

A large, black silhouette of two hands holding each other, forming a V-shape that frames the central text. The hands are positioned at the top and bottom of the frame, with the fingers interlaced. The background is a light beige color with a subtle gradient.

Brian & Ethan

Rude Awakenings

Martin Gitehi

Dedication

These words are for you who holds on to love, and the audacity that only hope brings. They are for those that refuse to fit in, to conform or to be defined in such little terms. For those who have risked and tried to love me, I hope the love keeps you warm always.

Foreword

The year 2008 while distanced by the inevitable passage of time will never slip from my memory. I was only 17 when I came out to my mother. Fierce, beautiful, single, Christian, liberal, not too out there, strong, well-travelled, a little reserved, feminist, traditionalist. My mother the phenomenal paradox. Our journey since has been an amalgamation of acerbic debates, cold warfare, overt displeasure, crippling grief, bliss and more. This journey is still in its infantile stages. We continue to fight for each other and for ourselves each waking day. Some days are horrible, many are quite the opposite, but 2008 and the months leading up to that life changing moment remain unalterably the most defining period of my life.

Coming out is an entirely bizarre notion to me. It should not exist as it does. It serves no purpose but to perpetuate an incendiary sub culture of subjugation. Sadly because of these social constructs which deem some humans less worthy of inclusion into society based on the orientation of their sexuality; an enemy group exists which victims are pressured to identify with. That one is gay should not even be a subject for discussion any more than one's being straight is, because it does not matter. Nobody should have to come out because there shouldn't exist any shadows from which to emerge anyway and the knowledge of their sexuality must never tint whatever human interactions they engage in.

In the following pages, Martin unbundles the experiences of three modern families presented with a 'conundrum' of astral magnitudes (in their stuffy narrow worlds). Two gay teens, one suspected and the other not. Multiple scenarios play out in the background of the core narrative: heartbreak, tension, deceit, love, subterfuge, tragedy and forgiveness. Themes which featured starkly in the story of my own life.

These characters' stories are told with a softness that is refreshing. Mini-biographies which read like ballads. Consuming these

chapters I felt I knew all who were involved, each a brush stroke of the colorful mural that is my own life. The reader will fall in love with just how recognizable features of the anecdotes are from a possession of anger turning one against their own child to the deep silence which follows a threat where the recipient knows it is not empty and they who spell it are stunned by the tenacity of their own words. Brian and Ethan is a delightful read. Perhaps a little too bold in pushing its underlying agenda which reveals itself rather shamelessly in the early chapters but for me writers lacking in such boldness I find simply insufferable.

Karanja Nzisa
Murang'a, Kenya
24th December 2015

Chapter One

THE GIRLS had dressed to impress, or kill, depending on who was looking. There were short skirts, silky legs under fine stockings and hilly shoes. There were tight pants and funky hairdos atop thickly made up faces, roaming the wide black and white polished floors. The loud house music fought the unending rise and fall of giggles, laughs and shrieks from a few of the party goers. A moan or two escaped from behind one of the locked rooms in the back. Mr. and Mrs. Wamari had enough trust in their son and their house help of many years now, to leave him for his birthday party with the good church boys and girls as they had been called.

Ethan Wamari, the birthday boy, chewed on the conversation leftovers in the air and choked on the heavy mix of body odors and perfumes that sagged and danced about the room like a mad man in a thronged market. Except for Jeri, the tall hyper-social girl, who bothered fake a smile and offer the clichéd *happy birthday*, the rest seemed too busy with the merry making to worry about their host. He was after all Ethan, and although none of them hated him, they didn't understand him much either. He kept to himself much.

Ethan, who had just turned nineteen years, was the only child of the Wamaris and that was a job by itself. They prided themselves as the only parents in the area who actually bought diapers for their child in his infancy. 'The rest' as they called their neighbors in the suburban area of Nairobi, had been content with cotton nappies. They were well learned people themselves and that meant something too, somehow, in comparison to 'the rest'. The mister was a pediatrician while the wife prided herself more as a reproductive health expert. Hence, their social standing was justified, and they needed neither validation nor challenge from 'the rest' on how to live and raise their son, and they loved him with all of themselves.

The boys and girls from the youth club had managed, in their youthful fervor, to raise some money from their pockets and the

never-offered church offerings, to buy a crate or two of cheap liquor to go with the moment. The Wamaris had provided all the nutritious foods, drinks and cake for the occasion. As they danced to provocative lyrics hurled by the deep bass speakers, Ethan stared blankly at them, but only saw the slow movements of fake friends and plastic smiles thrown leisurely across the room, amidst the constant soundtrack of incoherent laughter and conversations.

Brian was in a groovy state himself. That Holy Alice, as everyone called her behind her back, was astride his laps, darting her alcohol-laced tongue like a serpent on the nape of his neck while she chanted a serenade of nasty, vulgar things to his ears. He jerked uncomfortably in his seat, especially with his present knowledge of Ethan's stares from across the room, with his slanted eyes above the edge of his phone as he pretended to type something. He struggled with the thought of whether it was Ethan's look that made him feel uneasy, or the sucking on his right ear that had now turned from nice to disgusting. Holy Alice was completely wasted and going for the jugular. He tossed her onto the spongy couch and rose up.

Ethan fidgeted in his seat on noticing Brian's abandonment of their 'holy' friend. It was a mixture of great relief and anxiety, especially when he saw him rise to cross the crowded room approaching him. He fought a smile back.

"Hey birthday boy, having a good time, *niambie* (what's up)?" Brian joked, patting Ethan's shoulder as he wedged himself close to him on the couch.

"Um...yeah...I'm alright..." Ethan smiled, "great party. It's fun."

"I mean you, not them...you! How are you?" he scanned Ethan's face. "You've been quiet and awkward all night. What's up?" Brian was not the type to leave a conversation hanging.

"I'm okay. It's nothing. Just that..." He hadn't finished his statement when Bernice, the prettiest and the shyest of the girls ran over to them, kissed Brian lightly on the lips and scurried back to her friends at the corner who were now busting a gut in her honor. They were playing *Truth or Dare*, and she was dared was to kiss the

handsome dream that was Brian Musembi. He laughed as the girl ran back.

"I'm going outside, I need some air," Ethan said and stood up. He purposely knocked over Brian's drink but feigned a facial apology as he brushed past his long legs on his way out. He was furious and he wondered why.

Outside, on the porch, there was another group of the usual suspects amongst his so-called friends, making cheap conversation about female celebrities, breasts and cars and more breasts. Ethan missed the point every time. A few hollered: "happy birthday!", but all Ethan heard were truncated syllables fall on his ears. He felt suffocated. He needed a moment. He needed to breathe crisp, cold air into his mind. He wanted release from the airtight box that his life had been for the past nineteen years. A moment. A long moment. He slowly walked to the cold swings in the backyard under the moon's ambient light and the soft ruffle of the indigenous trees that dotted their lush grounds and sat on one of them. Some peace.

A moment passed, followed by another and soon, the loud, rowdy merry making inside the house seemed to recede a bit. He wondered why he had felt lonely and bored at his own party. He knew his parents had 'wanted to be there', but they couldn't due to some 'important conference in Mombasa'. There was always a conference or a summit to be attended throughout his life. Although they had faithfully and dutifully planned the parties for him through the years, they had only stayed for a few of them. His friends and nanny, Maria, had done for the most part, playing the parents in their absence.

