitor to my house. We are still waiting for a stronger signal from him about his intentions. It was a pleasure being in your presence Duofold's Mom Florence and Dad Fidel. You can bank on our support should you need anything, Duofold and Yasmin, as you raise these adorable children Warrior and Binte and as we wait for the new members Femi and Junior."

There followed a round of applause as Fidel took back the microphone. "Duofold, you have something to say?"

"Yes, I do, Dad. I just want to say thank you for this day. I still remember the day I discovered Akumu was married. It was the worst day of my life. I did not know how I would raise the children without their mother. One of them being a girl made it a bit difficult. It seems to me a girl's needs surpass a boy's, and I have no experience

whatsoever with girls' upbringing. I had looked around a bit before I got Yasmin," there followed a laugh or two accompanied by nods of agreement from some of the men who knew how difficult it can be to find a bride.

Duofold continued. "By the time I got Yasmin, I had almost lost hope and was prepared to raise my kids alone. God had a better plan for me. She was an angel sent from heaven for me. I have no way to pay for your kindness, beautiful Yasmin. My two kids do not come to me for consultation anymore. You filled the gap perfectly. I am now able to be a man again.

"I also thank the Yasmin family too for embracing me with my two kids. I know it is not easy for a family to allow their daughter to marry a divorcee, but I was honoured with their exception. Kids are like a passing happy cloud; they will be gone one day and leave me with Yasmin to continue our journey together. I look forward to that future when we shall be grannies, too, Yasmin. Long-live, my love. I have a gift for you, Yasmin, for being on my side as a wife."

He removed the Jewellery box from his pocket that he had recruited Phyllis to help him buy. He tied the sparkly necklace on her neck and a matching bungle on her wrist. He skipped the earrings, for he didn't know how to fit them, and then he kissed Yasmin as everyone applauded.

The second gift was to her mom Femi. For that, he requested his two mothers, Florence and Faith, to present it to Femi. It was wrapped, so no one got to know what it was. Then he invited his dad again to present a gift to Yasmin's dad.

"Mr Zahid, in our tradition, when you give us your daughter, we present you goats in exchange for your daughter. In this case, because you do not have a farm to graze them, we present them to you in monetary form so that when you get a place to graze them, you can convert the money back to the goats." He handed an envelope to him amidst of round of applause.

"Brother Girish and Phyllis, we have a token for you too." They also received some wrapped gifts. "Let us now continue with the feast. You are most welcome, good people. Fidel concluded the discussions as Zahid thanked him for the gifts."

Duo sat down next to Yasmin, putting his hand on her tummy. Girish got to his feet to congratulate the couple. This made him feel like he, too, should get married; he was of age, after all. "Next time, it shall be me you will be celebrating," he told the couple.

Akumu appeared in deep thought, as if not ready to accept she had officially been replaced. But she appreciated that it probably was how Duofold felt when he found her in another man's arms. It was not a happy experience. Their different paths now gained some clarity, and Floyd was happy about it. Now that his brother was officially married, it eased his feelings of guilt for having taken his brother's wife.

YASMIN WAS LAZING IN BED after breakfast. The kids had a swimming lesson. Duofold had a bit of free morning; he walked to his mom's house. It had been a while, and they had a lot to catch up on. He found her listening to gospel music as she had breakfast of sweet potatoes and veggies and a cup of tea. She welcomed her son to join in.

"Where have you been, son? You are never at home these days. You left kids to Yasmin like someone who has been waiting for just such an opportunity to gain his freedom. What a shame, Kim."

"I know, Mom, but that has not been the case. It is work. It has been too, too much. Without Yasmin, it would have been you looking after the children. She has been very supportive."

"I wish you left them with me than overburdened that beautiful girl. She is expectant, you know. But she is also a proud one; every time I offer to help, she politely refuses. That is a good sign that she is a hard worker. She is also kind and good with the children. She sometimes comes over to help me with recipes if I take a couple of days without sharing a meal with them."

"Yasmin is the mother to them, not you. If she could not handle them, then she would not have been the kind of woman I wanted for a wife. Raising Binte and Warrior has presented her with the opportunity to perfect her motherhood for when her twins come. I am happy you like her, not like my Boss Mary whom you failed to embrace for a daughter-in-law."

"You are right, son. If you had married the beastly Boss of yours, the kids would probably have been dead by now. Thank God you parted ways. She is not very different to Hezron or Falid. They all must have reincarnated from the same hell. Yasmin is a beautiful soul. Every evening she passes by with the children to say good night without fail. Sometimes they come with food, which we eat from here. On some days, we cook from my kitchen. She is very engaging and friendly too. The babies in her womb love me already."

"When some things go wrong, Mom, I take a moment to be thankful for the many things going in the right direction. Nature has a way of paying back favours," he said, thinking about Madam Boss Mary and the payback that saw her out of a job. "I need to get going and leave you to your work. Have a good day," Duofold said, not wanting to open Boss Mary's wounds.

Duofold walked back into his compound in the company of his dog T-Jay and cat Wajohn. They had patiently waited for him outside his mother's house. The dog

lay on the corridor as the cat chased a butterflies flattering over flowers in search of their food.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I AM HAPPY YOU ARE GETTING ALONG very well with Yasmin's mom," observed Florence to Duofold, who had passed by her house to check on her. "I saw it in her eyes during that family get-together the other day; Femi is proud to have you as her daughter's husband. It was a shame your Dad Hezron didn't come. Have you gotten in touch with him since I left his compound?"

Duofold said he was not planning to call Hezron anytime soon.

Florence did not press on the issue, seeing Duofold's reluctance. But though she did not say it, she really wanted to reconcile her family. She believed that hate hurt the hater more. She did not want the pain Duofold went through at the hands of Hezron to be a cloud hovering over him all his life.

"And your sister Ann?" she inquired, "How is she keeping? When she calls, she keeps complaining about how very lonely she has been since I left. It makes me feel sorry for her. I can't sleep thinking about it; it leaves me worried about what will become of her. I thought she would cope, but I now think she is still too young. I hope you will allow me to stay with her here."

"I know she's always been your favourite," Duofold replied. And, as an indication of how he was lost in touch with the sister, he asked, "What grade did she get in high school? I remember she used to be good in the sciences. I have someone who might assist her enrol in a nursing school. Actually, it is Yasmin's sister Phyllis. She tells me she was given a slot in her hospital's school of nursing."

"That sounds like a great opportunity for her. But I have no idea what she got. It is best if you speak with her directly," Florence said as she dialled Ann's number.

Duofold spoke briefly with Ann and sent her the pin location to his office. Outside of special occasions, as happened at the get-together, he was not yet comfortable with the rest of the Hezron family coming to his home.

The following morning, Duofold found Ann and his brother Falid waiting for him in the reception area of his office.

"Did I tell you to bring the whole clan with you to my office, young lady?" Duofold said, acknowledging their presence as he got into his office.

As he went through his in-tray to see what needed immediate attention, he asked his secretary to make his guests comfortable at the cafeteria and bring to him the academic documents Ann had brought with her.

Duofold was impressed that Ann had attained very good grades. He wondered why she was still at home. He scanned and sent them by email to Phyllis.

"She should report immediately, Duofold," Phyllis replied almost immediately. "Today was the last day for admission."

Oh my God! Duofold thought to himself upon realising the urgency. *I have to drop everything and get this poor girl to school.* The word school somewhat brought to his mind a version of the popular women empowerment aphorism emphasising that "when you educate a girl, you educate a whole village."

After Ann and Falid were finished with their breakfast, he invited Ann to his office, but Falid followed her into Duofold's office.

Falid is a fraud, thought his brother disapprovingly. *By following his sister, he is like one who follows the wind with no care about its destination. He doesn't even seem concerned that I might harm him or, better still, turn him in for all the evil he did to my children. He seems to think his needs come first.*

Duofold, however, ignored him and did not speak to his brother.

"Do you have your ID, Ann?" Duofold enquired.

"Yes, I do, Sir."

"Come on, Ann," he said with an encouraging smile. "I am your brother; I'm not 'Sir' to you."

The way his sister had addressed him made him realise not only the distance that must exist between him and the family but how unapproachable he must have become to be addressed with honorific terms like "Sir". Perhaps it also didn't help that he so determinedly ignored Falid.

"Do you like nursing, Ann; I mean, would you like to take a course in nursing?"

"Yes, it has been my dream course. I tried sending applications for the last two years but in vain."

"It appears you are in luck. I will be enrolling you at the School of Nursing, and the deadline is today. We urgently need to go shopping and head straight there. Is that OK with you, Ann?"

"Oh really?!" Ann almost screamed, unable to believe what she was hearing. "And, of course, I'm OK with it! Thank you so much, Kim!"

"I will bring Mom to see you in school over the weekend. She is aware and has been worried about you."

Ann let herself go with excitement. She stood up and jumped about like a small child. This tickled Duofold, and he thought how of his family members, Ann was the

only one he had not done something for, except perhaps pay for her school fees. But she was still young and needed support, making their mom Florence feel like it was her responsibility to look after her until she was ready to settle down on her own. Ann was Duofold's responsibility too and could not bear the thought that Falid and their dad Hezron were probably salivating at the day she got married to get their hands on her dowry. Perhaps like many people in the village, Hezron thought taking a girl to college was a waste of money, which saw many girls like Ann struggle despite earning good grades. Duofold also blamed himself for seeming uninterested; otherwise, Ann's welfare is something he long should have looked into.

"We should get going if we are to be there on time," he urged, leading them to his car.

Knowing he should have done better, he was ready to spoil his sister. At the shopping mall, he bought everything she fancied, including a new phone. If he wanted his sister to fit in her college environment and lack for nothing, he also did not want his sibling to look like a beggar among the affluent students who populated the school. He noted her good taste in the items she chose. But he also bought his brother Falid some clothes and a pair of shoes.

They had lunch together, after which they headed to the school, where Ann was immediately admitted. Duofold paid the required fees for the first semester, with Phyllis there to receive them. She promised to show Ann around to familiarise herself and know what to do in her new environment.

"I hope you settle down well. Call me when in need," said Duofold, but at the back of his mind, he wondered whether she would turn out to be like Falid and his sister Baily, who he had paid for their education only for both of them to drop out.

"I shall not disappoint you, brother; I will do my best. And thank you, Kim," Ann said with tears of joy in her eyes.

She could not believe that only that morning she had woken up in the village and would not be going back. She also could not believe she was now a college girl with a guaranteed job after her training. It was her happiest day.

"I trust you, Ann. Remember, if you cannot be a pencil to write anyone's happiness, then try to be a nice eraser to wipe away the sadness—which will be your calling to do assisting the sick while keeping them hopeful and comfortable. I'll be rooting for you."

Duofold embraced Ann for the first time in many years.

"I shall do my best to put a smile on people's faces. You have been the perfect example to emulate with your kindness and understanding, Kim." She hugged him again.

Duofold warmed up to Ann and left his sister with generous pocket money for her upkeep.

Falid was not one to hug; he just patted Ann on her back and wished her the best as they parted ways.

The brothers followed Phyllis and Ann with their eyes as the two young women disappeared into the long corridors chatting with each other.

Then Duofold left with his brother. This was the first time in a long time they had spent a day together since the day he picked up Warrior and Binte from the village to their new life with him in the city. Falid was the last person he had expected to see. But as he explained to Duofold, they feared to let Ann come alone to Nairobi, which she was unfamiliar with.

"Where should I drop you, Falid?"

Falid didn't reply immediately. "I wanted to have a word with you," he said, tensing up.

Then Duofold noticed his brother was trembling, *like a leaf*, Duofold thought, *as if with fear*.

"What word Falid?"

Duofold thought his brother wanted money. But he no longer felt obliged to support him or his dad Hezron for what they had done to him. He hoped they would one day explain to him why they so much wanted him dead. The two had land they could utilise to earn income and should not involve him in their rubbish.

"We are really sorry for what happened between us," Falid tried to explain. "I hope you shall be able to forgive us one day Kim. Dad has been very weak since Mom left. He is sorry for the assumptions he had about her obligations to him and the family. If you find it acceptable, kindly allow Mom to come back home."

"Tell Dad to remarry. Mom is doing fine without him. He tried to kill her son, he treated her like crap, and he expects her to come back to that prison? Excuse me, brother Falid. Mom is done with that home. Who would wish to live with such a beast given a chance?"

"I also need help, brother; life has become unbearable. I know I have let you down enough times, but now I know better. I have seen everyone move on, and I am left struggling behind."

"Falid, I have done for you more than enough, but you are a nonstarter. For how long do you want to be carried like a child; you are now a father of three with a five-acre piece of land at your disposal and additional two acres of coffee bushes. Yet all you seem able to do is keep the company of layabouts in the village, choosing not to work. The secret to getting ahead is starting something. Start now, start small and grow. Like it is said in the Bible, stop chasing the wind. God gave you a mind. You

are a brilliant man if you can put your thoughts together and do something," Duofold paused to let that sink.

He resumed trying to drum into Falid the importance of looking within himself to arise. "When we want to achieve something in life, we must first believe in ourselves that we can. If you begin something by thinking it is too hard or feel you will not make it, you are stopping your mind from thinking beyond that challenge. Your mind feels that this is the limit, and it reminds you to stop at that point, Falid. When your mind is set to think freely, it becomes strong and believes it has no limit. A strong mind can achieve anything. Falid, failure is success in progress. What I am trying to say is that if you think too much about how bad life is, it logically becomes so. Logic will take you from one point to the other, while imagination will take you everywhere.

"I came back from the mental hospital with nothing," Duofold continued, "My only tool has been imagination and hard work. You can achieve anything if you believe you can, Falid. For Dad, I have no problem supporting him despite his ill will towards me. I shall resume a monthly stipend to him for his upkeep. For you, just man up! You are no longer a child. As for your wife, I bought Akumu's shop and would like to gift it to her. I do not want my nephews, your children, to suffer. Tell your wife to personally collect the keys from Mama to Floyd. I initially wanted Floyd's mom to take over the shop, but she is stuck in her old shop. I've already stocked the shop."

Saying this, Duofold wondered at the many times he had sworn he was done with his brother, and yet here he was offering him assistance.

Something seemed to have awakened Falid after listening to his elder brother. He no longer seemed the same; he no longer seemed the helpless wreck he looked a few moments before, trembling as he sought forgiveness.

"Thank you very much, brother Kim. The shop is good enough to kick-start my family towards earning a steady income. I agree with you; I've willed my situation on myself. I will do my best to lift myself out of it. Perhaps it is what you've just said, but it makes me feel alive once more."

They stood in silence for a while. "Have some bus fare before it is too late," Duofold said as he handed him a wad of cash. Falid took the money and disappeared into the streets to pick up a bus to the village.

As he walked away, Falid had a discussion with himself about his brother and father: *I wonder how many people would be willing to turn the other cheek as my brother Duofold does. He is the guy Jesus must have been referring to. Such people are special. They are protected by God Himself, not even his angels. I don't know if I could have managed half the agony my brother Kim went through because of Dad and myself. I probably would be among people who could be six*

feet under by now. He is an easy, lucky guy. He is loving and caring even for those who have hurt him the most. Not many people know what my brother Kim went through at the hands of our dad. Kim keeps it within the family, yet Dad seeks mercy from anyone who cares to listen to his version of the story. Then he blames me for Duofold's children being neglected. Wasn't he the one who gave instructions on what to do with them?

God is good; those kids are alive today. A few more years, and they would have been in the obituaries. As for Hezron, were it not for my wife caring for him after mom left, he would be dead by now. Yet he pockets all the coffee money, the very money my family works for. It is time I demanded my share from him if I have to get some income.

When he arrived home, Falid put aside these thoughts to break the news to his wife. He found his family seated outside as supper simmered on low heat in the kitchen. He had brought with him some treats from Nairobi, and everyone was trying to grab a share. The kids disappeared somewhere in the house just before Falid broke the news to his wife.

She couldn't wait and hurried to the shopping centre to collect the keys to her new shop. She found Floyd's mother serving customers as she waited for her husband Fidel to pick her up and close for the night.

"Good evening, *Mama* Floyd. I was sent to you by Duofold about Akumu's shop."

"Thank you for coming, Mrs Falid. I was hoping to send someone to you about the shop but in vain. I lost the phone number you gave me one time. Here are the keys to the shop. I hope you shall be as dedicated as Akumu running *the business*. It will help provide for your young ones.

"I will try my best to run it, Mom. Thank you very much."

"Your brother-in-Law Duofold is a kind person."

"Yes, I have no way to repay Duofold for the goodwill. Just one man and the whole village sprouts with his generosity," observed Mrs Falid, who couldn't wait to get started. She had been hawking eggs in the market, and the income was never enough to sustain her family.

"Let me walk you to your shop," said Mrs Fidel. "I need to hand over to you the power and water bills."

It was a short walk to the next street, where Akumu's shop was located. No sooner had they opened the shop's door, and the late shoppers were gathering to buy. Fortunately, Akumu had labelled prices on the products.

In the little time the shop had opened, Mrs Falid had made a small profit. Falid came to help her close the shop and walk her home.

It was a hopeful beginning, Falid remarked, to which they had Duofold to thank.

"I wonder whether had it been you, Falid, in command, we could ever have gotten a gift like this one?" wondered Falid's wife.

"It is true. He is different from us, the Hezron clan," replied the husband. "We have a business now to take care of, my dear wife. Let us do our best to raise our family now."

They held hands for the first time in a long time. The children had wondered where their mother, who rarely left the home at night, had gone. They were happy to see her back. It was big news in the house when their parents announced that they now owned a shop. The children saw proof of this with sweets that their mother shared with them for once.

WARRIOR WAS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN when Duofold got home. It had been Warrior's habit to stay out for some time now. Yasmin had tried to persuade the teenager to keep at home in vain.

When he finally came home, the teen found his father waiting for him at the gazebo. He was fearful of seeing his father, but Duofold's eyes were on him should he decide to sneak out again. This, the father decided, was the day he would give his teenage son "the talk".

"Come over here, Warrior," he called. "Where were you at this time of the night?"

"I was finishing homework with a friend, Dad," he lied, forgetting he had no school bag on him to cover for his excuse.

"Let me remind you, son: When you were four years old, I was your whole world. It takes a lifetime for you to realise that I once was the best to you, Warrior. When I picked you from the jaws of Grandpa Hezron and Uncle Falid, I was a know-it-all because none of your questions went unanswered. I meant everything to you. And now that you are a teenager, you believe your dad has changed. He is not as kind as when you were a baby. You feel like I am old school now, that you know better than me, Warrior? You don't seem able to be tolerant or get along with anyone in this house, and your communication skills are wanting. You are just beginning to understand adulthood. That is why you seem to think out there is more fascinating than home.

"You wonder how we have managed to stick together, your mom and me, with the hardships life throws at us. It is not that there are no better people or things out there that are more fun than home, but everything has a season, Warrior."

The son just stood there looking at his feet. He did not betray what he was thinking.

"You even seem to think I am jealous of your progress when I reject your suggestions—suggestions that look perfect to you. You are not yet of age to start reporting home at night. As life progresses, we shall not read things from the same

page anymore. You will have your life to shape the way you want. But for now, you are under my care. But only when you will become a parent and are faced with the same predicament shall you appreciate what I am telling you. That is the time you will appreciate we closed our eyes on much that deserved punishing."

Warrior shifted on his feet, a sign that he was paying attention. Perhaps it was also because this was the first time he was hearing that his father had deliberately not punished him even when he deserved it.

"I am just tolerant because bringing up children is a command from God and the right thing to do. As parents, we trust in God for wisdom and foresight in structuring your life. So please, with all due respect, try to fit in until the time you do not need our help. Until then, orders come from only two people, your mom Yasmin and me. I hope you have understood, and we shall not have these conversations again. If you feel you can manage yourself better, pack and leave my house. I can as well drop you at Grandpa Hezron or your mom Akumu's home to live there."

"I am so sorry, Dad; I will do as you say going forward. I shall apologise to Mom, too; I love her very much and wouldn't want to hurt her."

He said and disappeared into the house, looking stunned. The thought that he might be taken back to the village or be raised by Akumu left him shaken. He could not imagine being in the village, which he now thought was too backwards compared to his life and affluent friends in the city. Neither could he imagine living with the Floyd family forever in Nakuru. His Dad was more fun to be with and was always caring and understanding. Yasmin was the perfect mom one could ask for. She was lovely and fun to hang out with too.

Duofold was left thinking about how his son had triggered a lot of things in his head. He remembered his teenage when life was self-centred and only revolved around his personal desires. He viewed everything according to his wants. It did not matter to him whether something was affordable to his parents or harmful to him. What he failed to see was how his parents always wanted the best for him as a child. Looking back, he now considered himself lucky, having absorbed his parent's values, which remained alive and always there to tap from. Some of his friends who didn't have parents to guide them had been taught the hard way by the harsh realities of the world.

Thinking about this, he suddenly missed Akumu, especially after the confrontation he had had with her son. He picked up his phone and rang her.

"Hello, Akumu, dear," he said after she picked up the call. For some reason, he missed being scolded by his ex. “How is Nakuru my Akumu darling? Now that you have settled down, you have forgotten we existed?"

"Stop it right there, son of two fathers. Since you married a movie star and were expecting twins, I became quiet," Akumu joked. "In any case, you only remember me when you are ignored. I was expecting you to sneak to Nakuru to check how I am doing, Kim.

"I wish I could. Been too busy, and life has been too fast for me nowadays.

"How are my kids doing?" she inquired.

"The family is fine, just your son's teenage issues, but we are coping. Work and family have been quite something, Akumu."

"Especially now that you are married; too many new things to deal with, your teenagers, new wife, coming babies—I was so jealous to see your beautiful woman. God sent you one who was a perfect match. You look too good together. It is like you were meant for each other. Maybe that is why mayhem broke at Hezron's to redirect you to her. My children must have forgotten I exist. Even in my presence, they preferred Yasmin. I hope the harmony in your family lasts forever. I hate seeing you suffer, my Duofold."

"Eat the cake you baked, Akumu. That is how I felt to see you with Floyd. You chose comfort for yourself and ignored my children. I guess I am so fond of you. In normal circumstances, I should never have talked to you. No excuse justifies the terror my children went through during your watch. I vowed never to make them anyone else's responsibility. Yasmin is a perfect mother, but my eyes are constantly on the two."

"You refused to choose me. I am Luo; you know our customs. It is demanded of us to leave children with the father's family. That is where they belong. If you had taken me back, I could have left Floyd with his children without blinking. However, let's look ahead; yesterday will take care of itself, Kim."

"I know culture got in the way," agreed Duofold, "that is why I am in charge of Binte and Warrior. It also got complicated, considering I love Floyd so much. Besides him now being family, he is a good man. You were not forced to marry him. You chose to, so let's get used to our new lives. After all, we are still family, you being my brother's wife. However, this 'keep looking forward thing' should stop and settle down with Floyd for good. You are ageing too, and your family needs assurance you are there to stay. No matter the storm, be a virtuous woman. Make Floyd a proud man."

"I was not hoping to be replaced so soon. I enjoyed sneaking into your house in the pretence of seeing my children. Now you are out of bounds. I am so sad."

"It is for the good of all of us. If we had continued with it, we would have broken Floyd at some point. I thank you for those moments we had, but now I am sorted. I am planning to be in Nakuru tomorrow. I shall pass by your shop and have a cup of

tea with you and Floyd before I get back in the evening. My love to all; I am late for dinner with the family. Good night," he hung up, mainly to avoid Akumu's disappointed complaints that he had broken off their illicit liaisons.

After Duofold hung up, Akumu felt empty. *For sure, Kim has moved on*, she thought. *He does not seem as excited to hear my voice as he used to. This woman must have taken him over completely. Neither do I understand what charm she has given to my kids too. They seem to love her more than me. It leaves me yearning for him; Yasmin has replaced me too soon. But it was bound to happen. I better get used to the idea. I have started warming up again to Floyd of late. I guess my easy access to Kim had gotten to me, and I felt like I still belonged to him. Thank God I moved to Nakuru; otherwise, I could have been torn between the brothers—the cloud between.*

Akumu was nicely settled in Nakuru, and her children had been enrolled in a good school. Her new shop was growing, leading her to invite her brother from Kisumu to help run the business. Floyd was also excited to have his family nearby instead of commuting upcountry every fortnight. It was a happy family. He helped at the shop in the evening after work when customer traffic at the shop was heavy. All was well, and the children were happier to be with Dad and Mom every day.

FLOYD PICKED UP THE CHILDREN from school on his way from work. He joined Duofold and Akumu in a hotel.

Duofold and Floyd soon proceeded to have a beer as Akumu and the children excused themselves to go home before it was too late.

The two brothers overindulged, forcing Duofold to spend the night at Floyd's house. Not that he minded it; he was curious to see what the house looked like, this being the first time he was visiting the home. When he was buying it for Akumu, the money transaction was online. What He loved was the location. He thought that it suited them. It was spacious and had a guest wing where he spent the night.

The next morning, Floyd had to leave early to drop the children to school. Akumu went to the guest wing to invite Duofold to breakfast. For the first time, he had no desire for his ex. He spoke to her through the window. He told her he was about to take a shower, then join her for breakfast.

Akumu could not believe Duofold would not let her in, even after informing him it was only them in the house.

Duofold knew he must set boundaries if Akumu was to stop laying claims on him; he didn't want her to feel entitled to him anymore. He took his time until her husband Floyd was back from dropping the children off. Duofold then joined them for breakfast and soon left for Nairobi.

When Duofold got back to Nairobi, no one was in the house. Yasmin was out to get the children from school as she attended her last prenatal clinic session. He entered his mom's home. She, too, was not there; she had left with Yasmin to pick up the children as they went shopping. But the door to her house was unlocked. He went to her garden to see how it was doing and whether she needed help to weed it. He went through the rooms to see whether he should hire a cleaner who might pass by a couple of days a week. Everything was spic and span; Florence was still capable of looking after herself.

He opened the door to the tiny store where his mother stored her harvests from the garden. It was now turned into a lovely bedroom with a three-by-six-foot bed and had a nice wardrobe and dressing table fitted. What used to be the garden toilet door now opened to the new bedroom with complete modern fittings. He suspected Yasmin must have had a hand in the makeover. *What are these women up to?*

He sat down to make some calls as he waited for his mom to explain the new development. She came in not long after with some shopping. She was surprised to find Duofold alone and comfortable in her house. She heartily greeted him and proceeded to make tea, which she served with the sweet bread she had brought with her. Though Duofold was not particularly hungry, he knew that an invitation to a mother's meal meant it must be eaten, whether one was full or not.

"I see you turned the store into a bedroom, Mom. Who is the guest?"

"Forgive me, Kim. I did not share that with you, yet I am not a person to keep a secret from you. I want your sister Ann to come and live with me. She is suffering a lot back at home without me there. Thank you for taking her to school; she called me last night and sounded like a happy girl. I hope you understand, son. I am a parent, and my comfort cannot allow me peace if she goes back to that toxic environment with Hezron in the village. Falid is a grown-up man with a family, but this girl needs to be shielded until she gets married or at least gets a job. When school closes, I want her to be staying with me, hence the extra bedroom."

I cannot imagine I am now managing three homes, my home, Dad Hezron's, and Dad Fidel's, Duofold thought to himself, somewhat triggered by what Florence was saying. *I thought it would be easy to disown Hezron's family, but now I see why the Kikuyu proverb tells us that clan and age mates are intertwined. I feel so sorry for all of them. I am the eldest son, and I have no reason to let Mom feel sad for her family when I can make things easy for her and them. I find myself rooting for them, whether it is my wish or not.*

"That is OK, Mom. I do not want her in that environment anymore, either. Hezron's home remains toxic for such a young mind. I'll call the architect who built this house to see how to design it into a better bedroom before Ann comes home for the holidays."

In the meantime, the children found Duofold's car in the compound and wondered where he might be. They took their after-school snack and a quick shower, and then they were on a hunt to find their dad. They found him where they suspected he would be, with Yasmin following behind them. Yasmin admitted she was too lazy to make dinner at home. Grandma Florence was happy to welcome them and made rice with beans, which they ate with some leftover beef. After the hearty meal, all were ready for bed.

THEY DID NOT SLEEP MUCH THAT NIGHT; Yasmin was in terrible pain, which they guessed could be labour pains. Duofold had to rush her to the hospital, where she was admitted. The gynaecologist determined that the babies had come before their due date, and she had to undergo a caesarean section procedure.

To Duofold, it was a long anxious moment in which he feared for Yasmin's and the twins' life. He had called Phyllis who was on duty that night to be with her sister Yasmin in theatre as he called the in-laws.

Duofold was a daddy of twins at last. The boy Junior resembled Warrior with a pale complexion similar to his mom's. The girl Femi was a replica of her mother. They were both screaming to suckle, and the mother was quite eager and happy to let them have their way. Yasmin felt proud to finally become a mother. She did not seem to notice the proud father's presence. She was so absorbed in the task of motherhood that she did not seem like one who had just had a C-section.

Yasmin's family led by her dad Zahid had already arrived to welcome their first grandchildren.

It would be a week before Yasmin was home with a nurse to manage her for the next one month. Warrior and Binte were, as expected, very excited to have a sister and brother. Every evening after school found Binte and Warrior by Yasmin's bedside to be with the newborns.

Everything from then on was on a programme. The babies shared their bedroom with Yasmin, who insisted on sleeping with them. She would only occasionally visit Duofold's bedroom to see him off to sleep and prepare him for work. It never ceased to amaze him how women seemed able to handle so many things at the same time. Four children and a husband, all demanding Yasmin's touch before they left the house.

Duofold organised a party for the new members. His three families – the Zahids, the Fidels and the Hezrons – were all invited. Hezron chose to miss out again on the family outing, but that was alright. Everyone brought something with them for the babies. Akumu was in the mix. She was concerned Yasmin might be overwhelmed

with the new babies needing her close attention, in addition to Warrior and Binte. But Yasmin looked in charge. Akumu was happy to note how the babies had brought a lot of joy to the family. She, however, was disappointed no one seemed to notice her presence at all.

Grandma Florence, on the other hand, seemed to have reservations about Akumu; she did not seem to want her near Yasmin. She was still bitter that Akumu had neglected her children and was suspicious of her former daughter-in-law playing kind since Duofold had been back. Florence also felt betrayed because she thought Akumu knew of her relationship with Akumu's father-in-law, Fidel. She also suspected Akumu had not given up on her son Duofold. She had witnessed her sneak into Duofold's house, though she had never told anyone. Florence saw Akumu as a wolf in sheep's skin.

Grandma Florence now took the role of being the permanent helper to Yasmin taking care of the two toddlers Femi and Junior. When they started walking, it was at their grandma's house—the best place it could be. Yasmin was happy with the arrangement, as it allowed her time to put her house in order.

After school, the older children would be out together with their younger siblings. The young ones were catching up quite fast with the support they were getting from Warrior and Binte. Soon, the twins were already three years old, and the girls were in one bedroom and the boys in the other. It was one big happy family.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

YASMIN RECALLED HER PARENTING JOURNEY, which started with embracing Binte and Warrior as her own children and the love and pleasure she had bonding with them. She saw herself as the accidental parent who saw them grow from their pre-teens to now when they had become teenagers with all the emotional swings that attend that age. This prepared her for Femi and Junior, who were now in kindergarten.

Recalling this journey, Yasmin remarked to herself how she enjoyed her role as a mother. She felt fulfilled that her twins were now of school-going age, joining their older siblings who were now almost joining high school. However, while she used to drive the children to school, she and Duofold had decided it would be better if Femi and Junior especially were picked up and dropped off by a school bus. This would allow them interact more with other children.

When the twins were young, they kept her busy. But now that they spent their day in school, it left her idle with little to do at home.

Yasmin decided to look for something to keep her busy again. Though she was a lawyer by profession, she had lost her passion for it and didn't want to practice anymore. She wanted something different and had identified a niche in the fashion business. She had discussed this with Duofold, who was relieved that she wanted to go it alone in business. He did not want her to join any of his three businesses. The enterprises were too involved, and he feared they might demand too much of his and her time, leading to both of them neglecting the family.

Yasmin created her fashion line. She started small, selling online but soon attracted a huge clientele as her creations grew in popularity. The next move was to open a physical shop where clients could walk in, and with enough storeroom to hold stock. She discussed this with her husband, which he agreed to.

Duofold, ever supportive, assisted her hunt for a shop in a prime location in the city centre. The shop was well stocked, and business was roaring. He would pass by her shop some evenings to have coffee with her before they closed for the evening. They were usually home by 6 pm, allowing them quality time with the kids before they retired for the night. The arrangement worked well for the family. On weekends,

she had to assign jobs to her assistants allowing her time to be home, unless there was something very urgent to tie her in the shop.

