

ERIC WALTERS

Winner of the Red Maple Award for *We All Fall Down* and *Safe As Houses*



walking
home

Every journey, no matter how far, starts with one step

We All Fall Down
United We Stand
Safe As Houses
Wave
Alexandria of Africa
Tell Me Why
Beverly Hills Maasai
Shaken
End of Days
The Taming (with Teresa Toten)

walking
home

ERIC WALTERS



DOUBLEDAY
CANADA

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For my good friend Henry Kyatha—we walked the same route for years. Now you've simply gone ahead again and I'll meet you on the other side.

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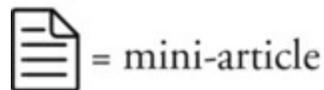
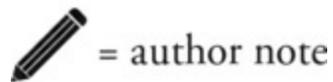
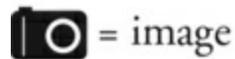
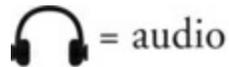
Author's Note

Join the *Walking Home* journey...

This book is the fictional story of Muchoki and Jata, a brother and sister, and their long, incredible journey across Kenya. But everything in this story—the characters, the backdrop, even their walk itself—is based on real life.

At www.ericwalterswalkinghome.com you will find an amazing digital companion to this novel, which will fully immerse you in Muchoki and Jata's world. Pictures, video and audio clips, maps, mini-articles, and notes from the author are told side-by-side with the story found in this book!

When you see an icon in the margin of any of the pages that follow, that means you'll find material at www.ericwalterswalkinghome.com relating to a character or event or passage of text that's being described. These are the following symbols you'll see and here is what they mean:



And the website has tons of other additional material, too: Find out how a manuscript becomes a finished book; how a book's cover design gets created; learn about what kind of connections you or your class can make with young people in Kenya; and discover more about the sights and sounds and traditions of this part of Africa. We're glad you've joined our journey!

Chapter One

My father led the way through the dark, my mother behind him, my sister in her arms, and I was just behind them. I kept looking over my shoulder, terrified that I'd see what I could hear in the distance, that they were closing in on us. We were surrounded by people—some relatives, some neighbors, some strangers—all of us bound together in our efforts to flee. Their looks of fear and confusion mirrored the expression that I knew was on my face. Others joined in while some scattered away, melting into the darkness, all looking for a way out, an escape. At least the night offered cover, but wouldn't the daylight offer protection? Evil was most at home in the dead of night—and evil was all around us.



My father came to a stop and he and his brothers and uncles all came together, gesturing wildly, yelling. They were acting as afraid as I felt which only made it so much worse. There was a loud scream, followed closely by a second and a third and out of the darkness they came ... there were so many of them and they all seemed to be carrying weapons and torches. We ran, trying to escape, but our way was stopped by more of them. Forced back. Each route blocked until we were funneled into the only shelter we could find, huddled together, hoping that our numbers would protect us, that the sanctuary of the building would be honored. And then the flames came—

I sat bolt upright, terrified. My heart and head were racing until I realized it was only in my dreams. That they couldn't get me, not here and not now. The flames, heat and blazing light of my sleep were replaced by the dark and cold of the night. I was bathed in sweat and started to shake—partly from the chill of the night air, and partly from what I'd seen in my head before I'd started awake.

I lay back down and pulled up the thin blanket, trying hard to get some protection, to generate some warmth. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my head. There was one thing I needed to do to make my mind slow down.

Quietly I got up off the ground and went to the cot where my mother and sister were sleeping. In the dark it was hard to make out their entwined forms, my sister in my mother's arms—sleeping, safe and protected. At least she was as protected as she could ever be. Would *I* ever feel safe again? Would *I* ever feel protected again? Even sleep wasn't an escape for me.

I heard a slight moan and moved closer. My mother was sleeping but her teeth were chattering. It was more than the cold—her fever was coming back again. I reached around and took my blanket from the ground, carefully draping it over both of them. The one blanket they shared wasn't enough. Gently, so as to not wake them, I tucked it in at the bottom and then at the sides. It wasn't much, but there was nothing else I could

do. My father would have known what to do—or his parents, or my uncles or aunts, or—but there was nobody left to help. My whole body shuddered. The chill in the air hadn't caused that.

There was no point in even trying to go back to sleep.

I groped around on the ground for my shoes, slipped them on and then quietly lifted the flap of the tent. I stepped out and let the flap fall back down to seal them inside. That flimsy piece of canvas, with the blanket, was a second layer to guard them.

It was still dark, still night, but not pitch black. The sun wasn't up yet but there was a hint of light just below the horizon. In the distance a rooster crowed. Then a second rooster called out from the other direction, joined by a third and fourth.

As I stood there, my eyes started to adjust. Our little tent was one of hundreds and hundreds, side by side, as far as the eye could see. There was tent after tent, row after row—a field of white canvas stretching across what had once been an open dusty expanse. The dust was still there beneath and between the tents, and when it rained, it turned into a sea of mud churned by the thousands of people moving through it. Today it was just dust and tents, however—lots and lots of tents. If I'd spent all morning trying, I wouldn't have been able to count them all. And in each tent was a family—two, three, sometimes seven or eight people. That would have been much more crowded, but much better. They were the lucky ones. They *had* more family. We were only three now.



I wrapped myself in my own arms, the only protection from the chill air aside from my thin clothing. It would be better to do something than stand and do nothing. Moving would make warmth.

Carefully I pushed aside the tent flap and reached back inside, fumbling around until I found our water container. We needed water and this was a good time to get it, before the morning, before there was a line at the tap. I didn't know how many people were in the camp, but I did know how many taps there were—only three. Large black plastic tanks had been placed on high wooden platforms, and water trucks came daily to fill them. They were the water for all of us. Sometimes the lines would snake away from the tower, hundreds of people and hundreds of containers sitting side by side, marking the owners' place in line. With each container filled, the remaining people would slide forward in the dust. They shuffled forward patiently, silently. There was never any pushing or shoving or arguing—or conversation or laughter. Just people quietly waiting their turn.

There was usually enough water for everybody, but the tanks sometimes ran dry toward the end of the line and the end of the day. When that happened a thin thread headed out through the gate and off into the distance. A thirty-minute walk away there was a small stream, almost dry now, where a trickle of water could be scooped up and put in the containers. The water wasn't clean but it could be used for washing and cooking, and boiling it made even bad water fit for drinking. I'd gone to the stream a

couple of times with my sister to get water when there was none to be found in the camp.



I had no way of knowing if there was water in the tanks now as I walked toward them. They could have run dry last night, and then there wouldn't be any until the water truck rumbled in. It didn't matter. I'd put my container in line and be first when the water did arrive. It wasn't like I could head out in the dark to the stream by myself. It wasn't safe. There were wild animals out there.

And other dangers as well.

This was all so different from the life I'd always known. Our homestead had a well full of sweet and clean water, plentiful enough to irrigate our crops. I'd never known what it was like to worry about water. It had always been there for us when we needed it.

I walked softly and silently now, trying to be invisible as I moved between the tents. They called out to me—a gentle *flap, flap, flapping* as the wind pushed against the canvas. There wasn't much wind, so there wasn't much noise. It was almost reassuring, as if each tent were offering a quiet greeting to me as I passed—a rhythm like music.

That was so different from the sounds made when the wind was strong or the rain was heavy. Then it was desperate. The tents flapped wildly, like the wings of big white birds—like storks—trying to take off and fly away as if they were crying out because they too wanted to be sheltered from the storm. The noise—rain on canvas and canvas flapping—was almost deafening.

On those stormy nights, we could hardly hear each other talk, and the noise was very troubling to my sister. She was so sensitive, so scared of loud noises now. During the last heavy rain, she'd sat on the cot, hands over her ears, blanket over all of her, rocking slightly. I could only wish we were back on our homestead. There, the rain had pinged off the metal roof, softly and safely.

Now our house wasn't safe. Now it maybe wasn't even there anymore. Maybe everything was gone.



Each week every family in the camp was given a ration of food—mostly beans, rice and maize flour. On weeks when extra refugees flooded in or the trucks didn't arrive on time, there was less food. Some families ran out by the fifth or sixth day and went hungry. My mother never let that happen.

Whatever we got each week, big or small, was divided into eight parts—enough for seven days and one extra in case the next relief supplies were late in coming. It had been late three times—once a full two days. There was always a lot of complaining and

hunger on those days, especially when nobody knew if the truck would be a day or two or even a week late.

My mother said it was better to be a little bit hungry all the time than starving for a short time. She said we could adapt to having less, and we had. We weren't eating nearly as much as we had before, but we seemed to be able to get by. I didn't mind that much. I was more worried about her. Sick people needed food. It was medicine to fight the sickness. I tried every day to persuade her to eat just a little bit more, but she refused.

We now had a little supply, almost five days' worth, carefully hidden under the thin mattress on which my mother and sister slept, where nobody could see it. Most people respected their neighbors' things, so there wasn't much theft, and those who did steal were chased out of the camp under a hail of rocks and angry words and threats. But hungry people could be desperate people. I knew it wasn't much food that we'd stored, but it was something—a little cushion standing between us and nothing that could be a temptation to some. Still, it made my mother feel good. It made me feel good. It was nice to have something to feel good about.

In the still and quiet dark, sounds seemed to travel so much farther. The roosters still called out in the distance, but closer at hand was the constant sound of coughing and sneezing. Lots of people were sick. Pneumonia and malaria were everywhere, and rumors about the rise in tuberculosis and cholera were spreading throughout the camp. So far it was mostly rumors, but the big hospital tent was completely filled with people suffering from one condition or another. Outside of that tent, in the dirt, were those who were unwell but not sick enough to warrant a bed.

Up ahead I could make out the dark shapes of people standing beside the water tank, and then I saw the ember of one cigarette and then a second. The smell of tobacco drifted over and drew me forward. I stepped into the clearing and the men stopped talking. I nodded respectfully and looked down. I knew they were looking at me.

"Early to get water," one of the men said.

"Yes, sir."

"Too early. No water in the tank," the man said. He reached up and tapped it with his hand and it made a hollow sound.

"Hopefully by morning light," another said.

"You can put your container in line," said a third man, gesturing to the five water containers already waiting by the spigot.

I didn't like to leave our container unguarded, but there wasn't much choice. I put it down on the ground at the end of the line.

"Come, boy. Have a seat," said the third man. He was clearly the oldest of the group.

I didn't know any of them, but it would have been rude to say no because they were my elders.

"What is your name, boy?"

I hesitated for an instant. I knew what the reaction would be.

"Muchoki."



They all burst into laughter. Of course I knew why—my name meant “the one who returns.”

“You have a most hopeful name,” the second man said. “I hope we all can return to our homes.”

“Those who have homes to return to,” the first said, and the last of the laughter stopped short.

“After all that has happened, they should have called you the one who keeps having to return,” the eldest added.

I shrugged. “It is my father’s father’s name.”

“That is the Kikuyu way. It is good to be named after our ancestors. That way we never die. Has your grandfather gone ahead? Has he died?”

I nodded my head. “He is gone.” My father was gone too. It had only been a few weeks and I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, but if he had escaped, I would have known. It was so hard to believe that less than five weeks ago I’d lived in the town of Eldoret with my parents and sister. We had a house and livestock, a store, and so many relatives, and schoolmates. I was happy then, and now it was almost all gone. Along with my happiness. My sister and my mother were all that remained.

“You are Kikuyu?” the older man asked.

“Of course he’s Kikuyu!” the second man exclaimed. “Do you think they are putting Luo and Kalenjin in the same camp as Kikuyu?”

“He could be other things. He could be Meru or Embu or Mbeere or Kamba.”

They all looked at me. “Well, are you Kikuyu?” the eldest man asked again.

“Yes.” I paused. “My father is Kikuyu and my mother is Kamba.”

“Ah, we have with us a Kikukamba!” the first man exclaimed, and they all laughed again.

I cringed slightly. I *hated* being called that. It was bad enough when schoolmates said such things, but shouldn’t adults know better—especially now?

“Do not take offense, young man,” the older man said. “It is meant only as a jest. The Kamba and Kikuyu are brothers. We are all Bantu ... the same.”

“The two are similar enough that the Luo or a Kalenjin would see no difference,” declared the second man. “For some, the only place for even a trace of Kikuyu blood is on the dirt at their feet.”

We always knew who was a Kikuyu and who was a Luo or a Kalenjin. It was important, but it really didn’t matter. Our homes were side by side; we sat together in school and went to each other’s stores. Then all at once, tribe was all that did matter.

“Where are your people from?” the old man asked.

“Eldoret.”

“Then you know about blood. What was the business of your family?”

“We have a parcel of land—our homestead—and a store in the main market.”

“Why is it that every Kikuyu wants to be either a soldier or a shopkeeper?” the old

man asked.

“Or the president,” the first man said. “None of this would have happened if he had stopped being president and let the other take office after the election.”

“And let a Luo become president?” the second man demanded.

“If he had, this would not have happened,” the first replied.

“No, much worse would have happened. Our president stayed to protect us, to keep us safe!”

“Do you feel protected? Do you feel safe?” asked the first man.

“But how much worse would it have been if the Luo controlled the military? The slaughter would have been even worse and—”

“Silence!” the oldest man said as he got to his feet. “There is no point in arguing over what is the past and about things we do not know. We are not the only ones who have suffered. We are not the only ones who have tasted death.”

I knew he was talking about the rioting and killing in Nairobi and other places. Across the country there had been killings—members of one tribe slaughtering members of another. Luo and Kalenjin and Maasai killing Kikuyu and Kamba. Kikuyu and Kamba killing Luo and Kalenjin and Maasai.

“There is a difference between them killing us and us killing them,” the second man said. “That was done because the Luo had to be stopped. They had to be punished and —”

“Burning a home or killing a child is the same no matter who wields the machete or tosses the match,” the oldest man said.

That seemed to silence everybody, although I wanted to argue against what he had said. Our killing was done in self-defense or to avenge the deaths of our people.

“What is done is done. It is over,” the old man said.

“Not all,” said the first man. “It is not done until we return to our stores and our homes.”

“There are no homes to return to. They have been burned to the ground.”

Is that what happened to my home? I’d heard rumors that our store was torched, and I knew what had happened to the church. Still, I wanted to believe our house continued to stand.

“We can rebuild,” insisted the first man. “They can burn a house to the ground, but they cannot take away the ground it stands on.”

“I have been driven out before—four times,” the older man said. “Why return to be driven out again?”



“I will return and plant my crops.”

“If you go back, the only act you will perform with a shovel or hoe is to dig your own grave. Do you think it is safe to bring your family home now?”

The man shook his head, and I could see the sadness in his face in the growing light.

“Not now. Later.”

The man who had been arguing so fiercely with the first reached over and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Someday we will return. I will go with you. But not now ... not yet.”

“In the meantime, we are here,” the old man said. “And we will do the best we can with the little we’ve been given. At least we are safe.”

“I wish I felt so sure,” the second man said. “Those guards are few. Do you think they could stop a mob if it attacked us? Would they even try? Maybe they would just run away to save their own lives.”

“We are not helpless,” the first man said. “We will not be driven and slaughtered like sheep. If they come, they will meet men who are prepared to fight.”

He pushed back the blanket over his shoulder to reveal a large machete dangling from his belt. The second man did the same, and another pulled out a club. I wished that I had a machete or a club. All we had was a small knife for cooking, and it was back in our tent.

“We are Kikuyu and we will fight if we need to fight.”

There was a low rumbling sound—an engine—and then two headlights came into view and marked the path in front of the truck coming slowly toward us. It was the water truck. There soon would be water to replenish the tanks and fill my container.

Chapter Two

The camp was coming to life: tent flaps open, bedding lying on top of the canvas to dry and breathe and catch the fresh air; little fires going and pots of water bubbling away; children laughing and playing. It hadn't taken long for that to happen. The smaller the child, the sooner he or she acted as if nothing had happened. I wished I were young enough to forget. I felt so old. I couldn't even remember what thirteen felt like. Did I used to laugh? Did I used to play football with the other children at the school? I remembered, but I didn't believe it.

My mother squatted beside the fire, our little pot held in place over the flames by a wooden spit. She smiled at me as she stirred the porridge. I smiled back, but I knew neither of us was truly smiling. In her eyes was sadness, worry, a weariness that extended throughout her whole body. She seemed so much older, as if she had aged before my very eyes. I felt the same sadness and worry. I wondered if she could see those things in my eyes too.

Her clothing was as worn and dusty as her face. It was all she owned, the clothes she was wearing when we had to flee. I wished I'd known then what was going to happen. At least I would have put on warmer clothes or better shoes. I looked down now at the little hole in the toe of my shoe.

I set the water container next to my mother with a loud thud. "I went for water."

"I saw that the container was gone," she said. "You couldn't sleep?"

"I slept fine. I just wanted to get the water before there was a line. How are you feeling?"

"Much better every day."

I didn't know why I asked. She would never tell me the truth about how she was feeling. She wasn't shaking or sweating, I noticed, but her eyes were cloudy and yellow. That she couldn't hide. Anymore than she could hide the fact that she was thinner, her shoulders more hunched, the lines on her face more deeply etched. I knew it was more than just the malaria flaring up again.

"Where is Jata?" I asked.

"Still sleeping."

"I am not sleeping," she called out from inside the tent. "I was waiting for breakfast in bed." She giggled.



"You will be waiting for a long time," I suggested.

"Come, little one. It is ready," our mother said.

She giggled again and came out of the tent. Our mother took the wooden spoon and portioned out the porridge onto three plastic plates. One serving was big—that one she

would give to me—and the other two were much smaller. She scraped the spoon against the pot until the last little bit of porridge was taken. She handed us both our plates and returned the spoon to the empty pot. I picked up my own spoon, took some food from my plate and transferred it to hers.

“You need the extra food!” she protested. She tried to take the spoon from me, but I held it away from her.



“You need more than a child’s serving,” I argued.

“I am not growing,” my mother said.

“I *am* growing,” Jata said.

“You are.” With her fingers, my mother took the spoonful I’d put on her plate and plopped it onto my sister’s.

Before my sister could react, I reached out, grabbed it and popped it into my mouth.

“Hey!” she protested.

“You may be growing, but you are not working,” I said. “You will be sitting in a classroom and I will be doing chores.”

“I could work too!”

“You need to go to school,” I said.

“Why don’t you need to go to school?” Jata demanded.

“They have only set up school for nursery and standard one and two,” I said.

“That isn’t fair!” Jata protested.

“It is not only fair but fortunate. You should thank your teachers for setting up the school at all,” my mother said. “Now finish your meal and your brother will walk you to class.”



“I can walk myself.”

“No,” I said. “I will walk you. I will be going out to search for firewood, and it is on my way.” I gestured toward the dwindling pile of twigs just inside the flap of the tent. Like everything else of value, our fuel was stashed away inside the tent.

“I could go for firewood,” my mother offered.

“No, I will. I have nothing else to do.” I had no school or studies, no games or friends to play with, no chores to do on the homestead. “You can stay here and watch our tent.”

What she could do was lie down and rest. I knew from the doctor that when the malaria flared up, rest and sleep were the best medicine. My mother didn’t argue, which worried me even more. She had to be more tired and sick than I thought if she was letting me go off by myself without a fight.



The flaps were up on the big tent that had been made into the school. Crates that had

once held supplies had been made into desks, and someone had found a few chalkboards. There wasn't much more—no books or writing paper, pencils or pens—but they did have teachers. Within this camp there were teachers, drivers, shoemakers, seamstresses ... well, everybody except for the rich. They had been forced to flee as well—if you were Kikuyu in our area, you ran or were killed. But those with relatives or money or connections were able to go elsewhere. They didn't need to be in the camp. Here were the people who either had nothing to start with or had to flee with nothing, leaving behind their homes, possessions and money.

My family wasn't poor. Before coming here, I'd never known what it was like to go hungry. There were always crops growing—the land was good—and we had our store and home and cattle. We *had* all of those. Now we had a cooking pot, a knife, two blankets, a cot, the clothes on our backs and one extra week's worth of food stuffed under the mattress.



“Muchoki?” my sister called.

“Yes?”

“You were staring again.”

“I was *thinking* again. You should try it. Now go to school. I will be back to get you at the end of the day. Do not leave without me, understand?”

“I can find my way back to our tent. I am not a baby.”

“I know, but you are my little sister and you need to listen to me. You need to respect what your older brother tells you. Understand?”

“I understand.”

“Now go.”

She skipped off toward the school tent and was greeted by one of the teachers, then instantly swallowed up into a group of girls. They were all smiling and laughing and talking. I wished *I* were young enough not to worry. I wished *I* could go to school. Not here, of course, but *my* school. Last year I was third out of forty-seven students. This year I would have been studying for my high school admissions. I knew I could get the marks to qualify to get into a good school—at least a provincial school, although my parents hoped for national. That would have been much more money, of course, and I might have had to go farther away, but still, to go to a national school was a dream.

I missed my teachers, my lessons, sitting at my desk, running in the field chasing a football, playing with my friends. My friends—people I had known for years whose fathers and uncles and brothers had come after us in angry mobs, carrying machetes and clubs and torches ... I turned and walked toward the gate. I didn't want to think about any of this. I just needed to get more fuel for the fire.

The entire camp was now up and moving. Almost all the tents had at least one flap

up, letting in the sun and allowing the breeze to blow away the stale air. In front of each tent was a small fire pit for cooking. Each one was made of a few rocks to contain the fire and ashes. Many women used small whisk brooms made of leaves to sweep the front of the family tent. The sweeping couldn't clear away the dirt, but it left smooth patterns in the hard red clay. Fires were being tended, food cooked, and clothes were slung across the tops of the tents—some to dry after being washed, and others just to catch the breeze. Life went on.



Two soldiers, rifles slung across their shoulders, came strolling toward me. I moved to the side to let them pass and looked down at the ground. There were soldiers who patrolled the camp—usually in groups of two or three—and those who stood on guard at the perimeter fence and the gate. The fence itself was nothing more than strands of wire nailed onto rough poles. It was not much higher than a tall man and was topped by razor wire. It would perhaps have been possible in places to pull it up at the bottom and crawl under, but it would have been very difficult, and painful, to try to go over the top. I guess I should have been grateful for the fence and the guards, but strangely it somehow made me feel trapped, almost penned in like livestock. They were there to safeguard us. Still, they made me feel uneasy and I wondered if the man from the water tank was correct—would they fight to protect us, or flee if there was an attack? Where were the soldiers when we were being attacked? Had they had just turned and run away or hidden in their barracks the way the police hid in their stations? When we needed them the police were nowhere to be seen. Would these soldiers be any different? I wondered how many of the soldiers were Kikuyu, how many of them were *our* people.

I wished I had taken our little cooking knife with me. It wasn't much, but it was more than I now had.

I slowed down as I came up to the gate. During the night it was closed and nobody was supposed to go in or out, but now it was wide open and the guards didn't even seem to notice the people flocking through. I was happy not to be noticed.

There was a trickle of people leaving the camp. A few were men but most were women, and some were my age or a little younger or older. I knew I wasn't the only one going out for wood, although I also knew there were many reasons for people to leave. Some were heading out to the highway to catch a *matatu*—the buses that carried everybody and everything—and take it to the city. Those people might have relatives in Nairobi or were going to find work. I'd never been there, but I'd heard stories of big buildings, road crammed with cars and people on all the streets. The city was supposed to go on forever—houses, apartments, people, cars, carts and *matatus*. Sometimes my father had had to go there for business. He said he was always grateful to come home because Eldoret was paradise compared to Nairobi.

For me, Eldoret was all I'd ever known. It was where I was born and raised, and where my father said I would eventually marry, have children of my own, take over the

homestead and store, and someday die. All that talk about marriage and taking over the homestead just seemed like so much talk, it made me laugh. Little did I know how soon the store and homestead would be gone, and how close to death I almost came to be. Eldoret had changed from paradise to hell.

Those in the camp who had been to Nairobi and were fortunate to find a job or a benefactor would come back with new cooking pots, thick blankets, warm clothing, a new mattress, or even a chicken or goat to be slaughtered. How long had it been since I'd tasted goat meat? We'd always had goats at our homestead, enough to milk and butcher for meat for holidays.

If I were a little bit older or my mother a little bit stronger, one of us would have gone looking for day labor outside the camp. Now, all she could do was rest and all I could do was search for wood and fetch water.

I felt a sense of relief as I stepped through the gate. I took a deep breath, hoping that the air would feel different. It didn't. I looked back through the wire to all the tents and all the activity. The crowds, the smell, the dust when it was dry and the mud when it was wet—it all drew me back. Part of me wanted to turn around and go back inside the wire. When I was inside I wanted out, and when I was out I wanted to be back inside.

What I really wanted was to be home.

Just outside the gate, sitting under the shade of a bush, were two girls and a boy. All three of them were about my age—maybe a year older or younger. They seemed to be waiting for something. It wasn't wise to go out alone, so if they were going out for wood, they might be waiting for more people to join them. Maybe four would be enough. I walked over.

"Hello, I am Muchoki," I said, speaking directly to the boy, because it would not be proper to address the girls.

The boy got to his feet. He was no bigger than me. "I am Jomo. These are my sisters, Kioni and Makena." All three were dressed in clean clothing with no holes, although only the boy wore shoes. "We are from Webuye. And you?"

"Eldoret."

They all took on the same look of concern that people did whenever my town was mentioned.

"It was bad there," Jomo said.

"It was bad everywhere, but I've been told it was among the worst there." I paused and offered a nervous smile. Somehow it felt shameful to be from an area that had had so much violence. "I am going to find fuel for the fire and was looking for company," I said.

"As are we," Jomo said.

"Do you think the four of us would be enough?" I asked.

"The two of us would be enough," Jomo said. "We could send the two of them back to the camp to cook, but they both have strong backs."

"We could work together and split what we find in quarters, each getting our share," I suggested.

"You are fair. Do you have a knife or an axe?" Jomo asked.

I shook my head.

He pulled up his tattered sweater to reveal a machete hanging in a sheath around his neck. “We will use this, to cut the wood and to have—just in case it is needed to cut something else. Let us set off.”

Jomo started off toward the highway and I fell in beside him. The two girls got up and trailed behind us. There were people—in ones and twos—extending over the hill ahead of us, marking the way. In the beginning we’d have had to only go a few hundred meters, but now, less than a month since we’d moved here, the walk could be close to an hour to find the deadfall.

“How long have you been in the camp?” Jomo asked.

“A little more than a month. We were one of the first, and the camp has grown around us. You?”

“Two weeks. Maybe we will be here only another two or three weeks.”

“You’re going back to Webuye?” I questioned.

He shook his head. “No, to Isiolo.”

“I don’t know where that is.”

“It is past Mount Kenya. My family, we are Meru and we have relatives. It is very far.”

“But how will you get there?” I asked. “Will you walk?”

“I *could* walk,” Jomo said.

Behind him, his sisters started giggling.

“What are you chickens cackling about?” he asked.

“It is hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away! You could never walk that far,” Kioni said.

“I could walk across all of Kenya if I needed to. Walking is simple: Every journey begins with one step. Step after step until you reach your goal. Maybe it would be harder for a couple of chickens.”

“Our father has gone ahead,” Kioni explained. “He is arranging for a place to stay and a vehicle to come and get us.”

“And until he returns I am the man of the family.”

“If we are chickens, then you are nothing more than a rooster,” Makena said, and the two girls burst into laughter.

“And not even a *big* rooster,” Kioni said.

“A rooster that sleeps in each morning and must be woken up,” Makena added. “Not *much* of a rooster.”

“Little sisters,” Jomo said, shaking his head. “Do you have sisters?”

“Just one. She is much younger.”

“You are so lucky to have only one. Would you like a second or third? As the man of the house, I could give them to you.”

“Thank you for your generous offer, but I am happy with just the one,” I said, laughing.

“I understand not two, but one certainly—” He stopped mid-sentence and dropped his voice. “Do you see them?”

He pointed and I looked. There in the scrub, not too far away, were three small gazelles.

“They are so close,” Jomo whispered. “I just wish we had a gun.”

“Or even a spear,” I said.

“We have a spear,” Makena said. “A *flaming* spear.”

What was she talking about?

“She is making a bad joke,” Jomo explained. “My name means ‘flaming spear.’ ”

“If we all picked up our brother, we could throw him at the gazelle,” Kioni suggested.

“Are you *sure* you do not want another sister or two?” he asked me.

“I would rather have a gazelle,” I said. “It would taste good.”

“Have you eaten gazelle before?”

“Never, but I imagine it would be good. Before coming here, I had never even *seen* a gazelle. There are only goats and cows and sheep around Eldoret.”

“The same for Webuye. There are lots of animals around here, though—even elephants and giraffes and lions.”

“You have seen them?” I exclaimed.

He shook his head. “I have heard about them. I have only seen gazelles and some zebras. I wonder what zebra meat would taste like?”

“If we see one, we can throw you at it instead of the gazelle,” Makena said. “It is a bigger target.”

Jomo turned to me. “If I give you a dowry, will you at least marry one of them so she will live somewhere else?”

One of the gazelles—the one with the biggest horns—turned and looked at us then. He ran off, and the others followed close behind. We started walking again.

“When will your family leave the camp?” Jomo asked.

“I do not know.”

“Surely you have family somewhere and can go there.”

“My mother’s people are Kamba. They live in a place called Kikima. Have you heard of it?”

“No.”

I shrugged. “Nobody has. I only know it is in Kambaland, up past Machakos.”

“I have not heard of those places either,” he said. “But all roads in Kenya lead to Nairobi. From there, you can go anywhere else. Have you ever been to Nairobi?”

“Never. You?”

“No. My mother said it is a big, black hole.”

“No, it is a city, a very big city. It is not a hole.”

“I think she meant it was *like* a hole.” He laughed. “She said that once people go there, they never leave. They fall in and the hole is so deep that they cannot climb out again.”

I could easily picture that—a hole so deep that you could never get out, so dark that you could hardly see the sky above. Sometimes it felt like we’d already fallen into one.

We followed the beaten path up a little rise. Up ahead, the people disappeared as they dropped over the dip. I looked back over my shoulder. A curve cut off from view

anybody else following behind. We were alone. It seemed so strange after spending all this time at a camp so crammed with people. You were never more than a few steps from other people, and even when you closed your eyes you could still hear them, coughing or talking, laughing or sobbing, even breathing. There was even a smell of people.

I slowed down slightly, hoping to hold on to the moment before we made the rise and saw the people ahead again. I even thought about stopping and letting Jomo and his sisters go ahead without me so I could be completely alone. Some part of me wanted to be alone, but another part craved the company of others. I was already living a life that was so much closer to being alone than anything I could have imagined. I realized I was relieved when we reached the crest of the hill and could see the other people once more.

From the little rise we stood on, I could see the highway leading off in both directions until it curved and dipped out of sight. Even this early in the morning, the heat was building up and there were wavy lines rising up from the tarmac as the air wiggled and shimmered. There were people waiting by the road, their colorful clothing standing out against the red of the dust and dirt. Along the road there were a few vehicles moving. They were so far away—so small—that they looked like toys.

“If you travel to the left, you will reach Nakuru,” Jomo said.

I nodded. “We traveled through there to get here.”

“And if you go to the right, you will reach Nairobi. My father will be coming back from that direction, and then we will all leave together.”

I couldn't help thinking how lucky they were. I could only wish that my father was coming to get us.

Chapter Three

“Time for bed, Jata,” my mother said.



“But I am not tired!” she protested. “Can’t I just stay up with you a bit longer?”

“I am not staying up. It is time for me to go to bed too.”

“Can you tell me a story?” Jata asked.

“I have told you every story I know dozens of times.”

“Please,” my sister begged.

“Only one, and only if it will help you get to sleep.”

I was pleased. I was too old to ask for stories but still young enough to enjoy hearing them.

“Which one do you want to hear?”

“Can you tell us a new one?” I asked. “Something we haven’t heard?”

“Are there any that I know that you do not know?” she asked.

“How about a story from when you were a girl?” I suggested.

“It was so long ago that they did not even have stories,” she said and laughed.

“Your mother didn’t tell you stories?” Jata questioned.

“She told me stories.”

“Can we hear one of those? Can you tell us a Kamba story?” I asked.

She nodded her head. “You know what ‘Kamba’ means, right?”

“It means ‘people of the string,’ ” I said.

“What does *that* mean?” asked Jata.

“That is what I will explain. That will be the story.”

I moved closer to the fire pit. The fire was almost out, but beneath the ash there were embers that still gave off warmth. I poked the ashes with a stick, and it sent up a puff of smoke and a gust of red and warmth. Both were good. The smoke chased away the mosquitoes, and the embers chased away the cold. I still found the smell of fire disturbing, but the other benefits outweighed the distress.

“The Kamba people did not originally come from what we now call Kambaland,” our mother began.

“Where did they come from?” asked Jata.

“Very far away.”

“Did they ride in a car or a *matatu*?”

Mother laughed. “This was long ago, before there were any cars or *matatus*—or even trucks or motorcycles. Not even bicycles. They walked.”

I thought of what Jomo had said about each journey, no matter how long, starting with just one step.

“There was a boy and a girl,” our mother explained, “and they loved each other, but their families told them that they could not marry.”

“So what did they do?”

“They decided that they were going to marry anyway. They would run away in the middle of the night and be together. They knew they would have to run far away, but after they were married, their families could not object anymore and they would return.”

“But if they went far, especially in the night, weren’t they afraid they would get lost and not be able to find their way back?” Jata asked.

“Yes, they were. You are a very smart girl.”

Jata beamed and sat up straighter.

“The girl had with her a big, big ball of string. She tied one end to the door of her home, and as they walked she let out the string.”

“So they could follow the string back, even at night!” Jata exclaimed. “*She* was a very smart girl!”

“She was,” Mother agreed. “They went off through the night, through the forest, down the side of the mountain, over a river and to a place where nobody lived. As they walked, they let that string out behind them, knowing that they could go as far as the string was long.”

“That must have been a very big ball of string,” Jata said.

“It was big, but it was also very, very thin, so it went far,” she explained. “The boy and girl became one. They built a house and had a child and farmed the land—it was very good land. Then finally it was time to go home to show their parents their new grandson. They followed the string back. It guided them over the river and up the mountain and into the forest, and that is when it happened.”