He remembered once, on his twelfth birthday. His parents had been home that day and the cake in the middle of the room was what all of his friends were fixated on. He, however, was fixated on the absence of one of them: Brian. He [Brian] had taught him how to make crafty little boxes out of folded paper after school in their backyard. They had climbed trees and shot water guns together for long when they were younger despite his parents' numerous attempts to keep them apart. He was perhaps his only true friend, and yet he

had many people around him throughout his life. He sighed out loud in sweet reminiscence. The memory train had begun and his face lit up and dulled in rhythms as the recalls flooded his mind.

After a few minutes had passed, the dry leaves rustled from under an intruder's step and he instinctively shifted his head in that direction, freeing himself from the nostalgia that had now embraced him tightly. It was Brian. He walked slowly, an apologetic manner in his step. Ethan laughed inside, the result of which was a slight crack of his lips into a smile all too shy to be noticed in the dim light. He knew him so well that he could even read his gait.

"I'm sorry about back there E." A silence. "Come on, let's go back inside. They want to cut the cake," Brian said as he sat on the lone swing beside him.

"I'm cool, just needed some air." It was a lie. He knew it too. And it almost made him laugh in his guilt.

"Jeri's asking for you though. Why do you keep running from these girls E? I mean...She kind of looks good, right?" Brian asked.

"Yah, she's alright, I think." Silence. That mostly meant only that. He had nothing to add to a conversation after those clipped statements. Brian didn't pry on this time.

They sat there for a while, swinging and chatting in their coded silence that had over time been perfected into a language with semantics and a syntax of its own. The house had for the most part quieted. It was as though *Big Foot* had smacked the noisy youth into a sudden, involuntary silence. Ethan thought it felt better. Brian swung on, quietly sipping the remainder of his cheap liquor, before the Mr. and the Mrs. of the great house returned. Long silence.

"I'm leaving for London. Business school." It was a flat statement and Ethan only realized he'd said it after Brian's swing stilled.

"What? When? Why didn't you tell me before?" He was suddenly animated.

"They only told me last week before they left. Said I'm leaving in a month."

Silence.

It was Brian's turn to feel the hard punch of an unknown anger inside his chest. He felt cheated, robbed of something, only he didn't know what it was exactly. He knew that he had not done as well in the final examinations, let alone afford to fly overseas with his friend. His parents were 'the rest' and worked as civil servants, only raking in a sustainable salary that basically catered for him and his younger sister. *Life is unfair*, that was the bolded message at the back of his numb mind. He felt sad.

The ensuing moment was laced with a bitter truth and a naked sadness written across their sullen faces. *I don't want to go* and *please don't leave*, were the inaudible prayers inside their hearts.

"Do you want to go?" Brian asked and held his breath.

"No. I'm not sure why, but I'd rather study here." Ethan lied again.

"Maybe there's still time to think about it?"

"I think so."

Silence.

Brian's fall from the swing was as unexpected as the news he had just been hit with. His intoxication had, without his getting the wiser, slowly taken him into a cloudy state that had now ended with his landing flat on his back against the cold hard earth, sobering him up. He gasped and let out a slight scream.

Ethan jumped over to him, genuinely worried for his safety. He knew Brian was a bit drunk, and though he himself didn't like alcohol, he had always let Brian be himself, albeit with a constant caution against too much indulgence. He slid his hands beneath Brian's upper back and easily put him in a sit-up state. He felt light to the lift, and there was something amusing to Ethan about Brian's weak state. He was always been the stronger one, and so seeing him in such a vulnerable state induced an odd humor and worry in equal weights. He had spilled the last of his booze on his shirt on his fall.

"Hey, are you okay Bry? Are you hurt?" He asked rapidly, his eyes traveling Brian's body for any signs of visible injuries.

"I think I hit my head somewhere," Brian grunted in pain.

Ethan sat on the ground so that he directly faced Brian by his side and leaned over to see the injured spot at the back of his head.

"You need a doctor. You've been cut. Come on, let's go!" He tried to lift him up.

"Wait..." Brian halted him, supporting himself partially on his left arm. "Don't go, stay here. I don't want you to go!"

"What...what do you mean? You need a doctor to look at that injury, Brian."

"Not that, I mean about school, E, don't go...please." Brian was pleading now, somewhat.

"I told you Bry, I really don't want to go but my parents..." Ethan tried to reason, leaning down so that his injured friend didn't struggle with speaking.

Then it happened. The apple flavored warmth of Brian's mouth got him mid-sentence and muffled his queries into a deep, unexpected kiss. They stilled and locked their mouths for a moment, with Brian's right hand holding Ethan's head down to him. A moment. An eternal moment, so that the wind in the trees turned to a beautiful tune and the ground moved about in a fuzzy way. A moment. A long moment. Ethan could easily have sworn that he was floating.

It was the calls from Holy Alice ringing the backyard air that startled them.

"I'm...I'm sorry Ethan," Brian apologized.

"It's okay." Ethan said as he recovered from the moment.

Alice had apparently sobered up and was in the earshot distance heading for the swings when Ethan quickly disengaged himself from Brian's warm hold and turned to her.

"He's hurt...he fell down. We need to get him to a doctor." Ethan fumbled for words.

"Hey babe," she called out as she rushed to Brian who was now struggling to stand and helped him up. What followed after tore deep into Ethan's heart. Alice was kissing Brian's face all over as they walked him to Ethan's car for the drive to the hospital.

"I'm sorry," Brian said and knew he didn't mean it. There was something awakening about the incident; something pleasantly welcome and longed for, and it mesmerized him.

"It's okay babe, you're a big man! You'll be okay, and you know I love you," she said softly in the twilight as they walked him shoulder to shoulder to the car.

Ethan knew the apology wasn't meant for her, and quietly answered to himself: "It's okay. Nothing to be sorry for," then he smiled happily into the darkness as they lumbered on ahead with Brian. And for the first time, for Ethan Wamari, it was a very happy birthday.

Chapter Two

ETHAN HAD risen much earlier than usual the whole of that week. Sleep was a scarce commodity in the abandoned market which his life had now become. He felt hollow and lonely since he had left Brian at the hospital in the hands of Holy Alice. The hours had dragged on since then and he hated himself for feeling that way. He tried writing when insomnia struck which had helped before, but there was no escape this time. His parents had returned safely and barely noticed any change of mood in their prized jewel, but it was expected of them. Maria, their house help however, did notice Ethan's more than usual withdrawal and took her time to enquire about what had triggered it. He loved her but she wouldn't understand, so he didn't bother explaining.

One week had passed since *the incident*, which is what Ethan opted to call it, and still, there was no talk of it between him and Brian. Brian had gotten a few stitches to the open wound on his head that night and left for his home with Holy Alice. He wondered what excuse Brian had offered, if any, to his tough parents. No one really knew if he and Alice were boyfriend and girlfriend, but whatever they were, Ethan didn't like any of it at all. His envy may have had something to do with the incident, or the fact that he believed Alice to be an attention seeker who didn't actually love Brian, or simply the fact that his feelings for Brian were a colorless psychopath that kept stabbing his heart.