After some time, however, Duofold began to notice Yasmin was often not at the shop when he passed by in the evenings. Then she started arriving home late after work without him. Duofold cancelled the arrangement with the school bus service to keep Yasmin more engaged by having her pick up the children from school. Eventually, however, the children had to be picked up by the driver. This was because Yasmin would drive into the compound after 9 pm and would be a bit tipsy. She said it was because of the demands of work, which forced her to be out with clients making late deliveries.

As her late coming continued, Duofold asserted himself and pointed it to his wife that it was becoming a habit and that it was unacceptable. He did not understand why a young mother would abandon her family, yet looking for money was not an issue to keep chasing business at night. Duofold put his foot down and told her it had to stop; otherwise, he was prepared to close that shop for good. After all, he was financially able, while the fashion business was to keep Yasmin occupied, not an income earner for the family.

"Do not test my patience, Yasmin," he warned her, displaying anger he had never shown her before.

This particular night, in defiance, she had arrived home after midnight. However, Duofold had locked the doors and waited for her at the parking bay at home. He knew her routine: She would park the car and sit inside for a while, making calls before getting out of the vehicle. As she staggered to the house, she would remotely lock the car doors with the key fob. The vehicle emitted its signature beeps to indicate the doors were locked.

On this night, Duofold did not wait for this routine to play out. As soon as she drove into the compound, he immediately got into her car, forced her into the passenger seat, and they drove off. He dropped her at her mother's house and left without a word to them.

"I'll be coming on Saturday to meet with your parents," he told Yasmin.

He left her cursing as he drove back home. He left instructions at school that no one was to pick up the kids except him. He left more instructions at home with the guard that nobody should open the gate for her.

She tried everything to hide what she had been up to, but in vain. By now, the parents had known her ex-boyfriend Barot had been in the country for some time after he had been deported from the UK. As would have been thought, Barot did not start a family with the bride her parents had chosen for him. His separation from Yasmin seemed to have affected him. He seemed to have lost interest in everything

and could not hold down a job. All he wanted was to get back with her, but it was too late, the object of his love having long been married.

Notwithstanding, Yasmin forgave him when they met through a mutual friend. He explained to her how he was reprimanded for insisting on Yasmin and was married off to his parent's favoured bride. The girl did not seem to like him or the marriage they both had been forced into. They ended up breaking up with no child involved; they had not borne any children.

Barot and Yasmin warmed up to each other again and started hanging out together, as Yasmin fixed him a job and got him a house. This was the main reason she was getting home late. It was not something they would have liked Duofold to know about.

DUOFOLD GOT TO HER PARENT'S house at 10 am on the Saturday he had said he would be there. He met Phyllis and Girish at the parking bay just before they left for upcountry to attend an event they had been invited to by friends.

He found the parents having breakfast and was invited to join. Shortly after, Yasmin joined them.

"We are curious, son, to know what transpired," her dad began. "For all we can tell, you and Yasmin have been a happy couple. I hope it is not as serious as it looks, dumping her and driving off without even a word with us. How are the children? I imagine they must terribly miss their mother. It's been almost a week now. First, however, serve yourselves breakfast, then we eat as we talk."

"You will forgive me, Dad and Mom. It was not out of disrespect that I dropped her without having a word with you. It was so that Yasmin would tell you without me there what this was about. Of late, she has been coming home late while drunk. She seems to have no time for the family anymore, especially for Femi and Junior, who are still too young and needy. She also seems to be keeping things from me about what is happening. This got me concerned, and I thought maybe she would open up to you."

"Yasmin, my daughter, what is the problem?" asked her father, as her mother looked on with worry and concern written on her face. "I remember we came to the hospital and found a proud mother of two. Suddenly you have left them to hang out at night with God knows who, yet these kids are too young to be left without their mother's attention. Can you not even wait for them to be five years of age, my girl?"

"I am sick and tired of this man." The rudeness of Yasmin's reply was received by surprise for the forcefulness of it. "He leaves me to toil with the children as he

flirts with women all over the place. I want my children; he can go to hell. I can raise them alone."

The parents could not believe the swear words coming from their daughter's mouth. They had great respect for Duofold and did not take it kindly that their daughter seemed to belittle him in front of them. The way she addressed him was uncalled for.

"Can you elaborate on those claims you are making against your husband, Yasmin?" harshly demanded her mother.

"I don't have to. Let him divorce me. I'll be happy to leave with my kids."

Yasmin's reply was even more surprising, more so to Duofold, who wondered whether he had been too hard on her, asking her to change her ways. Yet Yasmin spoke like one who had nothing to lose. She had her children and had her own money. And, if it came right down to it, she had her ex-boyfriend to go back to. In her mind, in case of a divorce, she could sue Duofold for maintenance. Her vengefulness would not only free her by being with Barot but would shame Barot's parents, who separated her and Barot back in the day. She loathed Barot's parents. She even contemplated getting Barot's baby if possible to spite them.

"I am disappointed in you, Yasmin," said his father. "The way you speak it is like somebody who has lost her values, which, as you know, are more important to me than valuables. You speak like somebody who does not care about family but like one who cares more about merrymaking."

"My daughter," began her mother. "It is like wisdom is deserting you. You have the knowledge to do better as a trained lawyer, but you do not seem wise. There are many situations in life where knowledge does not always help, except where wisdom is applied to handle a situation. I would have thought you would appreciate your good fortune compared to your agemates, many of whom spend their time chasing trivial pursuits missing out on the joys of family and loved ones."

Duofold could not keep quiet any longer. "The way things look, I can guarantee it will end with heartbreak. Or what's the point of spending your best days working at a marriage, only to realise you were wrong for each other when you are old and wrinkled? The way you have behaved in front of your parents proves how irresponsible you can be. Do what you think best suits you. I will take care of the children. I am the custodian of all four of them, Yasmin. You are still young; you can get another man and start a new family. You are a lawyer. Start the divorce process. If I will be excused, I have nothing further to discuss with her."

Duofold stood up to leave.

"You see, I am right," Yasmin said accusatively to Duofold. "You did not even deny what I said about your flirting with other women."

Then, to everyone's surprise, she picked up a glass on the table and spitefully splashed the water on Duofold's face.

He stood up and excused himself as she followed him with kicks and blows. Had Duofold wanted to know why the physical aggressiveness, he would have known the aggressiveness was from her frustration that he had not begged her to leave with him.

He turned and pulled her into a guest room adjacent to the dining room. He removed his belt and thrashed her with it.

As he thrashed her, Duofold wanted to quote a Kiswahili saying about mistaking a rained-on lion for a pussy cat. Instead, he said, "Yasmin, you seem to have taken me too for granted. Simply because I do not beat you does not mean we are two men in my house. I am done with you. If you are man enough to sustain your ex-boyfriend Barot, go ahead. I shall not have a woman attached to another man. Do not come back to my house. I owe you nothing, young lady."

All the pent-up anger and humiliation he suffered from the disrespect Yasmin showed in front of her parents erupted in rage as he slapped her beautiful chin, sending her tumbling. He had vowed never to hurt Yasmin, but she had provoked him in a way he never thought possible.

In another moment, she was on her knees, clinging to his legs and pleading with him not to leave her. Until he mentioned Barot, she had no clue he knew about her affair with him. Yet, to his credit, he did not mention it in front of her parents. He did not want to embarrass her parents with her infidelity or humiliate her in front of them.

"Let go of my trouser," Duofold told her contemptuously. "I am used to raising children by myself. I can do it all over again. Let us not cross each other's paths again. I will send your belongings here by the end of the day."

Unable to avoid hearing the commotion in the guestroom, her mother became worried her daughter might be killed. She asked her husband to intervene.

"Let Yasmin get disciplined, Femi. She lacks respect for her husband. I could not believe her language to him. That is not the same girl we raised. She is throwing her marriage to the dogs. She does not know how hard life could turn out to be should she get divorced. She does not seem to have learnt anything from what happened with Barot. The depression that ate at her could double, more so because there are kids involved. Duofold has every right to keep the children; he has proven to be responsible while our daughter has started her funny life again. Wait and see how she is going to be tormented."

Zahid stomped out of the house and angrily drove out of the compound.

A while later, Duofold came out of the room and went in his car without another word. He could not believe the naivety exhibited by his woman. He was so mad that

he did not think he could forgive her just yet. It was a time when Duofold felt his authority was being undermined as if being arm-twisted by life.

His phone rang amid his rage. It was Liz. She was calling from Singapore and wanted some paperwork done in the office to formalise engagement with accounts she was negotiating in the Asian country.

"While you are still there, Liz dear, I would like to send you to a hospital in Singapore. You check for me how Yasmin Zahid lost her pregnancy and fertility. I guess there was foul play. Get me all possible details."

"Your wish is my command, Kim. Shall be done and sent the soonest possible, dear. In the meantime, have the Instar order delivered. Are you well, dear? You sound like someone under duress. I can tell."

"A bit. It's just normal family disagreements. I'm driving and will need to be settled down to explain. I hope you are keeping healthy. How are men treating you there, my Liz? Do not respond. I shall call later," he said and hung up.

YASMIN LOCKED HERSELF IN HER ROOM for two straight days. Not long after, she left the house to check on her Barot, now that her relationship with her husband was ruined. She found him with another woman and, angry, she warned the woman never to show up again in his house.

"Yasmin," said an unapologetic Barot who was half-naked, "choices have consequences. You chose to remarry; flow with it. I shall find myself a suitable wife too. You are married now; concentrate on your family. I do not want to be caught in the crossfire with your husband. The bliss is over. Let us just be friends. I need to structure my life too."

Yasmin was left shocked at the arrogance of the man she gave all to the point she forgot her vows to Duofold. She could never have imagined he would speak to her like that after risking so much on him, leaving her finances dry. She had heavily borrowed to settle Barot down.

It pained her that he now had a well-paying job but was still residing in one of Duofold's villas she had accommodated him. Yasmin had long been granted two villas by her husband to collect rent for her upkeep and to boost her cloth business with the rent income. Her ex now occupied one unit, while she utilised the money generated from the other one to pay the loans she took to set up Barot.

Now she realised she had nowhere to turn. The idea of threatening her husband with divorce came from Barot, and it did not work. Instead, it got her in a worse situation than she was in before. She began to have her doubts about Barot. He may not be the man she thought he was. It occurred to her that a man who kept busy

merry-making and unable to sustain a marriage with the other woman his parents so dearly fought for may not be worth her trouble. She accepted it as his nature; nothing could be done. She must have been blinded by love not to have seen his shortcomings. Now she counted herself lucky not to have married him then. Perhaps this was the silver lining after she lost her baby, for which she was admitted to the hospital in Singapore. She decided to evict Barot from the villa before it was too late. She, however, realised it was not the kind of situation to involve her parents, let alone Duofold. She went home sad. She had to think of a way out of the situation she had created for herself.

Her sister Phyllis liked Duofold; she found him responsible and the right kind of man for Yasmin. She invited him for lunch and explained to him what her sister was going through. Several months had passed, and due to unpaid rent that had substantially accrued, her clothes shop had been auctioned. This made him want to meet Yasmin, but he changed his mind to give it more thought after what his sister-in-law said next.

Phyllis confirmed a rumour Duofold had heard from a mutual friend before he sent Yasmin back to her father's house; that, she was not together with her ex-boyfriend Barot anymore and that she was trying to help an old friend settle down.

"Please reconsider your separation from her, dear Duofold," Phyllis pleaded. "I know that she is very sorry for the hurt she has caused you. She has learnt her lesson."

"I hope the lesson sobered her up. But, Phyllis, we came here to discuss my sister Ann, not your sister Yasmin. Leave that to her and me, please, dear. I appreciate your giving Ann a chance at the school. And I'm happy to report that it has already scored her a husband, a Mr Duke. You might know him; he is a doctor in the same teaching hospital. They are planning to relocate to Europe after their wedding to which you have been invited."

"Oh, my God! That is very good news. I know Dr Duke; he is a volunteer doctor from the UK and has gotten a Job in Italy. I am sure that must be where they are headed. Lucky her, she found a husband before me. I think I need prayers, Duofold. Thank you for the invitation. Who knows, I might strike it lucky at the wedding and score myself a suitor. I am kidding, Duo. I will soon be inviting you to my wedding too."

"I knew you had already caught someone's eye; beautiful ladies like you never stay single. I wish I had known you before this crazy sister of yours. I would have married you in an instant. I fear she may not be the person I thought she was, forgetting that she is a mother now. No man wants unnecessary baggage. If she thought Barot would take her babies in, she is mistaken. If she wants to start a life's journey with him, tell her she may be too late. Getting another baby for her now will not be a walk in the

park. She should prepare for difficult times if that is what she has in mind, plus the bills it will involve. Her life is on the line, and she is no longer young to go through the procedure.

"Barot is a spoiled brat," said Phyllis, "He has a thousand and one women. He is a true Casanova; my sister was just excited to see him and nothing more. They do not see each other. The guy got a good job and has other plans for his life. It is unfortunate Yasmin trusted him and even used her money to support him after he betrayed her."

"It is difficult to believe. She said in front of your parents that she wanted a divorce. I could not believe it. I never imagined the word divorce would ever be mentioned between us, but now I am OK with it. I will bring up the children as I look for another wife."

"Please, Duofold, do not be too hasty to dismiss her. Find it in your heart to forgive her. She is depressed with regret, always talking about how sorry she is for treating you so badly. I know deep inside your heart you miss her too. She did not see this coming. These are the little mischiefs that complicate life but can be resolved. She is a good person; do not be blinded by this one failure on her part. I know that she loves you and your children. Kindly reconsider, dear brother," Phyllis was so emotional in her plea that she was already in tears.

"I have to excuse myself. I have a busy day ahead. Tell her to remember to send me an invitation card for her wedding with Barot. I shall do the same when I get a bride. Cheers, dear Phyllis."

AS YASMIN MOANED about her broken relationship with her ex-boyfriend one morning, Duofold was enjoying a walk with his children in the park.

On Yasmin's mind was her realisation that keeping a secret and healing a wound in a broken relationship were two different things. Before vowing to evict Barot, she had tried to make it work with him, except for the wounds his family inflicted on her – both in her body, leaving her infertile and emotionally for the pain she continued to endure. These wounds were still too fresh, so that all she thought about was revenge on Barot's mother. In addition to the love she thought she had for Barot, it was her wish for revenge that had made her forget she was happily married.

Duofold, on the other hand, was having his two ex-wives on his mind as he strolled in the park. *I am determined to be the parent who filled the gap for my two absent wives, Yasmin and Akumu*, he told himself as he watched the children to make sure they were careful as they rode their bicycles.

Ever since he married Yasmin, he had not had a day out with the four kids alone. It was hectic, and it seemed like for every three steps he made, one of the children would come running to report the other to him about something. Duofold realised a parent has a full-time job, much of it teaching lessons to their children. The social cues and values instilled by a parent shape the child's destiny. If you are a careless parent that talks back to them with all the cursing, they pick the language. Children do not learn what you teach them but learn by example. The first person a newly born baby greets when she lands on earth was the parent. The baby wakes up to see the parent's face every morning, and the words that come from the parent's mouth are echoed by the offspring. When things get thick for the child, a parent assures him all shall be OK, and the child trusts. Discipline comes in handy when the child misbehaves.

No matter how much one might be wronged, one should never be rude to others. Duofold wondered how this might be emphasised, as it seemed to him most parents were often rude to one another in front of the kids. That is why Duofold did not make a scene at home when he took Yasmin to her parents' that night she came home drunk, despite warnings from her husband. Either way, it is the parents' responsibility to instil in children a culture of gratitude – a smile and a simple thank you. The simple discussions with his kids go a long way, more so on sharing their favourite snacks or toys.

Halfway through the rides, Femi and Junior got tired and now wanted to ride on their dad's, shoulders. They also wanted him to carry their bike. He had seen that coming and had made sure Junior and Femi shared one bike. Duofold found it a challenging task without Yasmin around. He wondered how she managed to convince the two younger children to finish what they had started; in this case, their rides or how far to ride before turning back.

Duofold also thought that Warrior had become a typical sullen teenager, defiantly staring at him. It was not unlike another parent once told him of his own son, how it was like "he wouldn't come to his senses at any sign of trouble." When addressing him of late, the teenager seemed to just look at him, appearing not to want to understand when he had done wrong. Duofold thought the open environment outdoors in the park would be ideal for a discussion with him before he considered serious disciplinary action against the young man. There, however, was no chance to engage with Warrior with the young ones all over their Dad with all sorts of demands. Duofold was, however, impressed to note that Warrior had Junior's bike on his shoulders to take back to the car. *Warrior is not totally useless*, Duofold thought. *He is taking in some responsibilities, at least.*

Looking at his daughters, Duofold thought girls were more secretive. He began to wonder whether Yasmin should not come back home to enter Binte's secretive territory and see what was happening with her. Duofold found her teenage excitements worrying and wasn't sure what was the trigger. She was constantly on the phone, and in the park, Duofold was fighting with her to concentrate on her riding, other than being on the phone riding with one hand and always stopping to giggle with whoever was on the other end of the line. The dad didn't know who she was talking to. He wanted Binte to mind Junior because Femi was being too possessive of their Dad for him to cope with two younger children. Warrior, meanwhile, was taking his sweet time taking the bicycle to the car. Duofold was now seated by the side to feed Junior and Femi as he waited for the teenagers to help him out.

Duofold came to appreciate that marriage was not the bliss of the matrimonial bed but the responsibilities of parenthood and the workload that came with it. No wonder many men hated house chores, which required juggling the workload of various unending chores of a home. Moving back and forth with his hands full with the children at the park, Duofold felt like a tested man.

When they got home, he dropped the younger children at his mother's house, as the new nanny was having a problem coping with the demands from all of them. Both his mother and the nanny, who was elderly, could manage them. Nonetheless, the teenagers liked to be by themselves in their rooms and could take care of themselves. The nanny Yasmin had left was transferred the same day she left, including the guards. With the new nanny, with whom Florence had grown close, the children seemed happier.

ANN'S WEDDING DAY finally arrived. Everyone was busy with the final touches before the big moment. Yasmin showed up accompanied by Phyllis. Duofold's children were, however, not at the wedding. They were on holiday in Nakuru with Akumu. Duofold had anticipated Yasmin would show up. He made a technical appearance, gave a brief speech, and disappeared. He did not have much to do. It was his dad Hezron's day as the father of the bride to give away his daughter's hand. But Duofold disappeared in order not to overshadow his father but also because he still wasn't ready to interact with the Hezron family yet. The other reason was Yasmin; he also did not feel ready to have any discussion with her.

Linda seized the moment, too, and had tagged along her teenage son and daughter to attend the wedding. She was well-known to Duofold's extended family since she was a young college girl with Duofold. She wanted to catch up with them after so many years. And though Linda didn't want to admit it, she was also curious to see

how Akumu and Yasmin would behave around each other with Duofold in the mix. Linda had missed out on Yasmin's dowry event, having travelled out of town. To her surprise, however, Duofold was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Akumu and all the children. Linda would have liked her teenagers to meet Warrior and Binte. The missing family members left her very perplexed. Also, she had no idea Duofold had fought with his wife, Yasmin. Linda, however, saw Yasmin from a distance, though they did not talk.

Linda kept herself busy with Duofold's sister and mother to catch up on how the family was faring after Duofold's return. With not much else to sustain her interest, she left but not before trying to call Duofold several times, only to find his phone off. She, however, had been informed by the sisters that he had been at the wedding and gave a speech.

As for Yasmin, the wedding offered the opportunity to meet Hezron. She introduced herself to him as Duofold's wife who replaced Akumu. Despite the coldness between him and his son Duofold, Hezron was very glad to meet Yasmin and was happy for Duofold. He had not expected Yasmin to be such a beautiful and assertive woman, given the way she approached him. Yasmin was careful to come with a gift for Hezron. It was hinted to her at one time by Duofold how Hezron loved money, so she gave him a good sum of cash to buy himself a suit claiming she did not know his size. Hezron was delighted beyond words and was quick to show his gratitude to Yasmin.

She excused herself and went to Duofold's mom to plead with her to let her in the main house, which was locked. She was informed the children were away on holiday, but no one knew where Duofold was, and the mother, too, had no access to the house. She spent the night with her mother-in-law after the wedding, hoping to see Duofold. His phone was off, and no one could raise him or the children. With the help of Grandma Florence, they finally got through to Akumu. The children had been picked up earlier from Akumu's, and she had no clue what he was up to. She had no idea there was distress at Duofold's home. But she thought Duofold was in his element, bottling up his feelings and showing no signs of distress.

Desperate to see Duofold and not knowing where he was or what he was up to, Yasmin thought she was going to lose her mind. She had no idea he could be such a nightmare when offended. She was an emotional wreck by the end of that day. She went back to her parent's home and locked herself in her bedroom.

Seeing the state Yasmin was in, her father thought it was time Duofold released her from her agony and gave her a chance. He called Duofold to discuss the matter. However, instead of showing up or giving a date he would be available, he had his

lawyers serve Yasmin with a deed of separation. The deed was received by Yasmin's parents.

Zahid, her dad, read it out to his wife. The cause cited for the separation was infidelity, with the deed noting Yasmin's love affair with one Barot. The deed also charged that she took a loan for him, which was still outstanding. Bank statements showing the money transfers were attached. She also allocated Barot one of Duofold's rental houses, and he was in arrears of six months. The deed concluded with the accusation that she was not a responsible parent. Duofold requested full custody of their two children, Junior Duofold and Femi Duofold.

Had it not been for the deed, they would never have known Barot was back in the country for good and was the cause of the trouble between Yasmin and Duofold.

Her parents were very sad that matters had reached this point. But as a man, Zahid felt a kinship with Duofold. He felt the agony his son-in-law must be going through with Barot forcing a disruptive love triangle.

"Duofold is a lovely man," Zahid observed bitterly to his wife, "but his ego has been wounded by our stupid daughter, Yasmin, by taking his love for granted."

"It is unbelievable, my dear Zahid. How now! And why, so Barot is the cause of all the turbulence between Yasmin and Duofold?" as she said this, Femi stood from the sitting room where they were discussing this and went to get her daughter out of bed after Zahid angrily asked her to summon Yasmin.

After Yasmin had taken a seat, he handed her the deed of separation.

She read it in shock. She could not believe Duofold was already aware of Barot residing in their villa, nor could she believe her marriage was coming to an end. She felt very hurt that the deed should accuse her of being an irresponsible parent.

But she was also filled with shame. She regretted crossing paths with Barot, more so after what Barot's parents did to her. After he got a job, he promised to refund her the money to pay back the loans she had taken to help him settle down. He never did. She also knew the Casanova had already moved in with another woman. The man had come to extend Yasmin suffering from where it had ended in Singapore. She had never wanted Duofold to know Barot was around, but Barot had gone ahead to tell their friends Yasmin was back with him. Yasmin was convinced he was a wilful home wrecker; he was just after ruining her marriage.

What shall I do now? This is a double tragedy, I lost Barot, and now I am on the verge of losing my soul mate, Duofold, Yasmin wept as she thought this. She was engulfed by fear of losing her family.

"Were you, by any chance, contemplating going back to Barot, or you guys had actually been seeing each other?" Her mother enquired, still unable to believe her daughter's recklessness.

"Not really. I was just excited to secretly assist him. I don't know how this got to Duofold. I love Duofold and want to keep my marriage. I'd rather die than divorce Duofold," she tearfully said though she knew the hopelessness of it.

She knew there was probably no way she would get back to Duofold, who had shown how mad he must have been with her by sending all her belongings to her the same day she received the deed of separation. She grieved at the thought of all she had lost.

"Were you mad, Yasmin? Why do you think people burn some bridges?" harshly asked her mother. "Do you think we were at all done with our former lovers before we got married? Why on earth did you look back and embrace such a depressing past with that horrible young man? What were you trying to achieve?"

Her father joined in, offering some advice. "If we do not mend this before it gets out of hand, you will end up in a lot of trouble. You may never have your children back, and your future shall be a mess. You are or were in such a perfect marriage, my daughter. What got into your head? There will always be a person pursuing you, even in marriage. You need the wisdom not to fall to trivial temptations. If your desires are unlimited, then expect your sorrows and suffering to be as unlimited."

Zahid fell silent; he was thinking about what must be done. He sighed audibly after the silence and had made up his mind when he said, "The first thing we need to do is get Barot out of your house before we plead with Duofold. Setting him up in the house was an insult to your husband, Yasmin. He gave you the rentals for petty cash. And here you are, busy trying to justify your actions by saying it was your money, not Duofold's. Everything you have belongs to him. It is family property under him and you. I wish he transfers the property back to himself, for you have proven how irresponsible you can be. You must be very petty to have been swayed by a useless person such as that Barot."

"I was trying to say I did not expect Duofold to know my deals with Barot because the clothes business was solely my business. I had only given Barot the house in a temporary arrangement before he could settle down." She did not remember to say that she also had planned to evict him. It was that she didn't know how.

"Are you listening to yourself, Yasmin?" her mother asked, shifting in her seat with anger. "This is your marriage coming to an end, and here you are busy mentioning that good-for-nothing Barot?" She hurled a seat pillow at her daughter's face.

"Get up, guys," Zahid said to get things moving before it got out of hand between wife and daughter. "We need to get moving to evict this guy from that house."

The three of them got in the car, the parents in front and Yasmin in the back seat and headed to the villas.

Zahid knocked on the door. Barot had ordered pizza and thought it was the delivery guy. He quickly opened the door. Before he could think what to do, his surprising guests were already in the sitting room where a half-naked woman was seated smoking and taking liquor. While Yasmin might have expected the parents to be shocked at the sight before them, it was she who could not believe what she was seeing; she could not believe that this was a different woman from the one she met the last time.

"Young lady, pick your things and leave before things turn ugly," ordered Zahid as he knocked Barot to the floor. He had only a towel on him. He picked himself up and slipped into a tracksuit trousers, and a T-shirt.

They collected his belongings and threw them out one by one. They tied him up and forced him to transfer all the money in his bank accounts to Zahid's account. They, however, could only recover only a third of what he owed Yasmin. The furniture and other fixtures were bought by Yasmin and were left in the house. They put the personal items they had thrown out in a box and left it outside the gate.

It was sweet revenge for Yasmin. It felt very satisfying to see Barot suffer the humiliation. She had felt so abused by the man that she did not care whether he would sleep on the streets all his life.

She went straight to bed thinking about Duofold. She was fearful things might never mend between them. Her body felt numb.

Zahid called Duofold to arrange a reconciliation meeting after a week had passed. During this time, Yasmin remained closed in her room and didn't seem to stop crying. Her parents felt her frustration: she did not know where or how to start a new life.

Duofold took the phone after a few rings. "How are you, son? I am so sorry about what my daughter has taken you through. As a man, I know it cannot have been easy. But I beg your pardon Duofold. You guys have come a long way, and you still have a long way to go. I believe she has learned her lesson. This is the first time she has shown you disrespect, and we have done our best to point out her mistakes. We threw Barot out of your house and warned his family to make sure he never comes near our daughter. They are disappointed in him too. We trust it shall not be repeated either with that young man or any other man in the future.

"A good family has a mom and a dad. Already your first two children lost their mother and have been great friends with Yasmin, who they took in as their mother. I am sure you also would not want a third wife in the picture. Women are all the same. You will still find fault in the newcomer. I am not justifying what my daughter, Yasmin, did; only that I am worried about the future of the children—even your future and hers as well. Save the children your pain and the agony caused you by my daughter, Yasmin. Son, we all have life wounds that only time can heal."

"I hear you, Dad. I very much appreciate your taking the trouble to call. Let me think about it. I am out of town for the week; I will give you a call once I'm back. Have a good day, Dad."

Zahid called his wife, who was in the kitchen. "You need to have a candid talk with your daughter," he said. "Duofold is still hurting, but I have a feeling he is willing to forgive. Tell Yasmin this should never be repeated if he should agree to give her another chance. This girl needs to understand life is not a joke to hop from one man to another. Such men as Duofold are rare to come by. Again, she is now a wife and a mother. If she should not heed our caution, she will be lonely for life."

Zahid did not wait for his wife's reply. Femi knew her man and understood that he was beyond breaking point and did not want to hear any more about their daughter or her shortcomings.

Duofold, on his part, also did not want to discuss Yasmin again with her family. He felt like one hanging on a cliff. He did not understand why life was testing him in this way—first, it was Akumu, then Madam Boss and now Yasmin. He wondered whether women were all of a kind and had something wrong with them; he wondered whether they only existed to torment men. Yet it seemed the worst between the three women was Yasmin for her betrayal of him. It cast a dark shadow over all the good she had done to him.

When Duofold received the call from his father-in-law, he was in the historic coastal town of Lamu, mixing both business and pleasure with his family. He was there to explore business opportunities in the newly inaugurated port set to link countries in the region under the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport – Lapsset, as it was better known. He was seated under a large beach umbrella and felt happy watching his children busy with the nanny and grandma at the hotel swimming pool area.

The swimming pool was Florence's idea. After being taken to the shores of the Indian Ocean, she feared the endless waters would swallow her grannies should they attempt to swim there. Earlier that day, he had taken them to around Lamu Island, where the famed Mau Mau freedom fighters had been detained and to the museum to savour Swahili culture. He had also taken them to the area known as Lamu Old Town, where they were intrigued to learn that the law prohibited any form of motor vehicle, whether a lorry, car or motorcycle. Any activity that required a vehicle was only conducted by donkey transport or a handcart.

It is this he was thinking about when he took Zahid's call. After listening to his father-in-law's heartfelt plea, he walked to the beach to soak himself in the warm ocean. He thought it might help him think more clearly.

What he had discussed with his father-in-law was not something he could share with his mother. All this time, Florence believed Yasmin had been away at college and had reprimanded Duofold for disappearing on Yasmin at Ann's wedding when he disappeared. Yasmin did not change the story of her being in college when she discovered her mother-in-law was not aware of what was going on. She felt thankful to Duofold for keeping the truth from Florence. This had given her some hope there might still be a chance to solve her issues with Duofold before they got to the in-laws. Her hope was that Akumu was also not aware.

"I wish you had invited Yasmin for this trip, Kim," Florence had commented after they arrived in Lamu, adding, "She probably would have enjoyed the historical sites more than these children."

"Next time, she shall join us. Therefore, not to worry, Mom," he quickly replied and disappeared to the bar for a cold beer to avoid any discussion about Yasmin.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

YASMIN NOW NEVER SEEMED TO LEAVE the house. And as she grieved her separation from Duofold, she became more circumspect. While she had often heard how true happiness did not come from material things, she now believed it. The same was true of love from her family. Unlike wealth, she saw it as divine affection that brought tremendous joy to her.

She was, however, honest enough to herself to acknowledge that one nonetheless needed their individuality despite the love a family may offer. She also acknowledged that even happiness required financing. And if Duofold was determined to divorce her, she would not mind so long as she got alimony, or he gave her a share of his wealth to sustain her life. If this should happen, life would return to normal again.

The reality, however, was that she was grieving the separation from her husband and greatly missed her children; she missed the affections of her husband, who kissed her every morning when seeing him off to work. She also missed her children's noises and little demands that defined her motherhood. This left her with a sense of nothingness; she felt like an empty shell.

On this very morning these thoughts were going through Yasmin's mind, Duofold was in his office. Like her, he felt there was nothing left inside him.

For a long time, he sat in front of his office computer, scrolling through messages from Yasmin that filled his inbox, reading through each one of them:

> *Hello Dear, despite all the pain I have caused you, the only person who can give me hope and solace is you. I promise to reciprocate, Duo. Give me another chance to prove myself and mend what is torn between us. I shall be waiting, my love.*
> *Yasmin*
> ***---***
> *How is the family? Are you sure you are OK without me, Kim?*
> *We have shared years with you and the children, but tripping just this once, and you don't find it within you to forgive me?*
> *Yasmin*
> ***---***
> *When can you create the time we have a meeting? I will explain everything to you. I am sorry for the agony I caused you, my love.*

Remember, I forgave you and Akumu many times. All the selfies you took with different women, and I forgave you, Duofold.
Yasmin

How come you seem eager to judge me on what other people say of me and not my side of the story to explain myself?
I seek an audience with you, but you remain silent; I show up at the school, and I am denied access; I come home, but I'm not allowed to enter. What is it with you?
Are you sure this Barot is the only problem here, or have you got yourself another woman? If that is the case, give me my children, and you start another family with her.
Yasmin

I wouldn't want to waste your time, but I regret every bit of what I did to you, Kim because I love you and the children and miss them very much. I can't take it anymore. Come for me now; things can only be resolved through discussion. Give me a chance to redeem myself.
Yasmin

I can't describe the anguish I am going through without you by my side Kim. If we could try, as we tried before when we fought, I promise not to lie or hold anything from you. I shall keep away from anything that will hint at the slightest threat of hurting my family again.
Yasmin

It seems your mind is set on separation, but look deep in your heart Kim; there exists a way we can make up. I miss the look you gave me when we first met. It's a look I know I'll never forget. The distance between us is growing with each passing day. But distance is not a limit; we can cover it by bringing our hearts closer, Duofold. I cherish the day when every morning you will, with forgiveness, see my face and clear the pain tormenting your soul, my dear.
Yasmin

The messages went on and on, but Duofold kept his silence. He felt nothing inside. He likened the silence to fasting, like a pilgrim abstaining from distractions of life to calm his soul from the tragedies of life—only that, in his case, it was to heal from the wounds of his betrayed love.