“When *what* happened?” my sister asked.

“The string had broken.”

“That is terrible!” Jata cried out.

“It *was* terrible. They could not go back to find their families. All they could do was go back the way they had come, still following the string. And that is how the Kamba people—the people of the string—came to be. We are all the relatives, the descendants, of that first man and woman.”

“Were that boy and girl your grandparents?” Jata asked.

Again my mother laughed. “I am not quite that old, although some days I feel like I could be! Those would be your great-great-great-great-grandparents. Did you like the story?”

“Yes, it was very good. It reminded me of you and father,” Jata said.

“Why would you think that?” our mother asked.

“You were not supposed to marry, and you had to leave your home.”

“Who told you that we were not supposed to marry?”

“Mundi.”

“Our cousin has a big mouth,” I said. “And little brains.”

“But did he tell the truth?” Jata asked.

Once again my mother nodded her head. “My parents did not want me to marry a Kikuyu—especially one they had never met.”

“So you had to leave?”

“I had to leave.” She looked so sad.

“And you could not find the string to go back,” Jata said.

Our mother shook her head. “I wish I had been able to find the string to bring you home. Your grandparents would have been so proud and happy to meet you.”



“Why did we never go back?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“It is complicated. There was never enough time or money, and there were always other things happening. My sickness ...” She let the sentence trail off. “Besides, you are both Kikuyu.”

“We’re Kikukambas!” Jata sang out. “We are Kamba too.”

“No, *I* am Kamba. I married a Kikuyu, and when a female marries a Kikuyu, the children are Kikuyu. You are both named after your father’s parents, as is the Kikuyu tradition. You speak Kikuyu and you know the Kikuyu traditions.”



“You could tell us more stories,” Jata said. “We could learn the Kamba traditions and —”

“No, it is too late,” our mother said, cutting her off. “It is too late tonight. It is time for bed.” She got to her feet and took Jata by the hand. She looked shaky. Just before they entered the tent, she turned to me. “Do not be long, and make sure the fire is out.”

“Yes, I will make sure to do that.” I wasn’t ready for bed or sleep.

I knew the story my mother had told. Before my sister was born, my mother used to talk to me in Kikamba when we were alone late at night. There were so many words that were similar to Kikuyu, and although they were now foreign to my tongue, they were still familiar to my ear.

She also used to tell me about her home, growing up as the only girl with seven brothers and the grandfather and grandmother I never met. She talked about how someday I’d meet them all, about how we would go back to her home one day. But when her sickness came, she stopped talking about them and stopped talking to me in Kikamba. And we never went back.

I took the stick I had used to poke the ashes and snapped it into four pieces, throwing them on the fire. I knew it was a waste to use fuel just to sit by, but I wanted to. Besides, Jomo and I had gathered a great deal of wood that day, and my share, my quarter, would keep us supplied for days to come.

Jomo and his family would be leaving soon. They didn’t need to follow a piece of string: their father was coming to get them. I didn’t have a father. I didn’t even have a

piece of string.

Just then, I heard a voice coming from the tent. It was my mother, and she was singing. Her voice was soft and gentle. She was singing to Jata to help her fall asleep. I recognized the melody before I could pick out the words. It was a song she used to sing to me when I was little. It was a song about a little boy and his grandfather going on a trip together. She was singing in Kikamba.



Maybe I did have a piece of string.

Chapter Four

The sun was hardly up, but church had already begun. I could hear the singing drifting across the camp. It was a familiar hymn. I stopped to listen and it brought me back to our church on the outskirts of Eldoret. It was where my family—all of our family—went to worship. After my homestead it was the place I felt most familiar with, most happy being there. My father was an elder in the church and our pew was close to the front. I'd sit there, my father on one side, my sister and mother on the other. All around us would be relatives and friends. The music was always good, and even if the minister went on too long I knew there would be time afterwards to play with my cousins, and visit and share a meal.



Jata tugged at my arm, pulling me back to the present, and we started walking again. I was in no rush. It wasn't as if church was going to end soon. The service would be at least three hours long, and every minute I spent walking *toward* church was another minute I didn't have to be *in* church.

The voices got louder and the tent came into view. There were hundreds and hundreds of people gathered together, but there was still a great deal of open space underneath the gigantic tarp that served as the church. Funny how we didn't always have enough food or water but this gigantic tent had suddenly appeared so there could be a church. The ministers would say that God's Kingdom was more important than this one, but we were living in this one right now, and more food and heavier blankets would have been good. Would Jesus have built a temple or fed the poor first?

It was also hard to get away from my memories. Church was supposed to be God's home, a sanctuary, a place of safety. Instead it had been nothing more than a trap for me. How many times had my mind gone back to the last time I was in a real church? We were gathered under God's roof, and what did he do? Did he protect us? Did he save us? Or did he let ... I tried to force those thoughts out of my mind. I couldn't risk inviting any more of his wrath upon my family.

Standing at the side of the tent I saw many familiar faces—people I had gotten to know in the camp—but I was looking for one: Jomo. Over the past two weeks he had become my best friend. And his sisters, who could be truly annoying, were so kind and gentle with Jata. They had almost adopted her as their own. It meant that they would watch her for me and give me a little time free.

My mother seemed less able to do things as the sickness got stronger. Malaria was like

that. Sometimes it was so powerful a person couldn't work, sometimes so strong a person couldn't even walk. I had seen it that bad with my mother before, and then it had passed. It would pass this time. I'd seen it worse. And yet that thought scared me more. Did that mean it was going to get worse before it got better? Jata needed to be cared for. I was there for her when mother couldn't be. She also needed me to tell her that everything would be alright, that mother would get better. I offered her reassurances I had no right to make.

I scanned the group but didn't have to look for long. Jomo was standing at the back and waved wildly when he saw me. Jata and I went over to him.

"Being late for church is not a good thing, you know," he said. "God is watching."

"Then I'm sure he saw me walking," I said. "Where are your sisters?"

"Under the tent in the shade."

I nodded and had started to walk away when he grabbed me by the arm and my sister kept walking down an aisle.

"Do you really believe that God is everywhere?" he asked urgently.

"Um, yes ... I guess he is."

"Good. Then we do not need to go to church to be with God. Come with me."

He started to walk away, but this time *I* stopped *him*. "Where are we going?"

"Come and you shall see."

"I can't leave my sister alone."

"Alone? Just look—she is with my sisters."

I looked back. She was sitting on Kioni's lap with Makena on the bench beside them. She was laughing and happy, and I knew she wasn't going anywhere without them.

"Do you think they would let anything happen to her?" Jomo asked, seeming to read my mind. "Besides, we will be back long before church is over. So are you coming?"

Part of me didn't want to go, but the bigger part was curious to see what he had in mind. It *had* to be more exciting than church. I decided to risk making God angry. Anyway, he wasn't the only one who had reason to be angry.

I walked wordlessly beside Jomo. I knew there was no point in asking him questions when he was being mysterious. He had quickly become a good friend, somebody I trusted. Of course, I'd trusted my friends and neighbors in Eldoret, and that trust had proven to be nothing but empty hopes.

He stopped in front of his tent, reached inside and pulled out a spear!

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"I made it. I found the stick and attached a knife to the end." He handed it to me. "What do you think?"

I moved the spear up and down, feeling the wood in my hand, the weight of the weapon. "It feels good, but does it work?"

"Who would be better to make a spear than a boy named after a spear?"

"I do not think it works that way. It could just be a toy."

"A *toy*? There is only one way to find out if it is a toy or a weapon." He took the spear from me and then reached back into his tent and removed the machete. He handed that to me. Once again he started walking.

“Where are we going now?”

“Were you not listening? We are going to try to find something worth throwing my spear at.”

“Here in the camp?”

“Outside the camp,” he replied. “Come, and stop asking so many stupid questions.”

I trailed behind him. I did have questions, but going with him would answer them.

As we moved, we attracted a great deal of attention. Two boys carrying a spear and a machete were worth watching. People gawked and pointed at us as we passed. I didn’t think that was so good.

“Jomo, slow down! Let me at least hide the machete so people do not stare.”

“They will be staring harder when we come back with an antelope or a gazelle—or even a zebra.”

“Do you really think we can catch a zebra?”

“Not ‘catch’—kill. And not ‘we’—me. I am the one with the spear. You can help carry whatever I kill and then we will share it—your family and mine.”

I liked his confidence, but I wasn’t sure that a hastily made spear would be enough. He would need skills in tracking and hunting and using the weapon. I had never even held a spear before a few minutes ago, so I couldn’t be counted on for anything.

We came to the gate. Two soldiers, one with a hand on the holster of his sidearm and the second with a rifle on his back, came toward us.

“Why do you have a spear?” the first soldier demanded.

“It would be foolish to go hunting without one,” Jomo declared.

“What did you say?”

“He said we are going hunting,” I replied, answering before Jomo could trouble or annoy the soldier further. “We are going hunting.”

“You two squirts are going hunting?”

“Yes, out there.” I gestured beyond the fence. “We hope to kill a gazelle.”

“With that little spear?” he asked, and the two soldiers laughed.

“If it is so little, why did you need to ask about it?” Jomo snapped.

Both men stopped laughing.

I leaned in close to the first soldier. “Please forgive him. He is my cousin, but he is not so right in the head,” I said. “His mother dropped him when he was a baby.”

“If he isn’t careful, he may suffer another blow to the head.”

“I will keep him careful. Come, Jomo. Come!” I grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out the gate and away from the soldiers.

“Those two were just acting like big men because they have guns,” Jomo said.

“They *were* big men—bigger than you and me—and they *did* have guns. It is not wise to be impolite to soldiers.”

“They were the rude ones,” he complained. “But enough about them. We are here to kill an animal, and when we do, we will bring it back in through that gate and wave it under their big noses!”

“They will be seeing it, because there is no way into the camp except through the gate. But we will not be waving anything under anybody’s nose—and especially not the

noses of men with guns. Now what is your plan?"

"Plan?" Jomo asked.

"To kill an animal."

"I thought we would walk through the brush until we find one and then I would throw my spear at it." He shrugged. "Simple."

"It is simple. Very much like you."

Jomo gave me a playful shove. "Let us walk until we see some animals."

We walked off into the bush, away from the path that led toward the highway.

"When I leave the camp, I will miss you," Jomo said.

"And me too."

"I did not believe we would still be here this long. My father could be here today or tomorrow."

I didn't reply. He'd been saying the same thing for the past week. I think he was starting to worry.

"He must be taking longer because he wants our home to be perfect for us."

"I'm sure that is why." But I wasn't sure. I had heard rumors that there was continued violence, that people were still being hurt and killed. When there was no information, there were only rumors. I wondered if Jomo had heard the rumors too.

He suddenly ducked down, so I did the same. "Do you see them?"

I nodded. There were half a dozen gazelles ahead, almost on the top of a small rise.



"I want you to wait here, quietly," he said. "I will circle around and get behind them on the hill below. Wait until you think I am in position, then charge and drive them toward me."

"How long should I wait?"

"One minute. Count."

Jomo took off, heading in almost the opposite direction from where the gazelles were grazing peacefully. He disappeared into the scrub brush. I couldn't see him or hear him, and the gazelles didn't seem to have noticed either. Maybe this could work, I thought. Maybe I should give him a little more than a minute to get in position.

I tried to stay perfectly still. My grandfather had once told me that animals only see movement. As long as I didn't move, they wouldn't see me. I just had to stand there and wait. I focused on one gazelle. It had been so long since I'd had meat—so long since my mother had had meat—and I wanted it. She *needed* it. Meat would be good for her. Meat and the marrow from the bones helped malaria. There was hardly anything better for somebody who was sick.



The animals were starting to edge across the face of the rise. If they moved much farther, they wouldn't run toward the place where Jomo was—or at least where I hoped

he was—when I started to chase them.

I inched to the right, trying to cut them off but not startle them. The closest gazelle, the one with the biggest horns, stopped grazing and looked up. I froze. Slowly he looked all around with his nose up in the air, smelling. His tail twitched nervously. He knew something was wrong, but he wasn't sure what. And then our eyes locked. He'd seen me. They were going to flee, but in which direction?

I screamed loudly and waved my arms wildly as I ran to the right, cutting them off from that direction. All the animals jumped and then followed the big male as he ran over the rise! I kept running and screaming, up the hill, right to the spot where I'd seen them disappear. Scrambling across the rough ground was taking all my air, and I staggered, almost falling over the loose earth and rough rocks as I made the top.

And then I saw it.

There was a gazelle lying on the ground, still twitching, with a spear sticking out of its side! He'd done it—he'd hit the gazelle! But where was he? Where was Jomo? He was nowhere to be seen ... but how was that possible?

“Jomo! Where are you?” I yelled out.

“Here! I am here!”

He followed after his voice, running out from behind some brush, and he was still carrying his spear. I looked over at the gazelle—which had now stopped moving—and at the spear sticking out of it. How was that possible?

Then I saw the Maasai warrior. He was standing stone-still beside some rocks, the red of his clothing the only thing that marked him. He glided forward, straight for the gazelle, and stopped right over top of it.



“Hey, that was our gazelle!” Jomo yelled as he ran toward him.

He skidded to a stop in front of the man. The Maasai was a full head taller than him, but Jomo continued to yell. I hoped the man didn't understand Kikuyu.

I ran over. “My friend does not know what he is saying,” I explained, switching to Swahili in the hopes that he'd understand the common language.

“He is saying it very loud,” the man answered. “I don't know the words, but I know he is angry with me.”

I knew the Maasai from Eldoret. They often traded in our store. My father had told me that they prided themselves on being short-tempered, and that they always carried weapons. And, if what I had heard was true, those weapons had been turned on Kikuyu in parts of the country. He had a machete hanging from his belt.

“That is our gazelle!” Jomo yelled as he too started using Swahili.

“How did *my* spear get into *your* gazelle?” the Maasai asked. He took the handle of his spear, twisted it into the animal, placed his foot on its side and pulled the spear free.

Blood and guts dripped from the end of the weapon. He held it up. "Does your spear have blood?"

"We were chasing it," Jomo said.

"A dog can chase a *matatu*, but that doesn't mean the *matatu* is his," he said. The warrior turned to me. "You were the one screaming like a girl?"

"I was driving the gazelle toward my friend."

"Instead you drove it to the tip of *my* spear."

"He was chasing it to my spear, but you got in the way," Jomo cried.

"*That* is not a spear. *This* is a spear." He held it even higher and I felt afraid.

"Come on, Jomo. We have to get going."

"We are not going anywhere without *our* gazelle!"

"You did nothing to deserve any part of this kill," the man said. "There is only one way this can be settled."

Lightning-quick he drew the machete from its sheath. I staggered backward as he pointed the tip of the blade directly at me.

"*You*," he said menacingly, looking at me. "*You* did something. You drove the gazelle to me. Part of the kill belongs to you." He plunged the blade into the side of the animal.

Chapter Five

All eyes were on us as we walked through the gate. Each of us supported one end of the spear, the remains of the gazelle concealing the middle section. The Maasai had given us the back legs and part of the torso. It would have been more impressive to have the head and horns balanced between us, but still it was obvious that we were returning with a kill. Besides, you could not eat the horns or head.

I felt like a proud hunter. Of course, neither of us had killed this animal, but the people watching didn't know that. The man, the Maasai, had said I could decide what to do with my portion of the kill and I could share it with my friend if I wished, "although he deserved none." Of course I was going to share it. Jomo had started to complain again when the man portioned out what looked like less than half the animal, but I told him that if he didn't shut up, I would not only give him nothing but also kill him myself. Luckily, he had closed his mouth.

"Do you see the kill?" Jomo asked now, goading one of the guards who had teased us on the way out. "Not bad for a toy."

He seemed incapable of not causing problems.

The soldier removed his hat and bowed his head slightly. "My apologies for doubting you." He paused. "I have never tasted gazelle before."

"And you still aren't going to!" Jomo yelled back.

The guard scowled.

"But if you come to my tent," I said, "you are welcome to share a bowl of soup made from the meat. I would be honored if you joined us."

"Will *he* be there?" the guard asked, pointing at Jomo.

"No, he will not."

The soldier smiled. "Then it would be my honor to join *you* at your table."

"My family tent is in the center, in the row that runs from the central water tank."

"I will follow the smell. Thank you."

I started walking again, towing the gazelle and Jomo behind me.

"He is not getting any of *my* share," Jomo declared.

"You must spend your entire day thinking of ways to get in trouble."

"You are so wrong! I hardly think at all!"

I laughed, and he laughed too.

"First you fight with a Maasai with a machete, and then you taunt a soldier with a rifle. Neither of those is very wise."

"Maybe not, but I just do not like being bullied. That soldier would not act that way if my father was here. Maybe he will arrive in time to share my part of the animal."

"Maybe. I look forward to meeting him."

We continued to walk, with every eye in the camp on us. I did feel proud, even if all I had done to deserve this was scream like a girl. Nobody had to know that part.

Our pot simmered over the fire. I stirred it so the food wouldn't burn. It was a mixture of beans and rice—nothing different there—but the gazelle was a welcome addition. The smell of the meat drifted across the whole camp. I'd taken one section of meat for our meal, while my mother had begun drying a bigger section in the tent to preserve it. Still one more section had been traded for a warmer blanket and a few other items. I was so grateful for that blanket—my mother needed more warmth to chase away the chills that seemed to be overcoming her each night as she slept.

Jata joined me at the fire. "It smells so good," she said.

"It will taste even better. It will soon be ready."

"Do not start without me!" our mother called from the tent. She pushed open the flap and came out. Her stride was uneasy, and although she was smiling, she didn't look well. Her eyes were yellow and somehow she looked like she was faded.

"Come and sit," I said, offering her my hand.

"You are a hunter, a cook *and* a gentleman."

I eased her down so that she was sitting on a rock. That was the closest thing we had to a chair.

"I also have a guest joining us," I said.

"Is it your friend Jomo?"

I shook my head. "He is eating with his family. It is a soldier from the gate."

She gave me a confused and concerned look.

"He is a nice man, and I offered him the chance to taste gazelle," I explained.

"You are such a kind boy ... despite everything."

There was no need for her to say anything more. We knew what "everything" meant. Kindness was important for its own sake, but this was done with something else in mind. It was important to ensure that people with weapons were our friends.

I picked up a wooden spoon and ladled the soup into one of the three little plastic bowls.

"Did you borrow those bowls from somebody?" our mother asked.

"No, they were part of the trade, along with the blanket."

"You are a businessman, just like your father," she said.

I had so many memories of time spent with my father in his little shop. Our store was on the main street of Eldoret. It was far from the biggest store but it was very busy. It was co-owned by my father's brother—my uncle—and the two brothers worked together. My uncle's two sons and I would help out, but we were all still too young to be left on our own. The walls of the store were lined with clothing and racks of shoes. Behind the counter were the radios, flashlights, cellphones and other electronic items—safe from any potential thieves.

"Your love of business makes you a true Kikuyu," my mother said.

"And a true Kamba," I added. "I would like to meet my Kamba family someday."

"The meal tastes so good." She was ignoring my comment, which meant she wasn't comfortable with what I'd said. I shouldn't have said anything. I wasn't trying to make her feel worse than she already did.

She sipped quietly from the bowl—I wished I had traded for some spoons as well.

Perhaps someone would swap for some of the soup. I had seen people in the camp with lots of spoons and little food.

“This is just so good!” my mother exclaimed.

“It is good,” Jata said as she sipped from her own bowl.

“And you and Jomo caught it!”

“Mainly we just helped the Maasai warrior.”

“They can be very dangerous,” my mother warned. “Always be wary around the Maasai.”

“I was wary, but he was kind and fair.”

“Your father always said that they drove a difficult bargain but were men of their word,” she said.

Jata used her fingers to scoop up the last of the food in the bowl. Then she licked the bowl and her fingers.

“Do you want more?” I asked her.

“Can I go and play with my friends?” She pointed down the passage, where two of her little friends were waiting, holding a skipping rope.

“It is getting late and—”

“Go and play with your friends,” our mother said, cutting me off. “But stay where we can see you.”

Jata put down the bowl and skipped off.

“She needs time to play, to be happy.”

My mother was right. It was good to see her happy. It almost made me feel happy too.

Without asking, I scooped some more of the meal from the pot and put it in my mother’s bowl. “Eat.”

“I think you have come to believe that you are my mother rather than my son.”

“You need to eat. Food is the best medicine when you are ill,” I said.

“It is the only medicine we have, and we only have it thanks to you.” She paused and looked at me thoughtfully. “Actually, I can see my mother in you.”

“Your *mother*?”

“In the eyes. You have my mother’s kind eyes. You would know that if you had ever met her.”

“Why haven’t I ever ...” I let the sentence trail off. This was not what she needed.

My mother took another slurp from her bowl—a long slurp—and then looked right at me.

“I always thought I would go back. At first I did not because I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Of facing my family. My father—your grandfather—is a very, very proud man, and I know how much I hurt him.” She took another long, slow sip of the soup. “Then with the coming of you, caring for a baby, the distance, and the money that we did not have, it seemed like it would have to wait. But the longer I waited the harder it was to stop waiting and go. And then, in the end, I did not go because of hope.”

“I don’t understand. Hope?”

“I knew that the longer I waited, the harder it would be for my father to accept me back to his home. By not going, I had hope that he would not turn me away. By going, that hope could have been crushed and I would have had nothing.”

“We have nothing now,” I said. “Not even hope.”

“I know what you are saying. I just do not know if I could go back now with nothing, with everything gone. It would be hard to face him.”

“It sounds like your father is not the only person with too much pride.”

She laughed. “My father always said that of all his children, I was the one who was most like him.”

“I would like to meet my grandfather and grandmother.”

“It would not just be them. You have aunts and uncles, and I would imagine there are dozens and dozens of cousins by now. But I do not even know if my parents are still alive. I wish I knew.”

“There is only one way to find out.”

She took a deep breath. “It is very far and I am not well.”

“But when you get well?”

“Kikima is not close, Muchoki.”

“Every journey, no matter how far, starts with one step,” I said.

“That is very wise. Who told you that?”

“Jomo. He said that he could walk to Isiolo if he had to.”

“Isiolo is very far, even farther than Kikima. But hopefully we will not have to walk.”

“But if we had to we could,” I said. “It is not as if we have much to carry. As you said, you would return with nothing.”

She smiled. “I would return with something very important. I would return with my children—my parents’ grandchildren, the niece and nephew of my brothers, the cousins of their children.”

I understood why, for all those years, returning to her home village had represented the possibility of the end of hope for my mother if she was to be turned away. For me, now, it was the start of hope. And maybe it had rekindled her hope too. But first all that hope had to be in my mother getting better again. Right now she couldn’t even walk to the front gate.

“Good evening!”

The soldier was standing there, a rifle on his shoulder and a smile on his face.

“Good evening, sir,” I said.

“I hope I am not too late for a sample of gazelle.”

“No, sir. I made sure to save you a portion.”

“I thank your son, and I thank you as well, ma’am, for this invitation to join your family.”

“It is our honor,” she said. “Please sit.”

He pulled off the rifle and laid it carefully on the ground, taking a seat on a rock on the opposite side of the fire.

I filled a bowl and handed it to him, and also gave him the serving spoon. It was not right to have a guest use his hands.

He took a big mouthful. "So good," he raved, looking at my mother. "So very good! You are a cook who is a match for my wife!"

"You are most gracious to say so," my mother said, "but it was more my son than me."

"It is wonderful. I must admit, though, that as much as I appreciate the food, it is also good to be sitting around a fire with a family. It has been more than a month since I was with my family." He took another big mouthful. "Not that I should be complaining, of course, when I know how much worse it has been for the residents of the camp."

"It is better to be in a tent with your family than in a mansion alone," my mother said.

"And your family is all here with you?" he asked.

"All that remains." The last word was said so quietly that it almost couldn't be heard.

"You are not well," the guard said to my mother. "Malaria?"

"It has been there for a long time, but it has flared up again of late. Thank goodness my Muchoki is here to care for me."

"A son is a blessing. I have two sons and a daughter. Not that having a daughter is *not* a blessing," he added quickly. "Do you have medicine?"

She shook her head. "Rest, food, warmth are the best. So many here have malaria."

"So many have other things as well. The hospital tent and the medicine are for those who have diseases that can be spread. The fear is always of an outbreak of cholera or typhoid."

"And malaria can be suffered by many and spread by none. I understand."

"I am only a sergeant," he said, "but if there is help that I can give, please come forward and ask, and I will offer my humble services."

"You are most generous," she said. "We greatly appreciate your offer of help. But for now, you must finish your meal and then have more if you wish."

"I will finish this, but I will not take more."

"You do not like it?" my mother asked.

"I like it very much, but your family has greater needs than mine. I will not take advantage of the kindness you have offered—especially to me."

"I do not understand."

"I am Kalenjin."

"Kalenjin!" I gasped. "But you speak Kikuyu."

"I speak many languages. Kalenjin is my tribe."

I tasted bitterness in my mouth. If I had known he was Kalenjin, I would never have invited him to our tent, never offered an invitation to dine at our side.

Suddenly those fears of the soldiers guarding the camp came rushing back. How many of those who were guarding us were Kalenjin or Luo, and how many were Kikuyu?

"Most of the soldiers here are Kikuyu," he said, answering my unasked question. "But I am a soldier first and Kalenjin second. I am here to defend the people of my country. I am a Kenyan. I am here to defend *all* my people."

Those were brave words from a man whose people had attacked the defenseless.

"That is how it is supposed to be. We owe you even greater thanks and are even more honored that you sit with us to share a meal," my mother said. "Do have news of

things ... out there?"

"I hear things, but that does not make them true."

"And have you heard if things have settled?"

"There are still problems. Parts of Nairobi were still aflame this week."

I thought about Jomo's father—he had to pass through Nairobi to get to Isiolo. Was that why he had not returned? Because something had happened to him? Should I speak of this to Jomo?

"It was particularly bad in Kibera," the soldier said.

"Kibera?" my mother asked.

"It is a shantytown in Nairobi. There are so many people there they cannot even count them. It is reputed to be the biggest slum in Africa."

"And there were problems in Kibera?"

"Homes were set ablaze, whole sections destroyed and hundreds killed. There, many Luo and Kalenjin were killed by Kikuyu."

"That is so awful."

"I heard it was in retaliation for what was done in the western regions, but really it is nothing more than an excuse for people of violent natures to act violently. Still, those people may have spread the fire, but they were not the ones who started it."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The politicians who should unite us as Kenyans divided us as tribes. The fault lies with them." He paused. "I understand that some people were simply reacting to what they saw as violence being done to their people. I don't excuse their actions, but they were responding to what they heard had happened in the Western Province. It was particularly bad in the area around Eldoret. Stores and homes were burned to the ground, and many people were killed. There were terrible rumors—even reports of a church being set on fire with people in it."



"No," my mother said. "Not rumor. We are from Eldoret. We saw it. We lived through it."

"Now that you have told me, I will never again call it a rumor. I beg your forgiveness if my words have caused you offense."

"No offense was taken. I am sorry if I caused upset to our guest," my mother said.

"We are all upset, but you are not the cause."

"Rumors replace facts. It is wise to question. Can you tell us about things here in the camp?" my mother asked. "That is, if you are permitted to discuss such issues."

"I will discuss them with you and trust your discretion," he said. "What information do you request?"

"Is it true that there are over ten thousand of us here?" she asked.

"There are now over twelve thousand. The number has gone up as new people have come and down as others have left. At one point there were more than fourteen thousand, but others have left for resettlement."

“Have they gone back home?”

“There are no homes for some and no safety for any.”

“I thought things had settled,” she said.

“Settled but not finished. Violence continues to flare up as retaliation. An eye for an eye will leave everybody blind.”

“If they cannot return to their homes, where are those people going?”

“Many are returning to their tribal areas. Luo are fleeing Nairobi for the west, and Kikuyu are flooding back into the central areas, especially Nairobi. Do you have people in Nairobi?”

“I think everybody has people in Nairobi, but my family is from the hills of Mbooni district.”

“You are Kamba?” the guard asked.

“I am Kamba. My children are half Kamba and half Kikuyu.”

“It is a shame that every person in Kenya is not half Kikuyu and half Luo. Then none of this would have happened,” he said.

“Within the camp,” my mother asked, “are we safe?”

“All the displaced person camps are being held with integrity by the military.”

“How many camps are there?”

“There are twenty-two larger camps containing almost three hundred thousand people. This camp is large but not the largest.”

“And here things have gone well?” she asked.

“Everybody is hungry, but nobody has starved. Everybody is parched, but nobody is without water.”

“And disease?”

“There have been outbreaks of dysentery and a small pocket of cholera. There have been deaths, but the doctors and nurses are caring for the sick and disposing of the bodies to prevent disease from spreading.”

“We should be grateful,” my mother said. “So many people, so close together, so weak and tired—I’m surprised there has not been more sickness, more death.”

He shrugged. “In time it might get better, or it could get worse. It is wise to leave if you have a place to go.” His expression darkened, and I knew what question was going to come next. “Do you have a place to go?”

I waited for her answer, holding my breath ... hoping.

“Yes, there is a place, but it is far away.”

“Close is better than far, but far is better than not,” he said. And with that, he placed the bowl on the ground, stood and picked up his rifle. “I am so grateful for you sharing your meal and kindness and company. If there is some small way I can repay your kindness, I am at your service.”

“No, no. We should be thanking you,” my mother said. “You are a good soldier. You are a good Kenyan.”



Chapter Six

I placed the wet rag on my mother's forehead. It was hot to the touch. She was burning up, so fiercely that I finally had to move my sister away. She slept on the ground, a blanket wrapped around her to protect her from the cold ground beneath and the cold air above.

The chill couldn't break my mother's fever, but at least she was now asleep. For the past few hours she'd been awake, but not really awake. She would cry out, say words and look wild-eyed. I tried to talk to her, to answer her words, but she didn't seem able to hear me. She was like a madwoman, a woman possessed. And she was—by the fever.

Some of what she yelled out made a twisted sense. Many of her words were so garbled as to not even be words, but still I knew what was haunting her mind. The anguish in her voice and that look in her eyes—I just knew she was back in Eldoret, in the church. It seemed like the fever in her blood had brought back memories of the fire in the church. It was something she couldn't drive from her mind, and something that would never leave mine.

“Muchoki!”

I started out of my thoughts. My mother was looking up at me, her eyes wide open and staring into space.

“Yes, Mother, I am here.”

“Your father—go and get your father.”

She was so feverish she was out of her head.

“Go! I need him.”

She did need something, but I didn't know what more I could do. Maybe a doctor or a nurse at the medical tent would know.

“I'll go and get help,” I said. “You just stay here and I'll be—”

Her eyes were closed and she wasn't moving. Was she ...? Was she ...?

She took a deep breath and her whole body shuddered, then her eyes closed and she was asleep again. She was just asleep. For a brief second, I thought she had died. That was crazy but not so crazy. People did die of malaria—but not here and not now and not her. I wouldn't let her. She'd get better, just as she had done a dozen times before, and then we'd leave this camp. I didn't know how we'd get there, but I knew where we were going—Kikima. We were going back to the homestead where she was born, and once we got there, everything would be fine—as fine as it could ever be again.

I tucked the extra blanket around my mother to keep her snug in bed. Next I took the cloth from her forehead, dipped it in water and wrung it out, finally placing the cool, damp cloth back on her forehead. Slowly, so as not to jostle the cot, I went over to my sister. She was still sound asleep. In the little bit of light coming from the candle she looked peaceful, as if she didn't have a worry in the world. Maybe she didn't. I owned all of those. All the worries were mine to hold, mine to solve ... but how?

“I’ll be back,” I said softly, whispering in my sister’s ear. “It’ll be all right. I’ll always be here for you.” Even though she couldn’t hear me, I needed to say those things. Maybe I needed to say them for me to hear.



I slipped out of the tent. The sky was filled with a hundred million stars and a big, bright full moon. Between them was an eerie glow that seemed to reflect off the white tents. I’d never seen snow, but I’d read about it in books. Was that what snow would look like? I took a deep breath and in the silence could hear it release. There was no wind at all. It felt like the camp itself had fallen asleep. It must have been as exhausted as the people.

On silent feet I moved among the tents. There were no sounds other than my muffled footfalls. I was struck suddenly by the terrible thought that all the tents were empty, that all the people had gone, leaving me and my sister and my mother alone. I knew that wasn’t true—that the tents were filled with sleeping people, hundreds and thousands of sleeping people—but really we *were* all alone. Alone in a crowd. We had nobody. Well, except for Jomo.

I was near his tent. I had an urge to lift the flap and shake him awake so I would have somebody to talk to, to ask questions of. Of course I wouldn’t do that, but tomorrow I would ask his mother for advice. She was a good woman, and she and his sisters had been very kind to Jata, to me, to our mother.

I hesitated for a half second by their tent. It was identical to all the other tents in the row, in the camp, but there was one difference: the people inside lived in hope. They still went to sleep every night and woke up every morning hoping that this would be the day their father would return and take them away. And with each passing day, the hope both grew and faded. It grew because it only made sense that each new day was one day closer to his return. And it faded because with each day he didn’t return, some of their hope was replaced by the fear that he never would. How could something get bigger and smaller at the same time? I didn’t know, but I knew it was true.

I had hope too—hope that my mother would get better and we would then leave and her family would welcome us. I had started to realize how powerful hope was. After water and food, shelter from the weather and a place to sleep, it was the most powerful thing that could sustain a person. That was why my mother had never gone back home. She needed that hope, and I worked to convince her, to allow the hope to grow and the fear to fade. It would soon be time for us to test our hope. As soon as she got better.

As I approached the hospital tent, the silence was replaced by a gentle hum. It was the sound of the generator. In a sea of darkness, the hospital tent was a little island of electricity—a few dribbles of light leaking out through the cracks in the canvas. I wasn’t sure what I would say, or if anybody would even talk to me, but I had to try something.

I circled around the side where the entrance was located. There was a big truck parked right by the tent and two men came out, carrying something between them. As

they heaved it into the air, I suddenly realized they were tossing a human body. It landed with a thud in the back of the truck! I skidded to a stop and then darted over to the side so I was sheltered in the darker shadows.