He opened his laptop screen to catch up with the online world and there it was! It was a picture of Brian lying on a sofa on their porch with Alice kissing his cheek. The caption read: *What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. My love is getting well easy.* He slammed the screen down and walked out.

The cool morning air swept the leaves in the front yard into small heaps of brown that formed little domes in the compound. The orange sky seemed more of a motif painting than a reality, so that the

light on the ground was somehow filtered—incandescent. It was a serene feeling, but Ethan’s mind and heart were on fire. The recent turn of events had for the largest part left him sore all over, and while he had made a solemn decision not to talk to Brian about it, some part of him needed to talk to him, or just see him for a while. He knew Alice was looming around him all the time like a blind ghost, and her dramatic overtones were something he couldn’t deal with at the moment. *Maybe I should wait*, he thought. *Maybe he’ll call...or text, why am I even thinking about it? He was drunk, right? You know he was drunk. He obviously doesn’t remember a thing about an awkward midnight kiss under the moonlight. This is stupid.* He squatted down and tied up his shoes. It was time for his morning run.

Brian woke up to the normal bustle in their home. His parents dashed back and forth in their usual manner getting ready for work. He had made the habit of sitting midway on the stairway and watching the animated film that was the morning rush in the Musembi house.

“How are you feeling Brian? Come get your breakfast and don’t let me call you twice,” it was Mrs. Musembi. She said it with a smile on her face.

“Mum, it’s been over a week, I’m alright. I feel alright.” He joked back and lazily climbed down the stairs, pulling out his tongue on his little sister who wasn’t feeling much of a princess that morning.

“We need to get you into a short course in the meantime before it’s time to join college. You are too idle around here.” It was Mr. Musembi. He spoke as he rummaged through his briefcase, while he drank his coffee from the other hand.

And so the conversations went on and on, until his mother called out, “Maybe you should try jogging Brian. Don’t just sit and watch Charlie Been all day!” Off they went, dragging Rosie, his little sister along to school. It was just another typical day for ‘the rest’. *It’s*

Charlie Sheen, Brian muttered to himself and laughed. He loved his family. He decided jogging it would be, and besides, he needed to silence the uproar in his mind.

Since the incident, he had contemplated calling Ethan more than once. He had plotted and rehearsed the words to say over and over again, but they had all sounded phony, inadequate or just weird: *"Hey E, just wanted to say I'm sorry I fell off your swing."* Really? *Fell off the swing?* It sounded as lame as that margarine commercial on TV but he hoped that Ethan would overtake the conversation and get the awkwardness out of the way. He could also claim ignorance of the incident given his intoxicated state, but then again, he knew he would be lying to himself. His mind was tirade of gushing thoughts. He climbed back to his room and sat on the bed.

The harmony of sounds outside his bedroom window brought in some much needed tranquility. He thought about their earlier years. Ethan had always been his friend. Although his parents had tried to limit their friendship on the claim that he (Ethan) was from the uppity Wamari family (and that was saying something), they had found a way to triumph over the separation. At first, it was an innocent friendship between two boys, but with time, emotions had grown into more than a close brotherhood. He wondered now, if the feelings that presently flooded his heart and set up camp in his mind had always been locked away somewhere inside of him, or whether they had simply cropped up like a thief from the cover of darkness. He had kissed another boy; his best friend. He had kissed him back and it felt new, it had felt good and that knowledge in itself bombarded his mind and scared him as much as it intrigued him. He needed to run. It would ease his thoughts.

Ethan took his usual track behind the main concentrate of the upper middle class suburban houses, passing their former school and headed for the main grounds where later that afternoon, children would fill the swings and slides to play hide and seek. They had played

there once, with Brian and Bahari, who later moved when his parents died a few years ago. He slowed down and panted for breath.

Brian ran in no particular direction. His legs stretched and curled in constant motion and his athletic body followed along, the result of which was his running. He knew he was escaping, not really running. He was fighting to erase and preserve in equal strengths, the letters that joined and formed words in his mind. Words that scared him. Words that had meanings he had grown knowing to abstain from and even avoid. What did the kiss mean? What did it say about him now? Was he changing? Evolving? Mistaken about something?

The mental torment wove itself into a sudden halt in his thumping run and he bent over to catch a breath. *Am I gay? Did I kiss E or am I imagining it? No, it's the alcohol. What of Alice? Who is Alice? What? Why? When? Really? Me?* He screamed and sat hard on the track and only then did he realize he was in the park. He lay on his back, his knees angled upwards into a protective position and let the rising sun wash his guilt and fear and confusion away. He didn't lie for a minute before someone blocked the sun's warmth on his face. It was Ethan looking down at him—like a godfather.

"Hey..." Ethan started, still panting in half from his own run.

"Umm...hey E, what...what are you doing here?" Brian said and sat up. He imagined that he was imagining Ethan's presence.

Ethan tried to laugh: "I may have forgotten, but it looks like a park." *I'm doing it, finally!* He whispered to himself. Perhaps it wouldn't be as awkward as he thought.

"Okay Dr. Sarcastic! I didn't know you run too..." *What is wrong with me? Of course he runs. Of course we run!*

"I think that cut wiped your head clean, huh?" Ethan said and they both laughed.

Silence.

"Come on, get up!" He offered his hand and pulled Brian up. "I seem to be pulling you up a lot these days." He joked on. They sat on one of the cleaner benches under an old fig tree.

"How are you doing man, has the wound healed?" Ethan tried

to prod the injured spot.

"Woo....Easy! I'm still a bit sore. I'll come and burn down that crazy swing at your house!" He was of course jesting, but his face could as well have meant it.

"It is steel Bry, you can't burn it." Another laugh. "And are you really going to blame the swing for all of the night's events?" He swallowed hard. He had poked the bear and he froze in his seat waiting to get devoured.

Silence.

"First of all, don't start teaching me the periodic table again and metals! Even my Chemistry teacher never got to me." He tried to smile but it faded before Ethan could see it, then went on, "I wanted to...look I was drunk that night, stupid drunk and..." Brian struggled to arrange the words dancing on his lips, "I have a girlfriend E and..."

"Alice...Holy Alice?" Ethan spelled out her name as if she was a famous socialite with a mediocre sex tape on the internet. "Why did you do it? And don't say you didn't mean to Bry. .."

Brian was startled. There was no escaping it. "Look E, I'm sorry about..." he swung his head as if someone was listening then lowered his voice, "...sorry about kissing you that night, okay? I was just drunk and I don't know why it happened."

Silence.

"Are you sure? Because if I remember, you were upset and saying I shouldn't leave for school in London."

He turned to look at some other joggers who were pretending to run. Brian took advantage of the distraction and stole glances at Ethan and another smile crossed his face. There was something about him that he just hadn't placed for all of their lives; something uniquely appealing.

"Do you kiss other guys when you're drunk too?" An agitation was building up inside him.

"Why are you trying to make this into something that it's not E? I knew this would happen, you always try to complicate everything." Brian shouted.

Ethan leaned back on the bench, "I am not trying to make it hard for you, okay? I just want to know what that was all about Bry, that's all."

Brian was visibly uncomfortable. "Let's just forget it, okay? I mean, I've got all these conflicting feelings inside...I look at you sometimes and....look this is crazy...I love Alice. She's pretty and she thinks I'm cool!"