LINDA WAS IN HER OFFICE when her secretary, Alice, informed her she had a guest at the reception office. As Alice was informing her boss of the waiting guest, it was

with a sly, knowing smile suggesting that the person was hot and the visit might be more than official.

"I don't recall having an appointment at this time," Linda replied and didn't seem to notice Alice's sly smile. "I have a busy day ahead; I have a lot to clear before I leave the office. I'm therefore not available, Alice. Turn everyone away and ask them to book an appointment for tomorrow."

"He said it is important; he has to see you. He won't take no for an answer."

"Who is he?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. "Whoever it is, tell him to come back tomorrow," she instructed, not hiding her annoyance.

"He says his name is Duofold Kimwaki. He says he will wait until you finish with your meeting, however long it will take," Alice said this with an air of defeat that the guest should be so insistent.

"Oh my God, let him in," Linda said quickly, which somewhat didn't surprise Alice that her boss should change her mind so suddenly. "Why didn't you tell me earlier it was him."

The secretary thought it confirmed her suspicions as she watched Linda straighten her clothes and check her facial expression.

"OK, madam, right away," Alice bowed as she left.

Though this was the same Duofold she knew, confident and self-assured, the one who walked in had an unmistakable sadness that someone like Linda, who knew him well, could pick out. She could tell by the smile he was vainly trying to force that he was trying to appear normal. She got around her desk to hug him.

"You are Looking gorgeous and romantic today, Linda. Who is the lucky man?"

"Am good, Duo. But if you ask me, you are the one who looks like you could do with some luck," she said as she asked Alice to allow them some privacy and hold all calls. "Something is on your mind. How're you?"

Duofold started speaking, opening up to her in a show of trust to someone he could say anything without holding anything back:

"There's no one else I can share my burdens with but you. My life sucks, Linda. I am sorry I keep embarrassing myself in front of you so often. You will forgive me for that. Yasmin has been cheating on me with her ex-boyfriend. I feel like breaking up with her even if there is so much at stake. The reason I have held back is that I cannot stand the thought of looking for a third wife. I realise that if I don't correct this, not much may change, even if another woman enters the picture. I lost Akumu and now I am on the verge of losing Yasmin. I need to settle down, but not by paying a dowry every other time to different in-laws. I want my normal life back again, Linda."

He was saying this while still on their feet, as Linda intently listened to him. She invited him to take a seat and sat opposite him.

Duofold continued. "Yasmin touched my heart and made a huge difference in the way I perceive life. But her infidelity has deeply disappointed me; my enthusiasm feels worn down. I have tasted all that is sweet, but I found nothing sweeter than the fulfilling marriage I experienced with Yasmin. I have also tasted all that is bitter, but nothing was more bitter than the need to replace my marriage with Akumu. I have carried heavy burdens, but no burden has been heavier than my relationship with Yasmin. She is one woman I felt like I owned. But after the deep disrespect she showed me in front of her parents, I find it very hard to take her back."

Duofold briefly described the moment at her parent's home when Yasmin arrogantly told him to give her a divorce, that she could go it alone just fine without him.

"I know how it must feel, darling Duo. This is my second marriage too. The first guy took off after I became pregnant. He abused me and showed me contempt for a long time as I pursued him for the child's upkeep. I feel blessed to have found a young and energetic husband. I am a mother of three now. It has been a bed of roses, but as you know, roses come with thorns that don't spare a marriage and keep pricking here and there. At any one given time, there is a wound I am nursing from my marriage. But because roses are beautiful, I also accept the pain, Duofold. It is the same for you, dear. If you did not love Yasmin, if you did not have feelings for her, you would not be here consulting. You would have left her a long time ago when her infidelity came to your attention. Only animals such as pigeons and that little antelope called Dik-Dik are faithful to one partner for life. That is why you are confiding to me and not your mom."

She winked at Duofold, and they laughed at the obviousness of the truth she had spoken. She pulled her chair closer to his and continued with her wisdom.

"I have come to believe that life is comprised only of two important days: a day that is for you and a day that is against you. So, when it is your good day, my darling Duo, do not be reckless like your wife Yasmin. And when the day is against you, be patient like me, Linda, because both days will come to expire! When you chose to share your horrible predicament, you brought closer the expiry of the day that has been against you."

"I agree with you, Linda," said Duofold, "but when some secrets come to light, they can be very ugly to contemplate. I wish I had never known of the thing between my woman and her stupid man, Barot. Why must life remain a chasing game even after scoring a win? Yasmin has everything, including a man who has tried hard to run away from women to respect his fidelity and vows to her. Yet here she was

imagining the grass was greener on the other side of the fence. Life had been beautiful for us. But now it seems only my heartache remains."

"Not so fast, Duo. It may be more than the green grass she was seeing. When you showed me the messages she has been sending you, Yasmin was in worse grief than you. She is feeling emptiness, especially because you prevent her from being with her kids and holding them; you prevent her from fulfilling her maternal urges. She has not seen the children for three months. To many women, kids are more important than love. Her encounter with Barot could not have been anything but a passing cloud. She cannot start another family with him. Women are sensitive to who gives them children. Many women would prefer a family from the one man they love. With your four children, she is complete. Remember, she replaced someone, Akumu. She would not want to hand you a reason to replace her. I will bet that she just got caught up in her past, with nostalgia driving her to Barot for a fling for old-time sake. Otherwise, I want to believe she is remorseful about it. I am a woman, and I should know. Not that I am trying to support her, but you ought to give her another chance. She is your best bet, Duo; a third woman shall only be a gold digger. Yasmin and Akumu fulfilled you in their different ways, but a third woman can never fill the gap these two women would leave in your life. Yasmin is contented with you, and I am sure she is doing all she can to reconcile with you."

"You suggest I forgive her and behave as if nothing happened? Do you know the heartache this woman has caused me? Why do I seem to end up with women who have an eye for other men at the slightest opportunity they get?"

"She is better than most of us, Duo. She does not see other men. She was proving her credibility to Barot, the loser, that she made it. Yasmin has an able husband. She got children after the Barot family messed her up. People have a different way of avenging themselves. Some portray kindness like her and you to Akumu. Some can maim or kill, like Barot's mother. How people react is different, so learn to read what makes her do what and at what time without unleashing an iron fist on her. She is human too. Such challenges do not come to destroy you but to help you cope with the diversity of interpersonal challenges. Sometimes silence is very rewarding. If you keep reminding her over and over about her missteps, the pain will prolong, and the healing process slow for both of you. You need time to overcome what you see as a betrayal, and she needs time to build your trust again. Just flow with it, Duo. Find a way to use your inner strength to keep pushing when the bad days visit you. Good ones soon come knocking on your door. We cannot control some of the bad things that we go through in life. At such times, we must remain strong. Give her and yourself a chance, and don't give up on this beautiful marriage. Knowing that the

possibility always exists that you could be wrong in your judgement of her could help you reach out and hear her out."

"I wish it was as easy as you put it, Linda. To show kindness though I am burning with anguish, and my heart to hold compassion and give Yasmin tender loving care? What do you take me for, Linda; am I Jesus Christ of Nazareth?"

"That is exactly what you need to do, darling boy. You are now facing the reality you are looking forward to change. The outcome is determined by your willingness to win the battle to have Yasmin by your side. Barot is the loser here. Once you find no favour from the woman's family, you have no future with the spouse you so desire. The moment Barot connived with his mom to mess with Yasmin in Singapore was the breaking point for Yasmin's parent's favour with him. She is now your woman to hold and cherish. After all, how weak must you be to lose your wife to another man? Even in the animal kingdom, it has never been easy; males have to prove themselves, Kim."

Linda went on. "Everything that you do comes back to you overflowing. Do good, and the reward will be enormous. Seek revenge, and bad things will sting you. You refused to see Yasmin at your sister's wedding and perhaps also erased her from your dreams. Her sister and family tried to reconcile with you on her behalf, but you blocked your ears. You made both of you losers. Both of you are like limbs walking a marriage. And when you break your limbs, the quickest way to heal is often through physical therapy. It is not easy, but you must exercise the limbs even as they hurt. The easiest way to heal from betrayed love is to see Yasmin every day until you heal. Live the life you want to experience, and do not be ashamed of circumstances you cannot reverse. You only fall when trying. When you love someone, you accept them back unconditionally. Stop being too bull-headed and take on this situation."

"You speak like my dad Hezron who told me at one time when I was young and failing at my school grades. I remember every word as if it was only yesterday: 'To gain your best self back, Duofold,' he said, 'you must lose the weak self that has taken you over, denying you the opportunity to triumph again. It also means you have to relentlessly improve yourself and continuously reflect on your conduct. If you do not try to keep rising, your life will stagnate.' He emphasised that the tragedy of life is not death but the values we let wither within us in life. I wonder how life must have failed him to wish me death despite all his wisdom."

"Kim dear, the truth is that every challenging event you've encountered and all the trials you've endured because of this toxic person Barot and your dad Hezron have been perfect preparation to help you become more socially and emotionally perceptive. You needed these lessons to reactivate your love for Yasmin and rebuild

your relationship—a loving relationship that will still require nurturing. Your dad Hezron was spot on, dear."

Linda paused as if waiting for Duofold to say something. He seemed to be in deep thought then his face brightened.

"Thanks to you," he said, "because of this discussion, I am beginning to think things will change soon, leading to a sort of triumphant moment." There was hopefulness in his voice, unlike a moment before when he sounded negative and ready to give up.

He went on. "It seems to me now I have been in denial; I cannot give up on her. I have to fight for the woman I now realise I still hold highly. I have often heard how some of the harshest moments in life that people go through involve family. My own experience with my dad, Hezron, is an example. But this one with Yasmin somehow felt harder, like everything was falling apart. It seems to have clouded my judgement. I now realise I was probably too wrapped up in my own self-righteous anger to make her pay for it, yet I'm not the only one in this. There are our children who cannot in any way be at fault. Yasmin is also in it, despite having already suffered some punishment from me. Her heart might still be on Barot, which she denies. But I am willing to take the chance she is telling the truth and, as you've just said, reclaim a 'loving relationship that will still require nurturing.' Thus my optimism things will change soon. And, knowing myself, I know I won't stop until I triumph."

"Now you are talking, my boy. Reality has finally caught up with you. But I think the battle you suggest when you use words like 'triumph' is a battle within you; it is you against yourself. I am sure Yasmin has been waiting for you. You are hallucinating about Barot. Be like a sunflower, Kim. You are a boy child. Sunflowers turn according to the position of the sun. In other words, it chases the light! A woman is chased by a man when things are thick. Even when it is cloudy and rainy, sunflowers turn towards each other to share their energy. They do not give up. Nature's will for perfection is impressive. Turn to Yasmin; she is your sun, Kim. It is she that will make you feel complete. She carries part of the energy missing in that home. I want to bet that when she gets back with you, your low spirit and sense of vulnerability shall disappear."

"I hear you, *Madam Know-It-All.* I am glad you made the time to see me. In truth, it has humbled me, cut my ego down to size. Yasmin is the sun that brightens my home. I did not have a plan in place, but talking to you has helped show the way. That is why I came to be mentored by you, to help me demystify the 'how'. I want Yasmin back, but merely declaring it without action will not bring her back. Let me see how to unfold this mystery."

"I love your sarcasm calling me *Know-It-All*, *Mr Sufferer*. If you are done with hallucinating and victimising yourself, I need your help. I love your sincerity and humility, Kim. Once you are done on your domestic front, I need your input on my business front. You are the best in sales and marketing. That's why we are drawn to each other. By the way, we complement each other quite well. Before you storm your in-law's home, I would like to pick your mind if you can spare a few minutes."

"We can do it over lunch. I have not eaten well in a while, Linda."

"No worries, I cancelled my meetings for the day to be with you, boyfriend. "You are that important to me, son of Fidel and Hezron. You are also a cloud between. I would like to believe these two fathers tussle to keep you on their side. I hope you are able to balance the relationships despite Hezron's negative desires."

"You can say that again. They remain my fathers, each with a special place in my heart. As for the one with a bad reputation, I have since moved on and left it all to my creator, who gave me my life back."

"Your family dramas made me miss Akumu at Ann's wedding," observed Linda, before adding with a smile, "I hope to meet her before I die."

This made Duofold miss Akumu, too. Then, rubbing his hungry stomach, he said, "I suggest the Ethiopian restaurant for that lunch, especially because of their fermented flatbread injera with the accompanying chunky meaty servings. They also have a traditional Ethiopian brew that could help relax my nerves and soothe my wounds."

"I miss Ethiopian cuisine too. It has been a while since I visited the hotel, you know with who," said Linda with a wink.

Duofold chuckled. She was referring to his best friend Ben, who they referred to as Big Ben, who was her former boyfriend.

As Linda cleared her desk, she added, "However, with you, I'll do lunch any day—But forget about Ben; he has never been my man. For me, there's no competition between you and him. I love romantic men like you, Kim." She blew him a kiss, "*Mwah!*"

They were walking towards their cars when Linda remembered something and said, "And come to think of it, I never thanked you for the logistics order you pitched for me with Ben. It saved my last year's sales. Come here and let me hug you." They hugged for such a long time, stirring something between them that left them out of breath. They reluctantly disengaged and left her office, talking about what the order meant for Linda.

As they briefly waited to be assigned a table at the Ethiopian restaurant, Duofold's phone pinged, alerting him an SMS had arrived. He opened the phone to check. It was yet another message from Yasmin.

Linda was saying as they sat at the table, "You have hidden talents that can make you thrive in any industry. I feel like we have not yet tapped a tenth of your potential young man. Make sure you do not take it to the grave with you. I have been unable to meet my targets for the last three months. I need your help. The pressure I have from head office is unbelievable. After all these years with them, I wonder why they seem to forget how it works here in Africa. This is not Europe. They seem to forget some of our takings are seasonal. We often have to wait for coffee and tea bonuses, which help us meet some of our annual targets. But the pressure is also because it is a new position, which I was very excited to get. I had no idea I would not have regular sleep thereafter."

"I'm always there for you, Linda. But you did not give me a commission last time after I made you a star. If you remain my darling Linda, you will not have to wait for farmers' bonuses. And you know I love to put a smile on your beautiful face, girl."

A waiter came to take their orders, interrupting Duofold. But he soon continued, "In case you have forgotten, let me remind you how the world has changed, and it might help grow your sales. The market long went cyber. It has been disrupted by technology and opened up to global markets. Make use of internet platforms and social media influencers, who seem to drive a large chunk of the market these days. Traditional marketing is being forced to adapt."

"I hear you, Duo. I just keep forgetting to release the commission for you and Big Ben. I shall process it tomorrow. And, of course, I am aware how the market dynamics have changed with the digital disruption. But I need a quicker fix…"

"I'll throw your way sales and much more. But, Linda, there will be a price," he said with mischief playing in his eyes. It had to do with that rousing hug in the office that still stirred within him. "Let's do a getaway—just you and me, then I am game. I have been starved with no wife at home, you know!"

"Wherever and whatever, my boy! All I need are the numbers to keep the bosses off my back. I need to learn how these things work out. It seems so easy for you to close deals, making my strengths in management seem useless. I am an admin person, not a marketing guru." Linda replied, though she left no doubt that she, too, was game for the getaway.

"No problem, Linda. You are being too hard on yourself. We all have to begin somewhere. Even this expert was a beginner once and lost big time before I got my first win. And, talking about nagging bosses—my Madam Boss never initiated or motivated the team to grow sales. I know she remains your friend, but you have never come across her type as a boss. She seemed to find pleasure in harassing people. She seemed to put in her diary who to terrorise. Today it would be the sales team, tomorrow production, and the day after would be administrative staff. And, of course,

in between all these, Duofold had his share of the pettiest queries to answer to the madam in whole narratives, not yes or no answers. However, enough about her. What is your sales deficit like, Linda?"

"I am sending you our target sales by email right away. And speaking about your Madam Boss, she is hilarious. But I won't be so insensitive as to laugh at you, seeing part of the story you are going through right now at home."

She paused to ensure the email was sent. "The internet seems a bit slow today. One, two, three, there—check it is already in your inbox. Those targets are the reason my dairy was full today, hunting for accounts. Yesterday I spent a lot on clients buying lunches and endless coffees but could not close even one deal."

"No worries, I already have an idea who could order a year's worth of computer supplies from your company. Let me contact him as we wait for the food. Two NGOs are setting up and have opened branches in every county. They have a huge staff membership that needs facilitating with office supplies, including computers."

Duofold worked on his phone even as he complained about service at the restaurant taking too long to bring the injera. But no sooner had he finished with his complaint than the Ethiopian cuisine comprising a spiced mix of thick goat meat stews was generously served on the traditional huge round platter.

"Check your phone, Linda, there's an order. I've done a quotation for you already."

"My God, Duo! Are you a wizard or what? You've even quoted double the price I would have sold the products. Had they given an indicative buying price, or how did you come up with these figures?"

"Your wish is my command, Linda. The market is about the willing buyer and the willing seller. Always benchmark your prices with the market leader, and always quote in US dollars. The strong dollar and ever-fluctuating shilling could leave you in poverty. If you don't do this, your sales may never change. Now that the business is done, when is that getaway happening?

"Are you kidding me, Kim? Come on! First, go and put out the fire in your soul so that you are alive again, darling boy. God knows I have missed the outdoors holed up in the office trying to calm my nagging boss. But if I have to take the trip, it will not be to nurse your broken heart; I will go to enjoy myself, not to endure your grief."

"Point taken, Madam Linda. I would have been very disappointed in myself had I taken that trip also. So, you are right; let me clean up my mess first. You have done well to remind me we do not apologise to show Yasmin she is wrong and I am right but to show that I value the relationship more than my ego. It will be a good starting point; Yasmin will be in heaven when I go to her with an apology. I hope she is as hungry for me as I am hungry for her."

Before they knew it, they had gone through the best Ethiopian dish both could remember.

"I hope you enjoyed the injera, Linda?"

"Oh God, we are already done eating? My taste buds didn't seem to decide which it was savouring more, the computer sales or the food; I don't know what I enjoyed most, the injera or the deals you have just scored for me. Thank you for both. I'll take the bill for the mischief. Thank you, though next time, I shall pay more attention to detail."

The next moment Linda was in her car heading back to the office. As Duofold was getting into his, she shouted at him from her window as if to apologise she had to leave, "Work obsession!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT WAS A FINE DAY. The sun was out, the sky blue, and a gentle breeze was blowing. It was the sort of day to take the children for an outing to do something fun and special. Acting on their request, Duofold took them to a children's fair featuring parachute diving as the crowd puller popular with children.

As he watched his younger children happily bouncing on a trampoline, each trying to outdo the other on who will bounce the highest, he debated with himself whether to allow them to take the parachute dive as the highlight of their fun day out. He couldn't make up his mind. He thought perhaps only Warrior would be up to it. Binte had a fear of heights and so was out of it. Junior and his sister were the most excited, but he had reservations about whether they would not be a handful. Yet looking around himself, he could see other children lining up for their turn.

Duofold decided to let the experts charged with ensuring children have the most fun, but with utmost safety, handle it. He released his children to go have their fun with Warrior chaperoning them to ensure they didn't bother the fairground handlers too much.

He turned to his phone to respond to some urgent emails. Not long after, the phone buzzed in his hands. It was Madam Boss Mary calling.

His first reaction was irritation as to why she didn't seem to want to leave him alone. He hadn't heard from her since the day he handed her the Instar dismissal letter. He contemplated whether to take the call or not. *This is not the time to engage with people who leave me drained*, he told himself. *I am sure nothing good will come of it. I have a void in my soul that is like a vampire with nothing good enough to make me feel better.*

The phone buzzed for what appeared to be a long time, but he couldn't help himself. He picked up the call.

"Hello, Duofold. Kindly send an ambulance to my house. I am unwell."

"What happened?"

"It feels like malaria or worse. I don't know."

"OK. I am on my way, coming right over."

Duofold left in a hurry, only informing Warrior to mind the children as he had to dash somewhere. He drove fast, the only thought on his mind being that he had a life

to save. He called his driver and asked him to drop his children at his father Fidel's home. Akumu, visiting from Nakuru, would be waiting for them. Duofold expected that she might wonder why he didn't accompany the children. But, not wanting to answer too many questions about Yasmin, he was not too eager to meet her.

His mind turned to Mary, making him wonder why people like her, including his father, Hezron, and brother, Falid, who had hurt him seemed to turn to him when they were in trouble.

What do people take me for, Mother Teresa, Jesus of Nazareth, or the Buddha? My consolation is that I am me, and therein lies my power, Duofold concluded.

Still, he owned up to himself that he was a philanthrope who sometimes couldn't help it. He admitted to himself he was not perfect and that sometimes it took people like Linda to intervene to make him even contemplate forgiving the likes of Yasmin. But where life was concerned, he didn't know how to say no.

As he drove, he remembered his mom, Florence, once remarking how he was a naturally good person. She also cautioned him about how being good can sometimes be a thankless job.

"Son, you can't change or pretend to be who you are not. Bad people are like snakes. Even when you are saving a snake from fire, it shall still bite you. That is the only tool the snake knows how to use, whether fighting, saying sorry or thank you. It is the same with some people; however good you are, they shall always backstab you.

"Others are like the cat. They meow for you and get the best from you and never give back. For some cats, you have to buy poison or traps for rats, yet that is the core job of the cat in the homestead. We do nothing about it but keep pampering the cat. I wonder why we serve these pussycat sorts of people, but they will always be there.

"Others are like dogs. No matter how evil the master, the dog never complains and always salutes him in the morning and evening when he gets back. Even when the dog is unwell, it will still limp and wag its tail at him. It will also bite the enemy to keep the master and family safe. These are the doves that spice life for everyone in the family.

"Never complain to God for the category he allocated you. Be a good servant in it, Duofold. Being busy and being productive are two different things. Make sure you spend your time focusing on something that betters yourself and others. Don't make the mistake of spending time being busy on pointless tasks that don't push you forward. You are a dove. Stay on that course, dear son. It is more rewarding, for you shall never lack. You are a channelling tap," Duofold's mom had concluded.

He thought Madam Boss might have been the thankless animals his mother was talking about. Yet he remembered her sense of style parading the office in designer clothes as if she had a team of stylists ensuring she daily showed up in the office

looking sharp and pretty. He wished her soul matched her looks. Yet as he drove, he seemed to forget the monster she could be. Like a movie playing in his mind, he followed her with his eyes as her dress slid up her legs in the wind, not exposing too much but enough to stir his manliness.

He put the feelings it aroused to his staying without a wife for a while, making his unconscious need for release misinterpret his feelings. However, these thoughts softened Mary's image in his mind so that he thought she was not naturally evil, except perhaps she was too assertive, always wanting to have her way.

Duofold soon arrived at her gate and hooted. Mary's son Gideon came to open the gate and took him straight to the bedroom Madam Boss was resting in. She looked weak, and her complexion was darker than he remembered. This made him worry about her condition. He felt her forehead to check for fever. She was as hot as burning coal. He thought this might be serious. He lifted her from the bed and supported her to the car. He asked Gideon to follow him with her bag and the necessary documents.

They arrived at the hospital in ten minutes, and she was immediately admitted. She had good health insurance coverage that would cater for all the hospital bills. Duofold noted this with relief, as one could never tell with hospital bills which could grow huge, catching one unawares. They were informed she had to wait for at least an hour of drip and medication to take effect before her fever could improve.

They decided to wait at the hospital gardens, which offered a good opportunity for Duofold to catch up with Gideon. He had just concluded university, but jobs were hard to come by.

"What do you plan to do, Gideon?"

"I love IT."

Duofold took the answer with a pleasant surprise. *This is a boy after my own heart liking IT as much as I do*, he thought to himself. *And his grades are amazing.*

"How would you like to work with me? I run an IT company."

"By all means, Uncle Kim, you have been my greatest inspiration and role model. When can I start?"

"When your mom gets better, call me; I'll bring you on board immediately."

"Thank you so very much, Uncle Kim. I'll be honoured."

"Most welcome, son. You have the potential to excel in all that you put your mind and energy to."

"I look forward to emulating you, Uncle."

Duofold wondered whether had he married his mom, Gideon would have referred to him as his dad or uncle, as he now called him. It probably would have been uncle, he decided. He thought Gideon would likely have called him uncle because of the age gap between Mary and himself and the respect or deference

Duofold showed Gideon's mother as her junior. But the young man appeared different from his mother. Duofold speculated that he probably took after his father or grandparents. He was kind, respectful, and humble. He looked like a well-rounded kid. This made Duofold think how everyone had their gift, whether talent or that which came from them. For Madam Boss, it was his adorable son.

Time seemed to be passing too slowly, and Duofold was a bit bored with nothing more to share with Gideon. His mind wandered to Madam Boss again. *Why on earth would Boss Mary call me to take her to the hospital? In the list of her friends and family, am I the only one who could shoulder this burden?*

He felt that he deserved an explanation from her when she got better.

"We go in, Gideon. Time is up. Let's find out how your mom is doing. She should be well soon, don't worry." Duofold comforted Boss Mary's son.

They found her awake and seated on her bed. She admired her son and Duofold as they approached the bed in what seemed like slow motion. If it was up to Boss Mary, Duofold was the father figure she would have wanted for her son.

"You look much better, Mom, thanks to Uncle Kim. I knew he was the only one who would not let us down. Glad to see your smile back."

"No one can beat Kim. He is a well-rounded man. If you want to succeed, son, take after him. He understands service to others is the rent we pay for the time God has allowed us on this earth."

"He has already given me a job. But that has to be after you are recovered."

Duofold watched this exchange and felt a bit odd being discussed.

"You can start on Monday," said Mary. "I am fine now. I guess you have been part of my headache, too, Gideon. Knowing that you have something to do shall help me recover faster, son."

"Not possible, Mom. I have to wait for you to get better. Let me get your things from the car now that you are admitted."

Gideon was handed the car keys by Duofold to fetch his mom's bag. Duofold was now alone with Madam Boss Mary.

"Thank you, Duofold, for saving my life. You will agree with me that crossing from poverty to wealth is not easy; it is like crossing a deep valley full of slippery trails that many die without ever crossing. You have lived in the two worlds, and you attempted to cross the valley to touch my heart where I stood lonely. I failed to appreciate your good intentions, and I lost you. Now you belong to the rich world; your resilience and focus have reached you there. Despite all the treachery thrown in your way by the likes of myself and Hezron, it never stopped you thriving. I know you are the last person I should be bothering, but you are always the first person on my mind. I know it is hard for you to believe it, but that is the truth. I now know for

sure you are an angel. After all the evil I unleashed on you, you never avenged it in any way."

Revenge was the last thing on Duofold's mind. His focus was on testing Mary's body temperature from her lips. He bent forward and softly kissed her lips.

"The fever is gone, dear. Focus on getting better. That's all that matters for now."

Madam Boss closed her eyes and let tears of joy flow down her face. Listening to her, nothing seemed to make sense to Duofold anymore, from the ones that hurt him to the ones he loved. Life seemed to suck from all corners, and his fun for the moment being with Mary was his only consolation. His heart was, however, with Yasmin though he was still to get over her mischief. And now here was Mary, lonely and sorry for what she had done to him.

His thoughts momentarily deviated from Madam Boss and he thought of his teenagers, Warrior and Binte, who were now at an age they were a challenge to handle. He wondered how earlier generations of parents coped with a houseful of teenagers. In the meantime, Femi and Junior greatly missed their mother, and it seemed like they kept asking for Yasmin every other minute. Akumu was also in the mix and tried to occupy the children to distract them from missing Mom Yasmin.

Others like Falid and his family had benefitted from Akumu's shop, were now stable and led a happier life. Falid was nonetheless yet to thank Duofold for it. His mom, Florence, in the meantime, had been having a good time with his dad, Fidel, who was a frequent visitor. He wondered what would happen when his other mom, Faith, discovered the two were back together. Floyd was, in the meantime, well set with his ex-wife Akumu. Duofold had bought them a house, and their computer business was doing well in Nakuru.

These thoughts went through his mind as he sat in the hospital room with Madam Boss. He was surprised to discover that he still had strong feelings for her. He reprimanded himself that instead of going to look for his wife Yasmin, he felt like a man held captive by Mary, whose sweet talk and tears had already turned him on.

The doctor walked in to check on Madam Boss. He was immediately followed by Gideon. The doctor sent them out for privacy to examine the patient. He reported that her temperature was fine now, and she was back to normal. He could not find the reason for her illness. She was given a clean bill of health and discharged.

As they were driving home, Gideon explained that he was supposed to collect some stuff from a college friend. He requested Duofold to look after his mother while he was away, as it was likely he would be home the following day.

He is a grown-up man, and maybe he had a date, Duofold thought. *It is just as well as I look forward to being alone with Madam Boss. The jab she is missing is right is below my belt, and all her issues will be sorted.*

When they arrived home, Duofold volunteered to cook dinner as she sat on the couch enjoying the attention he gave her. He took her to bed and undressed her for a shower. It was time now for him to feed his pulsating physical need that craved release—a need he termed his hungry beast. He was surprised that while not long ago he seethed with anger and humiliation by Mary, he now lay with her, caressing her beautiful and well-proportioned body. His mind was surprisingly at ease and happy that the woman who drove him insane in the office was intent on sending him back to the mental hospital without a penny in his pocket. He appreciated that he was a man, after all, happy to meet his standard needs of food and shelter but also women to spice up his manhood. He knew that after this, he had nothing much to promise her except that hers would be one of the homes he would keep for occasional trysts after Yasmin's deceit.

"By the way, Madam Boss, you can come back to your Instar office. I am sure life has not been kind to you staying at home, and I want to believe you have learned your lesson. I need someone in the office to free up my time. It's been hectic with the family as demands have escalated with four children on our hands, two of them teenagers. I need more time with them."

"That is so kind of you, Duofold. I never expected that favour from you. I promise not to let you down again. This dry spell has taught me my lesson. I have learned that money is not the only factor to lead a good life. It is the people around us that make life beautiful. I have money, yet I live in a vacuum. It leaves me very sad. I've learned to make people around me comfortable. I have learnt that when you do good, life reciprocates; no one is an island. I might as well live in harmony with myself than wake up to fight everybody just to assert myself. It is not worth it. You made money for Liz and me without asking for more shares despite us doing less, even though we led the company. And I see your point. Putting in so much time with a young family must have been overwhelming more than myself and Liz. Our kids are now all grown up. I am, therefore, glad to come back and fill in for you as you raise your family."

"Thank you, Madam Boss. Liz is back and is now in charge of SmartLink. You remain a co-founder of Instar with her. I am sure you shall be happy to steer it as we continue to grow. Ben, the MD of Nutribelt Kenya, is joining Instar with a five per cent shareholding. We were to discuss this in our next board meeting. He shall be in charge of production. I shall be OK sourcing accounts for SmartLink and Instar once in a while. This should not worry you. The existing accounts have more than ten years contract with us. They are huge, hoping there will be no serious disruptions. As we get more orders, Instar will require expansion to boost production capacity."

"Impressive. I see there has been a lot of progress, Kim, since I've been away. I now understand why you need to try other things; there seems little for you to do at Instar. But you are a trailblazer, and I am curious to see your next move. And, by the way, thank you so much for your offer to Gideon. He is lucky to work under your wing. Though he calls you Uncle Kim, I know that he loves you as a dad. You are the only man he trusts. Gideon does not even trust me, his mother, with any information. He has made me appreciate why a father figure in a boy's life is critical. So, Duofold, if you didn't know, know that I owe you a lot for what you mean to my son Gideon."

"That's OK, Madam Boss. I am a father to many, from Hezron and Fidel's children to Akumu's children down to our children with Yasmin. Adding Gideon to the mix is a great pleasure. After all, he has been my son for the longest. We do not plant the seed just for our consumption but to also feed wild birds as they migrate. Thank you for breakfast. I should be going now. I shall meet you tomorrow in the office to welcome you back—my love to Gideon when he gets back."