Two more men came out of the hospital tent, and they were also carrying a body. They were more delicate in placing it in the truck. It looked to be smaller. Could it be a child? All four men disappeared back inside. In the light, I could see that they were all wearing masks over their faces and gloves on their hands. The first two reappeared with another body. How many were there? I stood there, frozen in place and barely daring to breathe, and watched and counted—five and six ... seven and eight. And then nothing. Was that all of them? I continued to wait, giving the men more time to return, until I realized I didn't want to see any more bodies. I turned and rushed off. There was nobody in there I wanted to talk to tonight.



Chapter Seven

I opened an eye and closed it immediately to the bright light. It was morning. I didn't even remember drifting off, but I must have at some point. I forced my eyes open and allowed them to adjust to the brightness. I looked over at the cot—my mother wasn't there! I jumped to my feet. My sister was gone as well. I pushed through the tent flap and there they were, sitting around the fire eating porridge.



“Good morning, Muchoki,” my mother said.

“Good morning.” I looked at her hard. “Are you fine?”

“Much better ... Weak, but better.”

“I'm sorry I fell asleep.”

“You needed to sleep. Come, have some porridge.”

I felt so relieved that my whole body seemed to melt to the ground right beside my sister. I watched my mother intensely as she served me some porridge. She said she was better, but I had to see it with my own eyes. Her hand had a slight tremor but her color was good—except for the yellow in her eyes. Had they ever been that yellow before?

“After breakfast, I will walk Jata to school and then go out and get more firewood,” I said.

“Perhaps I can come out with you,” my mother said.

“I can handle the wood by myself. You should stay here. Sweep up, or lie down if you need to.” Resting was what I wanted her to do, what she *needed* to do.

“You are a very considerate son.”

If I was considerate, I would have stayed up all night to watch over her.

“Muchoki!”

I turned around at the sound of my name being called. It was Jomo.

“Thank goodness you are here!”

“Where else would I be?” I asked.

“You could be fetching water or outside gathering wood, and then I would have missed you!” He was louder and more excited than usual.

“If you had missed me, you would have found me later.”

“No, no. There is no later. I am leaving!”

“Leaving?! You mean ...?”

“Yes, my father has returned! We are leaving, we are leaving!” He picked Jata up and twirled her in the air, then tossed her up high until she squealed with delight. He caught her and set her down.

“I am so happy for you,” I said.

“We are all happy. I just wish you were going to be leaving too.”

“We are talking about leaving,” I said, glancing in my mother’s direction.

She nodded her head ever so slightly in agreement.

“Wonderful. Could you come to meet my father? Could you come to say goodbye?”

Jomo asked.

“Of course ... if that is all right?” I asked my mother.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“I need to say goodbye too,” Jata said.

“If you did not come, my sisters would be very disappointed.”

I got up, but before starting away, I turned to my mother. “I will clean away the dishes when I return,” I told her. “You need to go and rest.”

I expected her to argue but she didn’t. She nodded in agreement.

Jata took one of my hands and Jomo the other, and we started off for his tent.

“I am so happy that my father is here,” Jomo said. “I did not wish to mention it, but I was starting to get worried.”

“I knew he would come,” I said.

“I *knew* but I did not *know*. I was worried about him and worried that we would have to stay here forever. It would be terrible to have no place to ...”

He let his sentence trail off. We both knew what he was thinking.

“But I am sure you will leave soon ... I am sure of it,” Jomo said. “I just wish you could come with me. You are my best friend—no, you are more like a brother!”

“And you are my brother.”

“I wish that you and your sister and mother could come with us.”

“I understand it would not be possible.”

He nodded his head. “It will be hard already. My father has told us. We are going to something but not too much—it is a single-room hut with a patched roof. We will be sharing beds, and the fields are rocky.”

“You’ll get more beds, and in time you will remove the rocks,” I offered. “It will be better than living in a tent.”

“I just want *you* to have more soon.”

“My mother has said that once she is well, we will try to go to her people in Kikima.”

“That is so good.” He looked away. “How is your mother?”

“Better today than last night, but not as good as she will be tomorrow.”

“Malaria can be strange,” Jomo said. “It comes, it goes; it gets better, it gets worse. Sometimes it disappears for years, and other times it can be so bad that ... it can disappear again.”

Or it can kill. Once again, I knew what he wasn’t saying. Sometimes friends agree not to mention things. I hadn’t talked about the possibility of his father not coming back, and he didn’t talk about my mother and what could happen to her.

There was an old car parked in the passageway between the tents. Jomo’s mother and sisters, along with two men—one of whom I knew must be his father—were loading their possessions into and onto the car.

“Papa!” Jomo called out.

One of the men stopped and looked over just as Jata broke free of my grip and ran to

be swept up by Jomo's sisters.

"This is my friend Muchoki."

Jomo's father handed the load he was carrying to the other man and came over to offer his hand. We shook.

"It is good to meet you," he said.

"And you, sir."

"I have been told that you are a good friend of my family's," he said. "Thank you for standing by them in my absence."

"Jomo also stood by my family."

"As it should be with friends. Jomo is distressed that we are leaving you behind."

I didn't know what to say.

"If there was more space, or we had more—"

"I understand, sir. I understand."

"I have written down the name of our village and my family name." He handed me a small scrap of paper. "Someday, perhaps, you will come and visit our homestead. You will be an honored guest."

"The honor will be mine. Thank you, sir."

"We are taking our few possessions with us."

"But not all," Jomo said. "This is for you." He reached down, picked up a blanket and gave it to me.

"I can't take your blanket." I held up my hands to stop him.

"It is for your mother," Jomo said.

That I couldn't refuse. "Thank you," I said, accepting the blanket.

"I wish we had more to leave for you, but we have so little where we are going."

"You have also left me with your friendship and an invitation to visit. That is worth much." But I had one more question I wanted to ask Jomo's father. "Sir, out there," I said, gesturing beyond the fence. "What is happening?"

He moved in closer. "There are still problems," he said very quietly—so quietly that only Jomo and I could hear. "Nairobi has remained a tinderbox."

"What does that mean?" Jomo said.

"There are still protests against the elections. There is still some violence spilling out from the slums. There are still clashes between different groups and with the police. There are still roads blocked with rocks or tires set on fire in parts of the city."

"But don't we have to travel through Nairobi?" Jomo asked.

"There is no other way. All roads lead *to* and *through* Nairobi."

"But how will we get through?" Jomo looked anxious.

"The protesters block the roads, and then the police clear them away. We will travel during the day, when it is most safe. The police and army will protect us."

"They didn't protect us in Webuye," Jomo said.

"There are more of them now, and they are more determined. Still, we will be most safe when we get to our village. Sometimes you must pass through danger to get to a better place," Jomo's father said. "We have to leave soon or darkness will delay our trip one more day."

“Thank you for speaking of this to me,” I said. “I will leave you to finish. I need to get back to my mother.”

His father and I shook hands again, and then Jomo came over and offered his.

“Goodbye, Jomo.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Not goodbye. We will meet again, my brother.”

“Until again,” I said, smiling.

The girls were hugging Jata, and all three were in tears.

“You must promise us you will bring her to see us,” Kioni said.

“I promise.”

“Perhaps we could trade?” suggested Makena. “You keep Jomo and we get Jata!”

“No,” I said. “Jomo is my brother, but Jata is my sister. She must always be at my side to be cared for.”

“As it should be,” Jomo’s father said. “As it should be.”

I stood sheltered from the sun by the tents, Jomo’s blanket draped over my shoulder, trying to see but not be seen. I wanted to be there to watch them leave. I knew it was going to happen, but somehow I needed to see it with my own eyes.

I heard the little engine first and then saw the car—the one carrying Jomo and his family away. It had mattresses on the roof, and they were all crammed inside. I was close enough to see, but not close enough to see well. I could make them out inside the vehicle, but I couldn’t see their faces clearly. I didn’t have to, though, to know that they would all be smiling. They were going to a new home, and they were going together.

The little vehicle rocked and bumped along the footpath until it came to a stop at the gate. One of the guards walked up to the driver’s side of the vehicle while the second opened the gate wide enough to let them pass. The car started up again and eased through the narrow opening. Once outside it picked up speed, kicking up a cloud of dust that trailed behind. I just hoped they didn’t look back at the camp as they left. I wanted them to only look forward. Forward was where they were going, toward their future. Behind was nothing worth seeing or remembering. I wished them the gifts of forgiveness and forgetfulness.

The car got smaller and smaller until it took the rise and disappeared over the other side. Soon even the plume of dust was gone. I felt sad and happy. Sad that they were leaving—that my friend was leaving—and happy because it meant it was possible to leave. Somebody I knew and cared for was going to a better place. I was happy for my friend, and I was happy because it meant that maybe someday I could go through that gate to a better place as well.

Chapter Eight

“Could you tell me about Kikima?” I asked my mother as we sat around our fire, and she stirred the food in the pot.



“It is a village like any other village.” She shrugged and offered a sad little smile. “It has been a long time since I left.”

“So long that you don’t remember?”

“So long that it has changed, I am sure.”

“Is it like Eldoret?” Jata asked.

Mother laughed. “Eldoret is a big city. Kikima is a small town, more like a market. Or at least it was then. Most days it is a sleepy little place, but Mondays and Thursdays are market days. People flow in from the whole Mbooni district to buy and sell. The square is filled with stalls and blankets laid out with produce and merchandise, and it is so filled with people that you can hardly move. It is very exciting.”

“It would be fun to be there on a market day,” Jata said.

“When I was a little girl, those were my favorite days.”

“Was your school far away?” I asked.

“It was no more than a twenty-minute walk to Kyangoma—that is the name of the school I attended.”

“You and your brothers?”

“My brothers and my cousins. And now I’m sure my nieces and nephews must go there as well.”

“Do we have lots of cousins?” Jata asked.

“Dozens and dozens and dozens I am sure.”

“It will be wonderful to meet our cousins,” I said.

“If we go, you will meet them,” she replied.

“It should not be *if*,” I countered. “It needs to be *when*.”

She looked hesitant, almost afraid.

“We can’t stay here, Mother, and there is no place to go back to. Our home is not safe ... if it is even there anymore.”

“The government will help us go back to Eldoret,” she insisted.

I shook my head. “Nobody is being allowed back. The government says it isn’t safe.”

“And how do you know this?”

“I listen. I ask questions. I speak to the sergeant every day. He has told me. He knows.” Our dinner guest had become my friend—almost against my will. Who would have thought that I could become friends with somebody of his tribe after all that had happened? We spoke often about the weather and other small pleasantries, but

sometimes we also talked about things that were significant.

“You know that Kikima is not close,” my mother said.

“Is it as far as Eldoret?” I knew how far that was from the trip to the camp.

“Not as far,” she admitted. “But right now, it is far for me. I cannot even go as far as the front gate.”

“We are not leaving today. We need to wait for you to recover.”

“Yes, I must get better before anything can happen. Even then, it will still be far away.”

“Do we travel through Nairobi?” I asked.

“Through Nairobi, and then toward Mombasa. Along the route to Mombasa, we head north toward Machakos Town. It is almost as big as Eldoret, except that all the people are Kamba.”

“All of them?” I asked.

“The whole region. That area is called by some Kambaland.”

“And from there where do we go?” I asked.

“From there, Kikima is not far. The people of Machakos all know of Kikima.”

“The sergeant told me that the government is giving money to people to help them get back to their traditional homes,” I explained.

Slowly my mother got to her feet. She stood there, looking a little unsteady, swaying a little bit, but still standing. She was silent, staring into the distance, not talking but thinking.

“I miss my brothers,” she said finally. “I miss my parents. I do not even know if they are still alive.”

“They are,” I said.

“How would you know that?”

“I don’t know. I just feel and hope.”

“Hope is all we have when everything else has been taken away. But I am afraid that we would arrive and then ... well, perhaps we would not be welcomed.”

“Why would they not welcome us?” Jata asked.

“I have been gone a long time.”

“If I was gone a long time, would you welcome me home?” I asked.

“Of course. I am your mother.”

“And they are your parents.”

A small smile came to her face. It was a sad smile. “They are still my parents. I can only hope that they still think of me as their daughter.”

“There is only one way to find out,” I said.

“Yes. Only one way. When I am able, we will leave. We will travel to Kikima. It will be a long journey, but we will do it.”

“We’ll be like those Kamba in the story,” I said. “We will follow the string to find our way home.”

“Let us hope that this time the string has not broken,” she said.

I couldn’t allow myself to think that it had.

Chapter Nine

I walked along the fence, looking for the sergeant. I'd already gone to the gate, but he wasn't there. They said he was on patrol around the perimeter of the camp. I just hoped that we were walking around in different directions so that we would eventually meet.

As I walked, I noticed that there had been a shift in the fence. New poles had been set farther out and the fence restrung to allow more room for tents to be put up. The camp was still growing. There was a saying that misery loved company. We had more and more company. More people meant that more food and water had to be brought in, more latrines dug, more soldiers to guard us, more tents to house us, more of everything.

Some of the new arrivals moved into tents that had been vacated by people like Jomo and his family. But this expansion was filled with tents that were obviously new. They were bright white, not weathered by the sun or coated and made dingy by the dust, or ripped and worn through use or abuse.

Our tent was still holding up well. We'd weighed it down with rocks so it was anchored to the ground. I'd dug a little trench to catch the rain and direct it around rather than through our tent. My mother had stitched up the two places where it had started to rip. It was secure. It kept us dry and out of the sun, held our possessions and sheltered us at night. But still it was just a tent and could never be a home. We needed to leave to find that home, even if it was far away in a place I'd never been. Kikima ... when I went to sleep, I repeated the name in my head again and again to make it feel like a place I'd known before.

Just then, three soldiers came into view. I didn't know two of them but the sergeant was the third. I waved and he waved back.

"Good afternoon, my young friend," he said.

"Good afternoon, sir. I was wondering, if you have the time, could I ask you some questions?"

"Certainly." He turned to the other two soldiers. "You will continue your rounds and I will meet you on your next circuit."

They both saluted and then continued their patrol.

"How is your family?" he asked. "Is all well?"

"My sister is fine. My mother is still feeling the effects."

"Malaria is a difficult disease. She would be better in a hospital, or at least in a home with a bed and shelter from the elements."

"That is why I am here to talk to you," I said. "We are going to leave the camp."

"To the faraway place that your mother spoke of?" he asked.

"Kikima, my mother's village. It is in Mbooni district, by Machakos Town."

"Machakos I know of, but it is not close. Would somebody come to get your family?"

"There is nobody who even knows we are here. We have to travel to them."

“Then you would need funds to pay for a *matatu* ride.”

“We have nothing,” I said. “You told me before that the government will provide some assistance for those who are able to move out of the camp.”

“It is not much, but some resources are there for families who receive a recommendation for assistance.”

“Who makes the recommendation?” I asked.

“Any of the camp administrators, or a ranking soldier, such as myself.”

“Would you make that recommendation for us?”

“Most certainly. You know that. You are good people. Is your mother able to travel?”

“I think she will be ready soon.”

“Excellent. I will put forth the recommendation for a travel allowance so it will be ready when you are ready. I will miss my visits with you, but I wish you well as you rejoin members of your family.” He paused and his expression became serious. “I have never asked—and you have no need to tell if you do not wish—but your father ... was he a casualty of the uprising?”



It was one of the things we had never discussed. I nodded. “My father, and his father and mother, and my uncle and cousins.”

“All of them?”

“All of them. It was just after dark when it began. We were already in bed. We were pulled out and told to run. My parents had been told the rioters were coming for us. It was my mother, my father, my sister and my grandparents, as well as my uncle, his wife and their three children.”

“You must have been very afraid,” the sergeant said.

“Even my father was afraid. I had never seen him afraid before. We fled with all the other Kikuyu we knew, trying to stay ahead of the mob. We were many, but they were so many more. They had clubs and machetes, knives, picks and shovels. And they were everywhere. We tried to get away along different routes, but they were blocked. Rocks and tires strewn across the road, fires set, men chanting and yelling. They were pulling people out of vehicles and killing them. Unable to run away, all of the routes blocked, we took refuge in the village church.

“There were so many of us. It was crowded and dark and confused. But I was there with the men who had always taken care of me—my father, my grandfather and my uncle—and I knew they would keep me safe.

“Then they came. First it was the voices. Then we could see torches bouncing up and down in the darkness, like they were living things moving toward us on their own. They came from three directions. Then as they closed in I could see the people who were holding the torches, burning bright and lighting their way. My father and the other men went outside. I went too.

“My father took me aside and commanded me to get my mother and sister and flee

through the back. I begged him to flee with us, but he refused. He said he could not stop them, but he could slow them down enough to allow us to escape through the fields. I asked if I should take my cousins and my aunt, but he said that was for his brother to decide, not him, and then the mob arrived and I ran back into the church.

“I looked through the windows as others turned away, afraid to see. I was too afraid *not* to see. I saw more and more torches coming toward us, and more and more people gathering out there. In the light from the torches I could see some of their faces, and even though I knew some of the people, I could hardly recognize them. There was something so different about them.”

“And there were no police to stop them?” the sergeant asked.

“There was nobody,” I answered. “At first the mob stopped just outside the fence marking the church property. It was sacred land and they didn’t want to enter. It was difficult then, telling my mother what my father’s wishes were. She did not want to leave, did not want to leave him behind. I understood, but I insisted.

“As the crowd grew, they started tossing rocks. I remember people jumping and screaming as that first rock pierced the stained glass and sent shards into the air. Those shards of glass compelled my mother to listen to what I had said.

“Then it all happened. They swept through the front gate of the church grounds, screaming and yelling, and people inside and outside the church answered with their own anguished screams. I grabbed my sister in my arms and carried her through the crowd to the back of the building and out the rear doors. I yelled for my mother to run! I looked over my shoulder as we stumbled into a cornfield. Desperately I looked back for my father, but I knew he was gone.”

“And through your actions, you and your mother and sister escaped.”

“It was my father’s actions that allowed us to escape. He stayed behind to give us time to leave,” I said sadly. “My mother, unsteady on her feet, clung to my other arm for support. The corn was thick and high and we were hidden in the stalks.”

“And then?”

“I left my sister and mother and went back to the edge of the field. The mob had by then surrounded the church on all sides, so there was no hope of escape. Again I looked for my father, but he was not to be seen. I knew. I knew. I could not do anything. I hid there, able to watch but not to be seen.”

“If you cannot talk more about this, I understand. This must be difficult for you to speak of,” the sergeant said.

Strangely, it wasn’t. I’d relived it so many times in my thoughts and my nightmares that the words simply flowed out. I was more of a distant witness than anything else, as if I were telling him of something I’d read in the papers.

“I can talk.” It felt like now that I had started I had no choice but to keep telling him the story, that I couldn’t have stopped the words if I’d tried. “The mob barred the doors, barricaded them so none could escape. And then they set the church on fire.”

“So awful. So terrible. I am so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“If I had been there, I would have tried to stop them,” the sergeant said. “If I had to, I

would have opened fire upon the mob to drive them back.”

“They were Kalenjin, your people. You would have fired on them?” I asked.

“I would have fired upon enemies of the country because that is what they were, whether they were Kalenjin killing Kikuyu or Kikuyu killing Kalenjin, as was done in other parts of the country.” He stopped. “All those responsible for these atrocities are the same. They are nothing more than savages, animals looking for an excuse for violence, hyenas reacting to the smell of blood.”

“It might have been different if the police and soldiers had come,” I said.

“I have spoken to some of the men who were in those garrisons. They said there were more in the mobs than they had bullets in their guns. They were afraid. I understand the fear, but that is not an excuse. Those men were sworn to uphold the laws of our land. They did not keep their oath.”

I should have felt angry at the soldiers who did nothing to protect us, but I didn't. I could still taste the fear I felt lying in the stalks at the edge of the field. I didn't have a gun, but even if I had, would I have done anything? Would I have been brave enough to help my father? I just lay there and watched as the church was set on fire.



“The flames started from the inside as windows were smashed and torches thrown in,” I said, resuming my story. “Soon the thick black smoke poured out through the windows, and then the flames licked up the sides of the building and the roof caught fire. The light from the fire was so bright that I was afraid I would be seen and the mob would come after me. I needed to get my mother and sister and get away—as far away as possible.

“When I reached them, my mother wanted to wait for my father. I simply told her that he would not be coming and said no more. She knew, but we agreed not to speak further of him. I pulled her to her feet and took my sister into my arms. We staggered away, stumbling through the darkness, trying to be quiet while trying to listen. We bumped into other people—Kikuyu fleeing for their lives, and sometimes Luo, as confused and almost as frightened as us. We walked throughout the night, each step putting a little more distance between us and the mob, between us and the church. It wasn't until the morning that we stopped.



“My sister had fallen asleep in my arms, and I'd put her down in the safe spot we'd found to wait. We waited with two other Kikuyu families who were also fleeing. Then I took my mother aside and told her what had happened. How do you tell your mother that your father has died? How do you find the words? It was the hardest thing I had ever done. It was much harder even than watching the church burn. That had not seemed real. Telling her was all too real.

“It was so strange. I'd been somehow preparing for my mother's death for years. The

malaria had weakened her and made so many illnesses appear. I didn't expect it to be my father. He was so big, so strong, so healthy. I thought he would live forever. I was wrong."



"I wish I could have been there that night," the sergeant said again. "Instead all I can do now is make arrangements for funds to be disbursed to your family. I wish to make sure that as soon as you are able to travel, you will be ready."

"You have shown friendship and kindness to my family," I said.

"It is important that Kalenjin show friendship to Kikuyu, and that Kikuyu do the same to Kalenjin," he said. "You must try to do this."

I understood what he was saying, but could I ever do that? Could I ever show kindness to the people who had killed my father? Wouldn't that be to disrespect his memory, to dishonor his passing?

"You cannot fight evil by becoming evil," he said, seeming to read my thoughts. "The only cure for darkness is light. Not that you should forget what happened."

"I cannot forget what happened!" I snapped, but then I felt badly. This man had done nothing but offer me friendship. He had shown us kindness ... but that was different. *He* was different. He was Kalenjin, but he was different.

"But please also remember the kindnesses that have been offered. Do not let the bad—no matter how bad—erase the good. Those people have taken so much from you, please do not let them take everything."

I slowly nodded in agreement.

He placed a hand on my shoulder. "You are a good boy. A boy a father would be proud of. Now you go and tell your mother, and I will go and make the arrangements. I will try to make things happen quickly, but it could be two or three weeks."

"Thank you."

I *would* remember this small act of kindness by a Kalenjin, but that act would never make up for the evil that was done by other Kalenjins. I would never forget what those people had done. Helping to get us a few shillings for a *matatu* would never undo those deeds.

I would not forget any of it. Ever.

Chapter Ten

There was a loud cry from somewhere outside the tent—sad and loud and desperate—and then I heard my sister react. She started crying. I jumped up from the ground and went to her side.

“Jata, it is all right. I’m here,” I whispered. I tried to keep my voice calm, although I felt my heart racing too.

The sobbing continued. I scooped her up and she wrapped her arms tightly around my neck. For somebody so little and thin, she had such power.

“It’s all right. It’s just a noise in the distance.”

At that instant, the person cried out again. I felt Jata tighten her grip, felt her body begin to shake as she cried louder. I had to comfort her, but I also had to make sure she didn’t wake our mother. I stood up with her in my arms and walked over to the tent flap, pushing it open and stepping outside.

“See, there’s nothing out here to be afraid of,” I said.

She loosened her grip slightly and peered around. I looked around too. She wasn’t the only person who needed reassurance.

“Everybody is asleep. That was probably somebody having a bad dream,” I said. I knew about bad dreams.

I felt her relax a little bit more. I needed to offer her more reassurance.

“We are safe here in the camp. Nobody can get in.”

My fears here weren’t from the outside. They were about diseases being spread, the water being tainted and of course fire. And there had been fires. It was inevitable when there were so many people, so many tents and so many cooking fires. Although most only burned a few tents, others spread rapidly and destroyed dozens and dozens of tents before they were put out. Those affected were without shelter except that offered by their neighbors until a new tent could be brought. It seemed so cruel for those who had so little to lose the little they had.

The fires scared me just as much as the loud sounds bothered Jata. She had *heard* the mobs, but I had *seen* the flames. The nightmare had entered not just through my eyes but through my nose. The smell of fire caused me great distress. How sad that something that warmed our bones and cooked our meals could also be used for something so evil. Fire wasn’t our friend or our enemy, it just was.



“I’m scared,” Jata said.

“Scared of what? You have your brother here, so nothing can ever harm you. You know that.” I needed to distract her, calm her. “Look at all those stars in the sky. Aren’t they beautiful?”

She nodded. They weren't just beautiful but bright. Between them and the moon—which was almost full—there was a gentle blanket of light that filled the night. The tents seemed almost to glow, and I could see clearly into the distance, tent after tent, row after row, until they disappeared.

“Do you see it?” I asked.

“See what?”

“It is very hard to see, so I'm not surprised you can't.”

“See what?” she demanded.

“The string.”

“The string?”

“Yes. I see it going down the passageway between the tents.” I pointed with my finger to trace the path of the invisible string. “It goes out through the front gate and then down the road to Nairobi. And do you know where it goes then?”

She shook her head.

“It goes all the way to Kikima, to the home of our grandparents.”

“You can't see that.”

“Of course I can't see it all the way! I can only see it as far as the gate. I'm just surprised that you can't see it at all.”

She strained to look, trying to make out the string in the moonlight.

“It glistens, reflects the light. Look harder. Can you see it?”

“I think I can see it ... I think.”

“It's okay if you can't. I can see it. It will lead us to our grandparents' home, to our *new* home. But don't worry if you can't see it, because I can.”

She gave a big yawn.

“Are you ready to go back to bed?”

“I'm ready.”

I opened up the flap and carried her back inside. I pulled back the blanket with one hand and set her down on the bed to snuggle back down. It was good that none of this had woken up our mother. She was quietly sleeping. In fact, she hadn't moved at all. I held my breath, listening for hers. I could hear her ... or was it Jata?

I bent down and placed my ear by my mother's mouth, straining, praying, hoping for a sound. There was nothing. I touched her face with my hand. It was cold.

My mother was gone.



“I am sorry for your loss,” the man said.

“What?”

“I am sorry for your mother's death.”

“Thank you, sir.” I took a deep breath and worked hard to keep the tears inside. It would not be right to cry in front of a stranger—especially a stranger who was this important. It was time for me to be strong. That was what my father would expect,

what my mother would want and what my sister needed. She was in the hospital tent being watched by a nurse. I needed to get to her soon, but right now, I needed to be here.

The stranger was a large man and he sat behind a desk piled high with papers. I had never met him before, but I had been told that he was the chairman of the camp—the man in charge—so he was *very* important. Before coming here—being forced to come here, like all of us—he had been a very successful businessman and a respected elder in his community.

“How old are you, son?”

“Thirteen ... fourteen in a few months.”

“And your sister is how old?”

“She is seven, sir.”

“Do you have any other family in the camp?”

“No, sir. We were alone.” If Jomo hadn’t moved, I could have claimed that his family was our family—they would have helped us. “We were going to be leaving soon, sir.”

“So you have some family elsewhere? Excellent, most excellent.” He smiled—a big smile. “Can they come and get you?”

I shook my head. “They do not know we are here ... I do not know how to contact them.”

“But you were going to go there?” he asked.

“When my mother recovered.” Now she would never recover. “We were going to return to her village.”

The smile disappeared and the man let out a big sigh.

“Sir, may I be excused? I need to be with my sister, to care for her.”

“The matron at the hospital will provide care.” He sighed again. “It is most unfortunate that you are not turning sixteen in a few months. Then I could ignore the things that need to be done, lose the paperwork for a while ... I could perhaps do something by doing nothing.”

“I do not understand, sir.”

“You are not of age to care for your sister, or for yourself. I must take action to provide supervision.”

I nodded in agreement, although I still had no idea what he meant.

“I have to sign the papers,” he said.

Did he mean the papers for the funds to help us get to our grandparents?

“When can we leave, sir?”

“It will be soon. Probably your sister will leave first.”

“I do not understand,” I said again. “She is too young to be going on her own.”

He looked as confused as I felt. “She will not be going alone. A matron will escort her.”

I felt a sense of relief—we were not going to have to go alone—somebody was going to take us to our grandparents. But still... “Why am I not going with her at the same time?”

“Because you are not going to the same place,” he said.

“But we are both going to our grandparents.”

He shook his head. “You are going to where you can be cared for as orphans.”

“Our grandparents will care for us.”

“You tell me that their village is far away, and that they cannot come and get you.

That they do not even know you are here. How would you get there?”

“There is money given to help some families leave,” I said. “I was told that.”

“There is some money for families, but not for two children. Do you expect us just to give you money and allow you to walk out of here alone? Do you think that would be responsible?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“And how do we even know these people will take you when you arrive—if you arrive?”

I hadn’t considered the possibility that they wouldn’t, so again I had no answer.

“You will both be well cared for. You will be provided for at the children’s homes.”

“We cannot be separated. We need to go to the same home.”

“That is not possible. One is for girls and the other is for boys.”

“But ... but ... she is my sister. She needs my care.”

“She will remain your sister and she will be cared for—far better than you would be able to.”

“My mother has been ill for a long time, sir. I have always been there to care for both my mother and my sister. I *can* care for her.”

“Not legally. You are too young. Do you know the trouble I would get into if I allowed you to care for her and something happened?”

I didn’t care about trouble for him, and anyway nothing was going to happen.

“Besides, it is not like you will never see her. I have been told that visits are possible.”

“Visits?”

“Yes. During school breaks, you will have an opportunity to see her—perhaps for an entire afternoon, if the two homes are not too far apart.”

“You don’t even know where they are?”

“I have enough to do inside this fence. Once people leave, they are not my concern.”

If we were outside the wire, would we be his concern?

“Would you like to tell your sister of the plans, or would you prefer I tell her?” he asked.

“No, you cannot do that ... I will tell her.” But how? Telling her of our mother’s death was the hardest thing I’d ever done, and now she was going to lose me as well. “When will this take place? When will she leave?”

“Do you think you can provide care for the night?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. I can care for her.”

“It could even be two nights. You must watch and feed her, put her to sleep. Can you do that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does your sister go to our school?”

I nodded.

“Tomorrow you go there and tell them that she will be leaving and there is no point in her taking up a seat.” He stopped and considered me carefully. “I know this is not what you want, but what choice do I have?”

He could have somebody take us to Kikima, I thought, or at least give us the money to go there ourselves.

“You have to have faith that what is being done is what is best for you. And who knows? Maybe once you’re in the orphanage, somebody there will be able to connect you with your family.”

“They could?”

He shrugged. “Anything is possible, although I would imagine it would not happen soon. There are so many orphans and only so many resources. Nothing will happen quickly. Are you of faith?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are your family churchgoers? Are you a believer?”

“Of course. We go to church each week. Sometimes twice a week.”

I thought about my last brief glimpse of our church, the flames engulfing it, the smoke rising into the sky and—

“Then you must know that sometimes things happen for reasons we do not understand. It was God’s will that brought you here, and it is God’s will that you go to a children’s home.”

“No, sir.”

“No? What do you mean?” he asked.

“It is not God’s will. It is *your* will. You are sending us to these places. You are sending my sister away from me. God would not do that.”

His mouth dropped open. He looked shocked. And then he started to look angry.

“You are only a boy, and you must understand that adults—your elders—are wiser. Do you think you are wiser than me?” he demanded.

“No, sir, but I—”

“You have taken enough of my time. I am a busy man.” He got to his feet. “Go and take your sister. Be prepared to leave by tomorrow. There is no point in discussing this further. Go.”

I got to my feet and stumbled out of his office. He was right. There was no point in discussing it further, and we did need to go ... just not the way he intended.

Chapter Eleven

Jata lay sleeping on the bed. It had taken a while for her to fall asleep. I'd rubbed her back until the tears had finally stopped and she'd drifted off. Then I was able to let my own tears flow. It was important that she not see me break down. Now more than ever, she needed me to be strong, to be in control. The only way she could believe was if I believed ... or at least pretended to believe. Did I really think we could do this? I wasn't sure. I felt all scared inside, so much so that I felt sick to my stomach. But I couldn't show the fear. I had to act. What choice did we have? When there is no hope, even a little glimmer is better. Besides, the longest journey starts with one step. That was how it was done.



I sorted through our meager possessions. We didn't have much, but I still didn't know if we could take it all. Everything had weight that I would have to carry, and at some point I might have to carry Jata as well.

Definitely we should take a blanket ... or should we carry two? That would leave one—a small present for the people who would take up this tent when we were gone. The cooking pot definitely would be needed. The water container, the knife and most certainly all the food. Two bowls and two plates and a spoon. Would a second spoon weigh that much more? I had proudly traded some of the gazelle meat for those three spoons.

Thank goodness my mother had always planned ahead. There was extra food for three of us for five days. That meant there was enough for seven or even eight days for the two of us, although we were going to need to eat more than usual. We weren't going to be sitting around doing nothing.

There was a gentle rapping on the flap of the tent and a rush of panic overcame me. Had they come early to get Jata? Was I foolish to have waited for morning?

“Muchoki, are you there?”

I recognized the voice. It was the sergeant. Had they sent *him* to get Jata?

I stayed perfectly still. If I didn't respond, maybe he would go away. But the flap of the tent opened and he poked in his head.

“I needed to come to express my condolences,” he said.

“Thank, you, sir.”

“Your mother was a good woman. I am sad for your loss. I just wish she had survived long enough for you to go to the homestead of her parents.” He paused. “I inquired about your circumstances. I was told they are sending you both away.”

“They want us to be separated in two places.”

“I was told of the plan, but it is not right to separate family,” he said.

“Do you ...? Do you think that perhaps you could ...?”

“Ask that they reconsider their plan?”

I nodded.

“I could ask, but my words would fall on deaf ears. I am merely a sergeant. Besides, the chairman looks at me and sees not a soldier but a Kalenjin, and he is Kikuyu. He will not change because of my words.”

“Then there is no choice.”

He looked at me hard, as if he were trying to look inside my mind.

“I hear your words agreeing to this, but I am not sure I believe them. The boy I know—the one who has cared for his mother and sister all this time—would not so easily agree. You have something else in mind, I think.”