That makes two of us, Ethan thought to himself.

"I'm not gay...I can't be gay...no, I am not gay, E!" He protested over and over, as if he was trying to convince himself. He wasn't sure which one it was too.

"I never said you are Brian. Nobody said that."

Ethan stood up and wiped the thin sweat beading on his brow. His face had cooled and his hands were freezing. They always did when he was nervous. He wondered if he had imagined the warmth of Brian's lips on his a week ago and for a moment, he felt himself the greatest fool in the world.

Brian wrestled his heart and lost. The scenes of that night, on the swings under the trees, played and replayed themselves in his mind like a bittersweet soap opera. He knew he had wanted to kiss Ethan, perhaps he had planned it all along subconsciously and yet, he couldn't bring himself to an acceptance of his action. He felt trapped, bound, or jinxed by something. Something he couldn't scrub off his heart; something gripping and solid. He didn't worry about loving or being in love with Ethan, but the prospect of being labeled 'gay', 'queer', a 'fag' or a 'homo', simply made his body shudder. Alice and all their friends would laugh and avoid them. He dared not think of their parents.

"It's alright Bry, I'm sorry I brought that up. I think you were too wasted that night, and I...I shouldn't think much of it."

"I'm sorry too Ethan, I promise it won't happen again." Brian apologized and almost laughed at how terrible a lie it was. That thing inside of him that couldn't quite be scrubbed off told him that it was bound to repeat itself. It said that a fire had been lit whose embers

would not soon die away. Deep inside, he knew their closeness had long passed the *friend zone*, and although none of them had ever dared break the barricades on the discovery route, it was too late now. They both wondered, each to his own, sitting in a pensive silence, what they were really afraid of. Was it Alice? The labels? Their friends? Parents? The unknown or simply themselves? It was Brian's phone that broke the hard silence between them. Alice was calling and Brian hesitated to answer it.

"Hey Alice, what's up?" He fidgeted. There was a general displeasure with the call or perhaps the caller. He spoke for a moment as Ethan found himself staring, and even admiring, the handsome features on Brian's face. He had a strong jaw outline on which whiskers of what would grow into a handsome beard were sprouting. He had a bush of eye brows above deep black eyes and sat perfectly on his dark brown face. He had a medium, padded nose and a pair of pale pink lips, above which a shy mustache was peeping. For a moment, he thought he couldn't blame Bernice and all the other girls who giggled and threw themselves at Brian during the party. *Was he one of them too? Was he becoming a groupie as well? Stop it Ethan! Stop it!*

"It's Alice," Brian said and stood up. "She's coming over to check on me. Mum called her mother and told her to check up on me." Most of their parents went to the same church and hence, they looked out for one another, whatever that meant.

Ethan felt the same rage of that night jab him in the throat once more and he literally choked on his words: "You go...Umm...I'll see you around. I still got a few weeks before I leave."

Silence.

"Okay E, but we still have to talk about that." Brian said and pulled him to himself, held his head between his warm hands, slightly hit their foreheads together then smiled and drew away.

"I have to go, I'll text you later," and off he jogged on the back track with his back to Ethan who was left standing still like one of the many light poles in the park. He was too afraid to move and lose

Brian's scent and presence on his skin, which had suddenly been invaded by a million goose bumps. He was gone.

Ethan sat back on the bench and let the mask he'd worn all along fall off. His tears flowed freely, joining the drying dew on the deep green grass as the sun hid its yellow face behind a black cloud.

Chapter Three

TORTURE WAS the appropriate word to describe the profound mix of rage, pain and sadness that was brewing in Ethan's heart. His eyes had not flinched or dared blink as he blankly stared at Brian jog away and they had remained so even after his masculine form had made the last corner off the park and back onto the estates. It wasn't fair, he thought, to want something so much and not have it. It wasn't just for life to bring him the most precious of it right to his face and for other factors to deny him even the mere feel of it. It was criminal, for life to make him fall in love so flatly and deeply and to equally deny him the chance to even say it out loud, let alone experience it. *Breathe E, breathe!*

Brian's 'thump and heave' on the back track quickly formed a hypnotic delirium in which he could escape the loud noises in his head. Over the years, he had grown accustomed to running, or be it literally, from his emotional problems and the many things in his life that he couldn't wrap his head around. He hated confrontations. The exercise came as a bonus, but even he now pondered the possibility, however absurd, that he could actually be in love with Ethan. He knew his dad would certainly disown him at the slightest hint of his son being gay. Mrs. Musembi might show some motherly compassion at the discovery, but Brian knew only too well that beneath her mercy would lay disappointment and a sense of poor motherhood. The prospect of Alice learning of his secret love—or whatever this was—for Ethan would be a catastrophe neither of them would recover from. The stakes were high, and yet his heart still pounded, pounded hard for Ethan.

He was nearing his home at the intersection when it suddenly hit him hard and threw him onto the curb next to the crossing. The pain was real and only then did he snap from his deep thoughts and quickly realized that he had been hit and bruised by a fast moving cyclist. His knee was scraped and the elbows oozed with blood. He

was lucky. The cyclist stopped and offered to get him to the hospital but Brian declined claiming he was close to his home and besides, the injuries were minor. Alice would perform first aid. He limped home.

"Brian! Oh my God! What happened? What happened?" She seemed genuinely concerned.

"It's nothing...some dude ran into me on his bicycle. Can you help me clean and bandage?"

"Of course babe I'll do it, come on...you could have died, and then I would have died...*pole*. You should have stopped him. He needs to be sued." She went on.

"No, I was on the wrong. I wasn't looking where I was going."

Brian almost laughed out imagining how Ethan would sneer at Alice's believable yet comical concern for him. He knew that Alice was for the most part a person that cared only for public opinion and public image and yet, somehow, he still saw in her a girl. Sometimes he actually almost believed her to be like most other girls—tender, caring, warm, loving, in a way needing and seeking the romantic fantasy of her Prince Charming—a Cinderella. Then just as quick, her selfish ego and callousness would surface and Brian would recoil and avoid the drama. Alice was like an expertly constructed maze of human complexity. He never understood her at all. He never understood women much. For today, she was loving and caring. Tomorrow was never assured.

She was flying all over the drawers in the kitchen and the bathroom looking for a first aid kit and she ran back to him in a flash.

"Do you know how to do this stuff?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, just chill and sit back. I actually took like a class on it, okay...not really a class, but like...you know, our school brought some guys to teach us." Brian only kept thinking of how red her lipstick was.

When she was done and had meticulously replaced the contents of the kit, she sat down beside him on the sofa, pulled his head onto her lap and asked him to stretch out and lay down. She slowly stroked his velvet chin and jaw and let her palms feel the tumescence of his biceps. *He is so handsome*, she thought. He was

falling asleep. There was something about Brian that always intrigued Alice. She knew that boys were always after her for the simple reason of a quick score on sex, after which they would mostly break up with her. However, this one had neither made the signs of needing any more intimacy than a kiss nor the premonitions of breaking up with her. She wondered then, why her mind was stuck on the idea that it wasn't that Brian didn't find her sexy enough, but that he was holding back the love and sexual adventurousness of young guys for someone else. Was there another girl? If so, who was she? She had to find out who the other girl was. To Alice, there was only one way to deal with competitors and those who dared steal what was hers—destruction! The more ruthless the better.