"Let me see you off, Kim. It was a pleasure having you in my house. I bought you a gift from Israel if you remember that trip long ago. If you do not mind, can you try it on? Despite not having been on good terms, my seventh sense compelled me to buy something for you. I had no courage to give it to you back then, but neither did I think you would have accepted it. You were angry, and I was so furious about our relationship falling apart. All I was yearning for was revenge. Forgive me for my lateness in giving the gift now."

She gave him a tempting kiss which he reciprocated. They could not resist each other, and the next thirty minutes left them breathless. Duofold `went back to the shower as Boss Mary dug in her drawers looking for the gift. She had kept it there for more than five years. Finally, she found it where it was hidden among other clothes. It was an expensive polo shirt with a pair of trousers to match. There was also cologne for him. He changed into the new set, having not carried a change of clothes.

"You don't seem to have added weight despite having a wife this long, Kim. But you look so good in the outfit, my dear."

"Many thanks, Boss Mary. I have always loved your taste in clothes, and this is a masterpiece. I appreciate your holding it this long for me. It says a lot about your love for me. With your permission, let me head home now."

What I am not telling Madam Boss is that I was on a mission to reconcile with my wife, Yasmin. Having these many women in my life has turned me into a guy full of secrets. But that is deliberate. After my experience with Hezron attempting to take my life, I vowed never to let anyone know my A to Z. I opened boxes for everything I do to make it easier to close any one of them when I am done with it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT TOOK DUOFOLD TWENTY MINUTES to reach his in-laws' home. So fast was he driving that he came to a skidding halt at the parking bay adjacent to the house. He could not wait any longer. He was here to take Yasmin back home with him, heeding Linda's advice. He found the main door open, but there was nobody in the sitting room. He could hear somebody bustling about in the kitchen and walked towards it. It was Yasmin's mom standing by a counter; she was facing the kitchen window preparing a meal. She didn't seem to have heard him enter the house. He bent to kiss her on the cheek from behind but misjudged it so that the kiss fell lightly on her neck. She wondered whether Zahid, her husband, had suddenly found the virile fire of his youth to come on to her with such a kiss. The whiff of unfamiliar cologne made her realise it could not be her husband.

She turned to see who it was. "Oh, my son Duofold, it is you? I didn't know you could be that cheeky," she said with an amused chuckle as they embraced. "Nice to see you. How have you been?"

"We are all well, Mom. How is the rest of the family?"

"I have missed you," she replied as Duofold brushed a dust of flour off her hair. He did it with the tender familiarity of one who cared. "Life has been miserable," Femi went on, "It has been a very confusing moment for all of us. We have no words to express it to you. We are sorry. Your wife has lost a lot of weight because of guilt and depression; she is all skin and bones. We can't seem to comfort her. Please, I beg you, Duofold, it is you she needs if her soul is to heal." Femi wiped her eyes which were beginning to tear up as she made the plea.

"That is OK, Mom. All shall be fine with Yasmin now that I am back," Duofold replied, patting her arm to comfort and reassure her. "Where is she?"

"She is in her room. Promise me you will calm her fears about your intentions before you disappear on us again. I know she was very rude to you, but she has since realised her error. It probably came as a great shock to Yasmin that you could abandon her. It has been a very trying time for her."

"I'll see her right away, Mom."

He bounded up the stairs taking two stair steps at a time, and when he reached the top landing turned left to the wing of the house where Yasmin's bedroom was located. When he opened the door, the curtains were drawn, leaving the room in semi-darkness. He thought the bedroom was too quiet and doubted she was in the room.

When he peered inside, the bed at first just looked unmade with nobody on it. It was when he moved closer he noticed her covered form. This unsettled him. In his earlier visits, she would be downstairs at the sound of his car entering the compound. Now she didn't seem concerned. She was lying on her back with her face turned to the ceiling, though her eyes were closed. Duofold thought the look on her face reflected the torment she must be going through, like one who had lost hope and left everything to fate.

He was deeply touched to see his wife like this. He uncovered her and lifted her into his arms. He wanted to assure her that he still deeply cared for her despite her infidelity.

"You have been on my mind since the last time I was here, my Yasmin. How troubled you look, and what pain must this cause you?"

She opened her eyes upon hearing his voice. She rested her head on his chest like a baby seeking comfort. She looked like she wanted to cry, but her tears had long dried. She had no more tears to shed. Seeing her like this made him miss her more. Since that talk with Linda, he wanted nothing more than to see her back home. He needed her warmth, while his physical desire for her screamed for relief. Despite the occasional one-night stand with Mary or Akumu when he couldn't help it, he was not that sort of man. Despite his mother and children being around, his home still felt cold and empty without Yasmin. This was to such an extent that much of his home and office schedules were now being managed from his office by his Personal Assistant. Thus his now all-consuming desire to have Yasmin back in his life. His mind was flooded with thoughts of her steadying influence as a wife, the ease with which she juggled the needs of her husband and children while keeping a well-managed house and playing great host to relatives. These were the qualities Duofold lacked and needed, making it trivial his thoughts of competition with losers like Barot.

"When did you last eat, my love? Did you miss me too? I'm sorry for being so brutal as to shut you out. I've missed you a lot, and I promise never to cause you—us, me and you—so much torment ever again. That is why I am here, my love. Our gestures and words may not always tell the truth, but not so our hearts. We have both

been dying to have each other—I know it in myself, and I see it in your eyes. It has been one of the loneliest moments of my life; I can confess that to you. I thought it was an easy thing to say, 'I divorce the mother of my children,' but I have since realised you are the core of my life—the very essence of my fulfilment of life. You are my soulmate, and a part of me left with you when I tried to walk away. I missed you dearly. I was hurt by the words you used in front of your parents, but time has healed those wounds. I hope it will heal those I've inflicted on you as well."

Duofold held her tighter in his arms and slowly, caressingly kissed her on the lips.

"I see you have not touched your breakfast, and it is now past lunchtime, and the lunch flask is still waiting for you. Here," Duofold said, picking up and scooping some fruit salad on a bowl by the bed sideboard. "Here, I will feed you myself."

Yasmin obliged and opened her mouth. They did not speak as Duofold tenderly fed his now-responsive wife until the food was finished.

"Let's have a shower," said Duofold, both of them knowing where it would lead. But she needed it, having not had a bath for a while. They undressed and took a long shower together as they made hot passionate love. It was a most exhilarating experience after such a long spell, not just for Yasmin but Duofold, who felt it was always more fulfilling with her.

"Yasmin, here is something somebody once told me, and I can't remember who: That we never should carry our mistakes around but place them under our feet and use them as stepping stones. By doing so, we not only learn from them, but it helps heal our wounds faster."

Life seemed to have suddenly grown brighter, and Duofold felt in a more jovial mood than he could remember with Yasmin by his side. He felt grateful to Linda for opening his eyes to better understand his wife and what she meant. His feeling of happiness drew him to how everyone at home was miserable without her. They all missed her motherly touch, the children especially and not least his mom, Florence. Even the family cat and dog seemed to miss her. Come to think of it, he thought to himself with amusement, how he sometimes could swear the cat and dog suspected he was to blame for her disappearance with the accusing eyes they cast at him.

Other than her smiles and sighs of pleasure, Yasmin had not spoken a word since Duofold had walked into her bedroom. She seemed content to just listen to him. Her face had brightened, and a rosy colour was returning to her pale skin. Her husband let her be, basking in her glow. He watched her groom herself and knew she was ready to face the world again.

They walked downstairs to the astonishment of Yasmin's mother, who could not believe the change she was seeing in her daughter. She looked alive again. And where she had described Yasmin as skin and bone, she now radiated energy and looked normal, but now a bit slimmer than her usual size.

Seeing the happy surprise on her mother's face, tears began to flow down Yasmin's face. Duofold removed a handkerchief from his pocket and tenderly wiped his wife's face.

"Please sit and have some food, dear ones. I spent the whole morning cooking; it was as if I knew something wonderful, like seeing you two holding hands, would happen. Do not leave before you taste the food. Give me a minute I set the table."

"Your food anytime, Mom," said Duofold as they watched her lay the table. "I have not enjoyed it in a while."

Yasmin, whose appetite seemed to have returned with force, ate her fill. For the first time in a long time, there was laughter at the table as jokes were exchanged between the three of them. Zahid was out on some errand to enjoy the moment.

Duofold bought his wife's belongings downstairs and put them in the car. Now Yasmin believed she was indeed going to her home and could not help feeling a bit overwhelmed with the excitement that filled her. A short while later, they excused themselves, with Femi walking them to the car to see them off.

"Thank you very much, Mom, for the hearty meal. Kindly pass my regards to Dad Zahid. I shall come to see him another day with the children. Have yourself a beautiful afternoon."

She watched them drive off with a mixture of relief and joy that it had finally happened.

As they drove home, Duofold kept casting an eye on his wife. Perhaps it was the profile of her face, looking at it from the side as he drove, but he thought it seemed to make her look frail than he had seen her in the house. The contentment he had felt a while ago as they left the house began to fade. But it also sharpened another truth that he had not fully grasped: that while he had always thought she was busy flirting with Barot, she had been alone all along, perhaps even when she was still with Barot, who must have had other women. This realisation made him wonder how short their fairytale affair had lasted. Now he felt more protective of her and felt it more urgent to take Yasmin home to recover not only physically but emotionally from the loneliness that even now in her silence seemed to haunt her.

Yasmin seemed to read his thoughts and spoke for the first time.

"Even amid my family, Kim, which, as you know, is very warm and caring, the loneliness I felt was still too much to bear. It was not the home of my childhood that I once missed a lot when I was younger. I now have my own home and family, a cosy nest I had nurtured together with our four children—children I adore and who adore me. It is not something I would ever imagine destroying. Not a day has passed without me wondering how lonely they must be, and it breaks my heart to imagine it. I acknowledge my rudeness to the man who made it all possible was uncalled for, especially when I recall it was the same man who granted me my motherhood. Kim, you are the epitome of true love. You have shown affection for me in front of our children, friends, and family. This was a cherished experience—an experience that, even if Barot was capable, which he was not, could only be hidden behind closed doors. I still do not understand why I fell for Barot and his nonsense. I deeply regret it."

Duofold did not want to reply. He allowed that this was her moment to speak out her heart; she deserved to be listened to—to be heard. She, however, seemed in thought and decided to leave her to it. They drove in silence for a while then he put on music that they both loved. It was his way of assuring her that all was well, just like the first day they met that long ago when he invited her to the company party and they danced the night away.

When they got home, Yasmin was taken aback that the children were not home. Her mind was focused on feeling their embrace as she gave them hers holding them close to herself like she would never let them go, especially Femi and Junior. That they were not at home was something of an emotional shock. She started to cry. *Where could they be?*

"I asked them to take a few days at their grandpa Fidel's. I thought it best to give you time to recover but also for them not to see you in the state you are in. When you left, I told them you went back to college, and that's what they know. I realise now that I should have given them a better excuse. But for them to see you suddenly appear looking unwell in your serious loss of weight might affect them psychologically. It will be only a couple of days, but please let them find the strong and vibrant mother they know. I am sorry I didn't tell you sooner how important you are to me and the children especially. We missed you every day despite my silence. I would also suggest not letting Mom know you are here just yet for the same reason. She has been asking every day when you are coming back. Perhaps I should let you know she has been inquisitive about what may have happened between us after you showed up at her house from my sister Ann's wedding. Those are not details I would

ever share with her. I hope that in two days, you shall be back to your normal self, Yasmin."

Yasmin did not reply immediately. But she thought Duofold had a point. She had stopped crying.

"I agree with you, Kim. I've looked in the mirror, and I look pathetic; I feel so too. It was a relief you came back for me. I was always worried our marriage was no more. It shall never happen again; I want to remain a housewife for a while. I have to make up for the time lost with the children. I often wondered how my kids felt to always come home and not find their mommy; I hated the thought. I have vowed that until Femi and Junior become teenagers, they will find me home every day the way I always found my mom at home. I thought that by staying home, my mom had nothing better to do—that she had no ambition. But now I understand family comes first; it is where the children's foundation is laid on their way to realising their dreams. But, having missed them so much, it will also be for the joy of seeing their smiles when they get home to the comfort of their mother."

Duofold thought he could not have said it better. "Yes, parenthood is a journey, not a season. I also came to the same conclusion long ago after my absence. And, to paraphrase how you have described it so well, being there for them is about the value of things like family, not by their price, but by their need."

"You sound intellectual, putting it that way," she attempted a joke, lightening the moment. "But that is my vow that I also hope will free you to concentrate on your work. After all, it is your work that affords our life. For me, I will have myself to compete with in nurturing the family. And while I might have messed up, I am now better for it. My only request is you bring them home tomorrow. It shall be well, I promise."

"It shall be well. I will go for them. They might be a bit surprised to see you, but I can't wait to see their reaction."

"Same here, my love. I, too, can't wait to see them. It has been very tormenting without them. I imagine that's how it once must have been for Akumu before you showed up. Perhaps like her also, none of my friends came over to comfort me; they seemed to avoid me, abandoning me to my predicament."

"Yeah, we all experience the predicament," said Duofold. "You may have been birds of a feather with your friends once, but even birds of a feather sometimes discard one of their own. The issue is what we learn from it; that's life."

"Yes, but happily, that is in the past now. Now it is to rest and look forward to tomorrow and the future, and perhaps someday I'll own a business again after the children are grown."

It was now almost sunset, and Duofold had work to follow up on. He excused himself to make some calls and respond to emails.

He remained in the sitting room and could not help following his wife with his eyes as she disappeared into the corridor to their bedroom. He thought she appeared her normal self already. He knew then, as he had never before, that this was the woman he wanted to gracefully age with. He momentarily forgot about the work he sat down to do and thought how he wanted to be there to see her first grey hair, her ageing body sag, and her eyes wrinkle as she kept her smile, serving them a cup of tea with a cake she had baked. His thoughts inevitably turned to his mom, and he vowed to make it a better life for Yasmin than his dad, Hezron, did for Florence. He conceived an untroubled love life in which he and Yasmin would visit their grandchildren and take each other to the optician to upgrade their reading glasses. He perceived a rosy and active life than the deflated and bored one of many elders once they retired.

His thoughts returned to the present, and he could not seem to shake from his mind the image of how, despite Yasmin having been at her parent's comfortable home, he had found her looking like someone from prison—a prison of her torments that conspired to make her look deflated, lonely, tired, and de-energised. It showed how distress can transform the look of a person almost overnight. Yet it somewhat also served to remind him how he often got home to a lot of grilling from the children about the whereabouts of their mother.

If Mom is in college and she cannot come, why can't we go to visit her?

Why can't we give her a call, or she calls us?

If you are too busy, why can't you ask Uncle Paul, the driver, to take us to see Mama?

When did you say she would be coming home?

A variation of these questions confronted him almost every morning and evening when he found himself alone with either of the children or when they were together, taking dinner or breakfast. He had to invent a satisfactory lie to answer each question, and it was a most unpleasant experience. He swore to himself never to lie to the children again and prayed that such a situation should never come that will make him live apart from his wife for a lengthy period. He admitted to himself he didn't seem as good at dealing with the juniors as Yasmin effortlessly seemed to be with them.

When Duofold was done with the mass of emails later that evening, he texted Linda good night and notified her of Yasmin's return to his bosom. As he typed the text, he couldn't help remembering a day the two women happened to meet at a company event. Both Yasmin and Linda had seemed quite uncomfortable around each other, despite both their husbands being with them. It made Duofold wonder what it was about women's uncanny intuition to appear to smell out a man's attraction to another woman, no matter how he may try to hide it. He had met Barot twice and never once suspected a thing about him and Yasmin, let alone that he was the cause of so much pain to her.

The bedroom smelt fresh, a sign that Yasmin had already taken charge and changed all the bedding. He found a clean towel on his wrack in the bathroom and a new toothbrush in the holder by the sink. These were the little things he might have taken for granted before Yasmin left. Now the little attention he previously overlooked made him conscious of how her woman's touch often was the life of the home.

He got in bed and wrapped his arms around her body, which no longer felt plump. Her ribs felt a bit more prominent than he remembered. He wanted to comfort her and pulled her body closer to fill her with the warmth from his body. Emotion swept over him, and he knew he loved her so much to ever want the horrid experience visiting her again.

He used to refer to her as his sleeping pill. And that night, he slept long and soundly, the first time since she left. It was bird chirps that woke him at 8 am the following morning. His pill was back.

He took a quick shower and dressed. He was careful to put on her favourite outfit. He found his breakfast on the table. He made sure he paraded in front of her as she joined him at the table. She chuckled at how hard he was trying to make her notice the choice of his outfit. She blew him a kiss.

He had become used to having his breakfast in the office, having found it hectic with the children in their mother's absence. This was despite having a nanny to tend to the children most of the time. With Yasmin, he could feel what he called his *vibe* return. Now he would get time for a beer and football with the boys.

DUOFOLD DROVE IN A RUSH to his father Fidel's home to pick up the children. There was no time for them to change or have breakfast. Akumu was not amused that he should just show up and demand to take the children even without breakfast. She had

taken a week off to be in the village so that she could help take care of them. She seemed to have an idea all may not have been well between him and Yasmin, but he didn't want to discuss it with her. He was concerned that Akumu knowing the truth might be enough reason for her to harshly judge Yasmin and never want to talk to her ever again. He could see that his ex-wife must have noticed a change in him and wanted him to tell her what was going on. He made the excuse he was in a hurry and collected the children.

He might have wanted to say hello to his dad, Fidel, but he was still out to take milk to the dairy deport. His second mom was also not in, having left on an early errand to get stock for her shop.

After saying a quick bye to Akumu, he left in a hurry before his parents were back to persuade him to let the kids stay longer. In another hour, he had dropped the kids off with Yasmin. They were all crying with happiness to see their mama.

It was a measure of the pressure he previously had with the children that now he felt he could breathe with their mother back. He was soon out to get to the office before traffic could build up.

He found Madam Boss waiting for him to officially be handed over her old office. He had already given her a password to retrieve files from the office network to catch up on Instar's current business status. Ben was with her to familiarise her with additional areas of operation new to her. Duofold noted with pride how impressed she was and the happiness she showed to be at the driving wheel again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BEING THE ONLY PARENT AT HOME when Yasmin was away had proved a bit difficult for Duofold. Despite being good at growing Instar and SmartLink, it was becoming tricky catering to the needs of four demanding children, Binte, Warrior, Junior and Femi.

Warrior was now a teenager and exhibited the rebellious characteristics of his age, including disobedience, back-talking, not listening, temper-throwing and rule-breaking. Duofold had no idea how to deal with his day-to-day antics.

However, Warrior was an entrepreneur in the making. When he joined his first lower-grade school, he had already identified a kiddie business niche. He had observed that lollipops sold at his school canteen were of small size but sold at a high cost that other children had complained about. He knew of a kiosk in his neighbourhood that sold bigger-sized lollipops at a much cheaper price. The price of his school canteen lollipops was more than five times that in the kiosk. He saw a chance to make a profit.

He hatched a plan to buy the kiosk lollipops using money from the home petty cash box that his dad usually left them to buy school snacks on days he failed to give them pocket money or when he was late to be home before they went to bed. He bought twenty lollipops to sell in school. Within a few minutes during break time, all the lollipops were sold, and he reaped enough profit to replenish his stock. He returned the money he had taken from the petty cash box and bought a new batch of lollipops for sale with the profits.

As demand for the sweet grew, Warrior recruited kids who craved the lollipops but had no cash to help in hawking sweets during break time and earn a lollipop.

The school Administration began to notice sweets circulating from outside the school canteen. But within no time, it had grown into a huge business that attracted the Administration's attention. With no one ready to snitch on the most handsome business kid in their midst, the Administration gave up. After all, it was not compulsory to buy snacks from the school canteen, only that someone from outside was not allowed to come and sell them in school.

Duofold had no idea what his son was up to. This was until one day when a parent approached him as they did school clinics and greeted him with a lot of admiration.

"Hello, Sir, you are the dad to the businessman, Warrior. He has made our children understand sales."

"Hello, madam, yes, I am the father to Warrior. How is he a businessman?"

"Our children are his KYMs (*Kanda Cia Moko*), I mean, his handymen or sales representatives for your son, Warrior. Now my daughter knows how to give change and take stocks. Your son is amazing."

Duofold was still at a loss to understand and asked the parent to explain. Warrior, who was there with his father, took three steps back.

"The sweets you buy for your son to make some money from other students."

"What sweets are you talking about, madam?"

"Anyway, it doesn't matter. We are very proud of the entrepreneurial skills your son Warrior has given to our children."

By then, two other parents had joined the discussion, and all seemed impressed by the son Duofold found a nightmare to deal with. He flowed with the discussion until the parents exhausted the topic. He did not fight with Warrior until they got home.

"Listen, son. I took you to school to study and not to do any monkey business! For that, I am transferring you from the school to discourage you from that practice. I am not saying it is a bad thing to be a businessman, but everything has its time. For now, it is time to study. I hope you are not too young to understand, Warrior."

Warrior was transferred to a Turkish school where Duofold thought he would tone down the hawking. Before Duofold got to know whether Warrior settled well in the new school, he married Yasmin and left responsibility for him and Binte to her. He soon opted to have Warrior stay in school as a boarder to ease the burden for Yasmin, who had since become pregnant with her twins. The school had the boys boarding from Monday to Friday. Weekends were spent with their families before they were dropped off by their parents at the school compound on Sunday evening or Monday morning.

One day Yasmin told Duofold she was concerned Warrior was taking the same snacks each weekend when he was taken for his back-to-school shopping at the supermarket. He took the same quantities or a bit more. The shopping comprised small packs of juices, biscuit packs that had five pieces of biscuits but the cheapest, and a packet of lollipops. Yasmin enticed him to have more fun snacks, but Warrior would not; if anything, he added more of the three items he always picked. Duofold realised the teenager had not quit the selling yet. There was a school meeting that was

scheduled for Friday the following week. He had put the date of the meeting in his diary. He was determined not to miss it.

Duofold and other parents were weary of dropping kids to school on Mondays and picking them on Friday. Now with Warrior's outing every week, it was even harder to discourage his hawking in school. He wanted the boy confined in school for the whole duration of three months of the school term. The parents made the meeting unbelievably stormy as they insisted their kids must be in school from Monday to Monday.

The school principal requested the parents who were not comfortable with the Friday pick-up arrangement meet him privately at his office. All the parents stepped out of the hall following each other, seeming like ants on a trail and were at the principal's office door. They wanted to make him understand that they were busy and had little time in their hands to pick up and have the kids at home over weekends.

The principal realised he would not finish having an audience with the parents on a one-on-one basis. It would take him three days to answer the same question on why it was important for them to be with their child on weekends. The principal stood at the entrance of his office and started addressing the parents.

"Our work as a learning institution is to give tuition to your children, not to help you parent them. Our tuition is from Monday to Friday. It is ideal you have the children over weekends to keep in close touch with them; they too need their parents. The child is your investment hence why you pay school fees and provide for everything your child requires, including your time with them as a parent. The way the education calendar is structured, school terms are in session nine months of the year, divided into three terms of three months each. The kids are given a break of one month after each term. For the busy parents, holiday tuition is encouraged if a parent is not able to be with the children or for some reason does not want the children to be at home. Note however that lucky is the child who is under their parents' custody during the 90 days that comprise school holidays each year."

He continued as the parents patiently waited for him to finish and give them a chance to emphasise their point to the stubborn principal.

"One can appreciate that most of you are working parents and would probably not be available during the holiday months. It, however, also means that the working parent would likely be free on weekends to find the time to be with their children.. That gives a total of eight days in a month which makes it thirty-two days in a year. That is all the time such parents have to mould their children. Parents, you are a reflection of the unruliness we are experiencing in these children. You have transferred your parenting to school institutions, as many of you are not able to keep up with your children as you usher them from one stage of their growth to the next

one. If you have failed, yet it is your child, how do you expect us to help them achieve the goals you have for your child, yet you are the owner of the child? Many have become very peculiar parents. You give birth to a child and then become a dispensing cash machine that only pays bills for others to bring up the child as if you least care about how he turns out in your absence. Everyone else takes the blame for your child's failure except you, the parent. Everyone including the maid, learning institutions, shopkeepers, drug vendors, but you!"

Duofold did not wait for the next statement. He went back to the school from which he had transferred his son for selling sweets and had him readmitted as a day scholar. He was with Warrior all this time and they had the to talk, when the son disclosed to Duofold that he had a lot of money in his piggy bank that he was not able to count. The dad seemed to like that Warrior was able to save and when they reached home was excited to show his son how to arrange the notes from the smallest denomination to the highest. Warrior, however, promised not to be involved again in selling stuff until he was done with school.

High school came knocking, and Warrior got curious about new things. One of them was drinking. They went out with classmates at one of the girls' homes. She was a classmate. They got drunk and by bad luck some glasses got broken. They were driven away from the house. Warrior and other classmates went to a nearby shopping centre to agree on the lie they would give back home for being drunk. Out of the blue, came knocking a drunkard. The stranger was busy calling everyone names claiming how useless statesmen had been.

Warrior thought it was unfair how a foreigner belittled them with no one raising a finger. He stood up and started pushing the noise maker as everyone cheered him on. In no time, he had thrown him in a ditch, but not without enough bruises on his knees and ankles. He saw himself as a celebrity, and without caring whether he was drunk, he walked home and went straight to bed without being noticed by anyone. He got pressed for a short call and removed his short trousers, and instead of putting them back on with each leg in its slot, he instead squeezed both legs on one slot of the shorts as he laid back on top of the bed.

Yasmin went to his room to check on him, for she was not used to Warrior not saying hi when he got in the house. Only to be welcomed in the room by a heavy smell of liquor and a half-naked body. He tried to wake him up in vain. She called Binte for backup, who in turn called Warrior's friends to find out what happened. They let him be as Yasmin waited for her husband to report the incident to him. However, Duofold arrived late that day when Yasmin was already asleep.

"Hello, Darling, you came late. My apologies; I did not hear you come. I slept a bit late. I hope you managed to serve yourself a bite."

Duofold drew Yasmin closer and murmured, "It's OK dear. You have done for me more than I bargained for."

"Thank you, dear. I am always grateful you made me a super mama! I have now brought up teenagers as I wait for my children to start messing with me all over again. I wonder how you expected your mom to manage these teenagers. Yesterday Warrior was engaged in a fight with a grown-up man."

"What! Did he win, or he has broken ribs?"

"What are you talking about, Duofold? Your son is as fierce as a lion. The guy was not only a grown-up but a foreigner. And he did not fight him because of a beef between them. The guy was generally abusing everyone, but your son was the only man enough to fight him."

"I am so proud of the boy; no doubt he is up to his name, Warrior. I was right giving him the name," Duofold said this with laughter that made Yasmin join in though she didn't think it was funny.

"Are you kidding me, Duofold? What's so funny about the fight? I was scared to death about my poor boy Warrior. He is still a minor and should not be involved in physical fights whatsoever."

"One should never be scared about a boy child, especially where he is behaving as a man ought to. If that guy had won the fight and harmed him, I would have hunted him down. Now that he was beaten by a minor, he cannot have the guts to go to the police station. It is the same as reporting he had been beaten by his wife." He laughed again, then stopped abruptly, adding that, "But had Warrior been beaten by a minor, I would have killed him myself. He must learn to stand up for himself, and if you get into a fight, you must always fight to win."

"Duofold, when given a choice of being right or kind...choose to be kind; why would Warrior choose to fight instead of just talking to the man to stop his shenanigans?"

"If you feel pain, Yasmin, it definitely communicates you are alive. Pain and men are relatives, Yasmin. If you feel other people's pain, you are a human being. You care about the well-being of others. That's a woman thing; men are human doings. We react according to the threat facing us. Warrior acted like a man, and I am proud of my son. He is a boy after my heart."

Seeing how Duofold had turned jovial about his son's fight, Yasmin decided not to report Warrior had come home drunk and let it slip. It was the first time she was catching the teenager. She would talk to him first before reporting to his dad.

The weekend was over, and that following Monday was his school's Community Service Day. Warrior was assigned to the Village Market Mall to assist in garbage collection and weeding flower beds together with his classmates. As he passed through the wide corridors of the upmarket mall, his attention was drawn to a small group of youths that looked like college girls and boys. They seemed to be enjoying

themselves, and he noticed they were smoking something from a strange pot not familiar to him.

"Hello guys, what is that pot and what are you smoking from it? It looks fun and smells great. My name is Warrior, and we are here for community service."

"Oh, welcome, we are campus students, out for group discussion, but we decided to have some fun. This is called a shisha pot. Have a puff. We have put vanilla essence, hence the great smell."

Warrior took a puff and thought he liked it. He sat next to them to learn more about that shisha thing.

"Is the pot for hire, or it's yours?" Warrior enquired.

"It is for hire, and we paid 1,500 shillings for a day's use. But you could buy one if you have 8,000 bob from a store upstairs," one of them explained and thinking he was making fun of Warrior, he added, "If you get it, we can guarantee you some business, young man. A shisha pot is a hot cake in events involving our agemates, only that we are not businessmen. We are just consumers." They all laughed at what they thought was a joke on the schoolboy.

"By tomorrow, I will be having one. Kindly share your numbers. I shall be giving mine for 1,300 bob or 1,000 bob if you hire the pot for more than three days."

"Are you serious," asked one of the college youths disbelievingly.

"Very serious," replied Warrior looking like one who meant it.

"Wow, then we need to return this one by today because we need one for the next 7 days."

"Super, let's talk in the next three hours, then we plan the logistics of how I shall be getting my payments," Warrior said and excused himself to find other boys – four of them including Warrior – to contribute and buy a shisha pot and make a business out of it.

Being international students, raising 8,000 shillings between them was not a big deal, and within minutes, they were at the shop to buy the pot. Each of the four boys contributed 2,000 shillings.

"You have a National Identity, Sir," the shop attendant asked Warrior, whose height and confident manner made the shop attendant think of him as an over eighteen college student.

"No, I don't have one; I am a minor," Warrior responded proudly.

"Sorry, we do not sell the shisha pot to minors. Wait until you are of age, young man," said the attendant and gave him back the money.

The other boys, who were seated outside the shop, were eagerly waiting for their boss Warrior to come with the pot to their first sale as promised. If it didn't work out,

none of them was going to have lunch, having contributed all their money for a share in the business investment.

"We have a problem, comrades," Warrior reported to them. "The shop attendant says I cannot be sold the shisha pot because I am a minor. We cannot ask our parents to come and buy for us the pot because shisha is for grown-ups. Anyone who has a brother among ourselves who could buy for us."

One of them volunteered to request her sister to buy it, but she did not want any part of it. "What if the deal backfires," the boy's sister asked, "Where would I tell Mom we got the money from… It's a NO!"

Another of his international student friends, a foreigner son to a diplomat, picked it up. "Forget about girls," he said, "they are risk averse. I shall get my brother." He proceeded to make a call and explained to his brother, who showed up and bought the shisha pot for them. He also took the responsibility of getting clients for the crew.

Warrior was henceforth permanently on the phone, which again had Yasmin suspicious about her stepson's activities. She asked his sister Binte to find out what he was up to. She discovered shisha social media adverts on Warrior's phone where he and the boys were posing somewhere on a rooftop smoking from a shisha pot. The adverts had several hundred likes. His clientele had skyrocketed in a matter of months, and by the time of Binte's discovery, he had five shisha pots in circulation.

Yasmin took the phone from where Warrior usually hid it in his bedroom when he was away at school. She noted that other than being on his phone too much in the evening when he was home, nothing else was off about him. His school grades were good too.

She gave the phone to Duofold the following morning as he was having breakfast. Duofold was lost for words. The sale entries on his son's phone were a whopping one hundred thousand.

He had no idea what to do. His boy Warrior seemed unstoppable. He saw something of himself in his son. He, too, was determined to make money. His son's desire to make money was consistent, and for both Warrior and Duofold, it was driven by *sheer determination*. He did not stop at anything, and it seemed whatever he touched turned into gold.

Duofold left the house without a word. Just after lunch, after he had cleared urgent work at the office, he called his friend Ben to help him demystify his son's strange urge to make money. What he knew about parenting seemed to have failed with Warrior.

"Hello, Big Ben, I need to borrow a leaf about parenting."

"Parenting? That sounds serious. Where are you?

"Same joint, buddy," Duofold was already on his third beer. He did not even see his friend Ben enter the pub. His mind was racing with concern about his son. He wondered whether to storm the school and drag him out of class for disobeying him after all the discussions they had had in the past about waiting until he was old enough to do business. He was most concerned that the high school student was doing his business with older students already at university who could lead him a stray.