I wanted to lie, but even more I needed to trust somebody and he was all I had.

“In the morning I will leave the camp with my sister. We will go to the village of my mother, to the village of her family. *Our* family.”

He shook his head. “You cannot do that.”

“I have no choice. I cannot allow my sister to be taken away.”

“No, you should not allow her to be taken, but you cannot wait until morning. By then it will be too late. I have been told that the matron from the children’s residence will be here at first light to take your sister.”

“But ... but ...” I buried my head in my hands. “I do not know what to do.”

He bent down until I could sense that his face was right beside mine—I could feel his breath. “You will not wait for morning. You will leave now.”

“But the gate is closed. No one is allowed to leave. Are you going to let us leave?”

“I cannot let you out in front of other soldiers or I will be punished.”

“I don’t want you to be punished.”

“And I do not want you or your sister to be punished either. You will not leave through the gate. You will leave through the back. There is a spot where you can squeeze under the fence.”

“*Under?* But how can I find that spot?”

“You will find it because I will be there to show you.” He got up. “You must gather your things and then go to the back of the camp. I will be waiting outside the fence at the correct spot. Do you know where you are going?”

“To the back fence,” I said, puzzled.

“I meant after you leave the camp. Do you know the way to travel?”

“To Nairobi, then to Machakos and finally to Kikima.”

“That is far, but it can be done,” he said. “You must be strong and you must be brave.”

I didn’t feel either strong or brave, but what choice did I have?

“You need to move quietly in the camp. You cannot be discovered as you leave or they will stop you.”

I suddenly felt a rush of emotions swelling up inside of me—fear, uncertainty and, strangest of all, hope. I wasn’t going to let anybody stop me. I would do whatever needed to be done. Maybe I was stronger and braver than I thought.



Chapter Twelve

My sister had a blanket draped around her shoulders. Not only did it provide her with warmth against the cold air, but it was dark red and so it would also help her blend into the night. I had a second blanket tied off in a knot and inside was everything we would take—the pot, our supply of food, three bowls and three spoons. I knew we didn't need the third bowl and spoon, but they had belonged to my mother and I couldn't bear to leave them behind. They were all we had left of her.



Everything was in that little bundle—everything except the water container, which was too big and heavy, and the little knife. I'd wrapped the knife in a piece of cloth and then tucked it into the belt of my trousers. I wanted to have it close if I needed it, but I couldn't think of much that could be solved by my little knife. I just wished Jomo had left me his machete. That would have been something.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“I want to sleep more.”

“There's no time for sleep. We have to leave now.”

“Why?”

What was I supposed to say to her? She didn't know the reason we had to leave.

“Um, I can see it best at night—the string.”

“Really?”

“The string seems to reflect the soft glow of the moonlight even better than it does the bright rays of the sun.”

“Does that mean we have to travel only at night?” she asked.

I hadn't thought of her asking that. What was I going to answer? “Um, right now we are very far away from where we are going, so the string is very thin. As we get closer, I'll be able to see it by sunlight.”

I threw the bundled blanket over my shoulder and picked up the water container. It was full, which made it heavy, but there was no telling where or when we would find clean water.

“It is time to go.”

I offered my sister my hand and helped her to her feet. She stood up, leaving the cot empty. It seemed strange to think that my mother wasn't there, lying hidden in the shadows. We were leaving her behind just as we had left our father behind in Eldoret. Just as we'd left behind our grandparents and aunt and uncle and cousins. They were all gone. It was just me and my sister moving forward.



The air outside the tent was cool and quiet. Everybody was asleep, and all was still. Even the wind seemed to have stopped, as if it were waiting for what we were going to do. Carefully I did up the buckles to seal the tent closed. I was hoping that when they came in the morning, they would think we were still asleep and perhaps not enter as soon, and that would give us a little more time to escape.

“Do not be afraid,” I said.

“I am not,” she replied. “I am with you.”

That made me smile. She trusted me. I just hoped that trust was justified. And I hoped even more that she couldn't sense the fear inside me.

“We want to move as quietly as possible,” I said. “We don't want to wake anybody up. That would not be *polite*.”

“I will be as quiet as a mouse.”

We started off, and then I stopped and turned around. Even a few steps away, our tent seemed different now. It was the same as all the other tents in the camp, and it would soon be occupied by another family. It would no longer belong to us—it no longer belonged to us now. All it held was a bed—just a simple cot and a mattress. Would the bed even remember that we were once there? Silly. It was just wood and stuffing and cloth sheltered underneath a piece of canvas. None of those could remember or forget.

But *we* could remember. Jata and I could remember our time here, our mother, our father, what had happened to us and where we had come from. We could not forget our lives in Eldoret, but now we were setting out to do something more—we would return to where our mother had come from. Even though we'd never been there we were going to be walking home.

“Why are we waiting?” Jata asked.

I couldn't tell her what I was thinking. “I was just waiting for a cloud to pass overhead,” I said, gesturing to the sky, “so that the light from the moon will show me the way. Do you see the string now?”



She seemed to be straining her eyes, tilting her head slightly, looking for the string that would guide us. “I think I see it.”

“I can definitely see it,” I said. “Strange, though—it is leading us away from the front gate.”

“It is? Before you said it went through the front gate.”

“Before it did, but now it doesn't. Just keep holding my hand and I'll keep my eye on it.”

She tightened her grip on my hand and I squeezed hers a little tighter too. I was never going to let go of her, not ever. She was all I had left and I was all she had left, and nobody was going to separate us.

Carefully I chose our route. I wanted to stay away from the administrative tent in case I ran into somebody who knew us. I was sure the chairperson was asleep—did he even sleep in the camp?—but we were known by other people. I didn't want to be asked any questions that I couldn't answer. As well, I wanted to stay away from the hospital. My fear wasn't just that some of the nurses might recognize us, but that we might see something we shouldn't. How would Jata react if she saw them moving our mother's body? It was in the middle of the night when I'd seen them throw those other bodies into the back of the lorry. I couldn't think about them doing that with her. I couldn't.

The nurse at the hospital had told me that our mother would be "laid to rest" at a cemetery they'd created outside the camp. She'd also told me that family members weren't allowed at the burials. All goodbyes had to be said there at the hospital. So that's what we'd done, leaving her in that bed.

"Is everybody asleep?" Jata asked now.

"Almost the *whole* world is asleep."

"Is Mommy sort of asleep?"

I felt my heart rise up into my throat. "It's like being asleep but never waking up again."

"*Never?*"

I shook my head. "She's with our father. She's at peace now and has been reunited with him. We are doing what she wanted us to do. We're following the string."

"And you can see it?"

"It's faint but I can see it. It's leading us to the fence at the back of the camp."

"Are we going to climb the fence, Muchoki?"

"It's too high to climb, and anyway the razor wire at the top would stop us," I said.

"Then what will we do?"

"There will be a way. The string will lead us. Just have faith, okay?"

She nodded. It was important that she have faith so she didn't have fear. I didn't want to lie to her, but the truth wasn't as secure or as certain. The truth was far from either of those. I wished I had somebody who would lie to me so I didn't feel the fear and the uncertainty.

"There's the fence," Jata said.

We were coming up to the edge of the camp. The wire of the fence glistened, catching the rays of the moon the way I'd described the string reflecting the light. Now, I saw the fence differently than I had before. Rather than a ring of protection, keeping us safe from the outside world, it was a barrier standing in our way. What would we do if the sergeant wasn't there? Would I be able to find the one place where we could squeeze under the fence? Surely we couldn't climb it, and I had nothing to cut it with. In fact, the only tools I had were those three spoons and my knife. A shovel would have been better, but if I really needed to, I'd just take that little knife and one of the spoons and dig my way underneath. I wasn't going to be stopped before we had even started. Not by the chairman and not by a fence.

We came to the base of the fence, but I didn't see the sergeant—I didn't see anybody.

"What are we waiting for?" Jata asked.

"I'm just trying to decide whether we should go left or right."

"Shouldn't we just follow the string? You do see it, don't you?" She sounded hesitant.

"Of course I do. I can see it right outside the fence. I just can't see where it goes through the fence. Let's go a little bit to the right and then—" I heard a sound ... feet against the dirt. It was either the sergeant or somebody else. Either good or bad. We'd know soon.

"Somebody is—"

"Ssshhh. Stay quiet," I whispered. I slowly dropped to one knee and pulled Jata down beside me, using my body to shield her.

The footfalls got louder, and then I saw a darkened figure walking just outside the fence. Was it him?

"Muchoki? Muchoki? Can you hear me? Are you there?"

It was him!

"Come," I said. I pulled Jata to her feet and we rushed over to meet the sergeant at the fence. He had his rifle over his shoulder.

"It is good to see you and Jata."

"It is even better to see you."

He bent down and grabbed the bottom strand of wire. It was a few centimeters above the dirt. He pulled it up until there was a gap wide enough for us to slip through.

"You first, Jata," I said.

I dropped the bundled blanket to the ground and grabbed the wire as well, pulling it up to make it easier for her. Jata easily slipped underneath. I pushed the bundle and the water container under, then slipped under as well.

"You came to almost exactly the right spot in the fence. Did you know about it being right here?" the sergeant asked.

"He followed the string," Jata said.

"What?"

"I just came to the back and it was by chance," I said. I turned to Jata and quietly said, "It is a secret."

The sergeant motioned for us to follow him as he walked away from the fence. Finally, well away from the fence, he stopped. "Stay this distance from the fence so that you cannot be seen by the guards but are still close enough that it can guide you. When you can see the main gate, you will be able to find the path leading out to the highway. I wish I could lead you that far, but I must continue my rounds or someone will become suspicious."

"I can find the path."

"Be careful of your steps. This is the time when snakes are out ... as well as other things."

"What other things?" Jata asked anxiously.

"There are lions."

"You have seen lions?" I asked.

"Not me, but others have. Have you seen zebras?" he asked.

I nodded.

“The Maasai have a saying: ‘If you see zebras, think of lions.’ It means that lions always follow zebras.”

Instinctively I put my hand against my small knife. “They have not been seen close to the fence or along the path to the highway. I think they smell and know to not come close,” he said. “Do not get too close, but do not stray too far. Understand?”

“I understand.”

“The people who will be coming to get you, the government people, will be distressed when they find you are not here and will look for you—in camp first and then perhaps on the road. But they will not look too hard or too far. There are more than enough orphans to keep them occupied. Regardless, you must get far from here before they arrive.”

“We will walk as quickly as we can.”

“You will do better than that. Here, this is for you.” He pressed some shillings into my hand. “I only wish it were more, but it is the end of the month. I have almost nothing left. The rest has been sent to my family.”

“Thank you. What more could any person do than give everything?” I asked.

“When you get to the highway, you must flag down a *matatu* that is going to Nairobi.”

“Is this enough to get us to Nairobi?” I asked.

“Not nearly, but it will get you down the road far enough that nobody will suspect you have come from this camp. It will take you twenty or thirty kilometers, maybe more.”

“Thank you so much.”

“When you get to the highway, remember you are going toward Nairobi. It is to your left.”

“To the left,” I repeated. I knew that already, but it was good to hear it again. Nothing could be worse for us than traveling in the wrong direction and having to retrace our steps.

“I just pray to God that I am doing the right thing,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I am helping you to leave. It is giving you a chance to be together, but it is also giving you a chance to die together.”

“There is always that chance,” I said. “Even when you are in a church with your family.”

“You are right. Besides, I think it would be better to die together than survive apart.”

His words hit me so strongly. I had thought about that so much—how it might have been better if we had all perished as a family. But I couldn’t let those thoughts overwhelm me, especially now.

“We will live together,” I said. “And I will remember that is was because of you, a Kalenjin.”

“First I am a Kenyan. Second I am a Kalenjin. Now, go. I will walk along the fence in that direction. You go the same way so you can see me even if I can’t see you. Follow along.”

I offered my hand and we shook.

“God be with you,” I said.

“And with you, my son.” He released my hand. “Now hurry! Another guard will be here shortly.”

I took my sister’s hand and then picked up the water container. It was heavy, but that was good. It had all the water we’d need for the next few days.

The sergeant walked back to the fence, and Jata and I started along through the scrub. I tried to move quickly and silently and carefully. I pulled my sister up a little incline and then down the other side. Suddenly, the sergeant and the camp were gone from view. It was almost too late to turn back. No, it *was* too late.

“Come, Jata,” I said soothingly. “Stay silent and we will be fine.”

We walked along the base of the small rise. As it ended, I was reassured to see the fence once again and even more reassured to see the silhouette of the sergeant. He coughed loudly, which I suspected had more to do with letting me hear him than actually having to cough. We hurried our steps to keep pace with him. His circle was smaller than ours, so we needed to move faster to stay with him. It was dark but not completely dark. The sky was sending down enough light to guide our feet and keep the fence in sight.

“Do you think we will die?” Jata asked.

“Of course not. I will not let us die. Why would you even think that?”

“I heard the words of the sergeant. It would be all right if we did,” she said. “It would be God’s will, and then we would be with our parents and our aunts and uncles and our cousins.”

“We will be with other cousins and other aunts and uncles, and also with our grandparents,” I said. “There will be time later for us to join our parents. Right now, there is a different plan that we must follow, and right now, you must be silent.”

The way was rough and it was hard to keep one eye on the fence and the second on the ground beneath our feet—harder still to keep one ear on the sounds of the sergeant and a second on any hints of noise from the brush. Maybe God’s plan was for us to be eaten by a lion, but it was not *my* plan and I would try to stop it.

We continued to circle around until the gate and the guardhouses came into sight. The path would not be much farther ahead of us. The sergeant walked right to the gate and stopped. There were two other guards there. He raised a hand and gave a wave in our direction, and I waved back even though I knew he couldn’t see us.

I turned away and headed forward, away from the fence, not wanting to chance entering onto the path where I could be visible to the guards. Jata and I went over another small rise and then I turned us back toward the path. Almost instantly we came upon it, worn and wide from the thousands of feet that traveled it daily from the camp to the highway. It was reassuring to have it to guide us, just as it was reassuring to have had the fence and the sergeant guiding us. I only wished there *was* a trail of string leading us to Kikima. But in a way, there was: it was a black ribbon of tarmac that led from here to Nairobi. I wasn’t sure of the steps after that, but I was sure of the first. In fact, we’d already taken them.

We followed the path up another rise until we stood at a place where I could make

out the outline of the camp if I looked back, and I could see the dark line of the highway if I looked forward. The camp was completely dark, but I could see two pinpoints of light coming along the highway—the headlights of a vehicle. It was coming in our direction and then would pass us as it continued to Nairobi. As it got closer I could hear the engine straining and see the lights stretched out before it, showing the surface of the road.

“There, I can see the string!” Jata yelled.

I almost told her to be quiet, but I didn’t. She needed to see the string, and so did I. The truck passed by the spot where the path met the highway, and as it did, the white headlights became dull reddish taillights, visible but not giving off any light, just a glow.

We started down the hill, and I stopped myself from looking back. There was nothing behind us. I just hoped there was something in front of us. The weight of the water container pulled me forward, and I pulled Jata with me. The path was smooth and straight, and there was nothing and nobody to stop us from reaching the highway. We were moving faster and faster. I had to fight the urge to run. At the end we could run, but now we needed to walk. I slowed our pace and then came to a complete stop at the highway.

We stepped onto the tarmac. It was empty and dark and solid and there was a little bit of warmth rising from it. I released Jata’s hand and put down the water container. I felt lighter, hopeful.

“This road leads to Nairobi,” I said. “All we have to do is follow it.”



“Is it far?”

“Very far, but not too far.”

“How long will it take?”

“If we stand still, it will take forever.” I picked up the container and Jata took my hand and we started.

“We’re closer now,” she said.

“Yes, we are.”

“And closer now.”

“Yes, another three steps.”

“And even closer—”

“Less talking and more walking.”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said.

We walked in silence for a few moments. I felt badly for snapping at her.

“Jata?”

“Yes, Muchoki?”

“We *are* closer now.”

She laughed, and her laughter made the darkness seem to lift.

Chapter Thirteen

All through the night we walked. We slowed but never stopped. Jata kept pace with me, even though she had to take four steps for each three of mine, which meant her journey would be longer. She never complained. That was Jata. That was my *mother*—always looking for things to make her smile, always making other people smile. She was exactly what my father had always said: a small copy of our mother.



As we traveled, most of our time was spent in open country. In the darkness I couldn't see far, but I could make out the darkened shapes of trees and hedges, and the imagined images of lions lurking behind them. I tried to stay in the very center of the road, feeling somehow that the tarmac would protect us—as if lions couldn't scale the side of the roadway. But maybe it *was* safer. If they didn't like the smell of the camp, they certainly wouldn't like the lingering smell of the tar and the fumes of the vehicles.

Frequently the country gave way to homesteads or small settlements, a few or a few dozen buildings huddled together. It was as if even the buildings did not like being alone. Their shadows were almost always dark, with only a very few showing any signs of life, light leaking out from beneath doors or around drawn curtains. Light was too precious to allow it to escape, but it wanted to find its way out to freedom.

With the night starting to give way to morning, there were more signs of the world awakening. Roosters started to crow, an invitation to all to wake up. While vehicles were still rare, they were more frequent. They were also coming in waves—not one or two but sometimes ten lorries, all moving together. Maybe they didn't want to be alone right now either.

Now we walked beside the tarmac. For the first few kilometers we had moved off at the sight of traffic and then back on again. Now the stream was so steady that there was no point. Those first few trucks that had come along were a welcome sign that we weren't alone. I could hear the engines and then see the lights and feel warmed by their passing. Now they were just noisy and smelly. I kept my eyes open for a *matatu*, but so far there had only been lorries.

“Are you tired?” I asked Jata.

“I can walk farther. How far is it?”

“We will walk for days,” I said.

“How many days?”

“It depends on how fast we walk.” I would have given her a better answer if I'd had it. I had no idea how many days it would be.

“I can walk faster.” She tried to pick up our pace, but I held her back.

“Do you not remember about the tortoise and the hare?” I asked.

“I remember that story, but I do not necessarily believe it. It would be better to move faster to get there sooner. If we moved very fast, how long would it take?”

I still had no answer. I didn’t know the distances, and I didn’t know how far we could move each day. “We will get there when we get there.”

“That is not a good answer,” she said reproachfully.

“It is the best I can give.” Just then, I heard an approaching vehicle and looked behind us. It was a *matatu*! “Do you want to move faster?”

“Yes, much faster!”

“Good, because we will move very fast now.” I put down the water container and raised my hand high for the driver to see. He blew by us, leaving nothing but a hail of stones and dust and ... he pulled off to the side! I grabbed the container and we ran after him. It was a big yellow *matatu* and its roof was piled high with boxes and barrels. By the time we arrived, the door was open and the conductor was hanging out.

“Nairobi?” he yelled at us.

“Yes.” I pulled the money out of my pocket and handed it to him.

He unfurled the bills, then said, “We are going to Nairobi, but you are not.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is not enough to get you there—not even one of you.”

“Can you carry us as far as the money will allow?”

“That I can do, but it will not be far. Climb aboard, quickly now!”



Jata jumped into the open door and I climbed up after her, burdened with the bundle and the water container. My feet had hardly hit the step when the conductor thumped against the side and the vehicle leaped forward, practically knocking me into the arms of an old woman in the first row of seats.

“Sorry, sorry!” she yelled as she offered me support.

The *matatu* bumped back up onto the tarmac, but this time I was ready and steadied myself with the side of a seat. Jata and I stumbled down the aisle. There were people sitting on the floor toward the back, which signaled that all the seats were taken. I wanted to move as close to the back as possible, somehow hoping that the conductor would forget about us a little longer and allow us a few extra kilometers. Slow and steady won the race, at least between the tortoise and the hare—but I didn’t think either could outrace a *matatu*.

As I passed each row of seats I looked at the people. Most were still asleep and couldn’t look back. There were men and women, some with their children, sleeping together in tangled groups. At their feet and poking into the aisle were bundles and bags—their possessions. I couldn’t help wondering how many of them were fleeing from the same storm we had left behind.

Jata slumped down onto the floor at the back. I put down the water container next to her. It was lighter from a night of drinking but still heavy. I heard the water sloshing

around inside. Next I removed my bundled blanket and set it down as well. Finally I sat down on her other side and she settled into me, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Go to sleep, little one, and I will watch over you.”

Instantly her eyes closed and her breathing changed. She was asleep. I decided I’d just close my eyes for a few minutes too.

“Hey, wake up, boy!”

My eyes popped open and I was blinded by a bright light and confused as to where I was. It was the *matatu* conductor standing over top of me.

“You have ridden more than your fare! It is time to get off the bus!”

“Yes, we will get off.” Jata’s eyes were only half-open. “Come, sister, we need to get off.”

I stood up and pulled her to her feet. The conductor retreated down the aisle toward the front of the still-moving *matatu*. We may have traveled too far, but with each second we were traveling farther. Deliberately, I grabbed her blanket and then the bundle with one hand and the water container with the other. I went slowly down the aisle, pushing past others who had boarded since we did. Now not only every seat but also most of the aisle was taken by passengers. I looked out the windows at the passing country. It didn’t look much different from where we had started, and I wondered how far we had come.

When we finally arrived at the front, the conductor signaled to the driver and we pulled off the tarmac onto the dirt shoulder, a big cloud of dust rising up behind us.

“Where are we, sir?” I asked.

“We are as far as your fare could take you and then more.”

“And Nairobi?”

“It is sixty-five kilometers ahead on this road.”

“How far did we ride?”

“It should have been only twenty kilometers, but it is now closer to forty. You should be paying more.”

“We have no more to pay, sir. Thank you for allowing us to ride longer,” I said.

“I did not allow. I simply forgot.”

He opened the door and I jumped down, helped Jata off with my free hand. Her feet had hardly touched the ground when the engine roared and the bus started off. The conductor leaned out the door. “And do not forget: it is this way. You cannot miss it!” he yelled.

The *matatu* bumped up onto the tarmac, driving off. Soon, the dust it had created dropped down and the sound of the engine faded to near silence before it was replaced by the noise of an oncoming truck.

I looked around. No homesteads, stores or people. We were alone in the middle of nothing. Behind us—well behind us—was the camp. We were far enough away—they would never bother chasing us this far. Stretching out ahead was the road leading us onward. I knew that the road would lead to another and then another until it finally reached our destination. I just prayed that we were on it when it got there. I felt that

sense of fear rising in my chest again. We were alone, so alone.

The sun continued to rise until it was directly above our heads. We had passed through dozens of little towns and markets—some no more than two stores together, and so broken down that they seemed to be leaning against each other as a way to stay upright. There were always people in the markets—little roadside stands put there to sell food or services to the passing trucks. Mostly we just passed through, ignored. I was grateful. We were not the only people moving between these places. We would come across others—by themselves, in pairs, sometimes whole families—who were either passing us or moving in our direction. Some would overtake us, and others we would overtake. Some moved slowly because they were burdened heavily with their possessions. We were not the only ones who had no better way to move than on our feet.



As we passed these people I would be respectful in how I observed them, but I still observed. Some seemed friendly, and almost all gave us a greeting. Others, though, had that look I'd seen in the eyes of people in the camp—a look I'd seen in the eyes of my mother. They were beaten down, afraid; they had witnessed things, and things had been done to them. It was in their eyes, visible in that instant when we passed, in a nodding of the head. I wondered if they could see those same things in me?

I was vigilant and wary of all but still welcomed their presence. In the great stretches of road that we were walking, even the company of strangers made me feel less alone. We were sharing a journey, even if we were headed in different directions.

Jata and I were walking to leave farther and farther behind everything that we had ever known, every place we had ever been, to go to people we had never met in a place we'd never been. But I couldn't allow myself to think about that. I was already carrying enough weight.

As the sun climbed throughout the day we slowed. It was hot and we were tired and hungry. A rest was needed, as was food.

“Are you hungry? Do you want to stop?” I asked.

Jata slumped down to the ground.

I offered her my hand. “I did not mean right here and now. We need to find the right spot.”

She took my hand and got up. “I do not see any right spots,” she said. “I only see this.” She motioned around.

In front and behind were open sections of road. There were no homesteads or shops, and even the trucks had seemed to abandon this stretch. Off to both sides, as far as I could see, was only scrub brush, cactus and the occasional tree. The only thing that broke the scene—the thing that gave me hope—was in the far, far distance: the rising rim of the Rift Valley. I knew we'd be climbing it eventually. I wasn't looking forward

to it but I knew it was the high point that stood between us and Nairobi, so it would have to be scaled.

“I want to find a spot off the road,” I said. I was still thinking that sometime today those people who had been sent for us would be traveling this road. They might not recognize us and would view us as nothing more than two of the hundreds of people walking along the highway. Still I would rather not chance being seen by them at all. We were far from the camp now. Between the forty-kilometer ride in the *matatu* and the distance covered by foot, we had traveled perhaps fifty-five kilometers. That meant that Nairobi was only another fifty kilometers away. We couldn’t get there today, but we could be there in two days. But after that I had no idea. How far was Machakos from Nairobi, and how far was Kikima from there? Was it two hundred kilometers or three hundred or more? I wanted to know, but perhaps knowing would have been bad. It was easier to walk these steps at least having hope that it was close.



Twice it had looked as if it would rain, but then it hadn’t. The rainy season was upon us, but the rain wasn’t. Rain was a blessing from heaven, and there appeared to be no blessings this day. At least when the clouds came, they shaded us from the sun. There were times when the tarmac was so hot that it was spongy under foot. It was better to travel along the side of the road, not simply to avoid the traffic but to be free of the heat rising from the tarmac.

Up ahead I could make out the outline of a few little buildings. Smaller still were the figures moving slowly about in the midday heat. They were moving because there was some cause to move. I knew that if I had no reason, I would surely be sitting in a spot shaded from the sun instead of walking along the side of the highway.

Between us and the buildings, there was a vehicle off to the side of the road. It was a vehicle, but it was not a vehicle. At least not anymore. It was a wreck of some sort, I was certain. Getting closer, I could make out the skeleton of a small *matatu*. Gone were the tires and the glass of the windows, and even the white of the frame was scarred and blackened by fire. It had been in an accident; a fire had consumed it.



“What happened to it?” Jata asked.

“An accident. You know how *matatu* drivers are. I’m surprised the roadway isn’t littered with more of their remains.”

It sat there, at the side of the road, facing forward, sitting right side up, and the body, other than the blackened frame, was not dented or damaged. The roadway, though, had been swept clean of any pieces from the collision, and there were none of the glistening pebbles of glass that usually lingered on the road for months or even years after an accident. This must have happened long ago, because nobody would ever clean up after an accident, especially out here where there was nothing but scrub bush to witness it.

“Do you think we could ride on this *matatu*?” Jata joked.

“It’s about the only one we can afford, although it would not go very far.”

It did look as if it was simply waiting for passengers the way it was sitting. I could almost picture the conductor hanging out the open door.

As we came right up to it, I could see that it would be a most uncomfortable ride. The seats had been completely consumed by the fire, so there was no place for the passengers to sit, and there was a blackened mass in one of the seats. In an instant of trying to make sense out of nonsense, then denying it and then realizing it was real, I knew. It was the burned remains of a man, still covered in shreds of clothing, the white of his skull the only contrast to the blackened, burned body.

I pushed Jata away, still holding her hand, trying to get some distance and to use my body as a screen between her and the dead man. I wanted to protect her, to stop her from seeing, or suffering from the sight.

“Up ahead in the next village we will stop for water,” I said.

“I am thirsty.”

“So am I. Very thirsty. How about if you sing me a song to pass the time?”

“But you told me not to sing because it takes away my breath and makes me more thirsty.”

“You are only going to sing until those next buildings, and then you will have something to drink.”

She began to sing. “*Charity, charity, charity, charity...*”



We left the *matatu* behind. Her little sweet voice had blocked the sight from her eyes. She hadn’t seen. I just wished I hadn’t either.

I started humming along with her.

I could tell there was something happening on the highway, but I couldn’t be certain of what. The trucks and cars were slowing down and then stopping. Was it rioters? I couldn’t see any smoke, and nothing was on fire. It would be easy enough for us to leave the tarmac and go into the bush, where we could detour around without being noticed. I didn’t want to do that, but if necessary I’d try to take as short a detour as possible. I needed to get closer to see exactly what was happening and how I would need to act. There were people coming slowly toward us on foot. Not only had they not been harmed, but they could tell us what was happening ahead.

I put down the water container and grabbed Jata by the hand, the better to move her fast if I needed to. With my free hand I sought the comfort of feeling the knife tucked into the band of my trousers. It was there. That was reassuring in a small way.

“Excuse me, sir,” I called out to an old man moving slowly toward us.

“Yes, young boy? What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering, sir, what is happening on the road ahead?”

“Security. The police and army are checking vehicles.”

“So there is nothing for me to fear?”

“Not unless you are a thug or a rioter.” He gave a raspy laugh.

“Thank you, sir.”

I picked up the water container and started back along the road, towing Jata along behind. Up ahead, the line of vehicles was growing. I took us on a route farther off the road so that I could see around the cars.

There were dozens of vehicles and more than double that number of police and soldiers. Across the road were metal barriers that completely blocked one lane of the highway, forcing vehicles in each direction to alternate in passing through the opening when the soldiers allowed. The gap was blocked by two soldiers, each holding a machine gun. Soldiers moved down the line in pairs and stopped at each vehicle. They were on the road to provide security. I should have felt safe, but instead I felt frightened. They were soldiers, but they were still men with guns.

I tried not to look at them as we passed, but it was hard not to. They were in green uniforms with red berets. They wore big black boots and each held either a rifle or a machine gun. They were giving loud orders—yelled out in Swahili—to the drivers. Nobody seemed to be saying much in response. The drivers listened, allowed the soldiers to look inside their vehicles and then drove off when they were allowed.

“Do you think any of them are friends with the sergeant?” Jata asked.

“I’m sure he knows them all,” I replied. I wanted her to feel reassured.

We passed by the checkpoint and continued to walk in silence, unnoticed and untroubled. The soldiers by the waiting vehicles didn’t even glance in our direction. It was as if we were invisible.

Chapter Fourteen

“There’s one over there,” I said to Jata, pointing out a piece of wood off to the side of the road.

She ran over and picked it up, adding it to the bundle she was carrying. We were gathering fuel as we walked so that we could have a fire to cook our meal over.

“Do you think this is enough? It is getting heavy.”

“Here, give me the pile to carry,” I said.

“It is not *that* heavy.”

“Well, you will not need to carry it much farther. I think I see the spot.”

Up ahead was a small bridge in the near distance. As we got closer, I could see a deep gorge. At the bottom were a few pools of dirty, brown water and a thin thread of water linking them together. This was the spot. We wouldn’t use the water, of course, but the depression would shield us from other eyes, from the wind, and from the sun until it set. It was—I believed—close to evening, and time was passing into the distance. Within two hours the light would be gone completely, but until then I wanted to escape its glare and the eyes that could be upon us. This might be the place to stay for the night.

Carefully Jata and I worked our way down from the road and into the gorge. It was hard going, with one hand on the water container and the other steadying my sister. The banks were damp. During the last rainfall—which had been recent—there must have been a raging torrent of water filling up the entire gorge. Now it had all run off, leaving nothing but the damp reminder of a trickle in the sand.

Reaching the bottom, I edged over into the shade provided by the steep carved wall of the gorge. The sand was giving off a coolness that was a welcome change from the heat of the tarmac. There were droppings from goats and cows. The little water that was there was being used to quench the thirst of the local herds. Jata dropped the bundle of wood and then slumped down to the sand. I wanted to do the same, but there was work to do before we could eat and nobody else to do it.

I started gathering stones and placing them in a circle as a fire pit, with one stone in the very center for the cooking pot to rest upon. For good measure, I also hauled back two larger rocks that we could sit on. After that, I took the branches Jata had gathered and broke them into small pieces, arranging them in the circle. Next I pulled up some fine dry grass that made the perfect starter for the fire. I tossed the grass onto the kindling but also threaded it into the twigs and branches. Satisfied, I took out a small box of matches. There were eighteen left—enough for the rest of our journey, and probably more than enough for the amount of food we carried, but still not even one to waste.

I squatted low and struck the match, shielding the flame with my hand, and then lit one part of the grass and then a second and a third. All three caught, and soon the fire spread to the twigs and the branches. I put more branches on top so that there would be

more fuel.

Finally, I undid my bundle and pulled out the pot, a big serving of beans and maize, two cups, two bowls and two spoons. I just wished that we'd needed three of each—that my mother had been sharing the third. I took the water container and carefully poured water in both cups and then into the pot. The container had grown lighter throughout the day as we drank, and now it was lighter still. That was good for carrying but bad for our ongoing needs. There was no telling when I could get us more clean water. Still, there was plenty for tonight, tomorrow and a little into the third day. I put the pot onto the stone in the middle of the fire, poured in the beans and maize, and gave it all a stir.

“Jata, it won't be long until—” I stopped myself when I saw she was sound asleep. I'd wake her when the food was ready.

I took one of the blankets and draped it over her. If I hadn't been afraid to wake her, I would have placed the second beneath her to offer some protection against the ground. The thin mattress on the cot in our tent would have been most welcome now.

Perhaps it would have been wise to travel farther, but it was better to stay out of the sun and heat than to keep going now. I knew that to beat the hare, the tortoise had to keep moving, but that tortoise did not have as far to go as we did. We needed to rest, and this was a good time. Any thoughts of moving for the night were now gone. This was where we'd sleep. Not that I could rest yet. We'd need much more fuel for the fire first—both for the warmth it offered and for the protection it provided. It wasn't just cows and sheep that needed water. But I knew that animals were afraid of the fire, and that it would keep them away. Strange, that. You'd think it would only show them where you were so they could come and make a meal of you.

Jata finished the serving I had put in her bowl. The walking had made us both hungry. Very hungry. I would have to rethink how many days of food we had. Our supply would not last as long as I had hoped. Still, there was some left in the pot. The portion had been too large. In my head I knew it was only for two, but in my heart and in my habit I had put in enough for three.

“My feet are sore,” Jata said.