Ethan was physically and mentally drained by the time he made it back to their home. The morning sun had shied away slowly but surely, and the gloom that befell the earth couldn't resonate more with the loneliness that engulfed his heart. His sluggish body dragged itself past the gate and into the compound where the golden leaves were still piled up in beautiful small domes and for a moment, Ethan almost smiled. They were a beautiful sight. Maria, their house help, was finishing up her chores in the kitchen when Ethan walked in and she simply stared at him.

"Good morning Ethan, how are you?" She greeted.

"I'm fine, Mama Wanja, how are you doing yourself?" he was always polite.

"I am fine too, it's you I'm worried about. Are you alright Ethan, you look so tired. You know you shouldn't run too much with your chest problem, eh?" Her eyes were wide open and staring right at Ethan.

"I didn't go too far. I need to shower."

"Okay, I put your clean clothes in the closet and cleaned your room too. Oh, and your mum told me to tell you that they may not be

coming home today. I also made your favorite biscuits.” She let out the last one with a falling tone.

She knew full well that Ethan had grown used to the disappointments and yet still, she knew that he was still needing of love; of his parents’ concern and affection. She feared too, that he had outgrown his love for her wonderful biscuits. He was all grown up now. Even she could see it. He ran up the stairs.

The events of the day had done little to dissuade Ethan of the feeling that he was the most unlucky human being in the world. He wondered what, or how, he should deal with the recent changes in his life. His feelings were a murk of grey that had neither boundaries nor administrators. The question of whether he was gay didn’t much disturb him as the thought of being gay *and* lonely. He had read the statistics on the internet claiming that a majority of gay men die from depression and obesity, caused by stress and loneliness. He supposed there’s always three sides to a coin and every story but still, loneliness wasn’t a thing he fancied. No human being did. He lay back on the bed and contemplated a quick nap but decided against it as fast. He needed a hot shower and later, a strong coffee and a book to ease his mind. He promised himself to forget Brian and stay away.

The hot streams of water hit his body in a sensual rhythm as he slowly washed the sweat off his neck and face. There was a sudden rage inside of him and he scrubbed and scratched his skin trying to wash away his feelings, his dependence on Brian’s closeness to him, his need to be loved and to love. He struggled to wash away his love for him—or whatever these emotions were—and almost succeeded before he noticed the weak change of color in the water. He had bruised himself and torn part of his skin open. It was then that he realized that he had been crying, his tears joining the water that washed him, disappearing into the colorlessness of it, just as he felt about himself in the world right then—invisible.

Alice slid her bony fingers into Brian's shorts and drew out his phone from his left pocket with the ease of a seasoned pick pocket. She enjoyed it too, since there was the bonus of feeling his muscular thighs on the back of her hands. She gently rose and placed his head on a pillow, then tip toed across the sitting room at Brian's house and into the kitchen. Her *Mission Obliterate Competition* was so on! She knew that Brian must have been texting the other girl all the time. She also speculated that she was a cheap one and that she had probably already offered herself to her boyfriend. She was ready to find any and all evidence and later plot an exhaustive plan to teach the trash a lesson.

Her face couldn't have been more expressive as she scrolled the touch screen scouring for the skeletons her boyfriend may be hiding. She was shocked, or impressed, by the findings. There was just a bunch of texts to Ethan written in the usual clipped, impersonal, guy-to-guy format; a few to his parents and the rest were hers and the cell service provider. *Where does he save the rest? There must be a locked app to hide the really dirty ones*, she convinced herself. *How does a guy as hot as Brian not have a list of bimbos on his contacts? Or maybe he actually loves me. Besides, he's so sweet. And all the time that he's away he's with Ethan, so there's no other girl involved. But why doesn't he want to do it with me, it's been long enough!*

"Alice...Alice?" he was up again.

She ran back to the living room.

"Hey! You're up...how do you feel now?" She pried on and felt his face with her hand and kissed him while the other hand dropped the phone on the sofa. He drew away.

"I'm fine Alice, what's the time?"

"Alice? You're calling me Alice now? Babe what's going on, or don't you love me anymore?" She was firing up.

"I mean...okay, I am sorry. I just..." he struggled walking the thin line between explaining things to Alice and making her think you're challenging her to a duel

"Is it because of the other girl you have been doing on the side? You think I don't know, huh!" She sprung up and held her waist. Brian braced himself.

"There's no other girl, Alice...I mean *babe*."

"Who's E then?" She asked, her face less than an inch from his. Brian's heart lurched and skipped a beat.

"E? What do you mean...*babe*?"

"You were calling this E all through your sleep and saying you're sorry!" her hands were flying all over, with her face curling into a million shapes at once.

Damn! Brian thought. *What did I say? Does she know?*

"Is it Ellen from school? Are you with her now? I knew she was just cheap!"

"*Babe*, come on, please...just sit down. There's no one else, and it's definitely not Ellen. She's not even my type." He struggled to ace it.

"Really, so who's your type? Bernice? Doreen?"

"None of them actually. My type is...um...you! You're my type," he swallowed hard. He hated lying about his feelings, but lately nothing about telling truth offered much appeal to him, "just you."

"So who's E? And what did you do to him or her?"

"Don't mind it *babe*, E's just a friend I had in school a long time ago that I let down. I feel guilty about it." He lied.

"Well..." she was much calmer, and she held his hand, "I thought it is Ethan and I thought it's awkward for you to be talking like that about him in your sleep. That would be so gay, imagine! But okay, like maybe you should apologize to this friend of yours. It's not good to keep guilt inside you. It makes you look old and I'm not ready to kiss old people yet," she was smiling now.

She cared little about friends or hurt emotions between Brian and his buddies as long as he loved her and only her.

"Maybe you're right, I should say I'm sorry." He simply said, but knew that Alice was far from dropping it.

The day had been long and the evening crawled in silently. Ethan only realized it was dusk when the letters on his book—*48 Laws of Power*—became illegible. He thought the book was thoroughly articulate on the rather appealing subject of power and dominance of one person to another, or others, and yet the very desire for control, he reckoned, was the primary source for the loss of it in many people's lives. The idea of being in charge of anything had never been a great relish to him. He had always avoided leadership even through school. He didn't essentially feel inadequate to lead or be in charge or control of things, but it was a matter of a more innate desire to let things fall into place like he was sure they would always do. Power plays and struggles only led to strife in his view. Besides, in the end, all human beings ever have, he believed, was the need to be needed, the desire to be desired and the love to be loved; truly, fearlessly and honestly.

The draught was getting stronger and so he left the balcony of their magnificent house and went into his bedroom. A movie would serve him well for the night.

It was past eight in the night when his phone lit up with a new call and he jumped for it, then paused and wondered why at all he had responded so enthusiastically as if he had been waiting for it all along. It was Brian: *Hey E, I'm outside, can we talk?* He wondered why Brian had come. *Was he here to apologize for leaving him in the park? Or maybe he wanted to tell him to stay away? Is he and Alice in a relationship now?* His mind lit up once more. He decided to go down and see him. Maria had left at six and his parents wouldn't be back for the day. Only the night guard was at the gate and Brian had been let in without question.