"I'm wondering what to do with my son Warrior," he confessed to Ben. "He is now a big business owner. He has graduated to renting shisha pots. Look at his phone. The mobile money wallet shows he is past 100K."

Ben took the phone to see for himself and laughed. "How old is the boy now?"

"He is only sixteen years old; imagine that, Ben. Where could I have failed in my parenting?"

Ben busted out laughing, almost irritating Duofold that his friend didn't seem to take his concern seriously.

"There is nothing wrong with the young man," Ben said. "A mango doesn't does not fall far from a mango tree. You defied death, my friend. Nothing stopped you from becoming rich when one might have expected you were broken after what you had gone through during your famous disappearance! You are unstoppable! Madam Boss gave you hell on earth, and that did not stop you from making Instar a company with international recognition or the success you have registered with SmartLink. Just one man! Almost as if the rest of us do not beat the morning dew as you do, Duofold. Your son, Warrior, is you reloaded! You should be a proud man, buddy!"

"Are you listening to yourself, Ben? I never disobeyed my parents despite the betrayals and anger I still have against Dad Hezron."

"If you are not proud about who you are, Duofold, just picture what you would love Warrior to be. He is your reflection. Children keep changing as they grow, and they start feeling out what might be their roles in life as adults. That's natural, Duo. Warrior shall keep drifting and experimenting until he finds his true calling. You see him as a minor now, but he might be an early adopter, not a laggard or a non-starter like myself who has the ability to start a business but keeps hopping from employment to employment. He has to keep moving to meet others with similar values as he grows."

"I agree, Ben, but Warrior is a junior, my friend. They had gone out for community service to learn about how to conserve our environment. Instead, he went to buy shisha pot. I wonder who he is making money for?"

"Duofold, you shall always get surprised by each change that happens in your child's life. He is not making money because he needs it but because it is the right thing to do... treating life seriously. He has been disowned by life before when he was

abandoned by you and his mother, Akumu. He is a man wired to secure his territory in case such a mess comes knocking again. Life has prepared him not to be an ordinary man but a man ready to take the bull by the horns. If you die for real next time, Duofold, you have an heir to take after you."

Duofold did not know what to think despite what Ben had said.

"You seem more concerned about the environment," Ben went on, "but I am sure he knows more than you do. Perhaps the clean-up he had gone to do was a waste of time for him, hence his detour into the shisha business. To make the exercise more worthwhile, their school should have considered the bigger problems in the world, such as diminishing freshwater levels in the world. Had the kids been taken to see dry rivers, like in my village, the lesson would have been worthwhile. I am sure many of them have no idea where water comes from because they only see water in the taps and bottled water. Some have been lucky to see a flood, a storm and water running on the drainages when there are heavy rains. For some the only stream they have seen is tears when they cry over irrelevant things."

"I don't think you understand the bone of contention, Ben. This has nothing to do with community service. It has all to do with my Warrior!"

"Warrior is fine, Duofold. You are the one with an issue. His world is unfolding, and nothing can stop that. Just some guidance here and there, and Warrior should be fine! As you are going through a rollercoaster of distressed thoughts, make sure not to lose your mind again, Duo. Beware of post-traumatic stress disorder," he said jokingly. "I am concerned you are exposing yourself to too much worry over everything around you, Duo. Be easy on yourself; nothing is too serious in this life, buddy."

"I have an idea, Ben," he said as he finished his drink without saying what the idea was about. Then, getting to his feet, he said, "I should be going, and Ben, thank you for your time."

Duofold left in a hurry without a care about the hotel bill. He drove fast to Warrior's school before classes were out for the day. Traffic was, however, a bit light when usually at that time of day it would be heavy with parents going to collect their children. He was going to patiently wait for the classes to be over before going for Warrior. The rest of the children would be taken home by the school bus as per existing arrangements.

I learnt a lot being a parent as a young adult. Basically, parenting looks easy and rosy, especially if you haven't had children of your own yet. But it is different as you walk the journey. You face challenges, and you question yourself as a parent—am I doing enough? Am I instilling good values in this child? I wondered how my parents did it for so many of us siblings all at once. One thing is certain; a responsible parent can't just let things spiral out of control. You need to be present for the

child, and you need to have the will to listen and learn from them their needs and what drives them. Be open to learning more from other people's experiences. Of course, not all that the people say is good or would work for your child, but there are things you can pick out which may be helpful.

Personally, I have learnt a lot from others' experiences and my own experience as well. I take it to heart and work at getting better. It doesn't have to happen to me for me to learn a lesson from something. Another thing I have come to realise is that how our parents raised us doesn't necessarily work with our generation of kids. They are different, and we may need to learn and adapt to new parenting methods to avoid spoiling or breaking them. The new parenting process can be very confusing sometimes, but we should be ready as parents to adopt. Some things don't change, however: Each child grows at their pace, and each of their milestone is different, and as parents, we do encounter challenges in each of their stages in life. The secret is to try and enjoy the process and be present for every milestone because this child is leaving his life; it is not a rehearsal. I would think Warrior's teenage journey is another chapter in his life and probably the hardest challenge a parent may have to endure, and therefore one that requires a lot of parental effort and attention. Still, parenting must be one of the most fulfilling journeys in life, I guess.

Duofold entered the school and found it a bit full of cars, making it hard to find parking. *What's the event? Why are there so many parents streaming in*? He wondered.

It was a day for high school kids to showcase their talents in swimming, but it had escaped Duofold. He was only just on time for it, but it was by coincidence. Yasmin had asked him to attend the event the day before, but with that morning's issue about Warrior's shisha pots, the school event had evaporated from his mind. To his surprise, Warrior was the representative for the school swimming gala, not in one race but three of them. Duofold might have found it difficult to trace his son in the multitude of students had he not heard his name being called out in the loudspeaker for the next heat. He saw Warrior's Rasta hairdo, and they were only two in the line of seven contestants. And perhaps not surprisingly to the proud father, all the girls were cheering for him.

"Warrior, the most handsome dude!" the girls seemed to chant. He could not get the wording of the chants right, but he found his daughters Binte and Femi in the stands, and they explained to him how popular Warrior was with his peers. On walls in the girls' bathrooms, there was some adoring graffiti about him. Junior was on the list of ushers to organise the junior participants. He was only five years old but was allocated duties already. Duofold wished he was with Yasmin to witness the boy's milestones, for these were milestones in their lives.

WARRIOR WAS NEVER SHORT OF DRAMA, such as one time when his school held a Hog Charge bicycle competition. He and his friends were among the last in the race.

On their way to the finishing line, they noticed a muddy section of the road on which trucks got stuck. Warrior pleaded with Yasmin to ask their teachers to let them take a lap in the mud. Yasmin managed to negotiate for them from the teachers, who judged it safe to undertake. Risk assessment was usually necessary in case of an accident, more so because the school insurance coverage, which was paid daily during the competitions, was almost expiring for the day. That impromptu section of the race proved the most interesting. The bicycle skids and falls on the muddy paddles attracted media and spectators as boys from other schools joined in the fun. Since then, hog charge competitions for international schools started featuring muddy sections to spice up the race. Warrior and his team were featured in the national newspaper, making it one of the highlights of his teenage.

IN THE HEATS DUOFOLD WITNESSED at the swimming gala, Warrior emerged among the top and won a medal in the freestyle and backstroke categories. Looking from the stands, his dad thought with a smile that it must have been the adrenaline, mostly because of all the girls rooting for him, that probably helped him win.

"I am so proud of you, son," said Duofold when they caught up after the competitions. "You are amazing. The only area you have let me down is in that shisha business without asking for my advice."

Warrior was taken aback. He did not think his father knew about it, let alone tell him about asking for advice. Though he could see the disappointment in his father, this did not seem like their usual face-to-face talk. His father sounded softer. "It is illegal to do shisha in this country because there are people who use the pot to smoke illegal substances such as marijuana and the like. You must promise me you shall sell those shisha pots and involve me in your future endeavours, son."

Warrior composed himself, and after letting a nervous cough, he said, "I promise Dad, and thank you for the permission... I shall always involve you in future."

"Good job, son. I am proud of you and hope to see more such victories in your class grades too. We need to go to the bank tomorrow to open an account for all the money you have made so far. And from now on, I shall work with you in my company during your school holidays. Help me grow family business, Warrior."

As a special treat, the family ate out that evening in celebration. Yasmin had already booked a table at a restaurant for the planned dinner.

A few days later, there was a juniors' school meeting that Duofold felt he could not miss attending. He brought Yasmin along with him. The swimming event seemed to have woken him up to what he may be missing. He wondered why he seemed too busy for his children, yet it was his sole responsibility before Yasmin came into the

picture. He had left all family chores to Yasmin and got too engrossed in making Instar and SmartLink thrive. The school offered buffet breakfast at the juniors' event, but Duofold only served himself a cup of coffee. Yasmin picked from a variety of servings in the buffet, forcing Duofold to indulge himself with cakes and samosas as the school principal began his speech.

Good morning, parents. Thank you for creating time to be here for your children. It is a happy journey that we have to walk together in shaping these young souls as we usher them to the next grade.

I know most of you are aware of the trends in the world today, but they bear repeating, if only so that we are all on the same page.

We live in a world where digital technology has become a part of our lives. While it has made life easy, it has also had negative effects, such as cybercrime and cyberbullying, and even addiction. Having and using digital gadgets is a fact of life in our homes. And though our children are being described as digital natives, they are also some of the most vulnerable. There has been growing concern about addiction to gaming and moral corruption on social media. This has led some to anti-social behaviours, not to mention that it leaves children vulnerable to online predators and exposure to mature content and other unsuitable information.

We have noticed a lag in the children's learning, and one of the reasons is the too much time they are spending with gadgets at home. While it is the world we are living, in that we cannot do without the internet or social media, there is a need to strike a balance if we are to address these concerns. It may sound obvious or simplistic to say that we limit the time our young ones are in contact with gadgets at home, but it is an effective solution. Some parents may not know much about digital things and see it as technological wilderness. But we urge them to take a keen interest.

The government has developed information packs for parents and has a lot of material to empower young children and adolescents on how to be safe on the internet. We shall send your emails the link to the government website you can find the information and material.

There is also the problem of guns. Some of our homes have parents who keep guns. We are mourning a parent killed by her own son. The toddler, used to playing with a toy gun with his dad, confused it with the real one when the dad – a policeman, forgot to immediately lock it up as he usually did to keep it away from the children. The accident happened as he was sleeping after night duty. The boy's mom worked online from home.

There followed some murmuring by shocked parents before they quietened down. The principal continued.

As parents, you don't need to be reminded that boys and girls have different needs. But while the girlchild has been receiving a lot of attention, the boychild appears to have been left behind. We are seeing this in their grades at school, especially in some urban settings where girls in some areas appear to perform better.

In the olden days, children were raised in a community set-up. Boys learnt from older men in their families and community and were initiated into adulthood once they reached a certain age—the same for girls. Lots of these traditions have been abandoned in many communities, though some still practice them. The world, however, has changed, while the demands of modern society have brought a bit of disconnect between children and parents, especially where both parents are working. Many children from such homes are raised by their schools and nannies.

In the meantime, the boy child today, especially in the cities, seems to not be groomed to handle family matters and take up what was traditionally a man's responsibility as head and provider. He has had to learn this the hard way, even in marriage. Society's mindset about men and boy's responsibilities has not shifted, so the boy is often under a lot of pressure. Compared to the girlchild, the boychild in some families is viewed as more capable of standing up for himself regardless of whether they have the capacity or not. This leaves them to make their own decisions and sometimes fend for themselves. Research tells us that this and other factors manifest into increased crime, poverty and illiteracy and increased school dropouts.

On the other hand, many men in the modern society seem not able to fulfil their traditional roles as head and provider, while women to a large extent continue in their traditionally feminine roles as nurturers and carers of the family. This means that the woman has sometimes been forced to assume the male role even as she continues to play her feminine role. This makes many women lose patience with their men, where money seems to be the only parameter to gauge a man's ability. A woman with money feels she can buy or hire any service her man is unable to provide at home. Men in such situations tend to feel useless and often fall into depression and drinking and such self-destructive habits caused by hopelessness.

So, what are we doing as a school, you might ask? Research is now showing us that overemphasis of the girlchild is proving negative on the boychild. For example, while commonly used statements such as "when you educate a girl you educate the family and community" are affirming and empowering for the girl, they imply that the same is not true of educating the boy child. This adds to the low esteem of many of the boys pulling them behind in school. Our curriculum emphases both the girls and the boys to ensure they grow up as well-rounded and responsible adults in their families and society.

This is, however, not to say that the world has been taken over by women. The boychild is still the leader in most institutions. Patriarchy therefore still reigns and remains deep rooted, with men still being viewed as superior in terms of leadership and as workers. I am sure you see this in your traditional cultures and corporate hierarchies and structures. I don't deny that "pretty privilege" exists here and there, but the man is still the ruler in the money-making games. We however still have increasingly many successful women who have defied the odds and started their own businesses—women who have brought their own seats to their own tables. Their entrepreneurial prowess is setting examples and helping level the playing field to some extent.

Just as a reminder, a mother is wired to perform her all her maternal duties, even as she excels in her career. Si, I urge you, even as you compete to make money create time for the family, which is more important than any wealth you can amass for your children. Make it upon yourself to be keen of what your children are doing by engaging them, inspecting their bags before and after school. And if you have boy child, cheer him on, even as you encourage the girl child; they need to emerge into responsible adulthood together.

Duofold listened carefully and concluded with the Kikuyu saying that *Njuguma njega yumaga o ikoriru.* And, thinking about what the principal had just said about women, his thoughts turned to Binte. He especially thought about the challenge of a father raising his teenage daughter, which he recalled in one particular incident that he let run through his mind, as if telling it to an imaginary listener.

For Binte, I am still lost, Duofold recalled. *The only time I have engaged with her was when Yasmin left my house. I know Yasmin did her best to shape my Binte so is my mother Florence, but I am certain they sweep a lot under the carpet. But she is my daughter, too, and I am concerned about her well-being. It is, therefore, up to me to unravel what they have been hiding under the carpet.*

Binte requested to go to her friend's house, who spent the night at our house. As we entered the car, I sent them back to the house to bring water bottles I had deliberately left behind so that I could plant a tracking chip in Binte's bag to help me follow her movements that night.

I dropped them to an empty house as both parents of her friend were working professionals. At around 11 pm in the night, I trailed Binte to Westlands shopping centre. I drove there, and as I revisited my phone to relocate her, I noticed some young girls approaching my car in the midst of young men. My Binte is in a branded wig I had not seen before and shorts that exposed her to near nakedness. The tummy was left bare out, and she had a golden ring on her belly button. The high boots had made her tall frame elevated to the point she looked more mature than I thought possible at her age. Were it, not her voice that betrayed her, I could swear she would have escaped my attention. I opened the door, grabbed her, and ordered her into the car as the young youth rallied behind me with all manner of insults you could imagine. I even received several blows from the boys.

When I turned and grabbed two of the boys, they all knew by now the senior Warrior was in play, and they all ran for their dear lives. That was the only time I have ever struck my princess's skin to punish her. Parenting has no formula, but the first instincts are always right. It should be the point for decisive action. There are such disappointing moments as when I caught Binte, but parenting her and her siblings had mostly been rewarding. So, in the parenting wilderness, where it might be difficult, there is also a silver lining.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DUOFOLD LEFT THE OFFICE EARLY, one of the few times he had left before 5 pm. The excitement he felt that his wife was back could not allow him to concentrate. He felt celebratory, but he also wanted to be alone just to enjoy the moment and collect his thoughts. He wanted it to be a brief beer or two so that he would be home in time for dinner with the family. He went to a favourite pub not far from his home that belonged to a friend of his. That he had not been to the pub for a long time was immediately apparent. The last time he was there, it was called King Dunson, named after its owner; now it was called Big D. Even the ambience felt upbeat to reflect its new trendy name.

Duofold ordered a beer and noticed the uniform of the young lady who served him was also different. It was a lively creamy brown with a better cut than the drab bluish dress he remembered. He inquired about his friend.

"Dunson won a Green card to settle in the United States," the young lady replied, "but he has since joined his wife in Canada, where she had started a business."

"Oh, Dunson had a family? I didn't know that," Duofold said, puzzled because of the bachelor kind of life his friend had seemed to lead.

"Of course, he had a family," she said, seeming surprised that the question should even arise. "But King Dunson was a heartbreaker … he left many women nursing their wounds after impregnating them and leaving them to bring up their children single-handedly as he moved on with his wife and family. I am a victim too. He was to leave this pub to me for our son's upkeep, only to wake up one morning to a new owner summoning staff to announce the takeover. Only necessity keeps me going; I have my child to feed after the father relocated to better his life."

"I am so sorry about that, young lady."

"Not to worry, as often happens, a child belongs to the woman, and when a man is done with the flings that kept him in the relationship. I hear that when Dunson got to the US, he was working as a night guard, and today, in Canada, he is a truck driver. Why would a man leave his country where he is a landlord and a business owner to be a servant in a foreign land?"

The young lady was interrupted by a troublesome customer on another table who seemed angry and complained about literally everything—from the seat in which he had changed position for the third time, to the brand of water he had been served as he waited for his beer.

As the young lady went to calm the customer, the thought of Dunson and the life he now led in Canada set Duofold off to contemplate how change sometimes is inevitable. Sometimes it came with pain, as he had experienced in his own home, but it could also be laden with joy, as was the case now that his wife was back. It can also be elevating or a stepping-stone to bigger things, as he hoped was the case with his friend, Dunson.

It, however, troubled him that Dunson could have been so selfish when he was still in the country. *How could he have left such a poor reputation of an uncaring Casanova breaking so many a woman's heart, some whom he had sired children and abandoned to their fate in struggling single-parent families?*

This thought led Duofold to think about the women in his life—women besides his two mothers and daughters.

Akumu, his once high school love and former wife, was articulate and had left a deep mark on his life. She was the one lady he liked to listen to, having shared so much from so young an age since their school days. They shared the same taste in music, except that for her, she knew which tune best fit the moment, whether when dating, making love, crying, laughing, grieving, or dealing with elders. She always had a song to suit a situation. She had a beautiful voice too. She kept a warm and tidy home and had high regard for her in-laws. She was also very firm in her decisions and stuck to her principles. She could not be swayed once her mind was made up on something and stuck to her opinions, however different or annoying they were to the other person. Duofold could never dare cross her boundaries.

Akumu was also a hard worker. And once they got married, she was happy in her role as a housewife and took charge of the family; it was her top priority. She was loyal and perhaps too much of a romantic who could never get over Duofold even after fate had separated them. Even after Duofold married Yasmin, she still felt romantically entitled to him. He, too, couldn't help her advances sometimes when they met. He always had to remind himself to respect her, that she was no longer his wife but Floyd's, his brother, and that she was family now, like a sister. He made a point never to be alone with her, though he saw her often when dropping their children Warrior and Binte to be with her. Still, she was like a thorn in Duofold's fresh but didn't know how to live without her.

Not a day went without Duofold and Akumu communicating in one way or the other. Because of this, the mistakes were many and complicated. These include their

first encounter on that mattress in Akumu's shop after Duofold resurfaced, from which resulted a pregnancy and a girl baby was born.

They named her Promise, who became the third child between the ex-spouses who were now in-laws. Akumu was adamant and had refused to abort her, and Duofold's heart failed him too and he had to relent He loved the girl as he loved Binte. Promise would, however, remain a secret as to who was the father—a secret known to just the two of the two lovers. Many wondered why she was given the name Promise, or what promise she stood for. But nobody bothered to ask the mother that question to find out what the name stood for.

If he had his way, he would have married both Akumu and Yasmin. But it often also led him to wonder: *Why is it that a woman cannot be married to two men?*

LINDA HAD BEEN WITH DUOFOLD long before Yasmin. She was to Duofold what in their social circles was known as his side chick. Theirs was an easy-going relationship in which they mutually appreciated each other. Back in the day, when she had been abandoned by his first child's father, Duofold was there for her, offering comfort and companionship. When he disappeared, Linda started dating again and got married.

When Duofold came back, they picked up from where they had left. He often thought that it probably was because there were no strings attached to the relationship that drew them together. It might have been thought that because Linda had a husband and children and was independent with her own money, she had moved on and needed nothing from Duofold. Yet no matter how hard she and Duofold tried to turn their back on each other, they always found a hundred reasons to get back running to one another. There was this lust between them. But even without it, they would often go out together for a good time. She had mastered Duofold, his desires, and could read his face when distressed; Linda knew the strings to pull for Duofold to find his footing back. A good example was when Linda's advice sorted him out with Yasmin when their marriage almost failed.

Professionally, Duofold gave Linda valuable intelligence on market trends, keeping her businesses ahead of the curve. They both enjoyed business travel and often combined their expeditions, mixing work and pleasure. Work often camouflaged their relationship. Duofold bragged that Linda was his "me-time love" when he wanted to spoil himself romantically. He was the Barot in Linda's life as Barot was to Yasmin. Duofold was well known to Linda's parents and siblings, and they often wondered why he never married Linda. They were disappointed when he got married to Akumu, that he would never be their son- or brother-in-law. He,

however, often brought her parents gifts when he went visiting, a signal to them that he always thought their daughter a wonderful woman.

Linda, on her part, was never jealous of Duofold's two other women, Akumu and Yasmin and his oscillating between them all. She knew her place and was content. The only time things nearly went wrong between them was when she discovered Madam Boss Mary wanted to marry Duofold. At the time, he had no idea Linda and Mary were close friends. Linda protested about it and would have caused trouble Duofold didn't want to imagine. As it turned out, however, Mary and Duofold were never meant to be.

DUOFOLD SAW YASMIN AS THE QUEEN of romance. She was a warm and attentive caregiver to him. She had good taste, both culinary and sartorial: Not only was she a great cook, but her sense of style made her insist on the best dress code for her husband. Duofold had become a poor shopper and had long allowed her to take charge of his wardrobe. She was also a great host, often escorting him to the car and receiving him in the evening with a drink, a ready bathroom, and a change of clothes. With Yasmin, Duofold felt like a spoilt man. The home was her domain, and he was subject to her as the woman of the house. Duofold found Yasmin endearing for the care she showed his mother, Florence. She pampered her mother-in-law too. In return, Florence loved her like a daughter. It was the little things that cemented their bonds—little things like Yasmin teaching her mom-in-law how to operate her smartphone, play games or choose a movie on the gadget, but also how to find a verse in the digital Bible or use a digital dictionary. Now Florence was able to read short English messages and respond to them too.

Yasmin was also a good mother and tutor to the young children. She encouraged them with their online tutorial classes to improve their grades, even as she ensured they were keen on their extra-curricular activities such as cooking, art, swimming, and many more that she supervised. Duofold felt he owed Yasmin for this, as he could neither make the time because of his work schedule nor feel capable of delivering on such parental chores.

Duofold's thought turned to the dark moment during their brief separation when he had exiled her to her parent's home. He recalled a message she had sent him:

"I was going through the messages you sent me when we were dating, Kim. I wondered whether you meant all that you had written. One mistake is not reason enough to leave me. I guess it is over now. It wasn't worth the effort because you never even said goodbye. All I received were divorce papers. Does it mean you gave up on me; was I just another Akumu down? How many wives do you want to test? You think there shall be a madam perfect?"

These are the kind of questions I am never able to answer, Duofold thought to himself upon remembering the letter. *I feel bad that Yasmin cheated on me with a man that caused her so much damage. I wonder whether love has boundaries or whether broken hearts heal over time, just like an open wound. If then that is the case, does it mean she shall forever be yearning for Barot, and any provocation shall send her packing to be comforted by this good-for-nothing brat?*

I know I am no angel, too; I keep sneaking back to Akumu, and I am stuck with Linda, but for my wife, I feel different and very offended. I am not ready to compete with another man. I have to intimidate her to a level of submission. I must not look desperate to keep her as a wife. She must feel the heat of being replaced. She has work to raise the children until they are grown up, then she can take off if she likes because by then she shall be old enough to settle down and enjoy the fruits of her labour.

He thought that harbouring such doubts was healthy as they kept him grounded in reality. The truth was that besides Yasmin being his wife, she was also his friend and business confidant. She was a learned and brilliant lawyer. She was his legal advisor and offered practical perspectives that helped his businesses. He often involved her in his business negotiations, especially with the shrewd Indian and Somali businesspeople in the same industry as Instar.

She was also a kind and accommodating woman, seeing the way she took Warrior and Binte as her own. Even when they fought, she never extended her bitterness to them. He was thankful for her. She was the one woman he thought he could kill for should someone the likes of Barot attempt to take her from him.

WHAT ABOUT MADAM BOSS MARY? He asked himself as if it was one of the most perplexing questions of his life. He had no answer to it. The good thing was that she was now back in the office and no longer an intruder into his life. They now knew where they stood with each other, even as each of his other women knew where they stood with him.

Despite people like his friend Dunson, many men, Duofold acknowledged, never burn their bridges with their women, and where they have, they leave a canoe at the shore to cross them over to the other side when need be.

He was now on his second beer and, as the subject took hold in his mind, this is what he was thinking, or lamenting: *The ultimate reason a man marries a woman probably has more to do with the orgasmic emptying of his balls than to propagate life. Yet, it doesn't matter whether a man is married or not; the need is ever present, and he has to find relief. It is a call of nature. Wives think they are doing men a favour by sleeping with them. But to the more suspicious wives, the man often has some questions to answer before they can give in to their husbands' male urges. They might ask:*

Why were you late yesterday?

Who are you seeing, for you rarely ask for sex nowadays?

Can I see who WhatsApped you in the last month?

In my case, there was this once when I was asked, 'Why were you smiling alone while we are seated on the couch? Was it a text from Akumu?' Before I could defend myself, the urge was gone, and I was left deflated. On other days Yasmin is busy with the kids and breakfast. These chores are usually left to the housekeeper, but she intentionally disappears on me to avoid what she and I call the morning glory. On other days during that cycle of their month, it comes accompanied by permanent headaches that only seem to happen when I get home. You wonder what it has to do with sex. In a month, if I am lucky, it is only seven days I get intimate with Yasmin. I sometimes wonder whether I am in a long-distance relationship to live with such drought despite waking up in the same bed with her. Yet when she desires me, we can enjoy sex for a week nonstop.

With this going through his mind, if Duofold had a message to women, this is what he would have told them: *Ladies, sex is a demand, not a favour to a man. It is a need just like you need food. I also do not understand what it is that a woman should treat her husband like a brother. She loves everything about him except having sex with him and making sure other women do not come near their husbands. How is the husband expected to relieve himself from burning desire if the wife is always cold?"*

Duofold knew what to do. To answer nature's call, the man has to find a way without provoking the wife. Hence his Linda; when his iron is hot, she is always there. He sympathised with her husband and was sure that he, too, dealt with the same marital bed issues Duofold went through with his Yasmin. He thought this was inevitable and wondered whether it was a covenant between women to frustrate their husbands, something their mothers should have taught their daughters to avoid before their marriage.

What about the men? What were they taught? Duofold knew of a cultural rite of passage after a boy's circumcision when women were brought to them to do what was called *kũhura mbiro*, to wipe away the soot. It was their introductory first act of sex as if to teach them that women would always be theirs for the taking now that they had become men. This seemed to work for a while, especially when they started courting when even the woman would demand sex. Thus what he thought was a mystery was what became of the girl after marriage. Why did wives seem to lose their desire for sex with their husbands? It was not a question he thought he could answer with Yasmin.

His last drunk thought as he staggered out of the bar was this: *Spread that aroma of love to your man, and he shall adore you for life. This I can assure you, ladies. Anyway, I am no better than Barot, but every sin has its forty days. Barot days are numbered. He has to face the consequences. I am determined to mark my territory as Yasmin's husband.*

Were it not a staggering distance home, he may never have driven home. He had downed far too many beers.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DUOFOLD COULD NEVER CONTAIN HIS ANGER at Barot for the hurt he and his family had caused Yasmin, making her lose a pregnancy and end up barren. Someone had to pay for it. For the moment, he did not want to involve Yasmin in his plan for revenge. He wanted to spare any recurrence of her trauma. He viewed it as a journey he must take alone and quickly get done with, with Barot being the focus of his attention. It was not unlike the saying advising that if you want to walk fast, walk alone. He could not remember where he had heard the saying, but he also remembered it also advised that if you want to walk far, walk in the company of others. When the time came, Duofold would walk together with Yasmin.

Duofold had a soft heart but now seemed to have mastered the art of using his heart less after the many pains he had known—his dad, Hezron, trying to kill him, his brother, Floyd, marrying his wife Akumu and Madam Boss Mary trying to sabotage his business at Instar. By not appearing to do much about it, Duofold seemed to have been giving in to all the storms that came his way, letting others win. He recalled one time thinking about how letting Akumu go symbolised a weakness, and how he was not ready to lose Yasmin to Barot.

This time it was revenge he sought and, thinking about the pains and hurt that had ever touched him from his father, brother and Mary, the revenge seemed to find form in the hatred he felt for Barot.

But it was Yasmin this was about. He could visualise the moment Barot and his family would bend on their knees to apologise to her. It had to be all of them apologising. It was Barot's parents' desire that their son marry someone else, even if it would harm Yasmin. They had poisoned her life and abandoned her in a foreign land.

To actualise his plan, Duofold requested Liz to investigate for him what had transpired for Yasmin to end up in the hospital in Singapore in the condition she was in. Liz was in the Asian country for a business trip and was more than willing to try and get the information Duofold had requested. Having borne witness to the pains Duofold had been through before and after meeting Yasmin, and especially his rising above his problems and turning Liz's businesses around, it made her feel indebted to

him. On his part, Duofold knew Liz as thorough and that once she got down to doing something, it yielded results.

Fortunately, the doctor who had operated on Yasmin was still in the same Singapore hospital when Liz visited it to find out what may have transpired. After a long discussion with the doctor, Liz left convinced there was a case to be answered. The doctor's tests showed that the pregnancy did not terminate naturally but was induced by an ingested poison that had also left Yasmin unable to bear children. Yasmin was indeed very lucky to be alive, the doctor explained, because the level of the poison in her blood was more than a body could have endured without quick intervention. He showed Liz details in the test results in Yasmin's file, and expressed his outrage saying he was willing to testify in court to bring the culprits to book.

The doctor further explained that he had requested the "Good Samaritan" who had brought Yasmin to the hospital to leave her passport details and explain in writing how and where on the streets she had found the victim.

It turned out Barot's mother was the Good Samaritan. Liz could only speculate with the doctor as to why she should claim to a kind passerby. Perhaps it was because Barot's family were also tourists in Singapore, despite telling Yasmin they had relocated from the United Kingdom, and that Singapore was now their new base. Nevertheless, Barot's mother gave the doctor her details and the hotel she said they had found Yasmin. Maybe she thought Yasmin would not survive the poison she had ingested. The doctor could still remember how, together with Yasmin after she got better, they tried to reach Barot's family in vain using the landline number Barot's mother had left as her contact. It was only later that Yasmin realised that leaving the non-existent number was deliberate to avoid being tracked. Indeed, according to the doctor, the matter had been reported to the police, and a file opened. However, efforts through Interpol, the international criminal police organisation, to trace the family had yet to yield results.

Liz took notes and photographic evidence where she could and followed up with the Singapore police about their findings. These she brought to Duofold. He added them to evidence he had already collected, such as the family's invitation message sent to their son Barot and Yasmin to join them in Singapore and the registration number of the car they had boarded at the hospital enroute to the airport. These amounted to a paper trail, and with this evidence, Duofold opened a court case against the family. This was after reporting Barot's presence in the country and his alleged crime to the police authorities in Kenya, who in turn liaised with their counterparts in Singapore and Interpol.

Eight years had now passed, and Barot's family seemed to be doing well. But as Duofold had put it, evil has a way of unwrapping itself however well you lock it in. He believed they would eventually be caught.

He wondered what Barot's family thought must have become of Yasmin. The best answer Duofold could think of was that they probably thought she had gotten over her trauma and moved on or maybe died in the Singapore hospital.

Not knowing what may have become of her may explain why Barot should show up in Nairobi. But after establishing she was alive and well, he must have been very careless to try and engage with Yasmin after the painful rollercoaster of betrayals and abandonment she had been through since Singapore. And despite being aware she was now married, Barot was still bold enough to try and convince her they get back together. That was reckless, not showing respect to a husband, especially an angry one like Duofold.

Barot could not have known how determined Duofold was to "send him and his parents straight to hell on this earth in prison," as Duofold had put it.