“So are mine.” I looked down at my shoes. The big toe on my right foot was peeking through a hole that had become larger throughout the day. Would my shoes last through this journey? If I had to, I'd walk barefoot. The lack of shoes wasn't going to stop me.

“Do you hear it?” Jata asked.

“Mostly I can just hear you talking and singing.”

The rest and the meal had raised her spirits and she was my Jata again, talking to herself, softly singing and—

“There it is again,” she said.

I had heard it that time too. There were voices ... and maybe a bell tingling. I got to my feet just as two goats spilled down the side of the gorge! They were followed by two more, and then more still, until a whole herd was sliding and surging down the slope. Cattle followed. The first few hesitated at the top, but they were propelled down by

those coming from behind. It was a big herd—dozens and dozens of goats and many, many cattle. They all rushed forward, ignoring us as they found the water they were seeking. The cows, which were far larger and had bigger horns, plowed aside any goats that weren't wise enough to scamper away on their own.



I looked back to the top of the slope to see if there were any more animals still to come. Standing there, with the setting sun behind him, was a Maasai warrior! In his hands was a long spear and strapped to his side was a machete, the fading sun glistening against the blade. He stood there like he was frozen, as if he were a statue made of stone. Then he started skidding down the slope himself, coming toward us.



He stopped a few meters away and looked at us. He towered over me. I moved a few steps forward, not to threaten but to put myself between him and Jata. He remained silent and still, staring, as if he was studying us.

Suddenly, Jata moved past me. In her hands was her almost empty bowl.

“Greetings,” she said. “Would you join us for dinner?”

The Maasai didn't react.

“We have enough to share,” she added. “We have more than this.”

His expression didn't soften or change in any way.

I stepped forward again to shield her. “Perhaps he doesn't understand,” I suggested. “Or—”

“I know some Kikuyu,” he answered in Swahili.

Of course he now knew that we were Kikuyu—just as I knew that as a Maasai he was of the Nilotic people, like the Kalenjin who had killed our father.

“Would you join us?” Jata asked, this time in Swahili.

“You two are alone out here?” the man asked. His head swiveled from side to side, looking around.

Before I could even think to deceive him, Jata answered, “We are alone.”

“Are you sure you have enough food?” he asked.

“We do not have much,” I said. “But we have enough to share.” It was wise to offer because he could have taken it if he'd wanted.

He nodded his head and offered a small smile. “That is kind. Thank you.”

Jata extended her bowl, but I stopped her. “I will get you a fresh bowl. We also have water. I wish I had tea to offer.”

“Water, milk and blood are what I drink, so water would be fine. Thank you, friend.”

We sat on our rocks around the fire, which was now the only heat and light left in the land. I missed the heat of the midday sun, although I never would have thought that possible as I passed along that scorching tarmac. An occasional vehicle would roar up and then past us on the road, leaving behind the smell of fumes and a silence that seemed deeper. All around us, moving in and out of the light thrown by the campfire, were parts of the Maasai's herd. They were corralled by the sides of the gorge, and one of his sons stood watch up on top. He had come after we finished dinner—his name was the same as his father's, Wilson—and after he was introduced, he had silently taken up his position caring for the herd ... and for us.

"You have traveled far," Wilson the father said.

"We have much farther to travel still."

"The Maasai can travel from sunrise until sunset."

"We started before the sun came up and traveled nearly until it set," Jata said proudly.

"Perhaps you are not Kikuyu but Maasai." He laughed.

He laughed a lot. He was very happy and friendly. The few Maasai I'd known—or had *seen*, not really *known*—always looked so fierce and intimidating and they always carried weapons. Wilson had a spear, a machete and a club tucked into his belt. I remembered what I'd been told about how the Maasai were short-tempered and quick to anger, but Wilson only seemed quick to laugh. Still, I was careful of what I said, trying not to give him reason to be angered.

"I am saddened for you for the loss of your parents," he said.

We had told him everything.

"How old are you, boy?"

"Fourteen in a few weeks." I knew I should probably lie and say sixteen, but I didn't. If I had told that chairman I was sixteen, would he have left Jata in my care?

"Then perhaps I should not call you 'boy' any longer. You are a man, in age and in responsibility. You are now the father."

"And mother," Jata said.

"It is unusual how people are related and what they are called. Kalenjin think of us Maasai as cousins," Wilson said. "But we are not. We are Maasai. Do you know that if a Maasai takes the life of a person who is not a Maasai—even one who is a Kalenjin—then it is not murder?"

"It is not?"

He shook his head. "It is only murder if a Maasai kills another Maasai."

"That is not right," Jata said.

"It is right. I know our customs and laws and legends." Wilson's expression had hardened.

"She was not meaning to question you," I said, trying to ease her words in case they had offended. "She knows you are wise."

"Your sister is also wise," Wilson said. "To take the life of any other is to murder. We Maasai have tried to stay separate always—to follow our own ways—but some things are simply wrong. Many of us have stayed separate from the problems that are out

there. We are content to mind our herds.”

“That is wise.”

“We have neither killed nor been killed. Although as warriors we are armed and trained to take a life if necessary.”

“Most people know and understand that,” I said. “We show respect.”

“As it should be. We ask for respect and we show respect in return.” He paused for a moment. Deep in thought, he stared into the distance before turning back to face me. “I have no interest in politics or politicians or political events.”

“None?”

“We ask only that politicians leave us to live our lives in the traditional way.”

Everybody knew that the Maasai were the tribespeople who most followed their past. Some admired them, but others called them “dirty primitives,” although never to their faces—short-tempered, proud and well armed was a bad combination to offend.

“Of course we have different ideas about livestock. Do you know that all cattle in the world belong to the Maasai people?”

“They do?” Jata asked.

He laughed. “It is one of our creation legends. In the beginning, God gave all the cattle to the Maasai. That means that other people with cattle have either stolen them themselves or inherited them from ancestors who stole them.”

“Really?” Jata asked.

“We believe that when we take cattle from other people, we are merely taking back what is rightfully ours. Of course, neither the politicians nor the other tribespeople believe that.”

“And what do *you* believe?” I asked.

“If I raised a boy from the time he was a baby—if I fed him, cared for him, defended him, gave him my name—then he would be my child. It is the same with cattle. I will not allow the convenience of an old legend to justify what is clearly wrong.”

“You are most wise,” I said.

“I am old. Someday you will be wise ... if you are blessed to live that long.”

A tingle went up my spine. Was that an innocent statement or a warning of what was to come? As if in answer to my thoughts, Wilson pulled back his robe to reveal the machete. It glistened in the light from the fire.

“Of course I would never allow *my* cattle to be taken. I would be prepared to kill or die in their defense.” He let the blanket fall closed again to hide the weapon. “I care not who is the president. I care only that my family, my tribe and my herd are left in peace.”

“That is most important,” I said.

“Your sister has gone to sleep,” he said.

Jata was lying on the ground, half on and half under her blanket, close enough to the fire to be warmed. This time it was no nap. You could see that she was in the deepest of sleeps.

“It is time for me as well.” He stood up. I’d forgotten how tall he was. “I will sleep close to my herd, and you can sleep close to yours.” He nodded at Jata. “You can sleep

secure. I know that this is a time of worry, but at least tonight you will have no concerns. You are under my protection. No one would dare to bring you harm.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He walked away into the darkness and was gone—but not far. I threw the remaining pieces of wood into the fire. There weren’t enough to keep it alive until morning, but I was not going to go out in the darkness and gather more. I was going to sleep. I had no fear. I trusted Wilson. Besides, if he was going to take my life, he had no need to wait for me to close my eyes.

I took the second blanket—the one holding our remaining food—unloaded it and draped it over Jata, covering her legs and feet with a second layer. Then I lay down behind her, offering her whatever protection I could from the darkness and what it might contain.

Up above there were stars twinkling in the sky. The ground beneath me was cold and hard. All around was openness that disappeared into darkness. I thought back to my bed in my room in my house. To being safe and warm and protected. It was all gone, no matter how much I wished it wasn’t so. Even the tent was gone. I closed my eyes and hoped for a sleep that would bring me escape, if only in a dream.

Chapter Fifteen

The smell of fire caused me to jolt awake. It was nothing—just the small fire I had made, still glowing and flickering and crackling. But the sky was also starting to show the first rays of morning light. How could both be possible? The fire should have died out hours before the arrival of dawn. Then I saw Wilson—the son—come forward with branches in his arms. He stopped by the fire and fed the branches into the flames, one by one.

“Good morning,” I said.

“And to you. That is for you and your sister.” He pointed to our pot. It was filled to the brim with porridge.

“It is special,” he said. “Made with cereal, and milk from our cattle.” He picked up the pot and handed it to me. “Eat, but leave some for your sister.”

“I will leave enough for everybody,” I said.

“There is no everybody. My father has eaten. I have eaten. It is for you and your sister.”

“We could never eat that much.”

“Never?” he asked. “Perhaps not this morning, but it will be there for later today and perhaps even tomorrow. It will not last till ‘never.’ ”

“Thank you for your kindness.”

“You offered your food and we offer ours. It is our way. You should awaken your sister. We will be leaving soon.”

“How soon?” I asked. It had felt calming to be under their protection, and now again there would be no protection except for my little knife.

“We will leave soon.”

Jata and I would not be ready that quickly, but this was a safe spot to be left.

Wilson the father walked over and offered his morning greetings.

“We will soon move our herd to graze. I have chosen to move them that way.” He pointed down the road in the direction we were going. “I ask if you would travel with us.”

“Yes, that would be most wonderful!” I exclaimed. “We will quickly ready ourselves for the journey.”

“But our journey together will not be for the full day. We will travel until the sun is overhead. Then we will rest, feed and come back this way for evening water.”

“Your company would be most welcome for as long as you offer it.”

“The road along this section is not safe, but you will be walking with us,” he said.

“I know, then, that we will be safe. Again, my thanks.”

We traveled well off to the side of the tarmac. We were close enough to the road to see

it in the distance but far enough away that we could only hear the largest and loudest vehicles passing.

Wilson's goats and cows moved slowly forward, nibbling from the brush and bushes. The goats would eat almost anything, but the cows were much more selective. Our pace was slow—certainly slower than yesterday—but at least we were moving forward. The tortoise would have been proud of us. And we were safe. I felt as secure as a goat or a cow knowing that both Wilsons—father and son—were our shepherds.

I looked around for Jata. She was being carried by Wilson the father. She looked tiny in his arms. She was smiling and laughing. He was smiling and laughing. She was my little star, twinkly and shining even during the day.

“This is where we will stop,” Wilson the father said.

“Thank you for your protection, but we must continue forward.”

“But there is danger for strangers. The road is not safe.”

“We could travel off to the side, away from the road,” I suggested.

“Then there will be other dangers. You will not travel alone.”

“I do not understand.”

“My son will accompany you farther in your journey. He will lead you.” He squatted down and picked up a stick. “This is the route of the road.” Wilson made a line in the dirt. “It must cut far to the west to allow the trucks to travel up the steep valley wall. But you can go more directly.” He drew a second line cutting through the curve of the road in an almost straight line. “This way is shorter and safer—as long as you are in the company of a Maasai.”

“Thank you again, sir. I'm ... I'm ... so grateful for your kindness.” I didn't have the words to let him know how truly appreciative I felt. To continue to travel in safety under the protection of Wilson the son was more than I could have hoped for.

“Offering to help is our way. The route you will walk is rough and very steep, but it is the path our people travel.”

“Today, with your permission, sir, we will walk as if we are Maasai.”

Wilson the son led. Free of the herd, he started the trip quickly, eating up ground with his big, bouncy strides. At times Jata was forced to run to keep pace. Finally he noticed her plight and slowed.

“Wilson, are there lions here?” she asked.

She sounded concerned, so I had to ease her fears. “Of course there are no—”

“Not many,” he said, interrupting me.

“So there are some?” I asked.

“Not many,” he repeated.

“What will we do if we see one?” I asked.

“It depends on what the lion does. If it allows us free passage, then I will allow it free passage.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“I have my spear,” he said, holding it up.

“You will kill it?” Jata asked.

“I have been a part of slaying a lion before.”

“When you say ‘a part,’ does that mean you were not alone?” I asked.

“There were many of my age mates in the hunt.”

“But here it is just you.”

“Even better!” he exclaimed. “That way, both the tail and the mane will be mine. I will have all the honor of the kill.”

“Or you will *be* killed,” I said.

“Perhaps, but then I will die in a way that will be sung about.”

“Aren’t you afraid of lions?” Jata asked.

“I am Maasai. Lions are afraid of me.” He paused. “But an elephant is different. One needs to be afraid of them.”

“Are there elephants around here?” Jata asked.

“You will not see one today.”

That was reassuring to hear.

“They are even more rare here than lions. But there are some, nonetheless.”



I looked all around to see which bush could hide an elephant. But I realized that any elephant that could hide in that brush would be so small it could probably be handled.

“If we see an elephant, you must stay close by my side. We will go downwind so that it cannot smell us. But if it sees us and comes in our direction, you must run very fast away from him in a straight line, and I will wait this long”—he held up four fingers—“because I am faster than you. We will hope that it chases me, but it will probably chase you, because even elephants are afraid of Maasai.”

“Do not worry, Jata,” I said. She had no need to worry because I was worrying enough for both of us.

“Do not worry, but run. If it does chase you, then stop running straight and start running zaggy-zaggy.”



“Zaggy-zaggy?” I asked.

He waved his hand back and forth like a snake. “Elephants do not turn very well and he might fall over.” He started laughing.

“Isn’t there something else we could do?” I asked. He shook his head. “It is an elephant. Unless you have a gun, it cannot be stopped.”



It was a sign of progress to leave the flatland behind and start up the face of the cliff. The path was challenging—steep and curving—but it had to be free of elephants and lions. Wilson led the way and we struggled to keep up with him. As we climbed, the valley opened up behind and beneath us. It stretched out so far into the distance that it didn't look real. On the horizon darker clouds had formed, and they seemed to be chasing after us. A storm was coming.

Wilson stopped and turned around. "This is where I leave you."

"Is the road just up ahead?"

"Ahead, but not just. Continue up, and when the path divides, take the fork to the right."

"Couldn't you come with us until we reach the tarmac?" Jata asked.

He shook his head. "I must leave to return to my father. I will not find his camp until after dark."

"I understand. Thank you, Wilson the son, and thank Wilson the father," I said.

"I will. You will be safer now. If you come upon other members of my tribe, you tell them you are still under the care of Wilson."

"Thank you so much."

"Goodbye, my friends."

We stood there watching until he disappeared down a small rise and into some trees. He was gone and we needed to continue moving forward—and up. The road awaited. I just didn't know how far it was.

I thought about the distance we had already traveled. On this section we hadn't followed any imaginary piece of string. Instead, we had been guarded and guided by two Maasai warriors. Someday it would make a wonderful story. I just wished my parents had lived to hear it. I leaned into the slope and started to climb again.

A few more steps forward.

Wilson had not lied—the road was not close. We struggled on up the hill, which never seemed to end. The forks in the path were few, and I followed Wilson's advice and always chose to go to the right. It had been a long day. Jata and I had traveled for nearly six hours with both Wilsons—father and son—and then another four with Wilson the son. Now, it had been well over an hour since the son had left us to walk alone.

Behind us, the storm was gaining ground. The wind was offering a push forward and the sun had been chased behind the storm clouds. It hadn't started raining yet, but the sound of thunder and the sight of lightning were common. This was threatening to be a big storm.

I turned my head to the side to listen. I could hear something more than the wind in the trees. It was the roar of an engine. That could mean only one thing—the road was close. If not the highway, at least some road was ahead. It would be good to be free of the trees and the constant climb.

"Come, Jata, we must hurry."

I reached back and took her by the hand to pull her forward, something I hadn't been

doing very often. The slope of the hill was more than I could handle with my heavy load and her in tow. We came through the trees. In front of us was a small homestead—a small but neat home and rows of knee-high maize—and beyond that was the highway. Two big trucks crossed in opposite directions. The road was lined with small stores and stalls, and I could see a few people moving quickly along the paths that lined the highway. A few drops of rain started to fall.

“Do we have to go much farther?” Jata asked.

“Not much. Our day is almost over and we have covered more than thirty kilometers. If we had some place to get out of the rain, then we could stop.”

“There is a house.”

“We do not know the people who live in that house—or which tribe they belong to. Just come and we will look for the right spot.”

We reached the road just as a big truck roared by in the direction we wished to travel. Behind it were a third and fourth and fifth—all traveling together. If any of those drivers had allowed us inside for a ride, we would have been in Nairobi in hours and not days. We carried on along the road, the sky darkening by the minute, more drops starting to fall. We didn’t have much time to get away from the rain.

Ahead was a small building. As we approached, I realized it was deserted and partly destroyed. On front, in big letters, was written THE STAGE SHOP. The name remained but the windows were gone, as were the door and part of one wall. But the tin roof still survived. I pulled Jata inside. Almost instantly the rain began pounding noisily, demanding to come through, but the roof would not allow it. Wind blew in through the openings, but there was a corner—two full walls—away from the windows and doors that seemed to be safe and hopefully would remain dry.



“Tonight we will sleep here.”

“It is already cold.”

“But it will stay dry, and I can chase away the cold if I can find fuel for a fire.”

I couldn’t go outside without getting soaked, and all the wood would soon be wet. I looked around. There, in the far corner, were the remains of a chair. I walked over. There were wooden slats, two of the legs, part of the back, and some ripped cloth and foam from the seat. That would be enough kindling for the fire. This chair would never be sat on again, but it could still be counted on. Raindrops were coming in, but the pieces of the chair were still dry enough to burn—at least I hoped.

I brought them back over to the corner where Jata was sitting. She had her back in the corner and her blanket draped over her. I smashed the wood into small pieces and then stacked a few in a way that I hoped would quickly catch fire. Next I ripped the seat pieces, shredding the foam and sprinkling it about, then topping it with some ripped pieces of the cloth covering. Finally, I removed the matches from my bundle. The first was blown out by the wind before I could coax the cloth into lighting. That left only

sixteen. I turned my body to act as a shield from the elements and then lit a second match, nursing it in my hands.

“Come on, come on,” I begged the flame.

It listened to my desperate plea. The cloth caught first and the foam quickly followed. Soon the flames licked against the wood. I just hoped the pieces I’d placed weren’t too big to be ignited by the kindling. I looked around the little floor. It was the only place where dry existed in my world. There, against the wall, were a few plastic bags and a scrap of paper. I gathered them up. They were damp but not wet. They would smoke, but they would also burn. I went back and tossed them on the fire. The flame got brighter and bigger, and the wood started to bubble as it got hotter. The flames licked around the wood until it charred and then began to be consumed. The fire had caught, and now it would last until the fuel was all used.

“Do you want your supper hot or cold?” I asked Jata.

“I am not hungry.” Her arms were wrapped around her legs and her face was buried. That was not a good sign.

“Since you are not hungry, it is my choice and I say it will be warm.” I hoped that the warmth of the food in her stomach would spread through her body and chase away her tiredness and despair.

I opened up our bundle and removed the pot. Throughout the day we had been nibbling its contents, but it was still half full. I was tired of porridge but more tired of being hungry. Besides, I couldn’t cook anything else in the pot until the porridge was finished, and worse than that, it would spoil before long. It needed to be finished.

I placed the pot beside the fire, where it could start to heat without burning. I’d just have to stir it about and maybe add a little water to make it moist. At least water wasn’t going to be a problem. I poured a cup from the container into the pot and then went to the doorway. There was a stream of water coming off the roof and onto the ground. I reached out and cupped a handful of rain and drank down what didn’t escape through my fingers. It was cold and clean. Whatever sand and dirt had collected on the roof had already been washed away. I placed the water container outside and positioned it so the stream of rain danced around the opening. Soon—within minutes—it would be full.

Jata was stirring the porridge when I turned back. “I didn’t want it to burn. It started to smell good.”

“That’s because it will taste good! You are so lucky to spend the entire day walking across the savannah with a Maasai and eating his food. Wait until you tell your friends. They will hardly believe you!”

“I do not know where my friends are,” she said. “I do not have any friends anymore.”
What had I said?

“You will make new friends when we arrive, and they will become your best friends, you mark my words. But for now, would you do me a favor?”

She nodded. There was sadness in her eyes.

“Could you tell me all about today? So many things happened that I don’t even believe it! I need to hear it from you to believe it was real!”

Her smile lit the small building even more than the fire.

Chapter Sixteen

We were awakened early by the cold and the sound of trucks rushing past on the road. We got up, said our thanks to the little building that had sheltered us and joined the trucks on the journey to Nairobi. The air was cool and the road was downhill. I was grateful for both, for I knew the sun would soon be blazing hot and the road could turn up at any time.



We walked on the right side of the road, facing the vehicles as they came toward us. Sometimes the path shifted away from the road, and sometimes it was so narrow that rather than hold Jata's hand, I had her walk behind me. Deliberately I walked closer to the traffic to try to shield her—as if a vehicle hitting me would stop and go no farther. And there was one other constant for the trip this morning: the mud.

The heavy rain had gone, but it had left much behind. Dirt had turned into mud and large puddles blocked the way; water ran from the hills and into the ditches beside the road, turning them into small streams. In places that were lower, those streams and puddles came together to create ponds, and goats and cows were wading through them, eating. They seemed not to even notice their early morning bath as they continued to graze. Life had to go on for them as well.

“Wait!” Jata called out.

I turned. She was much farther behind than I would have liked. I had got so caught up in my head that I hadn't been exercising enough care. As she tried to catch up, she slipped and slid toward me. Her shoes wore a thick sole of mud that made walking difficult.

“Here, do this.” I rubbed the bottom of my shoe against the edge of the tarmac until a layer of mud peeled away. I did the same with the second shoe as she copied me.

“I do not like the lorries,” she said. “Those trucks are so big and loud and scary.”

“Their numbers will increase as the day fully dawns.”

“Do you think it will rain more?” she asked.

I shook my head. “There is not enough water left in the skies because it all fell last night. Besides, if somehow it does start again then we will walk between the drops.”

“At least we know how far we have to go,” she said.

“We do?”

She pointed beyond me. There was a large green sign in the distance, close enough that it could be read: NAIROBI 45 KM.

“We are almost there,” she said.

“If we walk strong today and tomorrow we will be on the other side of the city by the

second night.” My hope was not to have to sleep within the city itself. I remembered what the sergeant had said—that I should treat the city as a dangerous animal, best approached in the light of day, when it could be watched.

“Are you ready to continue?” I asked.

“I am not ready, but we will continue.”

“First you need to take a drink. It is better that you carry some of this water in your stomach than I continue to dangle all of it from my arm.”

“There is so much water all around. Do you need to carry so much?”

“I’d rather carry water that we don’t need than not have water that we do need. I will carry it.”

I couldn’t help admiring the land we were passing. The crops were thick and lush and green. It looked as if the rain was a blessing to them on an ongoing basis. I thought about how my father would have envied these fields. If his family had possessed such land here, they would never have moved to Eldoret and then none of—I stopped myself. No point in thinking that through. As constant as the movement of our feet was the need for me to put those thoughts away. They would weigh me down even more than the load on my back and the thick mud under my feet.

More and more traffic—both driving on the road and walking beside it—was flowing by. We exchanged greetings with people. At first I used Swahili, but the greetings repeatedly came back to me in Kikuyu. The people were Kikuyu. That made me feel much safer. The homes here were many, and none seemed to have suffered damage. There were so many Kikuyu here that no one had been forced from their dwellings.

I slowed and came to a stop. Ahead of us the road was pressed against the cliff on one side and a drop on the other. There was barely space for a person to pass, and certainly not enough to pass with confidence of not being hit. Yet a steady stream of people had come toward us. They had to be coming from somewhere. I waited for somebody else to come into view.

Jata came up behind me. “Why are we stopping?”

“I’m not sure of the way.”

“Can’t you see the string?”

“Of course I can. It leads along the road. It is just that the way is only wide enough to allow two trucks and one strand of string. We have to find a way around this section of the road.”

“And walk without the string?” She sounded worried.

“Yesterday, with Wilson, we walked without the string. When we went back to the road, it was waiting for us.”

“Ah, yes, yes. So if we leave for a little bit, we can find it again,” she said.

“Most certainly. I’m waiting for a guide to appear.”

A woman was coming up behind us. She was about the age of our mother, and she was bent under the weight she carried on her back.

“Excuse me,” I said. “We are looking for a way to Nairobi.”

She stopped and straightened to look at us. “A *matatu* will come by soon.” I was relieved to hear her speak in Kikuyu.

“We do not have the fare for a *matatu*. We are walking.”

“All the way to Nairobi?” She sounded surprised.

“Yes, but we think better of following this road. Is there another way?”

“There is always another way.” She hefted her bundle again. “I will lead you. This is a shorter way by foot. Come.”

We waited for a big truck to pass and then crossed the road.

“Why are you going to Nairobi?” the woman asked.

“We are going farther—to Kikima,” my sister said.

“That place is not known to me. Are you sure you are saying it correctly?”

I hadn’t even thought of that. I was positive that was how to pronounce it. I thought back to the way my mother said it and realized I had to strain to hear her voice. It saddened me to think it could fade that quickly, but I could still hear it saying the name.

“It is very small and very far,” I said in explanation.

“And you are going by yourselves? Have you no one with you?”

“There is no one to be with us. We are going to find our family.”

“And how did you lose them to begin with?”

“In the violence,” I said.

“Where are you from?”

“Eldoret. We lost our home and we lost our parents.”

“Poor babies. Such evil ... such evil has been done to you.” She stopped. “This is my home. I go no farther. You need to continue on this road until you come to a large crossroads, not small. You will cross over many that are small, as you will go many kilometers.”

“And at the big crossroads?” I asked.

“You will turn right.”

“And that will lead us back to the tarmac?”

“Oh no! There are many, many twists and turns over many, many roads and paths.”



“But how will we find our way back?” I gasped.

“At each step, there will be people close by. Ask them and they will direct you. You are Kikuyu and you will be helped by your people. There is no need to fear. It is even safer here since the political problems.”

“How can that be?” I asked. “How can it be safer than before?”

“People are pulling together, for one thing, and those who were the cause of trouble—the small-scale thugs—have all left.”

“Left to go where?”

“To wherever they could be involved in the most trouble. Like moths to a flame, they are attracted to violence. Some of them will get burned. Now, travel safely.” She turned up a path to a house, leaving us alone, but not too alone. We would meet others along

the route, and those people would be our guides, one after the other. If we were helped, I had to expect it would be by other Kikuyu.

At each crossroads, I stopped and asked questions about our route. Sometimes we were ignored, but most gave us answers. If I was not confident in the answer or the person who gave it, I waited and asked another passerby to confirm. We were walking too far to travel even a step in the wrong direction.

Two little black sheep nuzzled against their mother at the side of the road. She was trying to graze and they were trying to nurse. They were frolicking and jumping and bumping into each other. It made me smile.

“Look at those babies,” Jata said.

“Those two little ones are like me and you,” I joked.



“No, they are not. They have their mother.”

Her words entered my heart like daggers. I felt sadness, but much more for her than for me.



“You are right. There is a difference—in fact, more than one. Neither of those little babies has a big brother who is there to provide for them. You have that.”

She took my hand. That was her answer.

“Do you know what we would be doing today if mother were here?” she asked.

“It is Sunday morning, so we would be in church.”

We had passed by a dozen churches already this morning. At times we could hear the singing flowing out the window to meet us on the road.

“I like church,” Jata said. “It is good to be close to God.”

“God is everywhere,” I said.

Almost as if in answer to that, God spoke—or at least sang to us. The sounds of singing came drifting through the air. Somewhere up ahead was a church, and with each step we took, the sound got louder. I knew the song. It was the one that Jata had been singing—“Charity, Charity.” She started to quietly sing along.

We quickly came up to a wire and wood fence that surrounded the church compound. We stopped and peered through. There were a few people outdoors, but most were inside, singing and worshipping. I could see them across the courtyard, through the open doors and windows.

“Muchoki, do you think we could go in?”

“It is not our church.”

“But wouldn’t we be welcome to worship?”

“Well ... yes.”

“It would make our mother happy if we went to church.”

It would. And we could use a rest. “Come.”

Jata squealed as I took her by the hand and led her up to a path.

The church was a big building, solid brick, with a cross on the side of the tower. Some of the windows were wide open, while others were filled with colorful stained glass. It was a church of substance. Would we—two strangers, two orphans dressed in mud-stained clothing—be welcomed? I put my water container beside a bush and then tucked it in so it was hidden by the leaves.



The music of the church got louder with each step.

“Good morning, children. May God be with you!” a woman called out in greeting. She was dressed in her church clothing.

“And with you,” we answered in unison.

“You have missed more than you will hear.”

“We were just passing by,” I said.

“And God called you in?”

“God and the singing.”

“Joyous singing. I do not know you. Where do you usually worship?”

“Far away.”

“Welcome. Go in, go in!”

We entered the church. The pews were mostly filled, and the people at the back turned as we passed by, looking for an open seat. At the front, five men sat on a raised platform. Off to the side I saw an electric organ and two men playing guitars. In front of the platform two dozen young girls were singing and dancing. The song was in Kikuyu. It made me feel both at home and uneasy. I’d been to church a number of times in the tent at the camp, but this was the first time I’d been inside a real church since ... well, since it all happened. Anxiously I looked around to find the doors, the ways out. What I didn’t find was anything that suggested danger. The fear subsided and faded away until only a sense of being safe and at home remained.



We sat down as the singers came to an end and the parishioners gave them a cheer. One of the men at the front got to his feet, clapping, and then went to the microphone in the center of the platform.

“Some items have been brought as an offering,” he said. “We will auction them to raise money for the church.” He held up a plastic bag and pulled out a pea pod. “This is filled with sweet peas. Will somebody give me a bid?”

“Fifty shillings!” a man called out.

“Does anybody wish to bid more?”

“Eighty shillings!” a woman offered.

“Any other offers?” the man asked. “Any?”

There was silence. He came over, and he and the woman exchanged the bag for the shillings.

Three more items—a pumpkin, some pears and some beans—were also auctioned off. This happened in our church as well, although I’d never been so interested in items of food.

The middle man on the platform got to his feet. He wore a suit and tie, and there was a large red Bible in his hand. I assumed he was the pastor.

“Good morning, and may God be with you!” he called out.

“And with you!” the congregation called back.

“If a lion were to kill your goats, would you be justified in killing that lion?” he asked.

“Of course!” a man called out. Others agreed with raised voices.

“Yes, you would,” he said. “We all know what is going on out there.” He gestured beyond the wall. “Kikuyu have been killed by Luo. Kikuyu have been killed by Kalenjin. So are we not justified in killing them?”

The parishioners roared out their approval and agreement. I understood what he was saying, but that didn’t stop me from feeling sick to my stomach. Did these people know what any of that meant beyond just words?

The minister raised his hands to silence the members of the congregation. It took a while for some to notice and others to react, but finally the room was quiet.



“No,” he said softly. “No, no, no, no!” Each word got louder until the final one was like thunder. “Jesus said, ‘Love thy neighbor.’ He did not say, ‘Love *some* of thy neighbors.’ He did not say, ‘Love only your *Kikuyu* neighbors.’ Each of us is God’s child. Each of us was made in his image, and we have no right to strike down that image.”

His words caught me by surprise. This wasn’t what I had expected. I could feel the tension in the air. I could read in some faces expressions of confusion or even anger.

“Some of you may not agree with me,” the minister bellowed, “but you would be wrong. *I* know the Word. When Moses went to the mountain to receive the Commandments, God did not simply speak to him. Words can be misremembered and misspoken. God did not simply write the Commandments on parchment, because parchment can be ripped. He did not simply write the Commandments on wood, because wood can be burned. He wrote the Commandments on stone, because stone is eternal—as eternal as our lives if we accept those Commandments.”

There was a rumble of approval from the congregation.

“And while each of the Ten Commandments is sacred, and it is not for me—a mere man—to place one above the others, I will speak of only one: Thou shalt not kill.”

He said each word with emphasis, making each one louder than the last.

“I know that the commandment does not say, ‘Thou shalt not kill a Kikuyu.’ It simply states, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ If each of us is made in God’s image—if each of us is

precious to God—then who am I, who are *any* of us, to take that life and kill God’s image?”

I leaned forward in my seat not only to hear his words but to be drawn closer.

“In time, each of our lives shall pass. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. When you stand at the gates of heaven, before your maker, before the Almighty, you will be held to account. None of us is perfect, all of us have sinned, but some sins will not be forgiven. Some sins will block the path through the gates.”

He took a long pause and not a sound could be heard.

“Thou shalt not kill.” He thumped his hand against the pulpit and I jumped, as did Jata and half of the rest of the congregation.

“A Swahili proverb states, ‘The hurt of one finger is a hurt of the whole body.’ Our body—our country—has whole arms and legs that are hurt. You do not heal one arm by harming another. You do not heal the loss of one eye by blinding the other. We will stand strong as a community of God.

“Now, I am not saying that we will not act in our own defense. We will not allow ourselves to be killed, but we will not kill. We will defend, but we will not attack. We must go forth as Christians, as Kenyans, as Kikuyu and spread the message we have been taught. These are not just my words—this is *The Word*.” He held his Bible high. “Let us pray for peace.”

As one, the heads of the congregants dropped. I closed my eyes as the minister started to pray. I listened to his words, but the images inside my head were stronger. I thought back to all that had happened. It was easy to say those words, sitting here inside this church where there was so much, where it seemed as if nobody had lost anything. Would he still be saying the same things if his father had been murdered? Would I kill the men who killed my father if I had the chance? Yes. It would be my duty. Would I kill those who were innocent, even if they were Kalenjin or Luo? I knew what I would have answered in the weeks that had passed before we were befriended by the sergeant, before we were helped by the two Wilsons, before I’d heard his words. I felt my whole body become lighter, as if the heaviness of anger was seeping into the ground at my feet. Thou shalt not kill. I would not take the life of one who meant me no harm. I would not do to another what had been done to me.

He finished the prayer. “Now go forth, and may God be with you.”



“Come, it is time to leave,” I said to Jata, as everybody started to get to their feet. I took her by the hand and led her down the crowded aisle. We had been close to the back and were among the first to leave. The courtyard filled up as the entire congregation spilled out. I kept moving away, stopping at the bushes to retrieve my water container. I felt lighter, but it still felt heavy.