He opened the door and there he was. He wore his hooded sweater and track pants. *Always easy*, Ethan thought, *that's why I like...liked him.*

"Hey, come in Bry."

Brian cautiously walked in and pulled his hood down. They sat on the bigger sofa by the fireplace. Silence. Only the CD player was audible as it played soulful rhythm and blues music.

"What's up, how did your parents let you come this late?" Ethan asked.

"They aren't home yet, but Rosie is with Alice at home. She's sleeping."

"And Alice didn't ask where you're going this late?" Ethan pried on.

"No, she's fine, although she was looking at me in a funny way today. I told her that I'm not feeling so bad anymore and that I was going to catch some air. Never mind." He paused for a moment and swallowed hard, "E, look...I am sorry about all this stuff that's been going on between us." Brian said and waited for a rejoinder; Ethan kept quiet and avoided his eyes.

"It's just confusing; even to me. I know I care a lot about you, but sometimes it's more than that you know...like, I care too much. And I really like being with you, around you, but I guess I'm feeling something that I shouldn't."

Silence.

"When I kissed you that day, it wasn't just spontaneous. I guess at the back of my mind, I always wanted to do it."

Silence.

"Come on E, say something man." Brian was speaking his feelings out and that scared him.

Ethan slowly raised his face: "I've known you all my life Bry. We've been best friends. Something happened between us that night, but I...no we, we can't fool ourselves that that was a fluke or an accident. Some things grow with time and they are just expressions of what's already inside us; they are expressions of who we are." He paused.

"However much we try to keep dancing around this, we'll never win. You like me as much as I like you, otherwise you wouldn't be here right now. Well, I know you're afraid of being labeled and called names

and people finding out, and given the circumstances and our society, I kind of understand. I'll admit that I am also afraid to some extent. But Bry, this is something bigger than what people think or say about us, it's bigger that what we are afraid of. Whether we are gay or not is irrelevant here man, whether to call it love or a weird love-like thing, I don't know and it doesn't matter. What counts for me, is what you genuinely feel about someone. I guess that's the only thing that counts. So don't apologize. Whether you're with Alice, or some other girl, my feelings won't change. Whether I go to London for school or not, I'll still be the same weird E, and you'll still be...well, the same awesome Brian. Everyone else will say it's wrong and we shouldn't feel that way, but everyone else isn't us Bry. But you and I know how it feels like." His eyes were growing wet. He didn't even notice that halfway through, Brian had been staring at him in a form of admiration while holding his hand on his lap.

No one talked. The bright lights didn't bar them at all. Their heads pulled in together like shooting stars on a free fall, hearts thumping out of hard chests as their mouths drew closer and closer, merging into an intimate kiss that was neither shy nor rushed. Brian hugged Ethan tightly, binding him in his wide and able embrace, aware of all the lights but unabashed, unapologetic and not scared at all. Ethan snuggled into a warmth hitherto unknown, and yet so strongly desired.

"Thank you for saying that E. I think I love you man...for real!" he said and held him even closer.

"I...I think so too Bry. I love you too Brian," came a happy Ethan, amidst tears of joy and relief. He had said it and he had said it back to him. And in that moment, all the hassles, the fear and the agonies they had endured made all the sense in the world.

"Ouch!!" Brian whimpered.

"Bry, what is it? Don't say it's the swing again, there's no swing here," he teased.

"No, I hurt my knee in the morning going back home, Alice dressed it but it's still sore."

"Can I see?" Ethan slid down the sofa and knelt on the rug to examine it. He gently pulled up Brian's track pants to reveal the bandaged injury and the chills of his warm fingers lit up Brian's spine. He prodded it tenderly and got amused by the tiny shrieks of exaggerated pain Brian would give off with each touch.

"Now what will I ever do with you Bry, you're always so clumsy! Sometimes I fear you might shoot yourself trying to see a bullet come out of a gun," he laughed and Brian laughed thinking, *I like it better when he laughs, when he's happy.*

"Come on, I'm not that dumb! Well, maybe I shouldn't join the army then," Brian joked.

"Actually," Ethan said and twirled his lips in anticipation for a retort, "there are no swings in the army to fall off of, and so you might come back to me alive."

"You think this is funny, huh!? Wait till I tickle you. I know how you scream!" He grabbed Ethan off the floor and onto the sofa and actively tickled his ribs. The laughter and pleas to "stop it" were not enough for Brian who kept going at it and kissing Ethan when he laughed too much. His own pain counted not in that moment; it seemed to have flown off with each smile and burst of laughter from Ethan. He knew he loved him, and he had said it. He understood too, that the future would be no easier, but it would be worth everything.

"I love you Ethan," he said again as he lay next to him on the floor where he had finally landed, "and I am scared of it, yes, but I can't keep running forever. As long as you're with me, I will try with all of me to love you and fight for love."

Ethan's eyes were wet again from the laughter and although he wanted to ask what will happen with Alice now, he decided not to let worry spoil his moment—their moment. Instead, he said: "I love you too Brian, always have. I still can't believe this is happening," he smiled and his eyes lit Brian's heart as he lay beside him with his face looking into Ethan, "I love you so, so much..." and before he could finish, Ethan kissed him again and again and again and again, their

thunderous laughter following their rolls on the beautiful rug, as soft rhythm and blues music serenaded the gleeful air.

Chapter Four

THE ALARM on Ethan's phone went off at the usual quarter to six in the morning. Instinctively, and completely out of habit, he pulled the phone closer and pressed the power key silencing the annoyance quickly and went back to sleep. It was a few minutes later (or so he thought), when the slow tap of a hand on his shoulder startled him from his warm dreams and he jerked upwards, parting his lazy eyelids like a round from a cleaned gun. It was Maria, and she had that look on her face whenever Ethan did something bad, weird or just inexplicable.

When he couldn't decode her facial contours, he shifted his heavy head to his right and there was Brian sound asleep, his one hand on Ethan's waist, his head on his upper back and a little drool on the left side of his mouth. She had come in unheard to them and was standing over their nest. *I am lucky she can't see the lower part of him*, Ethan thought to himself. He had brought a blanket from his room the previous night when Brian's wide jumper wasn't enough for the cold. It was morning now, and every inch of their lower bodies was awake. Maria gestured him to wake him up then rolled her wide eyes, turned around for the kitchen and muttered something under her heavy breath. Ethan nudged his bedfellow to wake up.

They had dozed off on the floor after last night's laughter and roll-a-rounds and they'd slept for almost two hours since the alarm had gone off. Towards the eastern skies, the lazy sun was gleaming and shooting its orange rays through the large windows in the Wamari mansion so that its warmth was spread out evenly on the skin. Brian snapped up with a startle and came to quickly, the usual confusion of waking up in unfamiliar territory apparent in his quick glances around him, until his puffy eyes landed on Ethan and he let out a slight sigh of relief. It had been a long while since he had slept over at Ethan's house. He smiled and leaned in to kiss his new found lover when the

clink of cutlery in the kitchen down the hall froze him midway, and he realized they were not alone.