Barot and Duofold, however, did meet and, surprisingly, without any violent confrontation. Barot tried to convince Duofold that the relationship between him and Yasmin was over and had happened a long time back, and therefore to let bygones be bygones. Duofold was of a different opinion; the crime they committed against Yasmin must not go unpunished.

And so Duofold's lawyer went ahead to consolidate the evidence and police reports and filed a case against Barot and his mother. The clever lawyer was able to show how Barot was a flight risk and probably a danger to other women. He managed to convince the court to have Barot put in remand.

In the meantime, a court summons was issued to his mother in the United Kingdom through their family lawyer in London. When Barot's parents learned that their only child was already in remand in Kenya, where jails were known to be terrible, it was more than the family could bear. They could not bear the thought that their son might spend his thirtieth, fortieth and fiftieth birthdays in jail. Barot's defence team tried to argue that it had been a normal miscarriage and that there was no intent to harm Yasmin. But the Singapore doctor's report showed otherwise.

In the court papers and oral arguments, Duofold's lawyer traced the sequence of events and how things had unfolded, focusing it on Barot. They first painted him as a victim to demonstrate his mother's guilt. They showed how he, too, like Yasmin, had lost his baby in addition to losing his true love to his mother's greed. The mother wanted Barot to marry into a rich family so that her business and social status could gain from the new family connection. This demonstrated how she had used her son Barot. It emphasised how Barot had no control over his life, with his mother making

life choices for him as if he did not have a mind of his own. Through this argument, the lawyer tried to establish the motive that landed Yasmin in the hospital in critical condition from poisoning.

To tie Barot to the crime, the lawyer described his journey back to Africa to trace his love, Yasmin, only to find that she had gotten married. Barot could not live with this reality and would not take "No" for an answer. For reasons only known to himself, he never expected to find Yasmin married. He loved Yasmin dearly, so losing her had left him somewhat unstable and disoriented. He had to take his chances and do whatever he could to win Yasmin back. And yet when he succeeded in luring her into a relationship, he would later dump Yasmin despite living off her. This suggested that his real motive was to wreck Yasmin's life in revenge for marrying someone else. It was as if he intended it to be the last nail in her coffin, separating her from her husband.

Languishing in remand prison, Barot considered how his life had come down to this mess. He somewhat saw parallels in his situation with some of the restrictions that the Covid-19 pandemic, which was then raging, had imposed. Just like the light he could see through the small window of his cell, the air outside may look pure, but wearing a mask was mandatory—the mask, in this case, symbolising his confinement. Roads were empty, but it was impossible to take a drive, not least because he was now a state guest. The Covid lockdowns and prison were similar in curtailing his freedom to go or do anything he wanted. He enjoyed a good conversation, but like the pandemic and social distancing, he had to talk to guests visiting him in remand from the other side of the glass. He loved cooking, but he could not invite anyone for lunch or dinner, and the state determined the menu.

Duofold could imagine the agony Barot must have been going through and had a sense of satisfaction that he suffered the same feeling of hopelessness as Yasmin when she was confined, alone and fearful in that Singapore hospital.

Barot was by this time aware that his coming to Nairobi was his greatest undoing and that he would remain indoors until Duofold decided when the convict would see sunshine again. With all the money Barot's parents had at their disposal, Duofold knew they would not be able to get their son out of jail.

Barot had to endure the pathetic prison food – the rice in a soup that had two potatoes or three that made them seem like they, too, were practising social distancing. It seemed to Barot that the tasteless meals were designed to punish prisoners; they had no salt or oil and were not well cooked. Life inside was a world away from the luxury the millionaire heir was used to.

As he reflected on his situation, Barot thought about how being in jail could change personal relationships. *Those who love you can hear you even when you are quiet, but*

once you get in such a predicament as I am now, not even your enemy can come near you. Thank God for family, Barot assured himself. *Family can surmount any obstacle to save you.*

Before he appealed to his parents, he hoped he could speak with Duofold to allow his release. But Barot's petition was not acceptable to Duofold.

As a Plan B, Barot appealed to his parents, who sent their lawyer. But this turned out to be in vain. Duofold had long vowed that if the parents wanted to make a difference, they would have to come and meet the Yasmin family and apologise. The apologies would also first have to be accepted; either this or their son Barot would rot in jail.

The court case kept on being delayed, but the main concern was no one could tell how it would turn out. It could mean a long jail sentence, probably over twenty years. This fear compelled his family to give in. His parents were ready and willing to make any sacrifice to save their son from the wrath of the law.

Finally, they quietly sneaked into the country and visited their son in custody. This was the first time they were back in Kenya since they had relocated to the UK many years before. They found a devastated son who was a ghost of himself. When Barot saw his parents, he broke down with emotion.

"Hello, Mom," he began, trying to redeem himself. "I know I let you down, but I never gave up on Yasmin. Where I messed is engaging her, knowing very well that she was already married to another man and there was a family involved. I did not suspect it would turn out to be a trap where the hunter would become the hunted. It is really messy, Mom. I pray to God to set me free from this hell. I would trade anything for my freedom, my dear parents. I promise to lead a humble life and completely shun my carefree lifestyle."

Had his parents been Christians, they might have known of the parable of the Prodigal Son in the New Testament of the Bible. Despite his mischief, the lost son was accepted back home by his agonised father, who never thought he would ever get back his child. Baron's parents similarly were quite agonised. This was not Europe, where jail could be more comfortable than some homes in Africa. Prisons in some African countries were known to be some of the most unpleasant and dehumanising. The parents had come ready and were willing to give anything, including their lives, for their son and heir to be released. They wanted descendants from Barot; they craved to have grandchildren.

The parents hoped that if there was any silver lining to this, it was perhaps that the pain and isolation their son had endured in prison had shown him the importance of freedom, how it was life itself. The parents hoped that he now understood life waited for no one and that people were on vacation, as they must exit this world at

some point. The baton must be passed on to someone, to him, and to the generation he would bring forth.

Visiting time was up. Before Barot was taken back to the loneliness of his cell, he turned and met eyes with his mom. He smiled at her, hoping to lighten her mood. Instead, it made his throat constrict with emotion. He quickly averted his eyes so as not to embarrass himself should he start to cry. His eyes were clouded with tears by the time he reached his cell, where he let them flow freely down his cheeks, not knowing what fate awaited him.

DUOFOLD ACKNOWLEDGED that if Yasmin was a victim, so was Barot to some extent. But while Yasmin had moved on, Barot was still stuck in a long gone past. Duofold had, however, by now, softened a bit because Barot's parents cried to him. He also questioned his motives and wondered whether, in punishing Barot, he was being driven by jealousy or he truly wanted revenge. He wondered whether his reaction justified the terror and pain Barot had experienced in remand. It reminded him of the pain he had endured at the hands of his father, Hezron, and brother, Falid, despite having not committed any sin. Barot's mother was no different than Hezron. To Duofold, she was an evil and heartless woman who had no regard for others. Simply because the parents were influential and powerful did not warrant them to use or victimise the vulnerable.

Duofold hoped that by punishing Barot, Yasmin would find a sense of relief that those who had harmed her had paid for it. He also wanted the punishment to serve as a warning to the monster in Barot to never dare hurt anyone else. By coming to look for Yasmin, he had unnecessarily caused her anguish and was shameless to knowingly trespass Duofold's territory. If he had kept to his comfort zone in the UK and not shown up in Kenya to follow Yasmin in his desire for her, he would have been safe. This, however, was not to say that he would have remained safe. Duofold had all the intention to pursue Barot before he came to intrude into his marriage. Duofold was very hurt by Barot, such that he could not see the parents' pained expressions as they pleaded with him to let their son go. But neither did his heart have room to comfort anyone.

FROM THE MOMENT THE COPS took Barot into custody, he felt that he should apologise to Yasmin. He deeply felt about making the apology, whether the court verdict would be in his favour or not. He was happy that Yasmin had someone to fight for her, even though he regretted that he was the one paying the price for it. He

was honest with himself, acknowledging that his family took the life of his child with Yasmin. He regretted it deeply, especially knowing that taking a life, let alone the life of their little one, is condemned by both law and religion. They could have left Yasmin alone to decide how to raise the baby without their support. Instead, they left her barren and took the fruit of her womb. It was a painful realisation for Barot.

DUOFOLD NEVER TOLD YASMIN he was pursuing Barot. The news was brought to her attention by her dad after being approached by Barot's parents. This made it a bit awkward. She did not know how or whether to comment about it to her husband in case it rubbed Duofold the wrong way. Part of the reason for this was because of a nagging feeling that she always was torn between two lovers that were diverse and unique in their different ways and that were very loving, such that she was not able to choose between the two. She, however, acknowledged that this would only have been the case had Barot not messed with her in his attempt to return to her life.

On the other hand, she was impressed that her husband should avenge her. The truth was also that, despite her thought about her being torn between the two, she still felt guilty about that affair with Barot. She decided to leave it at that and pretended not to know what was going on. Neither was Duofold ready to discuss Barot with her. The revenge was his fight—a man's fight.

Duofold had a couple of demands. It was going to be his way or the highway for Barot's parents. The first demand was that they compensate Yasmin for the physical harm they caused her in Singapore, then refund the hospital bills he incurred in India to reinstate her health. He also wanted compensation for the rift Barot had caused in his marriage.

Yasmin did eventually meet with Barot's mother for the first time since the Singapore incident. Yasmin was proud to parade her children Femi and Junior to her. Barot's mom was just crying, perhaps out of shame, imagining his son's miscarried child and the role she played in it. The child would have been ten years older than Femi and Junior. She also could not help comparing her son to Duofold. She felt intimidated by Yasmin's husband, who came through as authoritative and firm. She wished her son was as responsible as Duofold. Her husband kept quiet in all of this. He had always liked Yasmin, but there was little he could do to restrain his assertive wife, who ran the family. He respected his wife, but he often reminded her of the parable in the Old Testament about the wise woman who built her house as the foolish one destroyed hers with her own hands.

Duofold's last demand was to have Barot go back to the UK with instructions never to interfere with his family again.

All his demands were accepted and put down in writing. Barot parents had two properties in the UK that had a combined income of thirty thousand dollars a month. They agreed to give the property to Yasmin and Duofold as compensation for the harm and loss caused by their son. The properties in the UK were sold, and the money was invested in Dubai by Duofold for Yasmin. This was a condition they had to fulfil before Barot could be released from remand. Losing property was too high a price to pay. Barot lost more than his privileges; he cost his parents a lifetime of hard work. The family could not wait for this nightmare to end. They had been on their knees all this time, pleading with Yasmin's family. Duofold had to relent.

Finally, their son was released, and the case was closed. Barot went on his knees, too, thanking Duofold for letting him go despite the pain he caused him. He promised never to come near Duofold's wife or his family.

Duofold acknowledged the promise and saw in Barot a man who had accepted his past, not without regrets, but with the confidence to step into the future. He may never drop the memories that tied him to his past, but he was ready to embrace the future and its promises. Duofold also acknowledged to himself that even as he had made Barot pay for his sins, he, too, was equally a sinner.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DUOFOLD'S PLAN FOR THE WEEKEND was to keep his promise to Akumu and drive her back to Nakuru, as well as conclude a business meeting in the town. She had taken a longer visit at his father Fidel's this time around to break ground and supervise the construction of a building structure she was putting up. The building was on the piece of land Duofold had changed the title deed to her name after claiming it back from his dad, Hezron. It was now at a stage she could be coming back on weekends to check its construction progress.

Though Duofold was busy, he felt that he owed Akumu the drive for always being there for him when he needed help with the children. He would have wanted to drive with the children before they returned to school, but Akumu had insisted it must be him and her alone on the journey. She was driving Duofold up the wall as if she was still entitled to him.

This was a Friday, and it was proving much busier than he had expected. He was overseeing the processing of a big consignment that had specific client requirements which took some time to formulate and source. Duofold had to import rare ingredients to meet specifications. The contract was already late by two months, and he needed to sign it out that afternoon to avoid delaying much longer. The delay reminded him how even adequate cash flow and good production blueprints could be derailed by procurement bottlenecks; that took it little to ruin a promising project. Delivery of projects, he mused, should be like a healthy pregnancy—nine months and the baby is born. But even pregnancies sometimes went wrong leading to stillborn babies. What was important was anticipating eventualities and taking every precaution to make the chances of success close to a hundred per cent. This would ensure there would be no loss of business from prospective clients. That he had to personally supervise was an indication that Madam Boss and Ben were yet to properly fill in for him. He knew it would take some time before they got in the flow of a now much busier Instar.

The client arrived on time. However, while he had confirmed three guests—the client himself and two others—the client arrived in a delegation of ten members. This meant a slight change of arrangements to cater for the seven extra guests. It was a

good thing the fridge was full, while the office chef was ready to make happy customers with his famous meals. There was little delay serving the guests, which left them impressed not only by the chef but that accommodating the extra number of guests could be done on such short notice. Perhaps it was this efficiency, which reflected the company, that helped secure the order with the happy client.

Now that the contract was in the bag, Duofold decided to take a break. He called Linda who he had not spoken to for a while. He wanted to inform her that his wife was back. The other interesting piece of information he wanted to pass on was that he had finally unleashed his wrath on Barot.

Linda could not hide her happiness at the news of Yasmin. But, always considerate, she felt sad for Barot for the punishment and the love he had lost, or, more precisely, the love he had let go. Wasn't he also human to feel pain and regret at how things had turned out? However, as Duofold pointed out, ignorance and lost wishes were no defence for the pains they brought with them.

Before joining Akumu, he went home to inform Yasmin he would be away for most of the day. However, just as he was driving into his compound, his brother Falid called sounding desperate.

The call was to inform him their Dad Hezron was unwell and required specialised medical attention. Realising the urgency, Duofold did not even speak to his wife. He turned the car around and manoeuvred through the traffic to meet them at the hospital. He had already ordered an ambulance to pick up his father.

Hezron, who was in great pain, was diagnosed with a ruptured appendix and was immediately admitted and put on a drip. The doctor said it was serious, explaining that a burst appendix risked infecting the lining of the abdomen with bacteria and could damage internal organs to become life-threatening.

Duofold briefly left the hospital ward to call Akumu and postpone his Nakuru trip. Next, he called Yasmin to let her know of Hezron's hospitalisation. He explained that his father had been operated on and was stable. Hezron looked frail and frustrated, Duofold told his wife, explaining how her father-in-law looked ten years older. He felt sorry for the old man despite the anger that never seemed to leave him for the pain his father had caused. Duofold also felt sorry for Hezron that he did not have his wife, Duofold's mother, to look after her husband, who they were now estranged. He felt obliged to pay for the premium service at the hospital so that Hezron could receive the best care possible. The doctor said he would be admitted for the next five days.

It was late by the time the two brothers left their father's hospital room. Falid looked beaten by the day's demands and the stress their father's illness had caused him. Duofold invited him to his house. He thought Falid looked better than he last

saw him. He looked more in charge of his situation, like someone whose money afforded him an easy life. He seemed to have put his life in order.

Duofold did not want to ask him too many questions just yet as to how he was doing, but he was quick to congratulate him. Falid, however, explained that the shop, the one that had belonged to Akumu that Duofold gave him and his wife, had been doing quite well. He explained that the shop was doing well, especially after opening an agro-vet section at the shop for animal feeds and veterinary supplies. They also employed someone to tend the coffee plantation at the section of the family farm Hezron had bequeathed Falid and his wife. Things were looking up for them.

They arrived at Duofold's home only to find the house in a celebratory mood. Yasmin's sister Phyllis and their brother Girish had visited. Even Duofold's mom and the family chef had been invited to join the lively dinner. Falid had not met Yasmin and Duofold's children yet. His brother Duofold had not invited Falid and his wife for his wedding ritual where they might have met. Neither did Yasmin meet him at their sister Ann's wedding by the time Falid showed up. She had only made a brief appearance accompanied by Phyllis and had left after finding out Duofold had already left the wedding and would not be coming back.

Falid thought Yasmin was very beautiful. His eyes seemed unable to stop admiring her. But he, too, was a subject of fascination. While the twins Junior and Femi had previously been all over their Uncle Girish calling out his name, now their attention was turned to this new uncle in the house. Uncle Falid was equally fascinated by the bubbly nephew and niece that seemed to ask too many questions.

The teens, Warrior and Binte, were a bit more cautious and weren't sure whether or how to embrace their Uncle Falid. Yasmin, knowing their troubled history when they were younger at their uncle's hands, was quick to intervene and help them take the first step and interact with him. She urged them to let bygones be bygones with their uncle. That Falid had been invited in the house was an indication that his relationship with Duofold was becoming warmer. When Falid first entered the house, she happily welcomed him and showed him the bathroom to refresh. She even gave him one of Duofold's clean, sporty t-shirt and matching trousers to change into. Yasmin was a very warm person.

Florence was also very happy to see his son Falid. It had been a while. Not wanting to ruin the celebratory mood or her happiness, Duofold delayed telling her that her husband was admitted in hospital. Always the mother, she asked Yasmin to serve her sons food before it got cold after they joined her from their freshening up. She looked livelier than usual, which made Duofold suspect she had been given a glass of wine. The excitement of seeing both sons together made her look tipsier.

Yasmin smiled and cheerfully acknowledged her mother-in-law's request served her husband and brother-in-law.

Phyllis, watching from the sidelines, looked for a way to be introduced to this polished-looking villager in the tasteful sporty outfit from his brother's wardrobe.

Aside from the quick greetings when the two brothers got into the house, Duofold had not had time to introduce the two newfound in-laws. He signalled his sister-in-law to come closer from where she sat with her brother, Girish. Her brother also understood the signal and joined them.

"This is my brother Falid, guys," said Duofold, "sorry I forgot the introduction." To Falid he turned and said, "Phyllis and Girish, my wife's siblings. Perhaps we should relax at the gazebo and have a proper introduction."

In the meantime, their mom Florence wanted another glass of wine but did not want to make it too obvious. It might give the guests a wrong impression. She had acquired a taste for wine only recently, though she took it only rarely. Yasmin packed a small bottle for her in a bag and saw her off after dinner as the kids walked her to her house. Once the children were back in the house they were whisked to bed. Since Yasmin had been back, they had been quite well-behaved and never gave her a hard time as children do with their mothers. They were kept in line by a threat they didn't want to tempt: Though the threat was playful, she often scared them that she would go back to college if they misbehaved. Life, however, had long returned to normal in the home.

Life had also attained some kind of normality at the gazebo that evening. The in-laws overindulged and had to spend a night at Duofold's. Just as everyone was getting to bed, his mom was back demanding that Falid spends the night in her house. The extra bedroom added to their mother's house to accommodate their sister Ann had long been empty after she got married and moved out of the country. As Duofold walked them to the house, he broke the news to their mom about her husband's admission in hospital.

"The best time to visit him would be at lunchtime. Falid will take you there," he explained, 'Yasmin will pick you up from the hospital, as Falid goes to the village to tend to his business. Inform Dad Hezron I'll visit him in the evening on my way back from a safari." Duofold did not want to mention it was Akumu he was taking to Nakuru.

DUOFOLD WOKE UP the following morning with his father on his mind. After breakfast, he decided to first visit him before he went to collect Akumu and her clan. He still would visit him in the evening after he was back from Nakuru. He called

Akumu asking her patience as he first visited Hezron. He would pick her up soon after. Still, to begin by visiting his dad was a practical matter. One can never tell with a long trip out of town where something unforeseen might come up forcing one to spend the night out. He had not seen Floyd in a while, and he missed his company.

"Hi Dad, how was your night," Duofold greeted him cheerfully once he got to his bedside at the hospital. "I have brought you some fruits. I see you still have an orange they served you last night. Your plate is also untouched. I would be the last person to remind you that even food is medicine."

"I know son; I just didn't have the appetite, but I will try to eat. I have become a poor eater lately, especially now that I have no one to eat with. I hope your mom can come back home. I have an idea why she left, but I have learned my lesson. I shall treat her with the respect she deserves." Hezron was panting as he spoke, as if with pain. He paused briefly before saying with a pleading look on his face, "Duofold, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for not taking revenge on me. I wronged you beyond measure, but you found it within you to forgive my wickedness. You were always kind to me. You never asked for anything in return for the favours you have showered on each one of my family members. This has been very instructive. I can only express my gratitude, but your kindness shall be paid back one day. Accept my sincere thank you on my family's behalf, dear son." Hezron's voice was a bit weak as he said this.

"I appreciate your apology, Dad. I am only heeding God's commandment to always respect and support our parents; you took care of me when I needed help most. This is the time to reap from your effort as a parent in bringing us up. I am in discussion with Mom to host you in her house until you are well. About her coming back, it is not in my place to say. Whatever you two shall decide, I shall accept."

Seeing his father this weak and vulnerable made him miss Hezron's zest when he was younger. Not wanting to strain his father too much, he excused himself and left his dad somewhat surprised and relieved that he may not have lost his wife and son after all.

Despite the consuming anger that had kept him away from his father, Duofold had nevertheless maintained a health insurance cover for Hezron which was paid every month by standing order from his personal bank account. It was his father's illness that made him confirm the insurance cover was up to date. Immediately after Hezron was admitted at the hospital, Duofold had requested it to conduct a thorough test on his father in case of any undiagnosed ailments lying in wait in his body.

When he received the file from the nurses' desk, he made a shocking discovery. His father seemed to have every disease imaginable known to afflict ageing people like him. The doctor described them as geriatric diseases that the elderly often

experience. They were difficult for Duofold to imagine as he flipped through his father's laboratory the results. The diseases included asthma, back pains, dental decay, eyesight problems and poor memory, stomach gas that kept him blotted, borderline high blood pressure—the list seemed endless. Scratches on an itching though healed incision from a previous tummy operation threatened to become septic. He also had trouble with his Joints, which explained a limp Duofold had noticed. This was probably made worse by osteoporosis. Duofold made a mental note to keep a standing order at a butcher's shop near his father's home to supply bones for a soup to boost Hezron's calcium levels in addition to other supplements.

The morning was growing late and Duofold still had to collect Akumu. He left the hospital registry with his father's insurance number and rushed to pick up his former wife and her family for the journey to Nakuru.

Duofold had informed her husband Floyd that he had some business in Nakuru and would be dropping Floyd people on his way. They stopped at the popular Delamere Farm Shop on the highway for a snack. As the kids enjoyed themselves at the swings, Duofold was put to task by an Akumu, who felt neglected by him.

"I never thought you relocated me to Nakuru to forget about me," she complained. "I do not want excuses that I am married. I need some time with you and my children more often. I am your wife too. I tried all I could to trace you in vain during those years you were gone. This marriage I am now in is for convenience; my true love is you, and I shall never give you up to another woman. Yasmin needs to understand she found me in your life. I am not here to clean after her, which seems the only time you need me. I want you more regularly; you should be with me more often."

To quieten Akumu, Duofold assured her that he would do as she requested. He hoped to calm her enough to take her to Nakuru and probably never drive Warrior and Binte to her himself for a while after that. The rest of the journey went smoothly as a happy family with her children. She seemed content with his assurances. In Nakuru, he dropped them at her shop where he found Floyd waiting to take them home.

His business there concluded earlier than he had thought and was soon on his way back to Nairobi. He made it to the city earlier than he had expected and went straight to the hospital to check the progress of his father.

Duofold thought his father looked better than he had left him that morning. He thought it had to do with his mother, Florence, visiting her sick husband. It had been some years since she walked out on him to live with their son. Hezron explained to Duofold how his mother now looked polished and comfortable, like one of those

rich city women. He was amused that Florence now peppered her speech with English words. She looked much younger than he remembered her.

"What do you feed her," Hezron asked in wonderment.

"Ask her to tell you when she visits next time," Duofold replied, unable to suppress a laugh.

Hezron again thanked his son for taking care of him. It was as if he did not believe his son had heard him the first time. But such was his gratitude that he felt Duofold a son he did not deserve, not just for the guilt he lived with but for the kindness Duofold had shown him, sparing him death from this illness—a death Hezron thought he probably deserved.

Duofold waited until his father had finished some food he had bought along the way. Then he went back home after ensuring Hezron was comfortable.

He found everyone in Florence's kitchen garden. Duofold did not feel like stepping on the soil, so he sat with his favourite daughter Femi, who didn't care much for gardening. She preferred the watering, which she loved. She liked to be drenched from head to toe as the others sprinkled the garden. This is how Duofold found her. He was left damp from his daughter's dripping clothes after she followed the others to the bathroom to clean themselves.

This gave him the opportunity to chat with his mom. There was some 4 o'clock tea in the flask, which his mother served him. She always cooked more than she needed, which led Duofold to wonder when she would ever learn to cook just enough that suited the occasion, whether alone or with her grandchildren and other guests. Her usual habit was to make tea in the morning that would only get finished late in the evening when people were going to bed.

"This is not the village Mom; not every passerby walks in like they used to in the village. You can be making tea on demand, only as you need it. Milk is permanently available in the fridge, not like back home where you had to wait for cows to be milked."

"I try to drink it every so often, Kim. Now I am at five mugs. Old habits are had to kill, son. But I hear you and shall try to cut the quantity by half."

Duofold felt it was hopeless to try and persuade her. He felt clammy and needed to change from the damp clothes and join the boys for a drink at the Men's Club. He bid his mother goodbye and left for his house to change.

However, just as he had freshened up and was about to leave the house, Yasmin startled him with a question he would never have expected.

"Duofold, I have been wondering who the cloud between is. Is it you or Akumu?"

"Wow, I had never given it a thought, Yasmin. I guess it is Akumu. She has been married to two brothers and has children with both of them and therefore is

somewhat between them—in a good way. Or could it be me, because I also come between you and Akumu? Both of you have given me children."

"Over time I have started to feel like we are two wives; you never seem to get over her. While I was away, she took care of the children, and this morning you drove her back to Nakuru. Might she not be the perfect fallback plan for you, Kim? Just when I thought you were giving in and getting close, you get back to Akumu without as much as a blink. How come after all these years, Akumu still excites your emotions; what must I do to fully take her place?"

"You are the only wife I have, Yasmin. Akumu may have filled the gap to look after the children, but she means nothing to me. It was for the children. I have never told her that you and I ever had a fight, or why you were away. All she knows is that you were away to college, as the kids had told her. She was my best bet when you were away. The children belong to the two of you, and there was no way I was going to have a third woman in my life. So, how about you to fully take her place? It is for you to position yourself and replace Akumu for good in my life." He smiled and drew Yasmin closer to him with a passionate kiss that led them to the bed.

"If Akumu meant much for me, I would not be this hungry beast, Yasmin" the kissed Duofold again promising to create more time for him.

This seemed to silence Yasmin, who said nothing more about Akumu. She knew for sure it was her call to protect her territory. Duofold felt relieved as he proceeded with his plans for the evening. Yet, as he drove, he wondered how it was that women know stuff they shouldn't. He had not told Yasmin about his Nakuru trip.

Duofold thought she probably had called his dad Fidel with the pretence to say hello, but the real intention being to check whether he had passed by to pick Akumu. Or maybe she had eavesdropped as he informed his mom he was taking a safari. Duofold could not tell how she got to know, but he accepted he was guilty as charged.

His mind turned to Ben. He missed sharing a beer with him, especially after the deal he had just sealed which his friend had some good input. Though Ben agreed to work for Instar, he retained his own company, which also dealt with food formulations. They had started a discussion about a merger of the two companies after being too overwhelmed to combine marketing, which he was good at, with managing sales and production. Duofold gave the role back to Madam Boss Mary as Ben also took care of some functions.

He arrived at the Men's Club before Ben, who was usually better at keeping time. He decided he was going to put Ben to shame by boasting about how much he had accomplished that day, and still made it on time to the bar. "I made a 600-kilometre round trip to Nakuru and back," he wanted to Ben when he showed up. "I took a cup of tea with family, found time to visit dad Hezron in hospital…"

Duofold however knew Ben would be quick to retaliate. He remembered with amusement how Ben once gave a calculation of how many generations of ancestors in a family tree it took for one to be born. He had called it ancestral mathematics.

To be born, Ben had explained in great detail, you needed:

Two parents, your mom and dad, multiplied by two to get
Four grandparents, your mom's parents and dad's parents,
Eight great-grandparents,
Sixteen second grandparents, your granny's grandparents,
Thirty-two third grandparents, who as above you multiply the two sets by two to get
64 fourth great-grandparents,
128 fifth great-grandparents
256 sixth great-grandparents
512 seventh great-grandparents
1024 eighth great-grandparents
2048 ninth great-grandparents.

Multiplying the 2048 fore-parents by two gave 4096 ancestors. These amount to 12 generations going back 400 years.

Duofold still could not comprehend it and shook his head to consider that for him to be born it took 12 generations of ancestors numbering a total of 4094 people, in just four centuries. He wondered at the struggles of these thousands of ancestors, their battles, difficulties, sadness, happiness, loves cherished and lost, hopes for their progeny—everything the ancestors must have gone through before it came for him to exist in that present moment. He thought that was reason enough for him to take care of his sick dad, Hezron, who had played his role in his existence.

He thought about his mom too. He couldn't remember ever celebrating her birthday since they were born. Up to that moment, this had never occurred to him. He thought he should host her a birthday celebration. He would invite all her grandchildren, and invite her only sibling, Eunice. He paused a moment when it occurred to him it might become messy should both his dads Hezron and Fidel meet at such a celebration. He decided only Hezron's family should attend. There, however, was no hurry to hold the birthday celebration; there still were ten more months to prepare for it. He expected that by then Hezron would have been well.

Duofold turned his thoughts to Hezron. It occurred to him that this was the first time he had ever seen his father this sick. As far as he could remember, Hezron had never been admitted to a hospital. Before he could continue with this thought, he felt a tap on his shoulder from behind. It was Ben.

Even before he could execute the boast he had planned to tell Ben about how much he had accomplished that day and yet beat him to the bar, his friend was bombarding him with complaints about the revenge Duofold had meted in the Yasmin and Barot affair. He was unhappy that he had not been invited to the party, yet he was the perfect sadist to deal with a creature like Barot.

Duofold was however not eager to open that discussion. Instead, he dwelled on his new concern about his dad's health.

It was not lost on Ben the contrast between the depth of feeling Duofold showed for his sick father and Barot's revenge. It somewhat also took him by surprise to realise that Duofold could show such compassion even to a person like Hezron who had caused so much pain. He now saw his friend in a new light to realise that it was not just Hezron, but Madam Boss, another one who had returned to Duofold's good books despite causing so much emotional havoc.

"Kim, I need to learn from you the saying 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer,' and why. Or maybe it is to keep your record straight with your maker just in case death comes knocking for real this time. I hope the element of dating in marriage shall be exempted for you. It is the only apparent sin for you." Ben now thought Duofold must be quite a complicated character.

Duofold was all smiles as he recalled that he already had sex with two women that same day, Akumu in the car and his wife Yasmin after burdening him with talk of Akumu that had left him horny.

"Oh Big Ben, what a life," was all he could say as he ordered for more beer.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

FLORENCE WAS BORN INTO A REPUTABLE FAMILY. Her father was the administrative chief of their location, and he owned a big shop. Florence was a beautiful girl, and boys from her village and beyond used to admire her. Among the most ardent of her admirers were Hezron and Fidel. Florence liked both of them, and she often found herself torn between the two boys.

Fidel was the more educated of the two and seemed the more ambitious. He had his eye on Europe and hoped to go there one day. His dream would eventually come true when an opportunity arose to go to Britain. And, when the day of his departure arrived, the whole village was invited to his thanksgiving and farewell party. Girls longed to be associated with this young man who everybody could see was focused and whose star shone brightly. In the end, it was Florence who won him.

Florence and the two boys, Fidel and Hezron, attended the same primary school and were all good in their academic work and sports. Their excellence in school was admired by other students and their parents. The three did well in their final primary school examinations and joined high school. However, while the boys would get admitted to good national schools because of their better grades, Florence's performance was only good enough to get her admitted to a small provincial school.

Unfortunately, primary school is where her education ended. Her father did not attach much importance to girls' education; he preferred Florence to work in the family business. Though Florence's mother would have liked her daughter to continue with school, she could not go against her husband's wishes, more so because Florence would be the only child left in the home. Her only sibling, an older sister, was already married.

Florence was sad about her parent's decision to end her education, but there was nothing she could do. Many times she wished she could sue them for denying her education. Later in life, she would say she was born at the wrong time. Unlike in her time, she liked to point out to her grandchildren that today primary education is not only free but mandatory; parents can be jailed for denying their children – boys or girls, an education.