“Wait!”

I turned. It was the woman who had spoken to us as we entered the church. She had

two other women with her—one of them was the woman who'd bought the peas, and she still had the bag in her hand. They came over to us.

“Are you not staying?” the first woman asked.

“We have far to go before we can sleep.”

“You said you were passing by. Where are you passing to?”

“Today we will travel to Nairobi.”

“By foot? And by yourselves?” She frowned and looked concerned.

“We have no other way to travel, and nobody to travel with us.”

“And you know the way?” the first woman asked.

“We have needed assistance through this section to get us back to the highway. People have been kind,” I said.

“People can show such great kindness.”

“And such cruelty,” the third woman added.

“Today we will only offer kindness,” the first woman said. “I have no vehicle to offer, but we will have somebody help you move to the next stage of your journey and get you back to the highway.”

“That would be most thoughtful.”

“And I would like you to take these,” the second woman said, offering me the bag of peas. “They are sweet and you can eat them as you walk.”

I hesitated but then took the bag. “Thank you so much.”

“It is not much that I have offered,” she said.

“It is an act of kindness and nothing could be greater,” I replied. “Thank you for that act even more than what the bag contains.”

“We have heard the Word,” she said. “You may spread that Word as you travel.”

Chapter Seventeen

I took one more look back. The man was still standing at the place where the path met the tarmac. He waved and we waved back.

He had been with us for over an hour, guiding us through the twists and turns of roads and paths that led us back to the highway. I didn't know if we could have done it without his help. Now he was going back home and we were walking forward again. I wasn't sure how short the shortcut had been and wouldn't know until we saw another sign announcing the distance still to travel, but at least we were back on our route.



With a quick glance I saw the man disappear around a bend in the road. I felt afraid and alone once more. For these last few kilometers we had been in his care, moving under his direction. Now there was nobody but me, leading us along a road I had never traveled to a place I'd never been to be met by things I could not predict. At least my fear had reason.

“Can you see the string?” Jata asked.

I started from my thoughts and for an instant didn't understand. Then I recovered myself. “I'm so surprised that *you* cannot see it,” I said. “Take my hand and we will begin again.”

The day had become increasingly hot and the sun brighter. Between the two, the water had been drawn back up and the mud had dried, making the puddles smaller and the walking easier. The way continued to be downhill, and that helped pull us forward.

The peas the church woman had given us had all been eaten. They were as sweet as candy. Along the shared journey the man—his name was Njoroge—had asked people if we could pluck plump pears overhanging the road and they had given permission. We had eaten our fill. I had felt warmed by the sun and by the people who had helped us get this far. I had felt hopeful. Now, walking alone again and passing by people who did not speak to us, I felt that hope drip away with each step. Once again we walked and walked until many hours and many kilometres had passed since we had left our friend behind. Would I have any hope left when we reached Nairobi?

The road was now wider, with two lanes in each direction. On both sides of the tarmac were wide walking paths, and set back from them was an almost uninterrupted line of shops and stores, homes and homesteads. With the extra buildings came extra people. It now seemed as if it was impossible for us to be alone. There was a constant flow of people that made the time pass quickly.



There were also reminders of what had been going on. We passed more burned-out and overturned vehicles, their contents gone. There was the usual assortment of closed buildings, but some had obviously been put to the torch. A storm had passed through that had come not from the sky but from the people beneath it. But had it passed in the direction we had come from or the direction we were going? And even more important, was the storm going to sweep over us again?

We continually passed by roadside markets. There were dozens of stalls and hundreds of people flocking around, buying and selling everything in sight. Although I was still full and satisfied, the food stalls were the ones that most caught my attention. We had not gone hungry and still had many days of food with us, but it remained my greatest worry. Thank goodness for the kindness of the people we had met.



“There is a sign!” Jata called out.

Farther down the highway was indeed a large green sign. I could read the word “Nairobi,” but I couldn’t make out the distance. We’d need to be closer to read it. I felt a sense of anticipation. What would it say? Fifteen kilometers? Twenty? No, it couldn’t be that far anymore. It might even be ten, but better not to get my hopes too high.

I stopped in front of the sign. It only said NAIROBI. What good was that if it didn’t tell us how far away it was? Unless...

“Sir,” I said to a passing man. “Is this the line where Nairobi starts?”

“Where the government says it starts,” he replied. “The real starting point?” He shrugged. “That is for Nairobi to decide.”

“We’re here!” Jata yelled out. “We’re here!”

“Yes, in a few more steps. But we need to find a place to stay. I saw a place just back there where we might spend the night.”

“We should go forward and enter the city,” Jata said.

There was not enough sun remaining in the sky to allow that to happen. “No. We do not know what is ahead, but I know what is behind. Come, we will rest. Tomorrow we will travel *through* Nairobi.”

I turned and led her back the way we came. I knew it made no sense, but I didn’t want to go forward just yet. Nairobi was dangerous and would be most dangerous at night. Today we would sleep beside the beast but not within it.

I opened my eyes and was surprised to be greeted by light. I must have drifted off again. Throughout the night I had tried to fight sleep—my back pressed against the building, Jata nestled with her head on my lap. She still slept.

The air was misty and the sky overcast. That didn't necessarily mean a storm but it didn't mean that it wasn't going to rain. We had been blessed by a dry night. The overhang of the small broken building I'd found wouldn't have provided much protection against rain, and there were neither doors nor a roof to offer more shelter inside. It wasn't the best, but it was the best I could find. The building's chief asset was that it was far enough away from the road and from people to allow us to sleep alone. Here the people were so plentiful that there was no fear of animals but it had been replaced by the fear of the people who chased away the animals.

Jata stirred from her sleep.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"I am tired ... and hungry."

"We can fill your stomach, but you need to be awake."

"My feet are tired. Do we have to walk far today?" she asked.

"Maybe not *as* far, but still far."

That was a reassuring lie. I was planning on walking until we reached the far side of Nairobi, even if it meant going all day and into the dark. I would not have us stay there even one night.

"Let us gather wood for a fire to cook our breakfast. How about beans and maize?"

"Yes, that would be a good breakfast to have instead of porridge," she replied.

Jata rose to her feet. Before I could stand too, she draped her blanket over top of me.

"You stay and rest. I will gather the wood. Even big brothers need to close their eyes sometimes. I will watch you."

The road was like a never-ending river of cars and lorries, *matatus*, pushcarts and donkey carts. So many of the trucks spewed out clouds of black exhaust as they roared along the road. At the sides and tentatively venturing out between the lanes of traffic were scores of people on foot. I gripped Jata's hand tightly as we walked, hour after hour. I hadn't known what to expect from this city, but it was more. More of everything. It never seemed to end. Not only had I never *seen* this many stores and people and vehicles, but I had never even dreamed there could *be* so many. I was beginning to worry that I had miscalculated and it would not be possible to cross the city in one day. If that were the case, would this city swallow us up? Would we be able to come out the other side at all? I hurried my pace.



Jata seemed overwhelmed by the movement, the roar, the foul smell. I was overwhelmed too, but my fear could not be shown. As disturbing as the bustle of the city was, it was also reassuring. Despite the crowds, nobody here was fighting or seemed to

be afraid. The world was going on. Had I finally come to a place where there was peace, if not quiet?

The road started to rise up, and the traffic slowed and bunched together. Horns sounded as those trying to go around the carts changed lanes. Some boys who had been standing at the side of the road jumped out into traffic, put their shoulders against the carts and began pushing, helping them up the hill. That was so kind that they were helping ... but no, there had to be more to it than that. They must be getting something for their trouble.



“Hey, boy!” a man called out in Swahili.

I looked at him. He was not an old man. He was leading a donkey and trying to pull a big cart laden with oranges up the hill. It looked as if the hill was winning.



“You, boy. I am talking to you,” he yelled directly at me. “If you help, I will give you two oranges.”

I looked down at Jata. “We could use oranges, come.”

I looked for a break in the traffic, then ran out and started to push.

“I only want you, boy,” he said.

“She is my sister. She must be with me.”

“She can try to push, but it will still be only two oranges.”

He led the donkey and we started to push. The cart was heavy and seemed to push back. I fought against it and it finally gave way, moving up the hill.

“Good, good! Put your shoulder into it!” the man called out. “We shall do this!”

The hill became steeper, but our speed still picked up. Cars zoomed up behind us, narrowly missing before they swerved and changed lanes to pass us by. Maybe, I thought, it would be better if Jata did go back to the roadside ... no, if I was hit and killed, it would be better for her to suffer the same fate than to be left alone without me.

Finally the hill flattened out. We had done it! Now I just had to get the oranges.

“Come here!” the man called out.

I took Jata’s hand again and ran to the side of the cart.

“There are two more hills to come. If you come along with me, I will give two more oranges.”

If he was offering me two oranges for one hill, I thought, shouldn’t he give me six oranges for three hills? But I couldn’t afford to argue. Four oranges were better than two, and it looked like we were going in the same direction regardless.

“Yes, we will do it.”

“Good, good.” He jumped onto the seat of the cart. “Come ride with me. There is space for both of you.” He offered a hand.

I hesitated for a second but quickly realized that riding would be better than walking.

Especially for Jata. I picked her up and swung her up beside him. Then I tossed up our bundle and water container and jumped up myself. The cart sank with my weight and the donkey slowed slightly.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“No need to call me ‘sir.’ I am not a teacher or a minister. I am simply a man with a donkey and a cart.”

“It is a fine donkey and a good cart and a full crop.”

“We have come far. That is why my donkey needs a push.” He leaned far forward and gave the donkey a little slap on the rump. “I have heard that there are problems in Nairobi. Is that true?”

“I do not know. We have just arrived.”

“Arrived? Where are you from?” he asked.

“Eldoret,” my sister blurted out before I could say anything.

“Eldoret! There was so much violence. Is that why your family came to stay in Nairobi?” he asked.

“We are not staying. We are passing through on our way to a town called Kikima,” I said.

“I have never heard of such a place. Is it far?”

“Not as far as we have already traveled.” I didn’t know that, but it was what I wanted to believe and what I wanted Jata to hear.

“And where are your parents now?” the man asked.

“They are gone. My brother is my mother and my father,” Jata said.

“Your parents are dead?”

“Our mother died of malaria last week,” I told him.

“And your father?”

“He was killed in Eldoret. In the violence.” Saying that suddenly made it seem real again. My father had been killed. My mother was dead. Our home was gone. In a few short weeks, all of life had changed.

“And what are your people?” he asked.

I was afraid to answer. What if he was from one of the other tribes? I’d noticed a club and a machete strapped to the seat by his side. But he couldn’t strike out at me right here on this crowded street. The worst that could happen was that he would kick us off the cart, maybe deny us the oranges. But I would fight back and take two oranges from the cart as we left. That wouldn’t be stealing. They were ours—we had earned them!

“Well?” he asked.

“My mother was Kamba and my father Kikuyu.”

“Then I must offer an apology. My people are Luo, and they killed many Kikuyu in the uprising.”

“My father and his family were killed by Kalenjin.”

“Are you certain?”

“I heard them chanting in their language ... I was there. I saw them when they set the church on fire.” He shook his head. “I have heard of that church in Eldoret. Those people who did that were animals, but there were animals on all sides.”

“I have heard that. I know there were Kikuyu who did evil against Luo. They set a house on fire. They were just as evil. I owe you an apology too.”

“Some of my family reported problems, but none were killed. I just wish for it to be safe here in Nairobi. I have heard rumors that there are problems in many areas of the city.”

I glanced around hesitantly, looking for unseen danger. I had heard the same things from Jomo’s father.

“Why did you come into Nairobi if it is safe where you were and dangerous here?” I asked.

“Safe or dangerous, a man must eat. If I do not get our crop to market, we will not have money for food. Here there is a chance of problems, but not coming here there is a certainty of problems. Where I am going, I will avoid the worst places.”

“And where is the worst?” I asked. I needed to avoid those places too. I just hoped the Mombasa highway was not one of them.

“Kibera has been the worst. Do you know of Kibera?”

“A little. I was told that it was not a good place, and that it was filled with people,” I replied. I remembered the sergeant telling me of the dangers of that shantytown.

“Some say it holds six hundred thousand people.”

“It is a city?”

“It is a city within the city of Nairobi. Tens and tens of thousands of little tin houses pushed so close together that residents can hardly move. People from different tribes flow into Nairobi—Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin, Kamba—and when they have no place else to live they end up there, side by side by side.”

“But if they are side by side ...”

“That’s right. Neighbors are fighting neighbors. I heard on the radio that Kibera has been on fire and the flames have spread to the streets and neighborhoods that surround it. It is time to push again.”

“Oh, yes.” I hadn’t noticed that we were starting up another slope. “Come, Jata.”

“No, no, she can sit here. I will pull and you will push and we will succeed together—one Luo, one half Kamba/half Kikuyu, and mostly one donkey!”

I went to the back as he climbed down and went to the front. I knew that the cart would be heavier with Jata aboard, but somehow it felt lighter. I was so happy that she was able to move forward without having to use her feet, if even for just a short time.

The cart bumped up a curb and onto a smaller street. Soon there was rutted dirt under my feet, which made the work harder. We had left the main road behind—left people behind. Was the man being friendly to my face but luring us to a place where he could use that machete? If he drew that weapon, I would grab the club. No ... he was friendly. He could not be that good an actor to hide his true intentions from me. Still, I would keep alert.

The hill flattened out once more and we surged forward. I ran around the side of the cart just as the man was climbing back to his seat.

“I should have asked earlier. What are your names?” he asked.

“I am Muchoki and this is my sister, Jata.”

“And I am Omolo. Tell me, this place—this Kikima—where is it located?”

“We are to go up the Mombasa highway until we reach a place called Machakos. From there it is not far.”

“And do you know where to find the Mombasa highway?”

“It is in Nairobi.”

“Nairobi is made of thousands and thousands of streets,” he said. “But do not worry. I will guide you to it.”

“Thank you so much. Once we find the highway, we can—”

I stopped speaking. Ahead of us were five men. I counted. In their hands were clubs, and they were coming toward us.

Omolo drew the machete from its holder. “You and your sister must leave. Get her off the cart—go now. There will be trouble, I am certain.”

“You must come with us. We can all leave,” I said. “We can get away.”

“I cannot leave,” he said. “I must stay to defend my property.”

“My father stayed to defend us and he did not survive.”

“If they take my donkey and my cart and my oranges, I am dead anyway. I will not give them up without a fight.”

The men were coming closer, moving faster, and there was something about them I recognized, a wildness and ruthlessness in their eyes.

“You must go quickly or there will be no time,” Omolo said.

“No,” I said. “I will stay. Two is better than one.”

“And five is better than two! Just leave. I cannot have your blood on my hands.”

I reached across him and grabbed the club. “I will not run and I will not leave you.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am sure.”

I moved to jump down, but he grabbed my arm.

“You stay on the seat and defend your sister.”

He jumped down from the still moving cart and yelled something to the men. They didn't answer. Instead they fanned out so they could come at him—at *us*—from all sides. What had I done? Why hadn't I taken my sister and fled when I had the chance? Now it was too late.

“Do not worry,” I said to Jata, hoping my words would calm us both. I gripped the club tightly in my hand, swinging it slightly to test the weight. It was strong and would deliver a blow if needed.

The men blocked the road completely and I brought the donkey and cart to a stop.

“Who are you and where are you going?” one of the men yelled in Swahili.

“I am going to market,” replied Omolo.

“You are going nowhere. Give us your cart and go while we still allow you.”

“Let us pass.” Omolo said as he held out his machete.

One of the men started to circle around to my side, away from Omolo. He had to be stopped. I jumped down, but as I landed he rushed at me. I swung the club wildly and it came down hard, striking his shoulder and dropping him to the ground! I grabbed his fallen club and now held two. Omolo looked at me in shock, as did the other four men.

The fifth remained on the ground, whimpering and writhing in pain.

“You are nothing but thugs!” Omolo yelled. “My brother has dealt with one. Move aside or we will harm the rest of you.”

They didn’t move—not back or forward—but I saw a change in their eyes. There was uncertainty, even fear.

“Move now or you will taste my machete!” Omolo threatened.

All at once, they scampered off to the side. They looked less like a gang of thugs and more like a group of beaten dogs. Omolo grabbed his donkey by the lead and pulled the cart forward. He held the machete high and waved it threateningly as we passed them by. I stayed close to the side of the cart and then moved to the back as we passed, guarding our escape. What did I have to protect me other than my club? I held on to the cart with one hand, looking anxiously over my shoulder, certain that the men would give chase at any second. Instead they gathered around their fallen member, who was still struggling on the ground.

“Muchoki, come onto the cart!” Omolo cried out.

I leaped up as he took a small twig and smacked the donkey on the rear. It roared out in response and jumped forward, moving us faster than I thought it could. I steadied myself with one hand, then stood up and looked back. The men had grown smaller in the distance. We had made our escape.

“It is all right, little one. We are safe,” Omolo said to Jata.

I looked down at my sister. There were tears in her eyes and she was shaking. I had been looking so hard behind that I hadn’t looked beside me. I put my arm around her.

“They are gone,” Omolo said. “We are all safe now.”

“What tribe were they?” I asked.

“They were a tribe of hoodlums. They were just thieves, punks, criminals.”

“That wasn’t about the election?”

“There are always criminals—and Nairobi has more than its share—but now there are many who are using this election as an excuse for more crime and more violence. What does stealing and looting have to do with a political decision?”

“I do not know,” I said.

“Nothing. Yesterday I saw a man running down the street carrying a television on his back. At first I thought he was running from his home with his most valuable possession. Then I saw others coming out of a store. They had smashed the window and were looting it. People who are bad will look for a reason to do bad. Now, here is the last hill coming up.”

I stood up, ready to get off again, but he reached over to stop me.

“You do not need to get off yet,” he said, “and you won’t need those.” He gestured to the clubs in my hand. I’d forgotten I was carrying them. I handed one to him, to return to its spot, and gave the other to Jata to hold.

“If those thugs had attacked us here at the hill it might have been a different ending, but here and now, there is nobody. Now I pull and you push and you little Jata will drive.” He handed her the reins and jumped down. I followed.

At the back of the cart, I looked around. There were a few people nearby, but they

were all very young or very old. Nobody looked to be a danger. I put my shoulder against the cart and pushed with all my might. It was hard, but I felt strong. The blood was rushing through my body. The road was rutted and pocked, but it didn't seem to be slowing us down. I wondered if Omolo and the donkey felt as strong as I did.

Finally the way flattened, and after one more backward glance, I ran forward and jumped back into the cart.

"That was the last of the hills," Omolo said. "You have done your work. Would you like to continue riding along? I am still heading in the direction you wish to travel, and your company would be welcome."

"Thank you for your offer," I said. "It is good to ride."

"Especially for your sister. She has walked a long way for one with such little legs."

"We have not always walked. Once we took a *matatu*."

"And Muchoki sometimes carries me," Jata said.

"I have no doubt. There was a part of this trip when your brother carried a whole cart full of oranges, a donkey and its driver on his back."

"I did not see that!" Jata laughed.

"Oh, there is no question that he did. And I am most grateful," Omolo said. "Where will you two sleep tonight?"

"I do not know. We will find a place."

"Up ahead is where I am going. I will bring my cart inside the gates, and people will buy my oranges tomorrow. Tonight I will sleep there, safe behind the gates. You are welcome to take sanctuary there as well."

That was a kind offer ... wasn't it? I had to think before I answered. Perhaps we should just take our oranges and go elsewhere.

"It is not fancy. You can make a bed with the empty burlap sacks used for the oranges. They can be both mattress and covers if you wish. I would like to offer more, but that is what I myself will use. You have probably slept in worse on your journey."

"Much worse."

"And there are guards who watch the compound. You can sleep knowing that you will be safe for the night." He looked at me. "I imagine that most nights you have been sleeping with one eye open."

"Sometimes two," I admitted.

"Then this will be good. Please, it is my way of offering a small gesture in return for what you did for me. I would not feel right sleeping tonight unless I knew you were safe." He seemed to sense my hesitation and turned directly to look at me. "You will be safe, Muchoki. You have my word."

"Thank you," I said. "It will be our honor."

Omolo guided the cart to a building with a high cement wall looped with razor wire and topped by broken glass. He stopped in front of a closed metal gate and then yelled out something that I didn't understand. He was speaking in Dholuo, the language of the Luo people—which meant that the people inside the building were also Luo.





A small metal door opened in the gate and a guard appeared. He had in his hands both a club and a machete. A second guard stepped out after him. He said something in Luo and Omolo answered, but in Swahili this time. I think he did that to reassure me and it worked.

“Yes, many troubles. The last just down the road,” Omolo explained. “That is why we are glad to be here, where we can sleep safely.”

The first guard replied in Dholuo. I didn’t understand the words, but his expression was hard and his gestures large.

“What tribe are they?” Omolo asked. He was repeating what had been asked of him. “You know me for many years, and you know that I am Luo.”

The guard spoke again.

“They are my friends and that is what matters,” Omolo said.

“We can go if it is too much—” I began.

He motioned for me to be silent.

“You let them in or we all sit out here,” he told the guard. “What would your boss—my *cousin*—think of that?”

The first guard mumbled something but the second started to open the gate. It creaked and groaned in protest until it created enough space for us to pass. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to go inside. Would these Luo guards protect me and my sister? But then I realized that it didn’t matter. Even if they didn’t, Omolo would offer us his protection. I knew that.

The donkey started forward once more and the cart bumped over the threshold. I heard the gate squealing behind us, then there was a loud clang and it sealed shut.

Shutting us inside.

We were either safer than we had been in days or in more danger than ever before.

Chapter Eighteen

Slowly my eyes opened, adjusting to the light. Light? What time was it, and where was Jata? I sat up like I was on a spring. There she was, practically buried in the burlap sacks, eyes closed, still asleep. There was motion off to the side. I looked over to see five men, including Omolo and one of the guards from last night, sitting around a small fire in the open section of the compound. All around them were bins filled with oranges and piles of empty sacks. There were pushcarts and donkey carts off to one side, but I didn't see any donkeys. They were probably sheltered in stalls elsewhere in the compound. The air was sweet with the scent of oranges and something cooking.



“Good morning,” Omolo called out. “Come and join us for breakfast.”

“Good morning,” I replied softly, not wanting to wake my sister.

I peeled back the sacks that covered my legs and got up, carefully making my way over to them.

“Here,” the guard said in Swahili as he offered me a bowl. “It is porridge.”

“Thank you, sir. I will wake my sister so she can share.”

“Let the girl sleep,” he said. “There will be a full bowl for her as well.”

I dipped my finger and popped some warm porridge in my mouth. It was sweet—sugar had been added. It was wonderful. Maybe it was the best thing I had ever tasted! Or at least the best thing I had tasted since my mother last cooked for us in our home.

“Did you sleep well?” Omolo asked.

“Better than I have in many, many days.”

“You should have slept well knowing that you had guards to watch over you.”

“Very good guards,” the guard said. “And perhaps it is time that we went back to guarding.” He stood up, as did a man I now recognized as the second guard from the night before.

“And we should also get to work ... before the boss arrives,” one of the remaining men said, and he and the final man rose and walked off, leaving me with Omolo.

“I told them what you did when those men threatened me and my cart,” Omolo said. “They took note, as did I.” He pulled something out of his pocket. It was money—paper and coins. “This is all that I have: two hundred and twenty-three shillings. I will keep seventy-three and offer you the rest.”

“I cannot take all that. It leaves you with so little.”

“You must take it. I will get more for my oranges. You must take the money—if not for you, then for your sister.”

I took the three wrinkled notes from him. “Thank you so much.”

“I know you will use it wisely, perhaps for food or for a ride along the way. I wish I had more to give, but the money I receive for the oranges I will need for my family.”

“I understand. I thank you for what you have given.” I stuffed the three bills in my pocket—the one I knew had no holes.

“I will leave before noon, so that is when you should leave too,” Omolo said.

“We will leave earlier. Morning is the best time to travel.”

“It is not as hot,” he said, nodding.

“Or as dangerous.”

“Aye, bad people seem to be afraid of the morning sun,” he agreed. “You could stay with me, but I now travel in the direction you have come.”

I would have liked to continue traveling with him, riding on the seat of the cart. Even more, I would have liked that for Jata.

“I thought that perhaps you could come and be sheltered in my family compound, but I realize that would not be wise,” he said.

I knew what he meant. No Kikuyu should be going to a neighborhood of Luo.

“I have spoken to the guards about your route and the dangers that are ahead. They did not know of this place Kikima, but they knew of Machakos. They said you can reach it by two means—by train, which travels from Nairobi through Machakos, or along the Mombasa highway, as you are already aware. I know you do not have enough for rail travel, so I will show you the way to the highway, first traveling along and then offering directions. But you must be aware that there have been problems along the route. Many problems.”

“Problems?”

“Road blocks, burning vehicles, people being attacked and killed by both protesters and the police.”

“The *police* are killing people?”

“They are trying to wrest control from the rioters, but a fired bullet does not know you or your sister from a rioter. Of all areas, you must avoid Kibera particularly. But everywhere you go, beware and keep safe.”

“I will keep my eyes and ears open.”

“Once you are east of Nairobi, you are free of the worst. The guards told me that, from what they have heard, rioting has been absent in the Machakos region.”

“There has been none?”

“That region is all Kamba people, so there has been no tension, no rioting, no looting and no need for people to flee to their traditional lands. But you must get safely through Nairobi before you come to Machakos.”

I stood up. “First I must leave here.”

“No. First you and your sister must eat. I will walk with you for the first part, to make sure your route is reliable.”

We walked together to the top of a hill. Stretching out before us was an endless city. Houses and stores blurred together until I could no longer see where one stopped and another started. Vehicles bumped along already busy roads. In the distance, I could make out gigantic buildings reaching into the sky. I had heard of these buildings—these skyscrapers—but never before had I seen them. What would it be like to stand beneath them looking up? What would it be like to stand at the top and look out? From there, you must be able to see forever. Maybe even Kikima could be seen.



It was still early, but not as early as I had hoped to leave. Jata had continued to sleep and I didn't want to wake her. Dreams were a place of refuge. When she had finally stirred and eaten, she'd seemed reluctant to leave. I knew that reluctance. It felt good to be behind strong walls, with guards to protect us, a friend beside us and warm food to fill our stomachs.

At least some of Nairobi was still slumbering. That didn't mean it was quiet or empty, but not every space had been filled with a car or a person yet. Not like yesterday.

“Follow this road until you find yourself beside a large sports stadium. The sign will say NYAYO STADIUM. At that point, you will find the highway. It will be marked and you turn toward Mombasa.”

“Is it far to the highway?” Jata asked.

“You see those buildings that stick up in the distance?”

There were buildings everywhere, but I knew he was referring to those that stood tallest against the distant horizon.

“Yes, I see them.”

“Those buildings are as tall as the cliffs of the Rift Valley, but they are so far away that they appear to be small. You will reach the heart of the city, although right now some would argue that this place has no heart, or soul, just anger and danger. From that turn you will be halfway to the highway.”

I thought back to what the sergeant had said about Nairobi grabbing us and not letting us escape.



“If you walk with speed, you will be at the stadium by midday. Once there, your destination is to the right, but be certain to look for the cutoff to Machakos. It will be no more than fifty or sixty kilometers along the highway.”

That was two or three days' walk, depending upon Jata's pace.

“You will go to the left when you find that junction to Machakos Town. I am sure there will be signs to show you the way.”

“We don't need signs,” Jata said, “because we have the string.”

Omolo gave a questioning look.

“It is a Kamba tale,” I explained. “We simply need to follow a trail of string to return to our home.”

“In that case, I wish you not a string to follow but a thick rope. May God go with you.”

“And you.”

We shook hands.

“Goodbye, little sister.”

Jata wrapped her arms around him in a big hug.

“Jata, can you do me one more favor?” Omolo dug into his pocket and pulled out some change. “At some point on your journey, when you are tired and hungry, I want you to purchase two *mandazi*, one for you and one for your brother.” He offered her the money.

Jata’s eyes brightened at the thought of one of her favorite treats—a sweet, sugary, doughy snack. It made my mouth water to think about it.

“We cannot take any more of your money,” I said.

“I am not offering it to *you*. I am offering it to your sister. And it is not wise to refuse a gift from a Luo. It is an insult, you know.” He smiled broadly.

“Thank you so much, my friend,” I said.

“You have fresh water, correct?” he asked.

“I filled the container.”

“And you have oranges?”

“You stuffed my bundle so full I can hardly carry them.”

“Eat them and trade them. Oranges are as good as shillings. Now, go and remember me, as I will remember you.”

Omolo turned and started walking away. I expected him to turn back again, but he didn’t. His back was straight and his stride strong. He was practically marching.

“Goodbye, Omolo!” Jata yelled out.

He hesitated, then turned and waved. We waved back, and then all three of us, at the same instant, started walking toward our different destinations.



Chapter Nineteen

With each step, I became more hesitant. The city was growing more active, the streets getting more crowded with people, and all along our path there were signs of struggles. Burned-out cars and trucks were spaced along our route. We saw storefronts and homes that had been set afire, their charred timbers standing upright, their twisted iron gratings not able to withstand the looters.

Piles of rocks that were used as blockades had been pushed to the side of the road to allow the traffic to move again. Fires that had once burned on the highway were now crushed down by passing cars and carts. The remains of burned tires littered the road and their foul odor filled the air.

The smell of the city was everywhere. It was what I imagined hell would smell of—not just fire but brimstone. It came not only from the vehicles and the small fires people set to burn garbage at the side of the road, but from everywhere and nowhere all at once. The smell of fire brought back what I didn't want to remember. It brought me back to Eldoret, to the church, to the fire, to my father. Would I ever be able to smell fire again without my father being in my memory? Maybe it was right that he should never be gone from my thoughts.

But there was something more in the air than the smell of the fires. I think it was the smell of fear and anger and desperation. It filled my nostrils and it filled my heart.

"There are so many people here, I cannot believe it," Jata said.

"They are everywhere."

Surely that should have meant it was safer, but it just made me more nervous. The more people we saw, the more I had to be watchful of. But how could I watch all these people at once?

"How many are there?" Jata asked.

"Many more than you could ever count."

"I am the best in my class in mathematics. I can count to thousands."

"But you cannot count to a million, and they say that there are six million people in the city of Nairobi," I explained.

"I cannot believe there are that many people in the world!"

"You are so young. My teacher told me that there are billions of people in the world, and that is so much more than a million."

"Why did God make so many people?"

"Because he loves us."

"If he loves us, why did he let all those people die at the church? Why didn't he stop those men from killing everybody?"

I shook my head. "I do not know."

"Maybe it is because he made so many people that he didn't need *those* people anymore. Maybe he didn't need our mother and father."

“They are in a better place, Jata. They are in heaven, looking down on us.”

“I want them here with us, not looking down on us from above.”

“So do I, but it is God’s will.”

“God wanted them to die?”

“Well ... I... there are many things we cannot understand.”

“Did God make those men kill our father?” she asked.

“Of course not! What they did was the work of the devil!”

“But isn’t God stronger than the devil? Couldn’t he have stopped those men?”

“God is great and most powerful.”

“Then why didn’t he stop them?” She started to cry.

“God cannot be everywhere all the time.”

“The minister told us that God is everywhere, so where was he when those men came?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I am not a minister. I do not know what God is thinking.”

“But I just—”

“I do not wish to talk about this. I do not have any answers, so you have to stop asking me questions. Understand?”

“I just—”

“No more. Stop right now!” I yelled.

We walked along in silence. I think we were both stunned by my words and my reaction. But I was so distressed by her questions. She was asking things that I didn’t want to speak about. Why had it happened? Why was God not there in his own home, the church, to protect those people? Was the devil stronger? Would thinking such things invite the devil to take me over the way he had taken over those men?

I reached out and took Jata’s hand. She gripped my hand tightly. I could feel her quivering. She was fighting to hold back tears. I stopped and bent down so that I was looking her directly in the eyes.

“I am here to make sure that you will be cared for, that you will always be protected,” I said.

“Wasn’t our mother supposed to care for me? Wasn’t our father supposed to protect me?”

“They did. Our father died protecting both of us. He gave his life so we could get away. And our mother cared for you until she had no life left to live.” With the back of my hand I gently brushed away her tears. “And now I am not just your brother, but also your mother and father. I am *your* family and you are *my* family. I am sorry that I spoke harshly to you just now. I do not have the answers to your questions and I was sad, so it came out as anger. I do not know why those men did what they did, but evil overtook them—just as it overtook those Kikuyu who killed other people simply because they were of another tribe. Evil was waiting for the moment to come forth.”

“And that was the moment?”

“That was an excuse for evil to come out. Maybe there is evil in all of us.”

“Is it in me?” she asked.

I smiled. “Not in you.”

“And you?”

I thought about what I would do if I could find the men who had killed our father. Would I kill them if I could? Would I do to them what they had done to him? Wouldn't it be right to avenge his death? But then I thought about what the sergeant had said—evil was evil. Light was needed to take away darkness. I had once felt that it was my duty to avenge my father. But now, when I thought of the sergeant and the minister and Omolo—when I thought of all the people who had helped us along the way—I knew that I had already chosen a different path.

“The devil speaks to us in moments of desperation, but we decide if we are going to be his instrument, the weapon of his evil. I will not listen to the whispers of the devil. I will do no evil to any of God's children. Not even if they have done evil to me.”

She laughed. I hadn't expected that.

“You think these words are funny?”

“No, it is just that what you are saying makes me think that you would be a good minister.”

I did listen in church. I knew the Bible—our mother always had us study the words and what they meant—but still ... a minister?

“Do you really believe that our parents are looking down at us from heaven?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I do not *believe* it—I *know* it. It is certain, and they will guide us the way the string is guiding us now. Do you see it?”

“I don't need to see it,” she said. “All I need is to keep holding your hand, because you see it. You are a good brother ... and a good father and mother.”

“Then let us walk forward together.”

Suddenly the smell of the air changed. It was more pungent, and people who were in front of us started running back in our direction.

“What is happening?” Jata called out to a woman rushing toward us.

“Tear gas!” the woman yelled. “There is a demonstration ahead, and the soldiers are coming! Run, little ones! Run!”