They got up and Ethan pointed him to his bedroom upstairs as he scurried to the kitchen to assess and handle Maria. She had seen Brian sleep over at Ethan's house since their childhood, on occasion when his parents were away, but she was yet to see the kind of closeness they displayed that morning. She was busy getting the cooker lit up and almost simultaneously cleaning whatever kitchenware needed washing. Ethan walked in and paused for a minute, half constructing a good explanation for what she had seen and figuring out if one was indeed required, and half admiring Maria's sense of duty. She had practically been his mother since she was employed here and he believed she knew him better than his own parents. She was never late for work and even in her sick days, she always insisted on doing her job. Watching her do her morning routine of cleaning and making breakfast was like watching a well conducted orchestra—synchrony.

"Good morning, Mama Wanja," he greeted.

"Good morning Ethan," She greeted back and turned around from her washing on the sink to give him what appeared to be her ever warm smile.

"I'm sorry about that...in the living room. It's not what it looks like. We..." he was fumbling for words.

"Why are you sorry? It was just Brian sleeping over as he does occasionally." She rinsed off a mug or two then went on, "There's nothing to worry about. Unless you did something wrong. Did you?"

"What? How do you mean?"

"I mean the small parties you sneakily hold when your parents are gone. You invite people you barely know and don't even like. Did you have a party?"

"No, not at all," he quickly said and let out a sigh, "just me and Brian."

"Nothing to worry about then." She smiled again.

"Thanks Mama Wanja," *much better*, he thought.

"Now, be a good friend and go get Brian down here, breakfast is almost ready." She rinsed her hands off to take the pan out of the fire. "Don't just stand there, go on!"

Upstairs, Brian had no recollection of Ethan's and Maria's encounter earlier, but only the beautiful time they'd spent last night, kissing Ethan and dancing to intimate music he couldn't quite recall now. Between the tickles and dances, Ethan had stolen one of his father's fine wines and they drunk it in the ambience of the moment and lulling tunes. A bag of potato chips would also be missing from the kitchen this morning. *Dinner never felt better*, he quietly thought to himself. All this while, he stood in the bathroom with an involuntary smile on his face, as the hot water rode down his athletic body. He was happy and he knew it.

It was the creak of the bathroom door opening and closing that broke the delirium in which he was now swimming. Drawing the shower curtains back, he froze in utter excitement—Ethan stood there, pulling off his feet, his pair of shorts and then raised his eyes to look at Brian. None spoke. Ethan joined him in the streams and steams of the hot water and pushed Brian to the tiled walls kissing and groping his hard body in a rapid gusto, only comparable to a famished lion after striking a kill. As fast, the tussle moved to other end of the bathroom, on the counter tops, the floor and back to the hot streams again. Brian reciprocated the welcome attack on his body with a dash of his manly hands on the petite physique of his lover and lathered his smooth back as Ethan himself, uncontrollably and avariciously, virtually squeezed an entire bottle of shower gel on Brian's body.

The caressing, prodding, grinding and writhing of manly bodies, the shots of warm blood coursing underneath their skins and accompanied by loving kisses was accentuated by the wafting smell of ripe gardenias blooming behind the bathroom in the backyard downstairs and the moment seemed to last an eternity. It was a hot, raw love; an unbridled primal desire that erupted even higher with each tug, like a volcano that had finally received a quake. As the

climax of heightened emotions came to an end, they collapsed to the floors and let the falling waters marinate the moment. It was then that Maria's voice called from behind the bathroom doors, inside Ethan's bedroom about breakfast and they quickly grabbed their towels.

At the kitchen table, the quick glances, knowing looks and satisfied smiles played hide and seek on their faces, as they quietly enjoyed the eggs and Brian sipped on his good coffee. Maria never seemed to sit. She was always doing this or that and appeared completely disinterested in the silent exchanges behind her.

"Your parents are returning this evening", she suddenly said, without a change in her demeanor.

They exchanged glances. It meant no fun tonight.

"Thank you for breakfast Mama Wanja," Brian courteously said and smiled at Ethan.

"*Karibu sana*," she answered. "It's good you kept your friend company last night. It's a scary house to be all alone in," she laughed some.

They paused the munching and stared at each other. Was she insinuating something with her tone or were they just imagining it? Brian quizzed Ethan with his eyes but he only shrugged in response and the silence prevailed.

"I'm a big man now, Mama Wanja." Ethan retorted.

"True, but you're only saying that now because the sun is up and we're here." They all laughed.

Ethan shied away from Brian's mock face and the laughter roared again. *She doesn't know*, they both thought.

"Yes, I...I thought its good because...because I haven't stayed overnight for a while. Plus we needed to discuss some matters about courses."

Ethan blushed. *Discuss courses indeed!*

"And are your parents at home?" Maria asked.

"They were returning late last night, Alice stayed with Rosie on my behalf." He wiped his lips and sipped the coffee again. "I'm leaving now to go check on them. Thanks again for breakfast."

Ethan rose after him and walked him outside the house. As the cool morning air swept across the beautiful grounds to their eyes, it's only then that the reality of their lives once again dawned on them. They were still two young men in a homophobic society, falling in love and forced to keep it under wraps outside of their closed spaces. He realized with a stabbing ache, that he couldn't kiss him off as he left and Brian too spoke his fears in silence to Ethan.

They however, did not see Maria's face behind the laced kitchen window curtains, as she rinsed the mugs and dishes. She looked on as they stood there, hands held as they spoke briefly, hugged each other intimately and then Brian left. Ethan sat back on the front steps a while watching him leave with a resigned, somber look on his handsome face, while Maria struck a satisfied smile on hers. *They have finally found each other*, she quietly thought to herself.

Rose's screams filled Brian's ears from outside their compound and he half-limped towards their house. On getting to the small free portion inside the walls they called a lawn, he was relieved to see Alice playing with his sister. She wasn't in danger after all; he exhaled and smiled at them. Alice had always been good to Rosie and perhaps, Brian thought, that his relationship to her, whatever it had been, had lasted this long because of the love they shared for his sister. It was a shared interest in her well-being as a sister to Brian and the sister that Alice never had but always wanted. Alice rose to hug Brian as Rose displayed blank spaces in her upper jaw with her warm smile.

"I thought you would come back. You didn't say you're staying overnight", Alice started.

"I'm sorry, I should've told you when I got there." His attention was all over the place, "are mum and dad home?"

"Yeah, its Saturday today!" she queried his face like she always did, detective style. "They're inside. What's up handsome, everything alright? Is Ethan fine?" She seemed genuine now.

"Yeah he's good. Hey, thanks for watching Rose for me. I owe you." he hugged her again.

"No need to thank me, you know I'd do anything for you. And I love you, so...plus Rose and I are best friends now, right Rosie?" she squatted down to pinch Rose's cheeks playfully.

Brian smiled at his sister again and walked into the house to the sweet aroma of homemade *mandazi*. His mother was in the kitchen, singing her morning hymns as Mr. Musembi's hammer was beating on something in the rear of their medium-sized house—a typical Saturday. Walking into the kitchen, Mrs. Musembi's tunes hit a halt as she turned around, a pout on her pretty face, to look at her son. Brian shrieked.

"Where have you been, Brian? Don't tell me you went to those people's house again!" She wasn't jolly anymore.

"Mum, I'm sorry. I didn't think I would stay long, but when it got so late, I decided to stay in." he was biting his lips now like he always did when he got nervous.

"So you decided to just leave your sister and go?"

"I asked Alice to watch Rose for me."