"In my younger days in the village," she would explain, "girls were not viewed as independent human beings; they either belonged to their fathers and brothers or their husbands when they got married. They followed what they were instructed to do by the men in their lives. Girls were viewed as a source of wealth for the bride price they could fetch and were therefore considered an investment to secure the future for their families."

With nowhere to turn, the girl Florence resigned herself to her fate and decided to move on with her life. Her admirer Fidel, however, never gave up on her and sought her out after he had finished high school. Their love blossomed. For him, it was not about whether she made it to high school or not, but the love he felt for this beauty which made him feel good about her affection and the endearing conversations they had. They always had a good time together.

And so it was one bright sunny day as his departure for Britain neared, Fidel and Florence went out to lunch, which they had pre-arranged to have at the next shopping centre where not many people knew them. One thing led to another, and they intimately enjoyed one another one last time. Florence would always remember it as a heavenly moment. Later, they took a photo together, with each keeping a copy. Finally, the day came, and Fidel left for Europe.

The first month after Fidel was gone felt like a year to Florence. She felt abandoned and lonely and counted the days as she longingly waited for her love to return. On the day he left for the airport in Nairobi, he had only informed her it would not be long before he returned. Her anticipation of the day he would return was filled with recollections of how they both were the toast of the village at dance festivals where their age mates admired them as the perfect couple for the love they showed for each other. They were kind of special to their agemates, especially because both were well groomed and came from affluent families. They were always together, holding hands; nothing came between them.

One day, however, as Florence was leaving her father's shop, she met Hezron while on her way home. Fidel had by then not yet left for Europe. She was carrying a heavy bunch of green bananas she had bought earlier to take home at her mother's request. Hezron saw his opportunity to chat her up and try his luck with the village beauty. He offered to help her with the bananas. He didn't seem to know she had been dating Fidel, as he had left the village some years before to work with the post office in Nairobi.

Hezron was employed soon after high school when his agemates were still in college. He had a flashy lifestyle that he liked to flaunt and was in a league of his own in the village whenever he visited from the big city. Wearing the latest fashion, he was the admired working-class guy. He, however, was not a very outgoing guy. Therefore,

the only person whose admiration it seemed he had not won was the chief's daughter. And here the opportunity had presented itself with the beauty burdened by a heavy bunch of bananas.

As they laughed and talked, walking towards Florence's home, they met Fidel. They – Fidel and Florence – had arranged to meet her at the shop before she left so that he could help her with the luggage, but he had been late.

It, therefore, stung Fidel to see the two laughing with Hezron bearing the luggage. Fidel didn't care to know whether Hezron was only helping his girlfriend. But he could read Hezron's body language and could guess his intentions. Fidel fell upon Hezron, attacking him with kicks and blows, forcing Hezron to run for his dear life.

Florence was very disappointed by Fidel, who was late to meet her, only to suddenly appear and fight an innocent Hezron, who was just happy to help her out. She never could understand why men seemed eager to fight over a girl, which she had observed on a few occasions with friends she knew. That, however, was the day Florence realised that he had two committed admirers, each of whom wanted to win her. The only thing was that it was the cowardly one who took to his heels, saving what might have been an ugly situation. But as far as she knew, her love was with Fidel, and nothing could come between them. Word spread fast from those who witnessed the fight, and the whole village now knew Fidel could get physical with anyone who came near Florence.

With these memories still fresh on her mind as the days passed, Florence hoped a letter would arrive from Fidel. The letter never came. Not hearing from him left her feeling empty and anxious with the hours and days she had to kill with nothing else on her mind; only thoughts of him seemed to occupy her mind. The thoughts were like clouds drifting aloft at will and stubbornly seemed to decide on their own to stay or recur every other minute. This made her feel like Fidel had got himself a suitor on the other side of the world. It reminded her of the magical moments she and Fidel had that were adorable to their agemates. Their agemates always said their love was made in heaven. She looked at the photo they had taken together and noticed a shadow of them in the background, causing her a superstitious chill that made her panic and cry for days.

Finally unable to take the loneliness any longer, Florence went in search of Fidel's sister to see whether she had his post office address in Britain. She was desperate to write him a letter. But the sister was a way to college in Nairobi. It, therefore, took a while before she could get Fidel's address. She wrote the letter and took it to the nearest post office at the next shopping centre, half a day's walk away. The next few months went by as she waited for a reply that never came.

THE CHIEF WAS BECOMING IMPATIENT with Florence waiting for her Fidel. The chief, having been in such a situation before, knew that when you put a young man out in the field, he was like a bull out sniffing comely heifers and took the best he could. He thought that his daughter claiming to wait for that young fellow Fidel was foolish. She was now of age and had to get married before it was too late. In any case, Fidel, if he should ever come back, would return a learned man and in many cases, such boys often had a bride already chosen for them by their parents from affluent families like themselves.

The chief had a good suitor in mind, an agemate of his who wanted Florence as a second wife. He had paid part of the dowry. All that remained was to clear the rest of the dowry, of which a date had been set, and Florence would become a junior wife. Florence knew the man's family well; his children were her agemates.

Florence had other ideas. She was not about to get humiliated in front of her agemates and get mocked by them; it would be letting go of her pride. She had to do something. It was an end-month weekend, and she knew Hezron might be home. She did not wait and walked across the two valleys between her home and Hezron's. Luck was on her side. The guy was home. She confessed to him that she was running away from an arranged marriage and pleaded with the astonished Hezron to take her with him to Nairobi, where she would look for a job. Hezron was a young, energetic man and needed little excuse to grab the opportunity life had handed him to be with the woman he secretly admired, the chief's daughter. The chicken had brought itself home to roost. He now had beaten his rival Fidel, winning his girl. The rest was history.

However, though Hezron eagerly took her hand and she became his wife, Florence never stopped missing Fidel. When he got back from abroad, she went to meet him. She wanted him to explain the silence, why he had not replied to her letter.

Facing Florence, who showed the pain of the years that had passed missing him, it was Fidel's turn to express his surprise. He had indeed replied, he explained, only it seemed to have never got to Florence. He also confessed his guilt; he wanted to apologise for not keeping his promise. Five years was a long time to wait. He, however, understood she could not wait for him indefinitely, especially with the plans her father had to force her to get married. Fidel, therefore, understood why she ended up with his old rival Hezron, who not only saved her pride but was doing well to afford her and her young family a comfortable life. It didn't matter that Hezron probably still had a grudge from the beating he had received and had married her secret love Florence to beat Fidel to it. That was all in the past, and Fidel had no choice but to pick his second-best choice for a wife, who happened to be Faith.

FLORENCE HAD MUCH TO SAY to his Duofold, and it took a while before she was finished:

It's sad that your dad Hezron made you undergo untold pain. You endured much, my son. Your disappearance affected me so badly that it left my body weakened and my spirit sapped; I had no strength to move on with life. The joy, however, is that you overcame it all, and I got back my son after believing he had been dead. But even after you had recovered, it continued to cause me distress to think about what you went through and still live with your father. Living with him had been like a scar that has refused to heal. Thank you for getting me out of that village.

Duofold, my son, there is something I've learned through the wisdom that comes with age; it often reveals truths about life. One truth is that life is an expedition. Another truth is that the more open-minded you are, the better. The choice you gave me of leaving that village has given me exposure to many things that I never thought existed. You and your family made me travel the world to places in this city that showed me the richness of life. It is such moments that help redirect us to new courses in life, such as my being able to settle down here. These are important chapters of my life that would otherwise not have been engraved in my heart.

No time is wasted in life. All moments are important to help us change our course. Sometimes they are sad moments that leave scars, but it is those scars that urge us to reach better destinies. Your dad unleashed his evil so as to claim your wealth—wealth that proved temporary and gone before he knew it. Yet it is what made him sacrifice you like Joseph by his brothers in the Bible. Like Joseph, it ended up being a blessing and gave you new wings to fly. You now have Yasmin, A woman who loves you unconditionally, worships you, and now has given you two beautiful souls, Femi and Junior. Your children Warrior and Binte are almost teenagers now. I am so proud to have been there to witness their milestones as they have grown up.

"Mom, can you cut to the chase and get to the point?" Duofold was getting impatient, wondering what his mother was getting at.

'Kim, the time has now come for me to conquer my fears and take a stand."

Duofold sat up at the tone she said it. He knew she wanted to say something important.

"I want the hurts of the past to be washed away by these tears I am shedding here. Your dad has been in hospital for some time now. He will be discharged soon. He will have no one to comfort him as I am merrymaking here in Nairobi. My request to you is that he comes to my house, this very house you built for me, Kim, after he is discharged. When I visited him yesterday, he looked like someone whose life was slipping away in the hopeless loneliness staring at him. He is the father of my children and needs someone to look after him. No one is better suited for the job than me. He is my husband, and most of the pain he is going through is because I left our

matrimonial home. After he is done with follow-up clinic visits, I shall pack and go back to the village with him. This house can be inherited by Warrior. He is now of age to be in his own space. You need time alone now with the family without my interference. I thought it best to share this with you first so that you pass the news to Yasmin. The children can visit me once in a while when you get time to drop them by. I don't expect you to be happy with my decision."

"Wow! That was unexpected, Mom, but it is not in my place to say yes or no to the decision you have made. It is your prerogative to decide where and how to live your life. If city life has reached its end, so be it. Go back to the village and start where you left. I am sure Dad has changed a lot too. He has realised you are the magnet that attracts people to his home. The moment you moved away, few people saw a reason to visit; even his children prefer coming where you are based than his house. He must have been very lonely."

Duofold paused a moment before proceeding. "I am happy for you, Mom, and you have my blessings," he said, adding, "I shall visit to see what repairs are needed at Dad Hezron's home in the village for a makeover so that the house should be ready when you two return there. That can actually be done in the next two months before your birthday. I had confused your birthday with Dad Fidel's. He is the one who corrected me on the dates. We need to celebrate your going back home."

"I would like that, Kim. I can't remember ever celebrating my birthday," she said, breaking into a smile. "Your sister Ann shall be in the country with her husband and their baby girl around that time. She named the baby after me but shortened the name to Flora—the same name Fidel used to call me in my girlhood." She laughed at the memory. "It shall be a proud moment to see my new granny in your dad Hezron's home." She paused again as if trying to find the words. "I have had a lot of fun here. It felt like I was on a never-ending holiday. I shall miss all of you, but I shall also make someone else's life more comfortable, your dad's, now that he is ailing."

Wonders never cease, thought Duofold. *Mom is now packing to go back to the village to nurse her husband after all the heartache that guy caused her. Who am I to say no to the two who have covered themselves under one blanket for such a long time?*

The change in mood that now enveloped her mother's house made it feel like she was leaving the next day, yet there were months to go. It could be felt even in the way Duofold spoke.

"I shall miss you dearly, Mom. I had become too used to sneaking here to eat with you every other time. I believe we helped each other recover faster from our dramas. It's not how much we had but how much we enjoyed each other's company; that sharing made us happy, and the more happiness we shared, the more it grew. You filled the gap for me perfectly, especially with my Binte. I did not know how to deal with her girl issues. I needed a woman who could understand what a baby girl

requires in her upkeep. Thank you for doing that for me, Mom. She is now a grown-up girl. I am sure Binte shall be very sad to hear you will be leaving. This corner has been her second home."

Florence replied with another long, heartfelt speech, deepening the sombre mood of an unwanted but necessary farewell. Duofold listened without interrupting.

"It shall be well with everyone, Kim. After all, they are also a passing cloud. Very soon, they shall leave your house, too; take good care of Yasmin. She is the only guaranteed companion you have. It is the same realisation I have come to about me and your father. But the truth is I have missed being with him. Make Yasmin miss you all her life. Son, you will need her in your old age more than she probably will need you. This is why I am going back to Hezron. I believe that the warmth in that bed from a woman he loves shall prolong his life. A warm cup of tea from his wife is all he desires from me now. I also miss stories about our old times with someone who can resonate with them. Many of his agemates have now passed on, so he has few friends to visit and those that come calling on him, there is no one to serve them a cup of tea."

Florence paused to gather her thoughts before proceeding. "My gratitude to you for taking your siblings under your wing, and this is despite them not always being nice to you. They are all stable now, which is a relief for me because of the many heartaches they cause me. Despite their different personalities, they are all my children, and each of them has a space in my heart. Today they only have gratitude and good things to say about you for the great things you have accorded them. I thank God they hold you with the respect of a firstborn, as God intended. May you continue shining on our lives for as long as we live. May God bless you in your endeavours and shower favour upon your family, Kim."

Contemplative silence followed before Duofold also took his time to express what was on his mind.

"As much as you are not learned, Mom," he began, "you are a wise woman who has managed to keep her family together no matter the storm that shook it. You are blessed, and forever we shall reap from your wisdom. I shall forever adore and support your cause, whatever the cause shall be. We must make Hezron's family a safe place for all of us, a safe space despite the injustices some of us have experienced from the family."

"As for you, Kim," said Florence, "The beauty of life is its diversity. You have experienced all the successes and challenges that made you who you are today. Triumphs and failures are the true nature of life. Keep moving, my dear son, you have been the family anchor, and we are all proud of you. You shall never lack my son."

They spoke little after that and just enjoyed the company of each other that only a mother and son could understand. Duofold thought that sons and their mothers share a bond that not even a wife could match, let alone understand.

"It shall be a new horizon for all of us," Duofold said finally, "and it reminds me how I once reflected about where we have come from as a family, my young family especially and where it was headed. As I was grieving for losing my wife Akumu and the neglect my children Warrior and Binte had suffered, many tried to console me with one assurance that time heals everything, all the pains I had gone through. I am now not so sure about that. My honest opinion is that time heals nothing, except that through time we learn to endure and live with the pains or the memory of pains that really never go away.".

"Maybe you are right, Kim. Over time we embrace change or adjust old thoughts and pains to fit the current situation."

"The bitterness I felt back then," replied the son, "about those who backstabbed me has faded, yet nothing has changed about what happened back then. It has not reversed Dad Hezron's actions, and neither is Akumu still my wife. The only thing is that time has helped me pardon the past and abandon the boats I once sailed."

Florence took the last word and said, "We are all guests in this world, son. You have made the best of the situation and have given your backstabbers time to repent as you healed from the wounds they inflicted on you."

There was a sense of sadness between them, and perhaps a tear or two was shed. But it seemed the son and mother had a lot to reflect on, now that they seemed to have little time together in Duofold's compound, where they saw each other every day.

No wonder Falid had dinner with Mom many a night despite driving her up the wall with all the pain they unleashed on her with Dad Hezron. She should be back to spoil him the more. Falid, you shall be a lucky man to have mom to yourself in the village.

Looking at her son, Florence wondered why he should suddenly look like one overcome by some kind of envy. She didn't bother to find out. She only smiled at him.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

DUOFOLD HAD A LONG NIGHT trying to figure out how his life would be after his mother went back to the village. He respected her decision and understood her motivation to take care of Hezron once he was released from the hospital.

Duofold, on the other hand, had become so used to his mother being around that he didn't want to believe that he soon would not be popping into her house a few steps away to chitchat with her every other evening. Looking at how things had unfolded thus far in his life, he recognised how life could suddenly change from the time he disappeared to the life he now led with a new family after losing Akumu. And now that his mother, who had been his cheerleader all this long, was leaving his compound, it made him sad. But he wondered how Fidel would feel now that Florence was rejoining her husband after having been with Fidel for the second in her life; it was like history repeating itself.

Duofold was thinking this as he woke up early to pass by the hospital to check on his father before he went to the office. He had not visited him for two days. He found Hezron fast asleep. The nurse informed Duofold it was from sedation to make his dad sleep as he had been in a lot of pain that previous night.

Duofold looked at Hezron's frail body, and his thoughts went back to the time when they were young, and things were good for his dad and the family. He thought how age and the ailments that came with it had changed Hezron. He compared his father's current situation to the days he used to be in charge. Back then, everything seemed fine, with a strong and assertive father presiding over them. Duofold felt sorry for him and held his right hand to comfort him. He also wanted to see whether his father would respond to his touch. Hezron's hand felt warm.

But Duofold still could not accept that his mother was leaving him to join this man, who was a fraud and had caused the family so much pain. Even though his father looked fail to deserve his sympathy, he decided that he would rather fail in honour than succeed in fraud as Hezron once did sacrificing his son for temporary gains, yet there was always enough for everyone. All Hezron had to do was to continue with his life, as he lacked nothing. As he thought this, Duofold wasn't sure whether the pain he now felt was from his dad's illness or his mother relocating to

the village. The pain could also have been his concern about who would have been left to pay his parents' bills had he died and was the stranger buried in the grave in Hezron's farm back in the village.

These were the painful thoughts that momentarily went through Duofold's mind as he held his father's hand. Then, as he looked to see whether it would twitch from his touch, he noticed Hezron's fingers had a lot of similarities with his. The fingernails were narrow and pinkish-white, just like his nails. Out of curiosity, he checked his father's toes and toenails. Again they marched his. He remembered making fun of Floyd when they were young about how despite their toes looking alike in appearance and shape, his looked better. He felt the urge to stroke Hezron's greying hair and thought that its texture felt similar to his and Floyd's. Duofold started to wonder whether it was a coincidence that his and Floyd's toes should be so similar to Hezron's. He became very disturbed at the conclusion this was leading to and thought it was time to leave. He told the duty nurse he would be back later in the day and went to the office.

It turned out to be one of those rare days in the office when he could not concentrate on his work. His mind kept going back to the coincidences he had discovered as his father slept. He left the office for the day, still bothered by what it all meant. He, however, kept it to himself and shared it with nobody. He spent another sleepless night tossing on his side of their huge queen size bed. For the first time in his life, he began to wonder whether he could trust his mother with the questions that came to his mind—questions about whose mother she really was and with which husband.

If Floyd was his brother, he wondered, might it be possible they were born of the same womb, that of his mother, Florence? Duofold thought this a distinct possibility given the likeness between the two brothers. Might it, therefore, mean Florence gave Floyd out to Faith to ease a burden of some sort? And, thinking about the close similarities between himself and Floyd, might their being brothers be the reason they fell in love with the same woman, Akumu? This was not an impossibility; he had heard the same being told even of twins separated at birth who shared the same mannerisms and likes.

Being blood brothers and probably sharing genes from the same mother and father, might it explain why they had taken to each other with a love that surpassed friendship since their childhood? In school, Duofold and Floyd were desk mates. They joined the same high school and were admitted to the same university, though they took different courses due to school grading. Duofold lost his wife Akumu to Floyd, and for some reason, he continued showering them with gifts and

unconditional love, feeling Floyd and Akumu were still family to him. These questions were too much to bear.

When morning came, Duofold called Floyd, who was in Nakuru and told Floyd to expect him at around lunchtime. Floyd was happy to hear from his brother and said he looked forward to having lunch with him. Though he didn't say it, it was an unspoken expectation that Akumu would join in the lunch. However, just as Duofold was starting his engine for the trip, Floyd seemed to have gotten a change of mind. They had never had a moment alone – just the two of them since he married Duofold's former wife. He requested they meet halfway in Naivasha, where there were great hotels. There they would find a quiet moment together.

Duofold thought it a splendid idea and arrived at the popular prime tourist hotel they had agreed to meet before Floyd. He chose a spot in the expansive well-manicured gardens overlooking the picturesque Lake Naivasha. He responded to office emails as he waited. Duofold suddenly heard something like a horse trotting behind him. He turned, wondering which swashbuckling local white of colonial stock it could be riding out this early. Naivasha was full of them. It, however, turned out to be his brother Floyd.

"I thought to impress you with an upgrade from the donkeys we rode back in the village to a thoroughbred horse. Come on, Kim, hop on; let's ride together."

"Sounds like fun," Duofold said as his brother pulled him up to settle behind him on the horse. Duofold also joined the fun with a mind to closely observe Floyd to confirm his suspicions that they might be descendants of Hezron and not Fidel.

They rode the short distance allowed with two people on horseback in order not to tire the animal and hired another horse from the hotel stables. They had great fun racing against each other in what was like in a bad Western cowboy movie as they tried to show off to each other their limited riding skills.

Duofold, however, seemed the better at it, making Floyd say in a mock complaint, "Since when did you ever beat me in games, Kim?"

Before Floyd could disembark from his horse, Duofold had already gotten off his horse, and, just as a servant to his master, he was holding his brother's hand to help him down.

"What's with you today, Kim? You are overprotecting me in a weird way. Maybe we first have lunch lest I lose appetite after you give me the information you are holding in that head." They both laughed as Duofold realised that he was probably being too overbearing for his brother to make such a protest.

They went to the bathrooms to wipe the sweat off their faces and returned to the garden to enjoy Naivasha's famed warm holiday weather.

"I hope all is well back home with your wife and kids," Floyd said after they settled down to wait for their orders. "How are Dad Fidel and my mom doing?"

Before Duofold could collect his thoughts, Floyd went on, "It has been two months since I last saw them, buddy. I guess it was my family being back home that motivated my visits to the village. I'm, however, aware your dad Hezron has been unwell. How is he recuperating? Hearing that has made me remember how we used to enjoy his treats back in the day, and I am glad you've been taking good care of him."

As Floyd was saying this, he was observing him to see any tell-tale signs of Hezron in him, and he thought he could see some. In the meantime, Floyd was expressing his gratitude to Duofold. He seemed to have been waiting for just this moment, as they rarely, if at all, ever had a moment alone together.

"I admire the way you took care of all of us, Kim," he was saying, "Hezron's family and Fidel's. And this, despite the pain we all inflicted on you. You chose to scatter seeds of love and kindness. I hope you have, over time, come to appreciate the respect and honesty that we have been showering you." He patted Duofold's shoulder, making him smile back.

"Thank you for the compliments, Floyd. Everyone is well in the village and Nairobi. I wanted to talk to you about Dad Hezron, actually. I have been wondering why I am attached to him. Deep inside, I miss the guy, and I love him. Floyd, those who deeply love you shall never leave you. Even if they have a hundred reasons to give up on you, they will always find a reason to keep you close. I've had to rethink my previous assumptions. I have come to appreciate that life is not what you alone make it to be. It involves everyone who has ever touched your life and the experiences that come with it."

Duofold paused, looking for the right words.

"Floyd, what I am trying to say is that we are all part of one another. I mean, there is a good chance that Hezron is the biological father of both of us, you and me."

"What?!" Floyd sat up, not sure whether he had heard Duofold right. "Did I hear you right, Kim? What do you mean Hezron is our father? Because who is our mother then? And, Kim, how is that even possible? My mother Faith and Hezron are like…" he hesitated, lacking words to describe their differences. "…one is from the moon, and the other one from the sun."

The two saw the awkwardness of it and couldn't help to laugh despite the seriousness of the discussion they were having.

"Kim, when did you decide we are brothers? What triggered your imagination?" he asked, thinking his brother was making a joke.

The food arrived, and they watched as various cuts of meats and accompaniments were being arranged on their table.

"Not only am I suggesting that we are brothers, but we could be fraternal twins. How do you think we end up sharing a birthday, Floyd?"

"First things first, Kim," the still unbelieving Floyd said as he put a helping on his plate. "First, I remember we have loved each other forever, but never in my weirdest dreams did I ever imagine we could be siblings, let alone twins. What made you come to that conclusion?"

"The little things; compare your fingers with mine, for example, or our toes, if you remember how we used to joke about them when we were younger. I witnessed those similarities on Hezron yesterday at the hospital. I'm almost certain he is our father."

Floyd saw that his brother was serious, and he forgot the food he had served himself, which lay on the table untouched. Duofold was yet to serve himself. Both seemed in shock as Floyd removed his shoes and those of Duofold to examine their toes. He then placed his hands on the table as Duofold displayed his too. The similarities were there.

"Floyd, Look at the mark on your left ear and on your light hand near the elbow. These two physical characteristics are on Hezron's body. I witnessed yesterday in the hospital." Duofold said as Floyd turned on his phone camera which he used as a mirror to confirm.

Floyd had now started eating but seemed not to concentrate on his chewing, so a bit choked his throat. A concerned Duofold opened for him a bottle of water and made a hard pat on his brother's back to unchoke him. The throat cleared, and Floyd regained his composure. As they discussed further, the more the findings Duofold was reporting didn't make sense.

To break the tension they both felt, Duofold said jokingly, "Do not die, Floyd, before you are officially my twin brother."

They decided that the best way to unravel the mystery was to visit Hezron at the hospital. They ate without saying much to each other as the full implication hit them how their home, Fidel's home, may not even be their home. Floyd held Duofold's hand to the car. They even forgot Floyd had come in his car as they left the hotel after clearing bills.

The traffic was surprisingly light on the usually busy road. Duofold was driving the car fast with his hazard lights flickering like an ambulance. He was closely followed by Floyd. They wanted to make it to the hospital before visiting hours ended.

Finally, and safely, they got to the hospital during the visiting hour. Fortunately, the two, Floyd and Duofold, were the only guests visiting Hezron that evening.

Hezron was happy to see his son Duofold, and he seemed brighter and livelier than Duofold last saw him awake. He guessed Florence must have broken the news to him during her lunchtime visit that she was planning to get back with him after he was discharged. Everything else did not matter to Hezron for the time being. It was the best news to Hezron; his wife going back with him to the village was a most unexpected development.

Hezron also seemed more talkative. He couldn't remember when he last saw Floyd, he told him. It must have been many years back, perhaps when Floyd was still a young man. He was a regular visitor with Duofold at Hezron's homestead. They discussed this for a while as both Duofold and Floyd looked for tell-tale signs of his paternity to them.

Floyd had bought a shirt on their way to the hospital. Its purpose was soon clear. He asked Hezron to change into the shirt to see whether it would fit. As the old man obliged, baring his torso, the brothers inspected him as much as they could.

This left Floyd a bit shaken, and he excused himself to cough, so as not to show tears that came to his eyes. The fingers checked out, as noted by Duofold, and Floyd had the same feeling of certainty as him after closely scrutinising Hezron's facial features and seeing some striking similarities to their own.

Floyd's phone rang, and he went out again, this time overcome with emotion. Duofold followed his brother outside after serving Dad Hezron some fruits to distract him and not arouse his suspicions about the sudden walking out of the room.

Hezron, on his part, did not want to offend Duofold, just in case Duofold changed his mind about his mother going back home to him. He still lived with guilt and was never sure what punishment his son would unleash despite the kindness Duofold showed.

Duofold located Floyd leaning on a wall at the main entrance door and joined him.

"I saw you making a close observation, Floyd," he said. "What do you think? Are they not the same physical characteristics on your body, buddy? Is this fiction or what? You look so much alike when I assess you from a close view. I have even taken a photo of you and Dad, brother. Look! When we see the good in other people, we slow our judgment towards them. Give Dad Hezron the benefit of the doubt, buddy. How did all this mess happen, Floyd?"

Floyd did not speak immediately. He thoughtfully looked at the photo Duofold was showing him. "Yeah," he said, "you may have a point, Kim, about the similarities.

Still, they could be a mere coincidence. There is only one way, as you know, to be certain…"

"DNA test," Duofold offered.

They hatched a plan on how to go about it.

They were soon back in the room, where Hezron inquired from Floyd about his dad Fidel, and they talked a bit about it.

The two brothers were, however, in a hurry. "Dad," interrupted Duofold, "Floyd and I are going out shortly, but we are coming back. Be eating your fruits."

They looked for the nearest barbershop, and both got a haircut. They went back to the hospital accompanied by the barber. They found Hezron looking proud of himself. "Young men, you are back," he said brightly, then pointing at the peels of an orange and two bananas, he added, "I am done eating the fruits. The best I've tasted in a while. My appetite seems much better today. And who is your friend?"

"He is a barber," replied Duofold, "I want you to have a haircut."

"Not a bad idea," said the dad, "I can't remember the last time I had one. You want me to look sharp, eh? Who knows, the doctor might discharge me tomorrow."

The barber was already sitting him on a chair next to the bed and tying him with the barber's wrapping cloth. Soon the old man's unkempt hair was well trimmed, and his hair clippings were collected in a small bag.

Looking at himself in the barber's mirror, Hezron delightedly commented, "Already feeling fresh, and I look ten years younger!"

The plan Duofold and Floyd had hatched was to get a sample of Hezron's hair to take to a laboratory together with both of theirs for a DNA test. This would remove any doubt as to whether he was their father.

Now that they had what they needed to accomplish their mission, they bade Hezron goodbye with a promise to visit the next day. For some reason, he was left with a calmness he had not experienced in a while.

That night Hezron slept like a baby as he dreamt of his new future with Florence back in his nest. He looked forward to the day he would be discharged to see Duofold's children, Binte and Warrior, whom he had not met in a long time. He was curious about the younger grandchildren, Femi and Junior, who he had never met.

AFTER THEY HAD PARTED with the barber, Floyd said, "Now what is remaining is to somehow get a tissue sample from Falid and Dad Fidel, and everything shall become clear."

"True," Duofold agreed and called Falid and asked him to join them the next morning at a hotel in the city.

Floyd called his wife Akumu to let her know he was in Nairobi with Duofold to visit his dad and would not be able to make it back to Nakuru that night. He assured her it wasn't something serious and that Hezron was recovering well.

"Is everything OK with Dad?" Falid was worried.

"Yes, everything is fine. He's recovering well and is about to be discharged. I want to discuss that way forward."

That seemed to assure Falid, though he called Hezron to confirm for himself that he was doing well.

Duofold invited Floyd to spend the night in his house. They, however, made sure to get home late and leave early the next morning before Yasmin started asking endless questions. In the meantime, Floyd had been browsing through likely apps on his phone to hire a house for a few days. They were looking for a large house, ideally a four-bedroom house, to effectively carry out the plan they had in mind if they should require more family members.

By 9 am, Falid was in Nairobi. He, however, was met at the hotel by Floyd, Duofold having received a call to attend to something urgent at the office. Floyd was not sure whether he was hallucinating. The more he looked at Falid as they engaged in small talk, the more he saw his father, Fidel, in Falid. He kept this to himself. He would let the DNA tell the truth.

Duofold joined them two hours later at 11 am. They explained to Falid their suspicions and informed him that Floyd had earlier that morning been to his father Fidel's home and had collected Fidel's sample of his hair from clippings in his shaving machine. Now all they needed was a sample from Falid to settle the truth of their paternity, whether it was Fidel or Hezron.

They left the hotel for the hospital but first had to pass through a laboratory with state-of-the-art equipment to quickly have the DNA tests done. They were informed the test results would be ready by 5 pm that afternoon.

At the hospital, they were delightfully surprised to find Fidel visiting his old rival, Hezron. They found the two old men looking happy together, no doubt catching up on things their sons would never know. They congratulated their boys for the shave, happily unaware of the plot that had been hatched.

As the time neared to be at the laboratory at 5 pm, they found themselves caught in the heavy afternoon traffic. This was one appointment they could not afford to miss, yet it was one they dreaded for the truth it would reveal.

Floyd called the laboratory to find out when they closed and also to confirm whether the results were ready. The test results were ready, he was informed. To their relief, the laboratory closed at 22:00 hours, 10 pm.

They arrived and sat quietly in the slightly busy reception area, waiting to be served. Each settled to his thoughts. The lab technician handling their account finally emerged with an envelope containing the test results. He said his name was Robert.

Robert read the tension on their faces and concluded the results in the envelope were something they greatly anticipated or dreaded. "I can explain the results to you, or you can read them by yourselves."

"You can tell us yourself," Falid suggested, not being as literate as the other two.

Robert opened the envelope and removed the results. He took a moment to read them.

"It seems," he said, looking at the results again as if to confirm, "it seems two of you are fraternal twins. The other one is a half-brother to the twins."

It turned out Falid was the half-brother. His biological father was Fidel.

The three men left in a daze. Seeing the effect the findings had on them, Robert handed the results to Duofold, who seemed more in command and left them to their privacy. But they had nothing to say to each other just yet. Things were more complicated than they thought.

Falid seemed the least prepared and therefore appeared the most affected by the results. He sat there confused. He had always thought he had one brother, a brother he already had a problem with. Now they were two of them, Floyd and Duofold. As it sunk in, he became more confused to realise that the man he had always known as his father was not his biological father. Instead, his real father was a man he always thought remote and could never relate with.

How did this mix-up happen? This was the question the three men wanted answered.

They agreed among themselves that if this was a life-altering issue, it was their collective issue; they first had to carefully think through it together because the threat it posed might disrupt all their families, perhaps irreparably. Each called their wife and told them the three of them were together working on something and not to expect them for the night. None of the husbands explained what it was about.

This left the wives confused and angry that they were not involved. They wondered what this was all about to pit the three together, more so Akumu, who could not understand how Floyd could be away for two straight nights with Duofold, and now with Falid in the group.