We turned and rushed along with the group. Some people passed us and we passed those who were older or struggling with heavy loads. The mass of people flooded onto the road. Vehicles jockeyed about, some almost hitting people and other vehicles as they tried to turn and drive away.

There was a loud crack, followed by another and another. I knew without asking that it was gunfire!



“We must move faster!” I said, pulling Jata along. I had the urge to drop the water container, but I knew our life depended on it.

We came to a set of railroad tracks that we had passed a few minutes before which cut across the road. People were streaming off the road and onto the tracks in both directions. Railway tracks! That was the other way to Mombasa, along the tracks.

I grabbed an old woman by the arm. “These tracks—do they lead to Mombasa?”

“Yes, yes,” she yelled. “They run between Mombasa and Kampala, Uganda.”

“Which way is Mombasa?”

“That way, that way,” she said, pointing to our left. “Now leave me alone! Let me go!”

I released my grip and she fled down the road. I was going to ask another person, just to be sure, but I didn’t need to. The way the sun was shining, reflecting off the rails, I was positive that I could see the string.

“Come, Jata.”

We walked right down the middle of the tracks. We were not alone. There were many people in front of us and even more joining from behind, flooding off the road and onto the rails. There were more gunshots coming from behind, and that awful smell was stronger. My eyes felt itchy and my lungs began to burn. Whatever was chasing the people this way was still chasing us. We had to move fast not to be overtaken.



I overheard two men talking ahead of me. “The police are as bad as the rioters,” one said.

“But what would happen if there weren’t any police?” the other asked.

It was then I noticed that the side of the first man’s head was gashed, with blood flowing down his neck and staining his shirt.

“Sir, did the police do that?” I asked, venturing a question.

“No, a protester threw a rock that caught me. But the police have done far worse to many, believe me. I have seen it.”

“We have all seen it,” the second man said. “It is like there is no safe place to go.”

“Certainly not here,” the first replied.

“Will they come here?” I asked. “Will they follow?”

Jata gripped my hand tighter.

“Maybe they will. Maybe they are in front of you already. Sometimes you fear the police, and sometimes you fear that there are no police.”

“I do not understand.”

“The only thing worse than the violence committed by the police is the violence committed because there are no police. You will soon see that.”

What did that mean? I wanted to ask, but I was afraid of the answer.

All at once I skidded to a stop, getting bumped and jostled from behind before I could move us off the tracks. I was just so shocked at what I had seen. Ahead there *were* no tracks. They had been uprooted—the rails and ties torn from the ground and thrown about as if an angry giant had been at work. All that remained was the gravel of the railbed, as if the small pieces of rock were too insignificant for him to bother moving. Of course, it had been the work not of an angry giant but of angry men—many angry men.

I turned to a woman who was moving slowly nearby. “What happened here?”

She shrugged. “Even God does not know what happens in Kibera.”

“*This* is Kibera?” I gasped.



“It is not the Garden of Eden.” The woman walked on.

“We cannot be here,” I said to Jata, trying to steady my voice. “We cannot go on.” I could see that she was feeling the same fear I was feeling.

I grabbed her and turned around, then realized we couldn’t go back either. The crowd behind us was large and moving fast, and those who passed had panic in their eyes. Was there another way? I looked to one side and then the other. Both ways were blocked by small tin buildings—sheds, stores and homes—that stretched out into the distance. If there was a path, I didn’t see it. There was only one way: we had to follow the string. With Jata in one hand and the water container in the other, I plunged into the fleeing crowd.



As we walked I looked cautiously from side to side. The little buildings pressed in around us, but then suddenly a gap opened up. The buildings that had surely been there had been reduced to tangled piles of twisted metal, burned timber and wooden beams. A whole swath of homes on both sides of the railroad had been destroyed. The scar created a large opening over ground littered with the remains of what had once stood there.

While the buildings had been pushed away from the tracks, we were pressed in by the smells. The odor of burning was everywhere, and I could see that there were still small fires smoldering. But it was more than that. There was a stench—the foul air of human waste, so much more pungent than that of animals. It seemed to be oozing out of the thick black muck that was everywhere, extending out in all directions. Sometimes in their haste to pass, people would slide down the gravel of the railbed, sinking ankle-deep in the very muck they wanted to escape. Other times people would leave the tracks deliberately, disappearing along one of the small side paths into the endless shanties that stretched out into the distance. Kibera seemed like it was all one big tin roof. I couldn’t see where one shack stopped and another started.



Even with people leaving the path, we were constantly pushed from behind. But the pace seemed to have lessened—as if people were still running, but possibly not being chased.

Suddenly the rails were in place again, held together by metal ties. A few paces back they were gone, and now here they were. Had the giant grown tired of destruction? At almost the same instant, the shops at the side of the tracks started to press in upon us once more. The thick black mud was still there, but there were people moving through

it. Some were in fresh pressed shirts, and others in suits and ties. Women were sitting at the thresholds of the little shops, some using whisk brooms to sweep away the garbage. In one shop there were green bananas and even greener cabbage for sale. With the reds of the tomatoes piled on the counter, it almost looked pretty.



The rusty tin buildings were still cluttered and crowded together, but there was an order to things. Did this mean we were past the worst?

“Sir, is this still Kibera?” I asked a man just behind us.

“It is until we reach the road.”

“But this part seems so different,” I said.

“Different from back there, but the same as it was before. People are born, raised, schooled, shop, work and die in Kibera. It is just that too many died too soon these past days.”

“But there are shops open and people doing business,” I said.

“People can be killed, but life goes on. It is going on.” He left the tracks and disappeared down one of the narrow corridors leading past the shops and into the shanties.

“Are we safe?” Jata asked.

“We are safer than we were but not as safe as we will be. Keep with me.”

We continued to trip along the tracks. The line of people behind us grew thin, and nobody passed us as we walked. The shops thinned out and then stopped as we crossed a small bridge over an even smaller stream. Ahead was a road. My whole body felt light, free, almost as if I could fly.

A big *matatu* rumbled toward us along the tarmac. In the window sat a big sign: MOMBASA.

The string was still showing us the way.

Chapter Twenty

Being finished with Kibera did not mean being through with Nairobi. It stretched out along the highway—people and shops and homes and vehicles in an endless line, as if we weren't really moving forward but simply passing the same spot again and again. But I had made sure we were moving in the right direction. Three times I'd asked people to confirm our route, and three times they had pointed us toward Mombasa. And then, finally, we had seen the sign: MOMBASA 495 KM. We didn't have to travel the whole way, but what if it was half the distance? Omolo had said he thought Machakos was no more than sixty kilometers. That would take us at least two days. But then how far was Kikima from there? We could get more water, but we might not have enough food unless we only ate smaller portions. If nothing else, being put into the camp had shown me that I could eat less and less often. I had gone two days without food when we first arrived. But then we had only been sitting, shifting around, trying to stay out of the blazing sun. Here we were walking endlessly, and there was no escape from the sun unless a cloud drifted over top. We would need more to eat and more to drink.



Little by little, the city became less and less. There were fewer people on the side of the road, and fewer homes and stores as well. The only thing that remained constant was the traffic on the road. Lorries and *matatus* formed the bulk, but there were also cars, some holding only one or two people. There in the back, free and empty, were seats that could have carried us on our way. What would take us days would take the drivers only hours. I wondered who could be rich enough to have an expensive car all to himself.

Almost all the vehicles left behind a trail of dust and a stench of fumes. You could see the thick black smoke coming from some of the trucks, but you could smell the results from all—so strong I could taste it in my mouth.

“Look,” Jata yelled out. “That *matatu* is going to Machakos!”

There, written in big letters above the windshield, was its destination: MACHAKOS. Without even thinking, I waved at the driver and he pulled off the road, bumping onto the dirt and pushing up a thick cloud in his wake. He was not going to be pleased when I simply asked questions and didn't climb on board, but he had knowledge I needed. A few days ago, I would never have flagged him down or dared to ask him questions. Days ago felt more like another life ago.

I struggled through the dirt cloud, running as fast as I could with Jata in tow.

“Sir, are you going to Machakos?” I asked the conductor.

“We are. Climb aboard, quickly.”

“How far is it?” I asked.

“Not that far.”

“But how far?” I persisted.

“Are you stopping to ask questions or to ride?”

“What is the fare?”

“Three hundred and fifty for you and another three hundred for the girl.”

I knew the little money in my pocket would not be enough. “Sorry, we do not have that much. But thank you for your time.”

“How much do you have?”

“Not nearly enough. Sorry, sir. Could you tell me the distance?”

He gave me a scowl and then slammed his palm against the side of the vehicle, signaling not just his anger but his impatience for the driver to leave. The *matatu* squealed away, leaving us in another cloud of dust, but also in a state of hope. I didn’t know the exact distance, but that fare wasn’t too much. Machakos wasn’t ten days away, but maybe two or three, confirming what Omolo had told me. We had enough food to last at least until then. We could make it.

“Giraffes!” Jata yelled.



There they were, not more than a hundred paces away—three giraffes pulling leaves from a tall tree.

“They are so beautiful! I have never seen one before.”

“I have,” I said. “I was with my classmates when my school took a trip to see them in a pen. They have the most wonderful eyes, so big and moist.”

“I would like to be close enough to see their eyes,” Jata said.

“That was in a pen. Here they would run or kick if we got too close. Did you know that even a lion fears a giraffe?”

“No, I did not.”

That got me thinking. I hadn’t seen any lions or zebras, but this looked like the landscape for them.

“I wish I could have a giraffe as a pet,” Jata said.

“I thought you wanted a dog.”

“I did, but you cannot ride on a dog.”

“And you think you can on a giraffe?” I asked.

“You could on *my* giraffe. It would be very gentle and have a special seat so I could ride everywhere.”

“Would you let me ride your giraffe sometimes too?”

“Of course, but not alone. You would ride behind me.”

“That would certainly be better than walking. Can you imagine the scene we would make when we entered Kikima? I would lean down and ask directions to our grandparents’ home. Perhaps from up there we could even see their home!” I exclaimed.

One of the giraffes turned in our direction. I got the strange feeling he had heard me and understood that I was making fun of him. I didn’t want him to kick me, but fortunately he turned away, far more interested in the leaves than us.

“Muchoki, I was wondering about the string story.”

“It is a good story.”

“Yes, but in the story the string was broken and they couldn’t find their way home.”

“It will not break for us,” I said. “It will lead us all the way home.”

“And if it does break?”

“Then we’ll do without it. We do not need a string when we have brains and roads and signs. Even if we cannot follow the string, we can still follow the tarmac.”

“But you can see the string, right?”

For a split second I thought about telling her the truth, but I quickly realized that a kind lie was better than a cruel truth.

“I can see it as clear as I can see you. Let’s keep looking for more giraffes.”

There were more giraffes scattered along the route. And some antelopes, a few little gazelles and some zebras. I wished we hadn’t seen the zebras. I knew it made no sense because lions ate all of the others except the giraffes, but it was that saying—see zebras, think lions. That thought kept us from venturing out into the scrub bush that extended into the distance on both sides of the road.

Behind us the sun was starting to set. We were walking east and it was setting in the west. I didn’t need a watch tell to me that our shadows were becoming longer and the day was growing shorter. It was good to have the sun on our backs instead of in our eyes, but soon it would be good just to have it. It would be missed. We needed to find a place for the night. There were very few homesteads around, and those few were set well away from the road and surrounded by walls and barbed-wire fences. We hadn’t seen a store for over an hour, and I could see none in front of us either. There was nothing more. And dusk was approaching quickly, falling from the sky faster than we could move forward. We needed shelter and there was none. There was nothing except for shrubs, cacti and scattered trees. Trees ... lions did not climb trees. I remembered reading that. Now I just needed to find the right one.

We traveled on until we came to what I was looking for—a large tree that we could climb with a crook where we could sleep. I stopped below the perfect tree. I could push Jata up and then climb up after her.



“We’ll have our evening meal here,” I said.

“And sleep in the little ravine?”

I'd been looking up for trees so hard that I hadn't looked down for water. We needed that as well.

“No, not in the ravine, but close. You sit and put your back against the tree while I gather wood.”

She didn't argue. She was tired but had never complained, not even once. She was as brave as I was pretending to be.

I didn't have to go far to get wood. There was deadfall everywhere, and it was as dry as old chicken bones. This whole area was dry. There had been no rain here for a long time. I didn't miss the mud, but I missed the water. We had no more than a few mouthfuls left in the container, and I'd have to find water early tomorrow. We could go without food, but we couldn't go far without water.

I dropped the wood at Jata's feet and picked up the water container. I poured some into the pot—just the amount we'd need to cook the beans and maize.

“There isn't much water left now, so I want you to drink it.”

“I am not thirsty.”

“Of course you are.”

“You should drink it,” she said.

“Do not worry. We'll get more water, and I'll drink it then.”

“Is there water in the ravine?” Jata asked.

“I have not looked. But even if it is dry, there will be water if I dig into the sand.”

“Clean water?” she asked.

“I hope, but I cannot know. That is why you need to drink this water from the container. I know it is clean. I do not want you to get sick.”

“I do not want *you* to get sick,” she said.

“It is more important that you are well.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head violently. “It is more important that you are well. If I am sick, you can carry me. If you are sick, I cannot carry you.”

I didn't know what to say. What she was saying was true.

“We could share the water in the container,” I finally suggested, “and then get more from the ravine.”

Jata shook her head. “That would be worse. If we both drink from the ravine and it is bad water, then we *both* will get sick.”

Again she made nothing but sense. When had she got so wise?

“Just take a sip from the container and I will finish the rest,” I suggested.

She put her hands over her mouth. “I will only drink once you have emptied the container,” she said, her words muffled.

“You are a very stubborn girl.”

She nodded her head. I couldn't very well force her to drink, and there wasn't that much time. We had to make a fire, cook, eat and possibly dig for water before the sun set, and then we had to find a way to sleep in a tree.

“Fine.”

I opened the container, tipped it back and drank. The water tasted so good. I needed

it so much. Back and back I tipped the container, until the last drop fell into my mouth.

“You get the wood ready for a fire and I will get the water.”

I grabbed a cup from my bundle and the water container and set off. The lip of the ravine was steep and undercut, but at the very bottom was a thin trickle of water that stained the sand. It wasn't much, but it was good that I didn't have to dig. I slid down the side and walked across the sand to the water. It slowly snaked through the ravine, gathering in small puddles scattered along its route. I didn't want the sitting water, but that which was moving.

I dropped to my knees, straddling the stream, and dipped the edge of my cup into the thin flow, tipping it ever so slightly so that water could gather at the bottom. I brought the cup up to my face and eyed the contents. It was full of sand but looked clean. I took a little sip—Jata didn't need to know. It was cool and tasted fine, just a little gritty. If I'd had a basin and enough time, I would have filled it and allowed the sand to settle. But I had neither. I decided to try to pour only the clean sliver at the top of the cup into the water container. Less than a mouthful went from cup to container.



I dug down into the sand in the middle of the stream and then sank the cup up to the rim. It quickly filled with water. I had an idea. I removed my shirt and stretched it over the top of the cup. As I poured, the material caught most of the sand and the water fell into the container. That still didn't mean it was fit to drink, but it was better. I repeated this process time and time again, until the container was two-thirds full. That was much more than enough for tonight. Tomorrow I'd fill it to the top.

Lugging the container back up the slope, I was surprised to see that Jata had not only prepared the fire but also started cooking our dinner on it.

“It took three matches,” she said. “I am sorry.”

“We still have matches left. Thank you.”

Jata smiled up at me as she stirred the pot. I knew that I was leading, that I was the one caring for her, but she kept giving me reasons to move forward. Even in the darkness, she always gave me hope.

“We will eat and then seek shelter,” I said.

“Where will we sleep tonight?”

I pointed up.

“In the sky?”

“In the tree.”

“We cannot sleep in a tree!” she protested.

“You think we can sleep in the sky but question if we can sleep in a tree? I know that you have never flown like a bird, but I have seen you climb a tree. But first, we eat.”

I tied the end of the blanket in a knot so that it held both Jata and the branch that supported her. She was wrapped up snug in a crook of the tree.

“There you are, as safe as a baby being carried by her mother.”

Almost before the words came out I felt badly for saying them.

“Was I carried like that when I was a baby?” she asked.

“Of course you were. I remember.”

“I wish I could remember more.”

And I wished I could remember less.

“Do you miss our parents?” she asked.

I was going to say “every day,” but I didn’t because that was a lie.

“Every minute. I miss them every minute.” I smiled at her. “Now go to sleep.”

“Will you sleep?”

“I will try, but I will also watch,” I said.

“Watch what?”

“Hopefully my sister sleeping! But if you fall, I will be there to catch you. I will sleep when we rest tomorrow. Then you can watch me and make sure I don’t fall.”

I lowered myself to a branch below Jata. I’d already tied up the blanket with our remaining food to keep it safe from marauding animals. For good measure, I’d also hauled up our water container and crammed it into another crook. I wasn’t sure why I’d bothered, because I couldn’t imagine any animal clever enough to undo the lid and take a drink. But it seemed better to have all of what we owned up in the tree with us.

Below us, the fire continued to burn brightly. I’d taken every last bit of fuel and thrown it in. It provided not just the light to guide our climb but also ongoing protection. Animals feared fire, and this was a good fire. It continued to bathe us in light even high in the branches. I only wished I could feel the heat. The sky was cloudless, which meant the night was going to get cold.

I settled in my own crook and wrapped my arms around the branch, locking them together on the other side. There wouldn’t be much sleep for me. There *couldn’t* be much sleep for me. I closed my eyes and tried to remember and to forget.



My eyes popped open and my whole body jerked as I gripped the branch even tighter. I’d done that same thing dozens of times since drifting off. I had no idea how long I’d been asleep this last time. It could have been two seconds or two minutes or longer. The fading fire gave the only hint of the passage of time. It was nothing more now than a few embers throwing out more shadows than light.

Most of the light was coming from above. With no clouds, the millions of stars in the sky all gave their small token of light. Those and the half moon gave shading to the ground. The moon changed each night. It was more and more and more until it became full, and then it was less and less and less until it vanished completely, only to repeat again. The stars were different—they stayed the same. They could be covered by clouds, but they still remained in place. They were that way when I was young, and they would be that way when I was old—and even when my grandchildren were old. In this tree, at

the camp, at our homestead near Eldoret—they were always the same. And I was sure they would be the same in Kikima. I just wished that I could find out soon.

I looked up at Jata. I couldn't tell if she was asleep, but I could tell that she was motionless, at rest. My little star in the sky above my head.



Just then, there was a sound below, so soft that it could have come from inside my ear. The fire crackled, one of the embers calling out in pain. Before the fire at the church, I would never have thought about a fire that way—that wood tossed into the flames would cry out in pain. Now I did.

A large shadow shifted on the ground and my heart seemed to stop beating. There was the unmistakable outline of a lion! It edged forward silently, more shadow than substance, caught in the glowing light of the smoldering fire. It moved hesitantly, alternating between sniffing the ground and looking ahead. It had appeared from the ravine where I'd gathered our water, and I was sure that it was following my path. It was following its nose, tracking, hunting—for me.



As it approached, it grew in size. It was male with a tremendous mane framing its head. He moved warily forward, then stopped before reaching the fire. He was cautious, perhaps even afraid of the glowing embers. I was sure a full fire would have sent him running. That thought was calming—lions *were* afraid of fire. That gave me more certainty that my other piece of knowledge—that lions couldn't climb trees—was also correct. Jata and I were safe up here. I just wish I *felt* safe up here.

The lion was leading with his nose, searching, being pulled forward by the scent that I had left behind. He circled around the embers until he came to the spot where we had sat to eat. He started snuffling, drawing in scent so strong that he appeared to be not just smelling the air but tasting it.

He continued in a wide track around the fire, following the invisible trail until he came to the base of the tree. His ears and nostrils twitched, and then ever so slowly he raised his head until he was looking up at me and I was looking down at him. The light caught his eyes—glowing green eyes unlike any color I'd ever seen before—and those eyes were looking right at me.

His tail swished back and forth, almost like another living animal. Did a swishing tail mean the same as it did with the cats in our village? Was the lion angry? And if he was, was the anger directed at me or at the tree that blocked his path to me?

Slowly I reached for the club I'd taken from the man who'd attacked us when we were with Omolo. It wasn't much, but it was the only thing I had. I held it in front of me. The tree trunk, height and this small piece of wood were the only things that stood between me and the lion. And then there was a little more height and one more obstacle between it and Jata. That was me. If he ate me, would that be enough? Would he leave her

alone?

Suddenly the lion placed both front paws on the side of the tree and started up the trunk! I was so afraid I couldn't scream, and it happened so fast I couldn't react. Higher and higher, paw above paw, he stretched his full length toward me ... and then stopped! He was standing on his back legs and stretching toward the sky, but he wasn't able to climb. Then he reached up and took a swat at me with his gigantic paw, missing my feet by a few centimeters!

I struggled farther up my branch and knocked over the water container in the process. It tumbled over and flew past me, hitting the lion right on the tip of his nose! The massive cat roared out in pain, dropped down and ran away, vanishing into the darkness!

"Muchoki!" Jata called out.

I tried to respond but no words came.

"Muchoki!" she screamed again.

I swallowed hard to try to make words come forth.

"I'm here. Everything is fine."

"I thought I heard the roar of a lion," she cried out.

I didn't want her to know what had just happened. "How would you even know what a lion sounds like? You have never seen one or heard one roar. You must have been dreaming."

"But it sounded so real."

"Dreams can be like that." I had to say more. "I am just surprised you were not dreaming of giraffes. Those you have seen. Maybe one will come up to the tree and give you a goodnight kiss!"

She giggled and I felt relieved.

"If a giraffe comes, I will wake you. Now go back to sleep."

"Goodnight, Muchoki."

I looked around for signs of the lion, but I could not see any. The water container was lying on the ground below. The lid was off and water was leaking out. It looked as if it had been hurt in the battle with the lion and blood was flowing from a wound suffered in our defense. What a brave water container. Certainly braver than I had been.

I pushed myself up higher, getting closer to Jata and farther from the ground. I wasn't going to sleep now, but I wanted to not sleep higher up in the branches.

Chapter Twenty-one

“But why can’t we go down yet?” Jata asked.

I hadn’t told her anything about the lion, and I wasn’t going to. It was best that he remained part of a dream she hadn’t had.

“I’m waiting for the giraffe to come to kiss you good morning, since it did not kiss you goodnight. If you get down, it will not work. Giraffes do not bend down to the ground very well.”

It was no longer dark but it was not yet light. There were too many places still left for a lion to hide. “But my legs are sore. I need to stretch,” she said. “There is plenty of space in the tree to stretch. It is a big tree. Do you ever hear monkeys complain about being cramped?”

“I am not a monkey,” she protested.

“That is only *your* opinion.”

“I am hungry. Can we have food?”

“I can hand you some raw maize if you want. But we are going to walk before we eat.”

“So can we walk, then?” Jata asked.

“We will rest before we walk, and walk before we eat. Rest your legs and your mouth.”

I continued to peer out, trying to pierce the gloom with my glare. The sun was coming up quickly, and I was starting to be able to see farther, clearer, truer. Still I saw no sign of the lion. That didn’t mean he was gone, of course—only that I couldn’t see him.

“I have to go,” Jata said.

“We will go, but not now.”

“I mean I have to relieve myself.”

That she couldn’t do in the tree. I took one more long look around.

“Wait,” I called out to her.

I climbed down and then jumped to the ground, trying to land as softly as possible. Still, it would not have been soft enough if there was a lion close by. I turned the water container and picked it up. It was less than a quarter full. I took the lid from the ground and wiped it on my shirt before putting it back in place.

“Can I come down now?” Jata yelled.

“Yes, but be quiet.”

In the dust were the tracks of the lion. They were enormous! With my foot I smudged them, brushing them away. I didn’t want Jata to see the tracks—dreams didn’t leave footprints. Head up, eyes still looking, I used both feet to destroy the evidence. The tracks led back to the ravine. Any thought I’d had of going for more water was gone. We’d take what we had and leave.

“Here,” Jata said. She was holding my bundle and lowered it to me as I reached up. I

slung it over my shoulder and then helped her down the last part of the trunk.

“We have to go right now,” I said, picking up the water container.

“But I told you I need to stretch.”

“And I need to walk.”

I grabbed her hand and practically dragged her toward the road. Glancing from side to side, I moved as quickly as possible, imagining the lion hiding everywhere. My club was right there, sticking out of the waistband of my trousers. If the lion came, I would meet him. I wouldn't be able to win a battle, but I could win enough time for Jata to escape—as my father had done for us at the church.

Just then, a big lorry thundered past, barreling down the highway. It was gone in an instant, but for that brief second we were not alone. Surely the sound and sight and smell of the big truck were enough to drive away a lion. Surely. I dragged Jata right up onto the road with me. There was another lorry in the distance and we'd have to step aside before it came, but right now we needed to be there. Those few centimeters of roadway separated us from the lion. There was now nothing to fear. And if he did reappear, I still had my water container to protect us.

Jata sat on my shoulders, hanging on tightly. I supported her with one hand while I held the empty water container in the other. We'd traveled far and fast. The rush of the lion had driven me forward, and that rush had lasted throughout the morning. We hadn't stopped for breakfast or lunch. We ate oranges as we walked—three each. We peeled each section and popped it into our mouths, slowly chewing, sucking out every little drop of juice before swallowing what remained. No oranges had ever tasted more succulent.

In my mind I thanked Omolo and wondered and worried about him. Had he been able to get home safely? I felt bad that I wasn't able to help him the way I know he would have helped us—the way he *did* help us.

As we walked, we left behind a trail of orange peels. Peels behind and a string in front. I could picture a lion following the peels just as we were following the string toward Kikima. Neither was real, of course, but that didn't stop me from imagining lions behind every shrub we passed. But I had no need to fear. Between the traffic on the road and the people walking beside it, no lion would come near.

Up ahead was a market. There were stores with small stalls in front. Many lorries and *matatus* had pulled off to the side of the road. Others slowed almost to a stop as they came up to the big speed bumps on the tarmac. The lorries groaned in protest as they thumped over the bumps, and then roared and belched out black smoke as they struggled to pick up speed again.

Off to the side was a man sitting on a bicycle that he'd converted to a sharpener. There was a grindstone where the front wheel would have been, and he used that stone to sharpen knives and axes. He sat there, pedaling away, his efforts turning the grinding wheel. He had on pink plastic sunglasses—the kind that would be worn by a child—to protect his eyes from the sparks that flew into the air. In his hands was a machete. I felt

uneasy but watched transfixed as he moved it back and forth, back and forth across the stone, sparks flying as the blade became razor sharp. I both feared it and wished I possessed it. A machete could do so much more to protect us than my little knife. I tightened my grip on Jata's hand and pulled her into the crowd.

"I am thirsty," she said.

Our water had run out more than an hour ago. This marketplace needed to have water to survive.

"There will be a place to draw water here, I hope."

We crossed a small bridge over a river ... well, at least a riverbed passed beneath.



"Stay," I said to Jata.

I looked down over the side of the bridge. The river was dry and men were working with shovels, putting sand into piles. They weren't digging for water but gathering sand to be used with cement. If there was any water beneath the sand, it was so far below the surface that I could never dig deep enough to get it.



I started back—but where was Jata? In a panic I looked around, then spotted her next to a man roasting maize. I rushed to her side.

"Do not wander away from where I have placed you, little sister."

"I am sorry."

"No need to fight," the man said in Kikamba. "Buy some maize and be friends."

"No, thank you, sir," I answered back in hesitant Kikamba.

"I offer the best prices and the most tender maize in the market."

"I am sure, but we do not have money." That was a lie. We had money, but not for maize.

"Where are you from?" he asked, this time in Swahili. "Your Kikamba is ... well, not so good."

"Our mother is Kamba," I said, still using my Kikamba. "We were forced from our home by the problems with the election."

"Terrible, terrible." He had switched back to Kikamba.

"I was wondering, sir, is there a place where we might get water?"

"The ravine."

"But it is dry."

"Up farther the water still runs at the surface. Not much, but it is there and it is fresh. I need to go myself. I am almost out of water." He pointed down at the container by his feet.

"I could fill it for you," I said.

"I have no money to give you."

"I am not asking. The distance is the same to walk whether I carry one container or

two, and I have two hands.”

“Your Kikamba is bad, but your manners are good.” He picked up his water container and handed it to me. “Go down the ravine and up the dried-out bed. You will find the water.”

“Come, Jata.” We went back along the road to the bridge. It always felt bad to retrace our steps and move in the wrong direction, but at least there was purpose this time.

Carefully we crossed the highway. It was much easier here, with the traffic slowed to a crawl by the speed bumps. When we came to the ravine, we skidded down the steep sides until we stopped at the sandy bottom. I looked back and could see the high-water marks along the bridge. It appeared that during the rainy season, the river almost flooded the road. We would have had water more than three times my height above our heads.

It was easy to see that we were headed in the right direction. Some children were coming toward us, struggling under the weight of full containers of water, and others were going in our direction, carrying containers that were empty. One group was moving with much more speed.

Eventually the sand of the creek bottom gave way to rocks and a small but steady stream. The water danced among the rocks and then vanished beneath the sand. I joined the others filling their containers. Dropping to my knees, I took the man’s container, turned it on its side and allowed the water to enter to the level of the flowing water. Next I removed a cup from my bundle and cup by cup poured in the water until it was full. I did the same with my container and put the lid back in place. His container lacked a lid.



Standing up, I grabbed both containers and lifted them. I was caught off guard. The two seemed to weigh much more than twice the one. Perhaps my offer had been too generous. Both containers were too heavy for Jata to carry. Laden down with the water, I shuffled slowly along the dry creek bed. When I reached the road, I put one down and scaled the slope, leaving the other at the top, and then repeated it and returned with the second.

“Come now,” I said to Jata. “The way is clear.”

We crossed the road, dodging between the slow-moving trucks, and then made our way back to the stand.

“Here is your water container,” I said to the man.

“And here is your maize.” He offered me a cob of roasted maize.



“But I still have no money.”

“You have done a favor for me. I will return a favor to you. Now take the maize or I will be offended.”

I took it from his hand and turned to Jata. "For you."

"For us," she insisted.

"You start and I will finish."

She took the maize from me and started eating.

"There is one more favor that I would ask," I said, turning back to the man. "Could you tell me how far Machakos is?"

"Sixteen kilometers."

"It is only sixteen kilometers!" I exclaimed. "Are you certain?"

"That is what the sign says."

He pointed up the road. Sure enough, there was a large green sign confirming what he'd told us.



"So you are going to Machakos?" he asked.

"We are going to a little place beyond it."

"And it is called?"

"Kikima."

"Ah yes, I know Kikima."

"You do?"

"It is not that much farther. Maybe another forty kilometers. You could be there by nightfall."

"It will be longer. Maybe three days—two if we walk long hours each day."

"Walk? You are going to *walk*?"

"Yes, sir. We have already walked for many days, so two or three more is possible." In my head I thought it was not just possible but a certainty.

He shook his head. "You stand here and watch my maize. I will be back."

He walked away and I felt anxious. What was he doing? Maybe we would be best to leave. There was more than enough light for us to get at least part of the way to Machakos if we left right away.

"Hey, boy! Come, and bring your sister!" the maize man yelled. He was standing beside a big lorry filled with sand.



I picked up the water container, grabbed Jata with my other hand and hurried over.

"This is my friend Henry," the maize man said.

"Hello, sir. I am Muchoki and this is Jata."

Henry nodded his head in response.

"He is the driver of this lorry. It is going to Machakos, and you are going with him."

I could hardly believe my ears!

"Climb up in the back," the driver said. "Quickly, I have to get this and another load in before dark."

“Come, there is a ladder on the side,” the maize man said.

I helped Jata start the climb up, then followed close behind, struggling with the water container in one hand. Finally, I got to the top.

“Thank you!” I called down to the maize man.

“Good luck and offer my greetings to your family!”

I shooed Jata to the center of the truck, and we both positioned ourselves on top of the load of sand. Almost instantly the truck started moving, bumping along the dirt side of the road and then up onto the tarmac.

“Do not be afraid,” I said to Jata.

“I am not afraid. I am happy. We are moving without me having to use my feet. Wake me when we get there.” She lay back in the sand. That seemed like a good thing to do. Still holding the water container with the one hand and taking her hand in my other, I lay back as well. The sand was slightly damp and cool, and it felt so good as both soaked through my shirt and into my body.

Chapter Twenty-two

The lorry slowed and I sat up. I had fallen asleep. We were circling a roundabout. It was a big place with stores, a bank and a church. The roads were filled with cars and motorcycles, and people passed along narrow walkways that separated store from road. This looked to be a fine city. It reminded me very much of Eldoret—at least how it was before.



When we had left Eldoret in the back of the lorry, I saw what it had become. There were looted stores and burned cars on the streets. Rocks littered the road, and everywhere there was a smell of the fear and terror and anger that had gripped the city. It was there and still growing as we left. Even the rain that had fallen that day hadn't been able to cleanse the air. But here, there was none of that smell.

The truck exited on the far side of the roundabout and then went a short block and made a turn, the brakes complaining as the driver slowed through the turn. Up ahead sat a yard full of lorries just like this one—some full and some empty. Behind them was a gigantic pile of sand and a large building. The brakes squealed again and the engine roared as the driver downshifted and turned into the yard. He moved into a space beside the sand pile and then brought the lorry to a stop. Was this the end? Was this Machakos?

“Okay, you must get down now!” Henry called up.

Jata and I went down the ladder to where the driver was waiting.

“You are now in Machakos,” he said.



“It looks like a good town. Sir, could you tell me, was there any violence here? Has it been quiet?”

“Most quiet. There was no violence in the heart of Kambaland.”

“None?”

“Well, there were two men who came. They wished to instigate violence. We told them that we did not believe in violence ... so we killed them.”

“You killed them!”

“It was not me—it was others. They beat the men with sticks until they were dead, and then they set their bodies on fire. The men had to know that there would be no

violence in Machakos.”

His answer was disturbing and reassuring all at once. The citizens had stamped out violence and I was safe, but I shuddered at the thought of how that safety was accomplished.