The wives were usually not the best of friends, so they could not call each other to find out what anyone of them might know about what their husbands were up to. Akumu, for example, had never gotten over Falid and his wife taking over her home after she was evicted from Hezron's compound in the years Duofold had disappeared. She could never see herself talking to Falid's wife, who had also stood by as Akumu's

children, Warrior and Binte, suffered mistreatment in Hezron's compound during their parent's absence.

Neither could Akumu talk to Yasmin, who she suspected thought her a competitor for Duofold's affection. Neither could Yasmin call Akumu for the same reason, the most recent example being when Duofold drove Akumu to Nakuru after launching the construction of Akumu's house without involving Yasmin. On her part, Falid's wife had never been introduced to her by Duofold.

Moreover, Falid's wife thought Duofold's wife and Akumu were too aloof in their comfortable lives to approach and probably looked down on her. The thought of talking to either of them never entered her mind. Despite Akumu's assumptions, Mrs Falid did not participate in the squabble between Falid, Duofold and their dad Hezron. If anything, she helped in the raising of the destitute Warrior and Binte, which was better than Akumu could manage after her eviction. She was the one who queued in the hospital when they were ill. She is the one who went to the school parents' meetings, and she made sure to give them clothes Akumu had bought for the children every Sunday to wear when her husband Floyd was out with Hezron. These are some of the favours Akumu did not seem to appreciate.

Each one of the wives dealt with their husbands' absence by themselves; they decided they would find out what it was about when their men were back home.

In the meantime, the three newly discovered blood brothers drove to the house they had hired. They had witnessed a minor accident between two cars just before they got to the house. It was this they were discussing, trying to decide which car was in the wrong as they settled down with a beer. It took them a while before they got around to discussing what had brought them there.

Duofold let a flurry of thoughts about his past and present flow through his mind.

It is not easy to love the unkind, but when I imagine my mom's infidelity, I feel she risked my life by making Dad Hezron nervous. Love is truly a superpower. It has kept me glued to this Hezron family. Otherwise, nothing makes sense to me at all, from my siblings Falid, Ann, and Baily to my parents Hezron and Florence.

Everything around this family is so overwhelming. Mom going back home is a relief to me after the new revelation. Supporting them from a distance shall give me peace of mind to focus on my nuclear family for once. At least now, we are three siblings in the arena of Hezron that are well-able. Floyd shall ease my burden. After all, he wants to align himself with them as a new member of the family. I have been a veteran and a weary one now, for that matter.

Besides the outcome, Falid has a lot to lose here, so he shall be counted in the upkeep of the parents besides being the illegitimate son now. He has no guts whatsoever to face his biological dad, Fidel. He shall fight and take to the grave his identity. He is Dad Hezron's favourite, anyway.

My house had been ransacked by Falid. Now it is a shell of what I knew. Nothing holds me to that home. The sweet mama I die to see has betrayed me. I need time away from her.

I looked at Dad Hezron and son Falid as we stepped into the hospital to see him. They are like East and West in terms of looks. What they had in common was that they were both dark souls serving the same demon. It can really break Hezron's heart to learn Falid is a borrowed son from his friend Fidel.

The revelation that the son he was zealous about in the syndicate to kill 'Duofold Kimwaki' with is actually his legitimate son would kill him faster than the ailments he is treating now.

I am tempted to do a serious interrogation on this occurrence, but having family involved, I chose to swallow that bullet. Dad Hezron is being discharged tomorrow; They can revisit the discussion after he is home. He has a caregiver already, but they need to do some shopping and give the caregiver, Mom Florence, an orientation about his diet.

Falid has to be there to discharge the only dad he knows, while his twin brothers have to be there to discharge the dad they do not like.

The silence between them did not hold for long. The matter before them had to be discussed. Floyd, being an introvert, did not speak much, while Falid was still in shock to think clearly. It was Duofold, being the more confident and outgoing, who seemed to do the most talking. But he spoke for them. Nothing seemed to make sense, Duofold was saying. This was all very well, but what could be said of their sisters Ann and Baily and Floyd's sister Ng'endo? Were they even their sisters or half-sisters?

They discussed this and wondered about the possibility of getting a tissue sample for DNA analysis from either of the two sisters. This would be difficult, if not impossible. Ann was now living abroad, and though she was expected to visit soon, it would be difficult to pluck even a strand of hair from her. It would be the same with Baily. Going by the DNA tests already conducted, it was not possible Floyd and his sister, Ng'endo, were blood related. There was no need, therefore, to get a tissue sample from her. But getting any kind of tissue sample from Ann and Baily posed a delicate challenge. There had to be another way.

Why must things change, Falid was thinking, *yet the boys are contented with the current family set-up? Is it about streamlining the boundaries of our identities or our comfort?*

Before they could discuss this further, Duofold's phone, which he had placed on the table, buzzed. It was a call from the hospital. At first, they stared at it, dreading the news it bore. Nonetheless, it was not a call that could be ignored.

"Hello Daktari, how're you?" he said after establishing who was on the other end.

"Someone should have already informed you. Your father will be cleared for discharge later today after we get the results from some tests. He will be ready to leave tomorrow."

Floyd and Falid watched as their brother's face brightened and listened with relief as he informed them of Hezron's discharge from the hospital.

It took some minutes to discuss this over the phone with his mother and his wife, Yasmin, to make arrangements for Hezron's welcome. If necessary, Yasmin would inform him what to bring from the supermarket. The hospital would advise on any special dietary needs.

Floyd said he would chip in now that parental ties had been established. Falid would always be there for Hezron, as he still saw himself as his son. The old man had now become the collective responsibility of the three men, easing some of the burdens Duofold had always borne.

DUOFOLD SENT THE DRIVER to drop Hezron at Florence's home in Duofold's compound. Not surprisingly, Florence had prepared ahead and had already cooked for her husband. He would find a warm and welcoming home when he got there. At the hospital, the driver found her in the nutritionist's office, getting information about foods that would help improve her husband's health and recovery. She, however, couldn't wait for Hezron to get better and start taking normal foods so that he could taste her new recipes after he was given a clean bill of health.

Finally, Hezron was in his wife's house and was surprised to see the affluent lifestyle Florence was about to give up when she relocated back to the village with him. Hezron noted the privacy of the secluded house, and, always suspicious, he scrutinised every detail in the house to detect signs of a man ever entering Florence's life here. Had Florence been aware of what he was thinking, she probably would have told herself with great relief, "Thank God walls only have ears; they do not talk. Otherwise, Hezron would have gotten Fidel's scent in the house."

As he was admiring Florence's king-size bed, Warrior came calling after he heard the car park at their grandmother's compound.

At first, his grandfather could not recognise him.

"Hello, Grandpa, many days."

"Oh my God, this is you, Warrior? When did you break your voice and sport a beard?"

"It has been some time, Grandpa! I am sorry I haven't come to your home to see you after we were picked up by Dad."

"It was all my fault, my granny. Please forgive me. I hope your sister Binte shall forgive me too."

"Please come with me to meet other family members, Grandpa."

Warrior took him on a tour of Yasmin's home. Yasmin was there to receive him and Florence, who was following him. Again Hezron was wowed by Duofold's ability to turn his life around so fast. He could remember Yasmin from his daughter Ann's wedding, but Femi and Junior were new faces to him. They were all over him with what to them was a new vocabulary *Guka* – Grandfather. Binte was all tears thanking his grandfather for keeping her and her brother, Warrior, alive when they lived alone in his compound. The detail about his father being a victim of his grandpa had, over time, faded from her memory.

Florence reminded Hezron he saved her skin too in her youthful days when she escaped being married off to an old man friend to her father.

"I shall forever worship and reward you, Hezron, for marrying me. You saved me from my father's greed. I guess that's what Binte felt to be under your wing in her parents' absence," Florence said to change the topic and stop the children from revisiting a closed chapter of their lives.

Then, surprising him, she said, handing him some cash, "By the way, have this money. I was given by your boys Floyd and Falid for shopping. Since Duofold had already shopped for me I do not have any reason to keep it."

"Thank you, mama. I have been very broke. Now I have something to share with my grandchildren. Where are the shops we buy snacks."

Femi was happy to lead Grandpa to be bought chocolate.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

THE DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE THREE MEN, Duofold, Floyd and Falid, about their next course of action to unravel the puzzle of their mismatched fathers and the paternity of their sisters was not making much headway. They, however, arrived at what they deemed a logical solution, from which the issue of their sisters' paternity would also likely find an answer.

The boys knew they could not wait for the storm to pass but had to learn to dance in the rain, as Duofold put it. They did not have a lot of time; they needed to swing to action right away. They would take two routes: in the first, Floyd would lead in perusing registration of birth records at the hospital in the village and try to trace the nurse or matron who oversaw the brothers' births. In the second route, Duofold would speak to Fidel. They were not sure it would work, but they would try.

In the meantime, Falid did not have the appetite or the courage to face his biological father, Fidel, and start asking questions or making claims. He was prepared to fight to keep the issue of his identity secret to his grave. The three brothers also agreed that neither would it help to break Hezron's heart by letting him know that his favourite son, Falid, was a borrowed son from his old friend Fidel.

DUOFOLD CALLED HIS DAD FIDEL and told him he was passing by to say hello. He did not expect it would be easy getting his second father to open up about the two loves of his life, Florence and Faith, how they dated or why the two women still revolved around him.

Duofold, however, recognised the opportunity to broach the subject of his two loves when he informed him that Florence was getting back together with Hezron.

It was then Fidel realised his honeymoon with Florence was over. He had fallen silent as if in mourning. This, however, passed quickly. Though he was disappointed, he respected Florence's decision. They would remain friends, after all.

Fidel was open about their relationship, though he had not much to tell Duofold. When he got back into the country from Britain after five years of absence, he admitted that the person he most longed to meet was Florence. She, too, was hungry

for him. When they did finally meet a while later, they slept together for old times' sake and as a way of saying goodbye to their old relationship as both concentrated on their families. He was then about to marry Faith after discovering his first love was already taken.

As they discussed this, Duofold was able to gather that Fidel had no idea that the one-night stand with Florence after he returned had borne fruit, Falid. He decided that it was best to leave it at that; he was not going to tell him of the DNA results.

FALID AND FLOYD WENT to look for the midwife who administered the twins' birth in the local hospital to learn from her what she could remember. They were aware it was not going to be easy and was probably going to be a painful process. They also went with the knowledge that in the village, everybody knew everybody, and it was unlikely the matron or midwife at the time of the twins' birth would not have some bit of information.

They found the current matron-in-charge was now a Somali lady not from the area. She had no idea who they were but was willing to allow them to peruse a registry. That is how they discovered the matron-in-charge during the birth of the twins was within reach. She turned out to be a friend to both of their mothers, Florence and Faith.

They found the now elderly former matron at her home in Nairobi, where she had settled from the village. She was startled to hear the strangers address her by her village name, Mama Jimmy.

"Welcome, and who are the young men in front of me? Have a sit for a cup of tea," she said, paving the way for her guests to take a seat.

"Thank you, Mama," said Floyd after they were seated. "We are Falid and Floyd, Fidel and Hezron's sons. Nice to meet you."

She seemed surprised that the boys seated before her, who she had personally delivered, had grown into men. They informed her they were only able to find her after being directed by one of her former neighbours in the village.

Mama Jimmy was quite thrilled to meet them and asked about their parents and news of the village in the years that had passed.

It, however, took a while before the matron was comfortable to tell them what they wanted to know.

Finally, with her eyes seeming to look in the distance, she sank deeper into her seat to tell them what had happened.

Yes, she said, they were Florence and Faith 's children. It was also true Florence had delivered twins on the date they had mentioned. It was also true that Faith delivered a baby that same day.

"The three children by the two mothers were boys," Mama Jimmy went on. "I remember very clearly there was a shortage of staff that night. Nevertheless, the deliveries were successful. The three babies let out the cry that comes after they draw their first breath. However, while we were bathing the babies, one of the babies suddenly went silent. It felt as if the twins' souls were one and that it had settled in one of the bodies and let the other one die. Upon close examination of the departed child, we assumed he resembled Florence, the one who had delivered twins. So we gave the other child to Faith. We could not imagine either of the women not taking a baby home.

"In those days, systems were rudimentary, and mix-ups happened a lot, especially during a hectic time when there were many deliveries at the same time combined with a shortage of staff. If you were light-skinned and the other parent had a dark skin tone with two babies to decide which belonged to which parent, one often stood a chance to go home with the wrong infant. In this case, we suspected the babies belonged to the same father, who we believed was Fidel, because it was common knowledge in the village that both girls, Florence and Faith, dated the handsome young man at the time."

After she was finished explaining, she asked, "I heard that Duofold came back to your father Fidel's home. Maybe you are brothers, Floyd. You can do a DNA to check whether you are Fidel's son if you like. I hope the information I shared with you shall help you with the pressing issue that brought you here. But the guy, Duofold, has suffered a lot. You need to let him be, Floyd. Why didn't you bring him with you? I would have loved to see him."

"Duofold is on his way here, Madam. I have just sent him the location we are on his mobile phone to join us. I love him so very much, and I have no intention to disown him as a brother, my dear ma'am. At least we now know our mothers were girlfriends to our dad, Fidel. Thank you for the information you have given us."

As the former matron was expressing her thanks for having seen them and that it was a good opportunity to also meet Falid, they heard a car hoot at the gate to her house. It was Duofold who momentarily entered the house with a bouquet of flowers for her.

The matron was exuberant to see him, more so because of the flowers, which she could not remember anyone ever bringing her. She promised to keep the reason for their visit to herself after the boys told her in confidence that their mothers would be

offended to know they had been this inquisitive. After an exchange of their gratitude, she saw them off after making them promise they would visit her again.

THE THREE BROTHERS left Mama Jimmy's home with one realisation, other than confirming what they already knew: That both their mothers could not have been the best of friends if they dated the same man. Any rivalries the two women might have had chasing the same lover might not only flare up again, but it would be devastating to both of them to discover that Fidel's illegitimate child Falid was conceived after he returned from abroad when Florence was already married. There was another twist to this, Falid and Floyd's only sister Ng'endo were born two days apart.

The three drove back in silence to the furnished house they had hired. They had sent a message to their sisters, Ann and Baily, as well as Ng'endo, to join in the conversation. The sisters could not understand why the brothers had asked to join them. Ng'endo called her sister In-law Akumu to find out, Ann tried with Yasmin, and Baily called Falid's wife. Neither of the wives seemed to know. What they were certain about was that whatever it was, it must be important. They were, however, careful not to bring to their mothers' attention the meeting as warned by their brothers.

The sisters arrived at the same time. The hired chef treated them to a sumptuous meal of roast chicken and pilau rice that was accompanied by stew and an assortment of vegetables. They spared the chapattis to take with tea as a snack later. As they enjoyed the meal, the sisters were quick to note their brothers seemed a bit distant. The brothers, however, cracked jokes from the days they were young in school, village life, and home chores that usually brought village children together.

The sisters thought something serious had happened with Hezron. Of the wives—Falid's, Floyd's and Duofold's—only Yasmin knew Hezron was fine and was due for discharge but hadn't mentioned it to her sister-in-law, Ann, when she enquired from her.

After the meal and the many tales of the past life in the village, Floyd opened the discussion and informed the sisters of the changed family tree.

"Life has decided to take Fidel and Hezron's families to a crossroads again, where we, their children, have to make a choice about where we belong. The ugly part of the family's life secrets that our parents found hard to expose has been revealed. And in the weirdest way we could least have expected."

Floyd then went on to explain to the sisters in the detail. The information caught the sisters with shock. It is not anything they might have expected. Like their brothers,

the shaken sisters did not know what to make of it and sat in silence, each to their thoughts.

Nothing was clear anymore now that the truth they thought they knew had been shaken. "What more are we yet to discover," wondered Ann tearfully. "Did it have to take Duofold to uncover the lies Hezron and Fidel's families have lived and that were now threatening the two families' worlds?" This made her sad, and her sobs intensified.

Nothing was as simple as they would have loved it to be. All they knew now appeared in different shades of good and evil coexisting together.

They collectively began to feel some resentment toward both sets of their parents for the confusion and sense of betrayal they now felt. They felt that each one of the parents must have contributed in some way to the emotional hurt they were now experiencing.

After the sisters had calmed down a bit, the brothers fell each into their own thoughts as the sisters discussed their shock among themselves.

Floyd, son to Fidel, I need to face my new reality by force, by fire. I accept that I have to officially meet my biological mother, maybe introduce myself as the son she long buried in her backyard along with her other purported dead son Duofold. We need to unearth the foreign bodies from Dad Hezron's land because we both lived despite the evil burying us before our days in this world.

Unless mom Florence knew what had transpired that day long ago when her twins were separated, the discovery would come to her with great shock. Meeting her, therefore, would be a daunting task as no one could tell how she would react. I wonder how Duofold managed to fit in with Fidel's family so seamlessly. I am now the one to wear the big shoe. I imagine how life might have been had I, Floyd Fidel, been brought up by Florence as Falid Hezron or whatever name I would have been given. What might I have missed out on not being brought up by my biological parents?

It was not my fault to have landed at Fidel's home as his firstborn. Neither was it my biological mother Florence's mistake; it cannot be blamed on my mother, Faith *Fidel, either. Oh my God! Or maybe Mom Faith was aware she did the switch with the matron in secrecy? Maybe it was a genuine mishap if the matron's story is any information to go by. My mother, Faith, would be the great loser here if the story leaked to the public domain. I could only imagine how sad she would be for not getting an opportunity to moan about her departed son back then. Would she demand the exhumation of her dead son's body from Hezron's land to bury him in her compound?*

Would my mother, Faith, feel she had lost the son she always thought was from her womb, me?

Unable to tell what his mother Faith's reaction would be, Floyd snapped back to the reality that all three sons biologically belonged to his biological mother, Florence. What implications did this have for the two families? Would his mother Faith accept

Falid as her husband Fidel's biological son, or would she divorce him for an act of infidelity with Florence those many years ago?

Now knowing we belong to Hezron, would it not be better for our mother Florence to go back with dad Hezron so that we take care of them together? What is in my mind now? Am I losing my mind? They did already. Mom Florence is back with Hezron. They are going back home together after the clinics are over. But what about myself; to which mother and family do I think I now belonged? Would father Hezron fight to have his sons back, Duofold and I? If he does, how would Dad Fidel feel after having adopted Kim and me as his biological sons? Is he going to embrace Falid?

Floyd found these questions difficult to answer. He resigned himself to whatever would come,

FALID DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO THINK ANY MORE of Fidel despite being the legitimate and only son of the one he referred to as the loaded guy.

I always thought of following in someone's footsteps, but that someone is not Fidel. I always hold Duofold as the person to look up to. Everything I have achieved so far has been because of my elder brother, Duofold Kimwaki. I cannot comprehend the thought of Kim being my stepbrother, same mother but flipped daddies by the crazy DNA. It is so messy in my head right now when I remember I joined Dad Hezron in his scheme to kill his legitimate son, Duofold. This gives me goosebumps about what would happen when Hezron comes to know I am not his biological son. Shall Dad Hezron send me from his land, although the title deeds now are under my name? That's a no-brainer. What if Lucifer revisits Hezron, and this time, he kills this illegitimate son, Falid Fidel, for real?

And if Hezron spares my life, what if he throws me out of his compound? How would I gel with Fidel's family if I were sent there the way Kim was, despite the pain of losing his wife, Akumu, to the same family? Also, what explanation can Mom Florence give to Dad Hezron after giving birth to me in their marriage, isn't that the highest infidelity one could ever deal with? Why is my mom so attractive to these two men, Fidel and Hezron? Was she a wife to both in another life? What is so special about her; is just being a chief's daughter such a big deal? It is a big deal because he had only daughters, and has left all the wealth to them. Therefore, should Hezron or Fidel disown him, he could claim a share from his maternal side.

Where do I belong now? At least my brothers Kim and Floyd have settled away from home and have some properties here and there. If then I am Fidel's biological son, he should fill for me the gap I missed to be brought up by him and part with some inheritance for me if things are going to be thick at Hezron's and I am forced to pack. We all need a retreat to be able to surrender to this unfair and unfortunate dilemma. All the above possibilities are driving me crazy. I feel so empty inside though I appreciate that I now have to live with the new reality. I wish time could rewind so that we clean

this mess once and for all and return to the calmness of my life yesterday when I had not known my true status.

"Eeeiish!" Falid shouted as he stood up to serve himself more whisky to calm himself.

DUOFOLD WAS ALREADY A VETERAN of family dramas. But this current one had left him speechless, thinking he had found his real father in Fidel, only to be whipped back to Hezron as his real father, after all. This taxed his patience, and he felt that he probably should quit both families and go it alone like an orphan who knew not where he came from. It was fine that he had to fight now that he was a man, as that Kenny Rogers song says, but the emotional battles he was fighting were becoming far too many. He felt exhausted. He thought the best he could do was surrender to his fate and hope for a quiet life from now on, hoping his children would be spared the weird situation that had befallen the three hapless brothers. Duofold analysed his family in his head as he waited for others to come to terms with the new family reality.

Falid, now my real stepbrother, wanted me dead. They are so materialistic with Dad Hezron that my wealth and inheritance to them came first. Dad Hezron feels very entitled even when he has walked all over me. What of when he knows Floyd and I are his legitimate sons? What drama shall he cause in that village this time to be noticed by other villagers for being the ablest bull in that village? Any revenge on Fidel is a cup of tea to him. Hezron is a shameless being who only understands and sees from his own perspective. Reality is secondary. He is a perfect avenger even when he is the intruder.

My twin brother Floyd is such an undertaker. He was too quick to inherit my wife. He is a thorn in the flesh who constantly reminds me of Akumu. If she were married to another man, I wouldn't give a damn about her demands, but now she holds two brothers, Floyd and me, below the belt. I respond to her quickly not to arouse my brother's family; this makes Yasmin very insecure. Floyd and I being biological brothers, is a good reason for me to ignore Akumu's demands going forward. I shall raise my children Binte and Warrior my way, No more interference from her. The two children shall be visiting Akumu at my will. She should also know what to do with the cloud between – our girl, Promise. What nonsense!

My dear mom Florence is such a player; it is unbelievable. She swings from Hezron's to Fidel's. She is the one reason my life was at stake, yet she is the only angel I had worked hard to salvage. I really don't give a fling that she is back with Hezron after flirting with her darling Fidel to my face. To hell with this chief's girl. I want nothing to do with her anymore. I shall put a standing order at my bank to financially support her, and Dad Hezron and only visit them when I must.

Yasmin and her clan can fill the gap for me going forward now that I sent Barot back to Europe. I want to be left alone to heal these many wounds from every member of this family. Maybe I shall digress again to Linda or Boss Mary to forget the pain I am going through. Ruruka rwa kimbu rutithiragwo ni mung'ong'otu. *(The scales of the chameleon family never leave the clan – What*

characterises a family never fades; it is inherited through the generations) I inherited my Casanova blood from the madness genes in my parents.

Dad Fidel, I blame him for having my mom when she was married. He is learned and knew better how to safeguard her from pregnancy by using a condom. That would, however, have meant no brother Falid. God forbid.

Dad Fidel also lied to me that he had done Floyd's DNA when he married Floyd's mum, Faith. Why now? He has been dating my mom. I wonder why they are still apart. Mom Florence needs to pack and spend the rest of her life as Fidel's second wife. Oh! That is not possible! Most children belong to Dad Hezron. She shall live that lie for life. All her love to Fidel, but her body to Hezron, for that, is where she belongs. After all, she is tired of Fidel's fairy tale; that is why she wants to pack back to the village. Maybe she disclosed to Fidel that they conceived Falid, and maybe Fidel was mad that he did not get a chance to mould his son, Falid.

Now I understand why old age is gold. Florence has attracted everyone back into her life, including all three legitimate sons to her. We are geared to help her settle back home with Dad Hezron. We are all ready to spoil him to make our mother comfortable. The confidence mom has must be in cahoots with all the drama we are worried about. The only breaking news that could bring her to her knees is knowing she buried the wrong son again after knowing her son, Floyd, is alive and kicking around her. If this tussle goes the legal way, Mrs Faith Fidel has no son. This shall make her very sad, for she has given up a lot to accommodate me as a member of her family. Brenda had also been born at Floyd's home by Akumu. Floyd's firstborn is named after her. Does this mean now Floyd has to change the name to Florence, his biological mother, or get another girl to name her after mom Florence, or change my promise to Florence, his biological mother?

Mrs Fidel would be separated from the two sons she had embraced as her own, Floyd and me, Duofold Kimwaki, and united with a son she cannot agree to inherit no matter what, Falid. The betrayal by Florence and Fidel is too much. Hezron needs to stick with her till death do they part. After all, they are birds of a feather. They have survived a life of lies and deceit.

Then a fragment of the hymn song, "How great thou art…," started playing in his mind.

Duofold broke the silence that had momentarily engulfed the sitting room of the rented house. Are you done with the meetings in your heads so that we convene a common one, guys?

"My dear brothers and sisters, we are great when we stick together, he said. Our comfortable lives seem to have been shaken by the truth we now know. We have been invaded by a mysterious enemy. The question is whether to open Pandora's Box or let it be. I am not sure how we are supposed to deal with the betrayal we feel, but somehow we must reach a consensus. The risk of opening Pandora's Box is that it might break our two families because not everybody might accept this reality. I can imagine the trouble it might cause trying to make amends. It might even be the death

of some of our parents or even some of us. And because our relationships are intertwined, even one parent or family not accepting it could bring down the other family in the tag of war it might result into. Nobody will be spared; we will all go down together, our children included.

"We who are here in this room understand how things might change going forward; each one of us might lose some privilege we might have taken for granted—for example, the warmth of the family we thought we belonged, inheritances. This, however, we don't know. What we are certain about is that things are complicated, but we must trust they fall in place without too many upsets. But it makes me wonder whether, in acknowledging this reality, we should not accept ourselves, be positively selfish and love ourselves by taking responsibility for our own development, growth, and happiness going forward."

Duofold paused as if to let what he had just said sink. He resumed, "We don't need to be reminded how each day is different, how it plays to its own dynamics. What we knew yesterday is not what we know today. It is just a matter of paying attention to detail as I did with Dad Hezron to discover I am a twin to Floyd. It was a good thing to know, but now I wish I hadn't when I imagine the trouble it threatens to cause. Which, by the way, leads me to ask you, my dear sisters, would you want to have your DNA tested? We used our Dads' hair, and we still have some of it."

"No, no, no," the sisters said almost in unison, with Ann adding, "We are good. What difference will it make, and we are all married? We have our homes, and we care less about family inheritance."

Their homes and marriages represent the pasts they had emerged from and that anchored them in their lives. They, therefore, held to this past tightly without knowing what they would do without it. Sometimes the truth hurts, and this time the answers didn't bring any light, thus Ann's question, "What difference will it make?"

The sisters understood their brothers' agony discovering the families they now belonged to and what it might mean about which father each might now be heir to. In any case, Duofold's sisters had already moved on after being short-changed by Falid and Dad Hezron. All their family land was under Falid now.

This realisation seemed to have distressed Falid. "Duofold," he said with a pleading voice, "can we have another drink before we proceed with this discussion? My head hurts. While it can be good to know the truth, it can also be too distressing and disappointing."

The three sisters agreed about the drink. Usually very light drinkers, for the first time in their lives, they wanted to drink themselves to a stupor. They, too, like Falid, felt like they had lost their minds with the stress of the whole situation. Each was, however, trying to cope in their way; for some, it required a minor adjustment to

cope, and for others, it could be life-changing. At the back of their minds, each knew everyone stood to lose something or someone, and it was a kind of void that would remain permanent. A drink together might help dull their anxieties.

"Do we need to invite our wives to this discussion, good people?" Duofold suddenly asked after each had served a drink, "Or should we leave it as it is?"

No one offered a response. His siblings seemed more interested in their drinks, each one of them feeling they had created a fortune in the family they were brought up, but that now they were eventually going to be forced to spend their entire lives dealing with a family tree they didn't want to adjust to fit into.

Duofold let them be. He thought that if there was a lesson or two they had learned between them, it was about family and friendship. It was upon them to save their parents from this pain, to cover up their shame and not expose them. He thought the best way to express this was for them to say that "it is none of our business" what relationships their parents had when they were young. The thing was to understand them and cherish them. Reminding their parents of their pasts mistakes would not make them or the siblings gathered any better. It was a very delicate situation in that what they held today belonged to their children tomorrow.

As the alcohol got better in the family that was now united by pain, Falid stood up and said, "You guys … be, you need to be humble. You, too, have stories you might never want to be told to anyone. There are seasons under the sun, and all of them are different, and as humans, we react to them differently. Who do you think you are, Hezron and Fidel's descendants, to snitch on our parents?"

Everyone cheered him on, "You are on point, son of Fidel. No wonder you are as militant as your dad."

As a final thought before Floyd poured another drink, he decided that "while it must always reflect on the road we had come and the injustices some of us might have experienced, it is up to all of us to ensure our homes remained safe places for us all, including those crazy parents. I, Floyd, shall forever remain a cloud between my two fathers, Hezron and Fidel.

I am no angel. I, Duofold Kimwaki, have made enough mistakes. All the best, Akumu, as you raise our daughter, the Promise.

Duofold was not sure whether the statement was just in his mind, or a sin confessed to the entire clan of Hezron and Fidel.

Floyd looked at Duofold as if reading his mind. He noticed there were a lot of similarities between Binte and his daughter Promise. Was it because the two cousins were born of the same woman fathered by the twins, or did Duofold have something to do with Promise? *Anyway,* Floyd shrugged, *even if that should be the case, it is fine with me if only to pay Duofold back for my taking his wife. I am happy to raise the Promise.*

Floyd's mind went back to the meeting, wanting it to be over. *I hope they have already concluded what they thought was pending so that our two families can move on without further disruptions*.

"Oh my God," he sighed. "Pass the bottle this way, Ann," he asked his new sister and poured himself another drink.

About the Author

Mirigo Kinyanjui is a Kenyan motivational speaker and writer. Her books aim to impart practical lessons drawn from real life experiences and close observations of family life. Where many give up because of perceived insurmountable personal mistakes and frustrations of life, Mirigo hopes the experiences portrayed in her books will manifest into positive life choices for the reader towards a better version of themselves. The author seeks to help tap into opportunities often obscured by the hardships and calamities many encounter in life.

Other Books by the Author

1. **Cross-Roads Legend**
   Wairimu Ndegwa is a goodhearted African girl studying at USA University Academy. Due to her kindness, she offers to assist a classmate whose visa card has failed. She feeds him using her 'peanuts' of pocket allowance for a fortnight. She later learns he is a Muslim billionaire heir-apparent. They connect and one thing leads to another, one cross-roads at a time.

2. **My Lame and Sick**
   Orphaned children Abigail and Joel lose themselves by being gay and lesbian. They later come back to their senses and start a family to become parents. Then they are later reunited with their parents

3. **Transition**
   Miss Morgan is born out of wedlock by a black father and a white mother. She creates her own blissful world to live in with all enjoyment and fun that nature had to offer. But life seems to have had its reservations.

4. **The Layman Entrepreneur**
   The saying that, "If you must burn bridges, build new ones", is not an idle suggestion. A bridge is for others to cross over as they find themselves, or for you to find your way back to the crossroads to rediscover yourself should you lose your way. That is the way of entrepreneurship as we must keep recreating our paths for our business ventures to succeed. The book draws from personal experience and tips from the business world at all levels of entrepreneurship.

5. **The Prodigal Daughter**
   Experience the resilience of a mother. Prodigal son left with wealth, but came back empty handed. Prodigal daughter left with her womb and she brought back generations. Life is but a few moments yet those moments last a lifetime.

6. **The Remnants**
   The book tells the story of a young man born in Kikuyuland who loves his language and culture so much that it inspires him to trace the origins of Bantu peoples to understand where his community came from. This takes him to many Bantu communities around Africa, only to later learn that his ancestors were Maasai, who are Nilotic. This was not before he had married a beauty from Cameroon after kissing enough girls across the continent.

THE CLOUD BETWEEN

The Cloud Between tells the story of Duofold, a brilliant corporate executive in a foods company, who recovers from mental illness after a poisoning and finds that he has to start life all over again.

Even as he must succeed in business, he must also navigate the pitfalls of lost loves and new courtships to find a suitable wife and mother for his children. It is an intricate tale of two families in which the drama also revolves around Akumu, Duofold's ex-wife who becomes his sister-in-law in what turns out to be a tangled family relationship of shared siblings between the Hezron and Fidel households.

The Cloud Between is a motivational tale based on real life experiences. It depicts personal and family turmoil and how hope and friendship can help overcome debilitating hurdles in life.

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ISBN 978-9914-49-893-6
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