“Thank you, sir. We now have only one more step to travel. We have to get to Kikima.”

“That is a fine town.”

“You know Kikima?”

“Everybody around here knows Kikima.”

“Is it far?”

“The roads are rough, but by vehicle it is no more than an hour.”

“And by foot?” I asked.

“It depends on the speed of the foot. It is twenty-five kilometers.”

“It is one day’s walk.”

“One day,” he said. “Not one night. The roads are not safe.”

“But you said there was no violence here.”

“There are always thugs. The roads are much safer during the day.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the building behind him. “Now go before my boss sees that I brought cargo with me that was not sand.”

“Thank you, sir. Thank you so much.”

I led Jata away through the gates and onto the busy street outside. Traffic buzzed around us and people brushed by. We had no time to gawk.

“We need to find a place to sleep for the night,” I said.

“We aren’t sleeping in a tree again, are we?”

“No trees.” Here it was not animals I feared but the people.

Machakos Town was big and we were close to the center. We needed to get out of the heart and into a part that was deserted. How far would that be? I thought back to the places we had slept the last five nights—under the protection of a Maasai, in an abandoned building, under the overhang of a building, in a warehouse filled with oranges and in a tree with a lion at our feet. Last night had been the worst. Tonight would have to be better than that.

As we walked, I made an inventory of the things we possessed. The water container was solid and almost full of clean drinking water. We had enough beans and maize for at least five more meals—far more than we would need before we arrived. We had our pot, the cups and bowls and spoons, and of course my little knife and the club. The two blankets were still in good shape. And we had one more thing.

I put my hand into my pocket and felt the shillings folded in the bottom. It wasn’t much money, but tomorrow we would use it. Tomorrow we would get on a *matatu* and ride toward Kikima. We might not have money to pay the fare the entire way, but each kilometer that we didn’t have to walk was good. Jata was starting to struggle. And I was beginning to struggle as well. I could continue to move forward, but I might not be able to carry her on my back ... no, I would carry her as long as I had the strength if that was what she needed.

I knew I should have felt excited—our goal was in reach—but instead I just felt afraid. What if my mother’s fears had been correct and we wouldn’t be received? With her we had their daughter and a claim to kinship. Now we were only strangers claiming to be family. Then what would we do? Where would we go? How would we move forward? The only other person I knew was Jomo, and while I had a slip of paper that gave the name of his new village I had no idea where or how far it was or how we could ever possibly get there. I felt such a sense of panic and dread that I stopped walking, suddenly weighed down by so much more than what was on my back and in my hands.

“What is wrong?” Jata asked.

“Nothing, nothing.”

I reached out and took her hand and started walking again. Standing still meant we were finished. None of the steps that preceded this one meant anything.

The streets became much quieter as we left the center of town behind. The setting sun was a signal for us to seek shelter. We passed by a government office and the local hospital. Ahead were some bushes. I wondered if we could find shelter in their midst, safely away from the prying eyes of passersby.

“You stand right here,” I said to Jata. “Do not move from this fence, and watch our water container.” I set it down at her feet.

I walked across the street to the bushes. Almost instantly, I was disappointed. They weren’t thick or deep enough to hide us from passersby or the people in the small dwellings behind. We would have to go farther from the town, and we would have to go quickly.

Jata was still where I’d left her but she was on her knees, facing the fence. It looked like she was peering through the wire and into a little compound. As I came closer, I could hear voices—she was talking to somebody. There was a little girl about her age, and she was pressing her face through a small opening in a building where a board was missing. The girl was speaking Kikamba, and Jata was replying in Swahili.



“Come, we have to go,” I said.

“But I am talking to my friend.”

“Tell your friend goodbye.”

“My friend’s name is Mueni.”

“Tell Mueni goodbye. We need to find a place to sleep.”

“I asked her for a place and she was telling me where we could go.”

“She was?” I turned to the girl. “Do you know of a place where we could sleep?”

She didn’t answer.

“It is polite to call her by her name,” Jata instructed.

“Mueni, do you know where we could sleep?”

Again, no answer.

“She has probably been told not to talk to strangers,” Jata said.

“But she talked to you, and you are a stranger.”

“I was a stranger. Now we are friends. I will introduce you. Mueni, this is my brother, Muchoki.”

“Hello, Muchoki.”

“Hello, Mueni. It is a pleasure to meet you. Do you know a place where we could sleep?”

“Yes, there is a shed at the back of our compound.”

“And what is this compound?” I asked.

“It is Suvia.”

That was the Kamba word for “taking care.”

“Is it a school?”

“It is a children’s home. We are all total orphans who live here.”



I had a rush of fear. We had walked hundreds of kilometers to escape being placed in orphanages and now we were pressed against the fence of one!

“What is a total orphan?” Jata asked.

“Those who live here have no mother and no father.”

“We are total orphans,” Jata said before I could stop her.

“We need to leave,” I said. “We cannot stay here.” I took my sister by the hand and started away.

“But why not?” Jata resisted, digging in her heels and refusing to move.

“We do not know these people, and we do not have permission to stay.” There was so much to fear that Jata didn’t know about—things I had not told her and could not tell her about the authorities wanting to put us in separate orphanages.

“It would be a secret,” Mueni said. “You would be where no one goes—at least not until later tomorrow, after you have gone. Inside the fence is safe.”

All of what she said played in my mind. To have a roof over our head and a fence around us would be good—like the night we spent with Omolo. But what if we were discovered? Would the people running the orphanage try to keep us? Would they separate us?

“Go around to the side,” Mueni said. She pointed to the left. “I will meet you.”

With that, she disappeared into the darkness of the opening.

“It will be safe,” Jata said.

She was not afraid because she was unaware. But having a look would not cost us anything except time.

“Come,” Jata said. She took me by the hand and started to lead. I did not resist.

We circled to the side of the fence, and it gave way to a wall made of blocks. It was high and was topped by pieces of jagged glass. The ground sloped away, making the wall even higher. I certainly saw no place where we could get through such a formidable obstacle.

Just then, Mueni appeared. Jata broke free and ran over, and the two girls hugged like long-lost friends. There was a hole in the wall—or *under* the wall—where rain had washed away the ground, creating a gully. The hole was protected by strands of barbed wire that had been pushed aside. Mueni started to lead Jata through.

“No, I will go before my sister.”

She nodded and released Jata’s hand, taking mine. Mueni ducked down and edged through the wire. I was pulled along, but since I was larger, the hole became smaller. I had to ease through, careful not to snag myself or the bundle slung over my shoulder. Jata pressed in behind me. She was not waiting to be invited in.

Once on the other side, I poked my head up, released Mueni’s hand and looked around. There were some bushes and a small shed—was that the place she meant? Farther along were patches of cultivated land, and behind that two large buildings blocked the view of what was beyond. The wall provided protection to keep the outside from entering—and the inside from leaving. I could hear children’s voices but saw no children.

“Who lives here?” I asked. “How many?”

“There are twenty-six. Seven are boys and nineteen are girls.”



“And adults?”

“There are eight staff members, but all have left except the matron and the patron. Soon the night watchman will arrive.”

“There is a watchman?”

“He sits in a shed by the main gate. He is very old and does not walk back here. Soon after he arrives, he is asleep. I will show you where you can stay.”

Mueni led us toward the little building and opened the door. I noticed that it did not have a lock. That was good. I feared being locked in. Inside was dark, but there was still enough light to see. There were tools along one wall. The floor was empty except for a pile of burlap bags. I now knew that they could make good beds and blankets, but I still needed more before I could allow myself to stay here.

“Where are all the other children?” I asked.

“They are studying in the dining hall.”

“And why are you not there too?”

“I am so smart that I do not need to study as much.”

“You are?”

“I must be, because I was smart enough to sneak away without being noticed!”

I couldn’t help smiling at that. “Why are you doing this for us?”

“You are my friends and we have been taught to help our friends, especially those who are in need.”

We were in need—there was no arguing with that.

“Thank you for helping,” Jata said.

“But in the morning, you must leave or we will all get in trouble.”

“We will leave at first light.” If not long before, I thought.

The two girls hugged again, and then Mueni was gone. Part of me wanted to follow—not back to the dining hall but out the door and under the fence. The other part just wanted to make a bed from the burlap bags, lie down and go to sleep. That part won.

Sometimes you just had to trust. Even new friends.

Chapter Twenty-three

Sweet voices filled my head. It was a lovely sound. Where was it coming from? I snapped awake and sat bolt upright. It was dark and it took a moment to remember that I was in a shed in the compound of the orphanage. We had to leave. It was still dark, but why were there voices? Why was there singing? I reached over and felt for Jata beside me. She was there, still sleeping, a soft whistle coming as she breathed in and out.



The door creaked open and a beam of light entered, and before I could even react, Mueni poked in her head.

“Are you still here?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“You need to go soon, before you are discovered.”

“Yes, of course. Jata, you must get up.”

She yawned and stretched, and I threw off the burlap sack I’d been using as a blanket and got to my feet.

“This is for you,” Mueni said. She handed a banana to me. “I wish there were two, but I only get one for breakfast.”

“I cannot take your breakfast,” I said.

“There will be porridge. I will have some of that. You take this.”

Reluctantly I did as she asked. Jata needed to eat.

Mueni opened the door wider. “It is time.”

I slung the bundle over my shoulder, handed the banana to Jata and picked up our water container. We followed Mueni out into the yard, hidden by the walls of the shed. The voices were much louder now. Mueni peeked around the edge of the building.

“Go now,” she urged. “All is clear.”

“Thank you so much. We will not forget your kindness. Someday we will come back for a visit,” I said.

“I will look for you both.”

Staying low, trying to keep the shed as cover, we reached the gully.

“You first,” I said to my sister.

Jata waved to Mueni, who waved back. They exchanged a last smile, and then Jata ducked down and was gone. I waved as well and then followed after my sister. Quickly we circled back the way we’d come, along the wall until we reached the road.

“Where do we go now?” Jata asked.

“To Kikima, of course.”

“But how do we get there?”

“Today, we ride.” I pulled the shillings out of my pocket. “We will take a *matatu*.”

“All the way that remains?”

“As far as our shillings will take us.”

The *matatu* station was a crazy mass of people and vehicles. Hundreds and hundreds of people were pushing and shoving, trying to get on the *matatu* that would take them to their destination. If there was sense, I couldn't find it. *Matatus* both small and large rumbled in and out, almost bumping together as they passed. Their conductors were busy, screaming destinations and collecting fares. There were vendors selling everything from newspapers to roasted maize to sunglasses and maps of the world. Who would buy a map of the world at a *matatu* station?



I felt overwhelmed, pushed in on all sides by the sounds and smells and movement. The few other times I had been in such a place—and I had never been in a station so large—I was watched by my mother and father. Here I was the one doing the watching. I tightened my grip on Jata's hand as we wove through the crowd.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said to one of the conductors. “Can you tell me where I can get a ride to Kikima?”

“Over there,” he said, waving to the far side of the station.

“Thank you, sir.”

He had already turned away before I finished speaking.

“Come, Jata.”

We walked along, trying to avoid the hordes of people rushing on and off the vehicles.

“I want a *mandazi*,” Jata said.

“We do not have the money ...” I began. But then I remembered that she *did* have the money. “I do not need one, but you can get a *mandazi* with the money Omolo gave you.”

“He said I need to buy two—one for me and one for you.” She pulled the money out of her pocket, balancing the few loose coins on the palm of her hand.

I wanted to say that we would be wiser to pool our money so we could ride closer to Kikima, but I didn't. This was what Omolo had wanted—and I really did want a *mandazi*.

“Come.” I led her to a little stall that had a shelf filled with *mandazi*. “You make the purchase.”

I allowed her to step forward and talk to the woman who was selling. That was what

my mother always did with us. She said that we needed to know about money. I watched but allowed Jata to make the purchase on her own.

She turned around holding two *mandazi*, with a smile so bright that it was worth the price even without the treat—although I did want the treat too. Jata had eaten most of the banana this morning, and I'd had only a bite. I knew we had at least three more oranges in my bundle, but we would save those for the ride.

She handed me one *mandazi*. “Thank you,” I said, and took a big bite. The pastry was fresh and warm and sweet, and it practically melted in my mouth. It was the best thing I'd ever tasted in my life! I took another bite and another. I hardly needed to chew as the soft dough slid down my throat and filled my stomach.



When I finished, Jata tore off a piece of hers and offered it to me.

“I had more of the banana,” she said. “You give me more of everything.”

I took the piece from her and ripped it in two again, handing back half. Together we popped the last two pieces in our mouths.

“It is time to go to Kikima,” I said.

I led Jata back through the crowd, searching for the right *matatu*. The drivers all yelled out encouragement to the potential passengers, trying to convince them that their bus was the best. I tried to ignore the voices and looked instead for the names posted in the windshields. There were so many places I'd never heard of—Kalawani, Tawa, Tuvilani, Nzaini and Emali—but there was no Kikima. Still, there were so many *matatus* that I wasn't worried ... yet.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out our remaining shillings. They were a crumpled ball, dark and worn from where my fingers had held them, wedging them in and making sure that they were safely buried deep in my pocket. Slowly, deliberately, I straightened them out. Three notes—three fifty-shilling notes—for a total of one hundred and fifty shillings. Would that be enough? There was only one way to know.

“There is our *matatu*!” Jata exclaimed.

She was pointing at a bright orange bus. On the windshield was its name and motto: MUM—YOU ARE GREAT. But I couldn't see where it said Kikima.



“That is a fine *matatu*,” I agreed, “but we need to locate the one going to Kikima.”

“It is that one, I am sure,” Jata said. “Come and look.”

Before I could stop her, she ran toward it. She was so much smaller that she was able to move through the people quickly. She stopped by the *matatu* and I ran to her side. There, in the side window, was a smaller sign: KIKIMA. Jata burst into laughter and started jumping up and down. I felt like doing the same. This was the *matatu*—and she had known it all along.

“I knew our mother would lead us home,” Jata said.

She was leading us home. We would travel the last part of our journey with our mother. We were returning to her home with her.

If we had enough money.

A conductor was standing at the door, taking fares. The bus was already filled with people, and the roof was piled high with items.

“Good morning, sir. We wish to travel to Kikima,” I said.

“You are most fortunate, since that is where we are going. The fare is two hundred shillings for each of you.”

I let out a big sigh. My heart and my hopes sank.

“Do you not have enough money to pay the fare?” he asked.

He must have read my reaction. I shook my head.

“This is not a charity. You must pay to ride.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How much money do you have?” he asked.

“One hundred and fifty shillings.”

“That is not even enough for one, but I could take you partway.”

“That would be good.”

“And that partway could be longer if you ride on the roof instead of inside.”

I had often seen people doing that but had never done it myself. Our parents would never have allowed that, and when we were with them we would never have needed to do it.

The conductor saw my hesitation. “Or you can ride inside—just not as far.”

“We will take the roof,” I said, handing him the money.

“Climb up, and make sure you help the little one. And stay low so nobody sees that I’m letting children ride on the top.”

Jata started up the ladder on the side of the bus. I climbed up after, shielding her from a fall. The conductor handed me my water container and I placed it on the roof, then followed up myself.



The roof was full of all manner of items. Barrels, boxes and bags, even a bed, a chesterfield and a cabinet were all tied in place on the rack. There was a spare tire tied down at the front. That would be our seat.

“Sit,” I said to Jata, directing her into the center of the tire so she was surrounded by its rubber walls. That would be the safest place. I sat on the rack itself, leaning against the tire, easily able to reach out for Jata if needed.



The engine roared to life and the low rumbling became a full shaking. I leaned over the side and watched as the *matatu* started to move. Slowly it edged its way through the other buses and the people dodging between them. It slipped through impossibly small

spaces, practically pushing vehicles and people out of its path.

When we came to the gate, the conductor and the gatekeeper yelled back and forth. If it not for the smiles and laughing, I would have thought they were fighting. Instead they were sharing a joke until the man opened the gate to allow us to pass. The conductor continued to talk to the gatekeeper as we rolled by and started off. Finally he ran after the *matatu* and jumped aboard as it began to pick up speed. We were off! We were either on the last leg of our long journey or else the first leg of one that I didn't think I had the strength to finish.

The streets around the station were hardly less congested than the station itself. There were so many people and vehicles. Despite the crowds, the *matatu* began to pick up speed. Occasionally I could feel the driver apply the brakes, but mostly he used his size and his horn to open a way through.

We quickly left Machakos behind. The stores and stalls, people and homes spaced out. The driver passed several slower-moving lorries, swerving onto the other side of the road and back again before hitting any oncoming traffic. From up top I could see how close he sometimes came to running headfirst into those vehicles. But I wasn't afraid. It wasn't that I trusted this stranger, but I had lived through so much already that I had no fears of a crash. Somehow we had been protected, and I knew we would remain protected all the way to our destination. It had been our destiny to reach Kikima.

We raced forward, the ground at the side of the road a reddish blur. If we could find a way to stay aboard for the entire trip, I knew we would be there within an hour. One hour and we would be in Kikima. And then what? We would try to find our grandparents. I would ask questions of people until they were able to direct us to them ... if they were still alive. Many years had passed since my mother had had contact with them and they had to be very old.

"Do you still see the string?" Jata asked over the rush of the wind.

"Not now, but the driver can see it. Have no worries."

"I am not worried. Our mother is taking us home."

For an instant, I forgot that she was referring to the name of the *matatu*.

"It is like you said—our father and mother will guide us," she said.

It did feel like they had been watching from overhead. There was no other explanation. We had got here through more than my efforts.

"I cannot wait to be welcomed by our family," Jata said.

"Yes, that will be most special. But first we must find them."

Finding them was a task I could control. Being welcomed was still in question. Would we be accepted and embraced, the children of the daughter who had defied her parents, the children of a Kikuyu father they did not approve of, the grandchildren they did not even know existed?

Walking had moved my legs and left my mind quiet. Whenever those questions had arisen, I had pushed them aside. Now my legs were still and my mind was active, and there was no escaping them. I opened my bundle, pulled out two oranges—leaving one remaining—and handed them to Jata. "You peel them for our remaining breakfast."

She started to peel, tossing the pieces over the side. No worries about a lion following

our path now. Perhaps those little orange peels would help us find our way back to Machakos if there was no place for us in Kikima.



I sat there and for the first time allowed that thought to sink in—what if we were not wanted in Kikima? What would we do and where would we go? There was no place for us at the camp anymore. I would not travel across the country twice just to end up back where we'd started. We hadn't gone through all this to go back to the beginning. If we stayed in Kikima, at least there was peace. We would be free of the violence. And we would be in the home village of our mother, so at least a small piece of her would still be with us. We had followed the string.

Wherever we were, Jata would remain at my side.

The *matatu* slowed and I had a rush of fear that it was to let us off. But I looked down the road and saw three people waving it down. When we came to a stop, the trail of dust we had been leaving behind caught up and surrounded the vehicle. Up top we were clear of the hovering red cloud.

After a minute, we started moving again and the conductor appeared, clambering up the side and tossing a bag onto the roof.

"Enjoying the ride?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. This is a good place to ride."

"It is my favorite," he said as he tucked the bundle under a rope and made sure it was secure. "This is where I always ride when I am not the conductor. It is mostly above the dust, and you have air in your face and lots of space. I think we should charge a higher fare up here than we do down there."

"Can we still ride farther?" I asked.

"Still farther. But why did your parents not give you more money for this ride?" he asked.

"We have no parents," I said.

"Orphans—there are many. You have never been on my vehicle before."

"Never."

"Why are you going to Kikima?"

"Our grandparents live there."

"And you live with them?"

"Yes." I hoped so badly that I wasn't lying.

"Tell them to give you more money next time. Now I'd better be a conductor."

More people on the road ahead were waving for us to stop. The conductor climbed down the ladder and was gone.

Repeatedly the *matatu* stopped to let passengers and parcels on or off. The conductor appeared and disappeared, putting things on or taking them off from the roof. Most stops were quick, but others—such as when he had to untie and lower the chesterfield—

were longer. Each time we stopped, I wondered if this was where he would tell us that our fare would take us no farther. But each time, we traveled on.

Despite the bumps and the stops, Jata had fallen asleep, held safely in place by the rubber of the tire. I wished I could fall asleep too and wake up in Kikima.

The road had gradually become rougher. We passed over dried riverbeds, between huge boulders, down rutted roads and through mountains. Along the way, the homesteads grew smaller and were set farther back from the road. Crops, where they grew, seemed to be suffering. There was as much brown as there was green. Had the rains failed, or did they simply not come here very often?

Once again the *matatu* slowed. There were no people waiting by the roadside, so I had to hope that passengers inside were wanting to get off. The conductor appeared at the side—perhaps to get a parcel for that passenger?

“We are stopping for you,” he said. “Your fare has passed.”

I roused Jata and gathered my bundle. “Are we far from Kikima?” I asked him.

“Closer than your shillings should have allowed.”

When the *matatu* came to a full stop, the conductor offered Jata a hand to get her started down. Then he took the water container from me, handing it down to Jata on the ground. No sooner had I landed beside her than the *matatu* started moving again. The conductor ran alongside and then jumped into the open door, hanging out and looking back at us.

“Follow us!” he yelled. “It is just up the hill. Not far. Follow the dust!”

The *matatu* raced away, disappearing into the dust cloud it created.

I picked up the water container one more time. How many times had I set it down and picked it up? More important, would this be the last time in this journey?

“Muchoki, are we going?”

“Of course. I was just waiting for the dust to settle.” And waiting to settle my fears as well.

We started walking.

“Do you think it will be big or little?” Jata asked.

“What will be big or little?”

“Our grandparents’ home.”

“Does it matter?” I asked.

“Not really.”

I was more interested in the door of the house—would it be open or closed?

We were not alone on the road. Women with heavy loads on their backs were slowly walking up the hill, and they were joined by pushcarts filled with produce and bicycles piled high with merchandise. We were not the only people heading in this direction.



“Look!” Jata exclaimed, pointing at a store. The window said, in big letters, KIKIMA WEST SHOPPING CENTER. “We are here!”



“I think this is just the outskirts, but we are close. There is more ahead.”

Jata’s steps became lighter. She was almost skipping she seemed so happy. My feet, on the other hand, felt heavy, burdened with worries she knew nothing about.

We moved to the side of the road as another *matatu* came up from behind. I turned and shaded my eyes from the dust. Many people were going to Kikima, it seemed. Up ahead were more stores, more vehicles and many, many more people. We had come upon the center of the town, and we were here on a market day. The square was filled with stalls, the ground covered with burlap and plastic to display merchandise. There were tomatoes and potatoes, onions and oranges, mangos and passion fruit piled high.



The square was crowded with people, young and old alike. Were any of these my grandfather and grandmother? Were my uncles and aunts and cousins standing around me? How would I know other than to ask? I looked around for the right person—somebody who was older, who would know the people of the community. At one stall I saw a woman old enough to be a grandparent, carefully stacking potatoes into little piles.

“Good morning,” I greeted her. “I am asking of you, do you know the Kyatha family?”

She shook her head. “I only know potatoes.”

We started walking again. The market space was crowded with only small aisles of dirt left open between the blankets and stalls. People bumped through and loud voices—those of the vendors and those of the customers—seemed to make it seem even more chaotic and crowded. I was reassured that every voice seemed to be speaking in Kikamba but that made it even more difficult as it was harder for me to understand and it strained my mind even further.



All along throughout the whole journey I’d only thought of reaching Kikima but not the difficulty of finding my mother’s family when we did arrive. It was so much bigger, more confusing than I had imagined. My head felt like it was spinning, my legs were shaky. All I wanted was to find an empty spot and quietly think, but there was no empty and no quiet.

I led Jata through the market, being bumped from behind, people and produce crowded in all around us, never allowing her hand to slip from mine. Finally in what seemed like the very center I stopped and put my water container down. It felt like we were in a small island of calm within the middle of a sea of chaos. I looked all around, trying to see an answer that wasn’t visible in my eye or clear in my mind.

“Do you see our grandparents?” Jata asked.

I answered with only a shrug. What else could I say?

“I do not know where they live,” I said to her. “I only know they are the Kyathas.”

“Did you say Kyatha?” a man passing by asked.

“Yes, do you know them?”

“I *am* Kyatha,” he said.

“You are?” I gasped, unable to believe my ears or my luck.

“Yes. Why do you ask for the Kyatha family?” he questioned.

“We are looking for *our* family. Our mother was a Kyatha.”

“Was? Has she passed?”

“Last week. Her name was Mutanu.”

The man’s eyes got wide in shock. “You need to wait right here. Do you understand?”

“Yes, we will wait.”

“Right here—do not move ... understand?”

“Yes, sir. But who are you?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. Instead he stared directly at us, as if questioning whether we would wait. Finally he said, “Your mother was my sister.”

“Your sister!” I exclaimed. “Then that makes you—”

“Your uncle. Now wait. Do not move.”

He rushed off. I had to fight the urge to run away, as well as the urge to run after him, not to allow him to leave my sight in case he vanished. That option was quickly removed, though, as he was almost instantly swallowed up by the crowd and disappeared. Where was he going and why did I let him leave?

“Is he really our uncle?” Jata asked.

“I do not know why he would lie to us.”

I tried to calm myself. I felt afraid, but I couldn’t allow Jata to sense my fear.

She took my hand and I looked down. “It will be fine.” She smiled. She didn’t need my comfort—she was comforting me.

Within minutes the man reappeared, and he was not alone. There were others moving with him, pushing through the crowd. I tightened my grip on Jata’s hand to check my rising fears. Six men and three women stopped in front of us, and behind them were some children and finally an old man and old woman, walking slowly. The crowd parted to allow the old couple to come to the front.



“I am Kyatha, the father of Mutanu,” the old man said. “And this is her mother. Who are you?”

“We are her children,” I said. “I am Muchoki and this is Jata.”

“And where is my daughter?”

I took a deep breath. “Our mother—your daughter—she is dead.”

He staggered slightly, and the man who had spoken to us first offered a hand to steady him.

“How? When?” the old man asked.

“Only a week ago. It was malaria that took her,” I said.

The old woman—our mother’s mother—began to cry.

“And what of your father?” he asked.

“He was killed. In Eldoret, in the violence. We have no parents.”

“And how did you get here?”

“Mostly we walked.”

“From Eldoret?” the old man asked in disbelief.

I shook my head. “From the camp. From the place they put us in the Rift Valley, near Maai Mahiu.”

“That is over two hundred kilometers! You walked from there?”

“Yes ... almost all the way.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?”

“Yes, sir. We walked because there was no other way.”

“You have come so far to bring me such terrible news. I always dreamed that one day she would return, and now you have told me she never will. You have taken away the last thing of her I held—the hope that she would come back.”

Without thinking, I smiled.

“You think this is funny?” the old man demanded. “No. It is just that our mother always said that. She did not wish to return because she feared she would be turned away, and she said she wanted to live with the hope.”

“We would never have turned her away. *Never.*” The man reached out and took his wife’s hand. “You say that you are my grandchildren and that my beloved daughter is dead, but I do not know either of you. How do I know that what you are saying is true?”

“Can you not see?” his wife asked. “Look in their eyes.”

He looked at my sister, hard, like he was studying her, and then turned and stared at me too.

“I do not see my daughter when I look at you,” he said to me. “But there is something in the girl.”

“My father always said she was like my mother, and that was why he loved her so much.”

Tears were starting to form in the old man’s eyes.

“And you say you walked that far, not knowing where you were going, and still you found us here, in Kikima. How is that possible? Did you have a map?”

“No map.”

“Then how?”

“Our mother told us the way to travel. Before she died, she had decided to return.”

“If only she could have. There is so much I wanted to say.” He choked back a sob. “It is hard to believe you could come all that way on your own and find us.”

“We just followed the string,” Jata said.

He turned to her. “What did you say?”

“The string. We followed the string to find our way home.”

“It is nothing,” I explained. “She is telling you a story.”

“I *know* the story,” he said. “It was told to me by my father, as it was told to him by his.” He paused. “As I told it to *all* of my children.”

“And our mother told it to us,” I said. “It is just a story.”

“But it is a *true* story!” Jata protested. “Muchoki saw the string and we followed it here. Sometimes it was so thin that I had to squint to see it, and mostly I could not see it at all. But my brother could *always* see it.”

In my mind, I realized, I *had* always been able to see it.

The old man looked at me. “Do you see the string now?”

I shook my head. This was the end. It led me no farther. We’d always been moved forward by the vision in my head and the hope in my heart. Now there seemed to be neither.

“Do you have any money?” he asked me.

“We have none.”

“And the water container?”

“It is half empty and half full.”

“And food? Do you have any food?”

“Some beans and maize for a few days.”

“And nothing else?”

“One orange.”

He shook his head and smiled. “You *had* an orange.”

I turned to follow his gaze. Jata was sitting on the ground in a little circle with some other girls. She had peeled the orange and was giving out the pieces!



“You have come with empty pockets, empty stomachs and only enough water to last a day. Both of you wait here!” he ordered. With that, he turned and walked away, leaving us with the others.



“My sister,” the first man—our uncle—said, “was always so kind and gentle.” He pointed down to Jata in the dirt, talking and laughing with the other little girls. “My sister would have done that. Two of those little girls she has given that orange to are my daughters—your cousins.”

Suddenly the old man returned. He opened his hands and revealed a ball of string. He unraveled it until it dangled to the ground. Then he turned and started walking away, the string dragging behind him in the dirt. After a few steps, he stopped and turned back around. “Do you see the string?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said.

“Then why are you not following?”

“Are we going ... going to your home?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, we are not going to *my* home.” A smile came to his face. “We are going to *our* home. Together, we are walking home.”

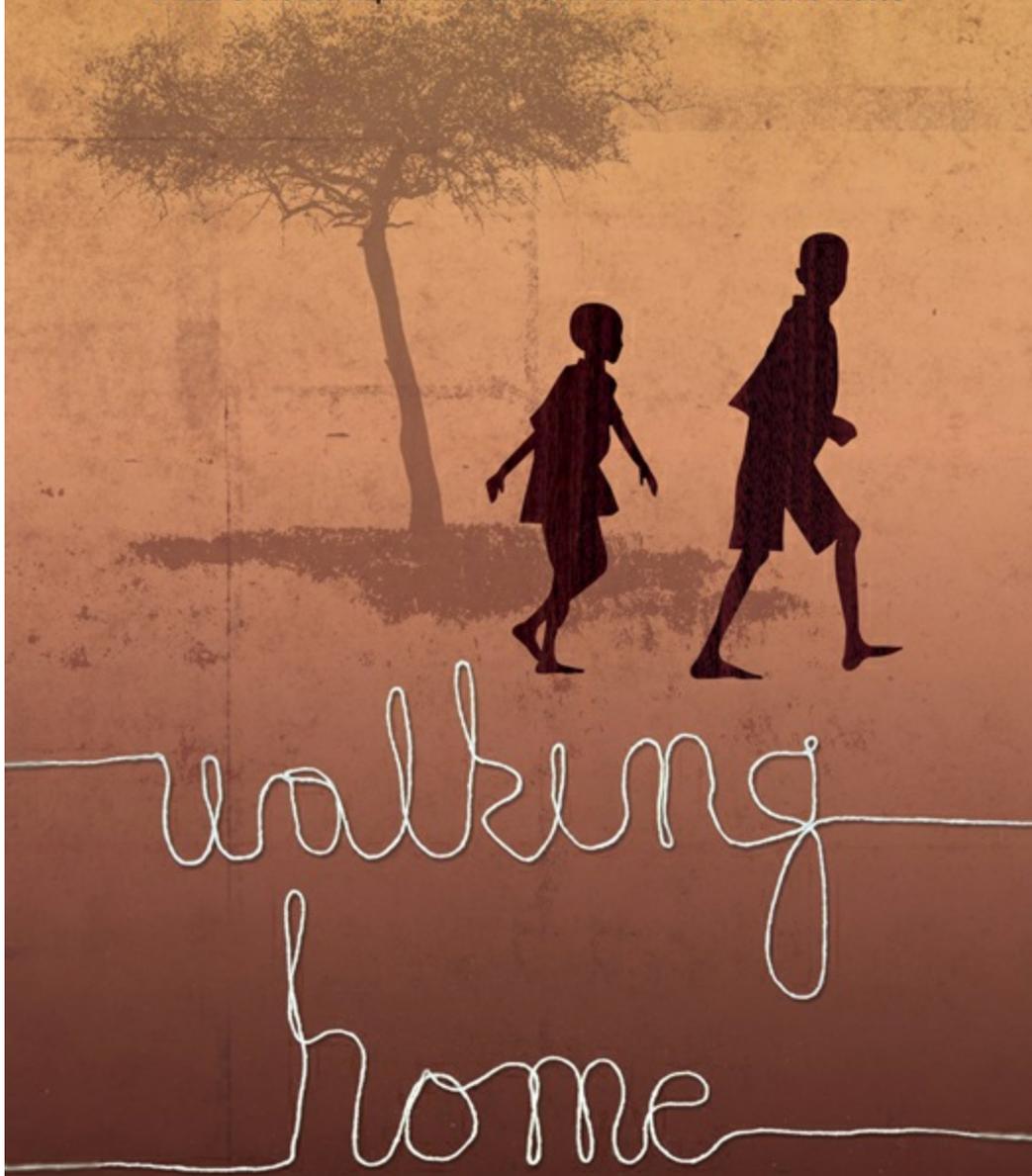


Author's Note

In the summer of 2011—accompanied by four children from the Creation of Hope Orphanage, four young Canadians, and my good friend Henry Kyatha—we walked the route traveled by my characters Muchoki and Jata. From an internal displacement camp on the Mara, up the Rift Valley, down to Nairobi, through Kibera, along the Mombasa highway, to the mountains of Kikima, we walked home. As you'll know if you've visited www.ericwalterswalkinghome.com, along the way we talked, filmed, interviewed, experienced, made notes and wrote as I tried to put myself in the shoes of my protagonists. They say if you wish to know a man, walk a mile in his shoes. Over six days we walked more than 150 kilometres so I could know Muchoki and Jata. I hope you got to know them as well as you followed along on our journey.

ERIC WALTERS

Winner of the Red Maple Award for *We All Fall Down* and *Safe As Houses*



Every journey, no matter how far, starts with one step