"Alice *alisema* you were injured yesterday, what happened, huh? And instead of staying here and take care of the injury, you went to see your friend. I have told you so many times to leave that boy and his family alone! What is so interesting about him anyway? He only causes you problems." he remained silent and took a seat at the kitchen table. "Do you remember last year, remember what happened?"

She was referring to a cold day in July, during the mid-term break, when Brian had spent the whole day with Ethan and a few of their friends at Ethan's house. Later, their friends had left one by one,

until Brian was the only one left. The crush was still there, he believed, and it was largely the reason he had wanted to stay a little bit longer, but when the Wamaris returned to their castle, Brian decided to go home. It was a few minutes past nine in the night, but being Brian, he declined an offer from Mr. Wamari for his chauffeur to drive him home. On his way, in a darkly lit portion just a few minutes after leaving Lishoni Estate, three men accosted and attacked him. He was only lucky that he didn't have much on him, except a few hundreds and his phone which they took. He sustained a head injury for which he got stitches.

The memory of that night now, oddly enough, made Brian smile to himself. He had the scars to show for the love he bore for Ethan, he quietly thought. He recalled how Ethan had blamed himself for letting him leave alone in the night, but as it were then, none would really admit what exactly they felt for each other. *We've come far*, he thought.

His mother's voice slowly faded in like a waking sound from a dream and he realized he was daydreaming. "I'm speaking to you, and you're just smiling!" She exclaimed.

"Sorry mum, I won't stay late again, I promise."

"Don't make me angry again, Brian. And you need to talk to your father. There's something he wants to discuss."

"Okay, thanks mum," he said and rose to leave.

"Where do you think you're going? You talk to him after you eat." She wasn't in the mood to negotiate and Brian knew better than to infuriate her with an excuse. He crept back into the chair and savored his next breakfast.

Mr. and Mrs. Wamari arrived at their home right before dark and Ethan came down to greet them. As always, they came bearing gifts from wherever they were this time around and as always, he smiled and thanked them. Mr. Wamari brought him his coveted

limited edition headphones, while his mother brought him an array of designer clothes and shoes whose price tags Ethan felt guilty looking at. They were lovely gifts.

"How are you doing son?" his father asked. He had the pristine look of a cultured, privileged man and the airs of an entitled upbringing. "Is Maria treating my boy fine?"

"I'm fine dad, and Maria is always amazing as you know. How was the conference?" he always asked. It was the cultured thing to do.

"It went well. Your mother and I...", he gestured towards Mrs. Wamari who was returning from the kitchen with a glass of orange juice in her hand, "...we have been nominated for an award due to our collective efforts in the sensitization of rural populations, on issues of maternal and reproductive health through our foundation." He smiled broadly.

Mr. Wamari looked handsome as he always did. He wore one of his bespoke three-piece suits and the refinement in his look was one thing that Ethan was deeply proud of in his father—he knew how to look like a gentleman.

"Congratulations dad, and you too mum." They seemed thoroughly impressed with themselves. "You two have worked so hard, you deserve it."

"Come here," his mother called to where she was sited across the wide living room and opened her arms wide to embrace her son. Ethan snuggled into what he missed much of in his upbringing—the comfort of his own mother and the knowledge of her care and concern.

"You look so skinny!" she held his head in her slender hands and cocked her head back an inch to scan her prized jewel closely. "Doesn't he look skinny, Gerald?"

Gerald Wamari laughed and said: "he's still growing up dear. And there's enough food here to feed a mob. He looks fine to me." They all burst out laughing and for a moment, Ethan thought he saw a figment of what their family should have been like. He cherished the moment, before the phones started beeping and medical jargon

started dropping from all corners and quick last minute bookings of a flight here and another there. Maria appeared from the kitchen saying dinner was ready and Mrs. Wamari dragged her son to the dining table, her beautiful white teeth glinting under the chandeliers. It was time to eat.

After Maria's delicacy was gobbled up, she excused herself and left. It was her time to go home. She was always driven to her house by their faithful driver, Mohammed, but as to where she lived, the Wamaris had no time to concern themselves with the details. They only cared that she was in their house at daybreak and did her work as expected.

"Does Maria cook at this time when she gets to her house?" Ethan asked.

"Maybe she does. She's always welcome to eat here before she leaves but I never see her do. She's a very independent woman that one," Mrs. Wamari said.

"Most poor people are proud like that." Mr. Wamari closed the discussion.

With that punch line, Ethan recoiled in his seat and was once more reminded of what his parents were—detached and impersonal, even with their faithful domestic worker of many years, who Ethan considered as family. They were now winding down the evening with an expensive bottle of wine in the living room, watching a news debate on the rising cases of anti-gay laws being drafted and passed in countries across Africa. Uganda was lately the subject of discussion around the world following the inhumane treatment accorded to gays and lesbians. Ethan quietly sipped his juice on one of the many sofas by the corner as he texted Brian on his phone.

The debate was apparently a task, even for the news anchor and the panelists. The level of discomfort in the news studio was visible as they talked on and on about why the *gay agenda*—as it had come to be referred to—in Africa was a lost cause, and how there are other *more important and urgent things* to shift attention to, than the homophobia resulting in the deaths of innocent people.

"These people have suffered enough, I think." Said Mrs. Wamari as she swirled the wine in her glass.

"That may be so, but Africa is yet to relinquish its hold on beliefs and taboos created to suit our own fears of what even our ancestors did not understand, or want to acknowledge." Ethan's father started. "It is the same fears that lead to the murder of twins in some communities and high numbers of maternal deaths due to birthing complications, because they do not believe in modern childbirth in hospitals."

"It's sad to be the odd one out in such a way, don't you think, Ethan?" she asked.

Ethan had been carefully following the debate, his heart heavy with the persecution of people like himself in other countries around the world, while giving ear to his parents' views on the matter.

"I bet anyone would feel bad to be the odd one out mum, but then again, everyone is odd in their own little way I guess." He spoke with a falling tone.

"Truth is, no one really cares when it's not their son or daughter or family member, even for those drafting these laws." Mr. Wamari scoffed and took a long sip at his wine, savoring each drop of it.

"Would you care?" Ethan suddenly asked. The words seemed to have won the struggle his mouth had relentlessly put up against them, pushed his lips open and slipped out. He wondered why or how he had asked that. His parents paused their drinking, sat up and gave him a hard look.

"Care that someone is gay?" It was his father, "why would you ask that?"

"Nothing really, just asking. You said many people don't care if it's not their son or daughter or family." He sized them up then went on, "What if it were you, would you care?"

"Why are you asking this?" Mrs. Wamari's interest was exponentially growing. Their son had always been an intellectual who questioned everything, but it seemed to her, that this was far more important to Ethan.

"I'm not asking in a bad way mum, just curious to hear your views on the matter."

"Of course we would care. Were it my son, I would have to enlist him for therapy so that he unlearns the behavior. Homosexuality is simply a behavioral abnormality that with the right treatment, I believe can be unlearned. Nothing worth stoning people for. Crack open any well researched medical journal and you'll see that," his father said and laughed. Mrs. Wamari sighed her head in agreement, or something.

Ethan felt his face flush with hot spasms. He couldn't believe what his ears were picking up. How could such learned medical professionals be so ignorant of such a matter? He had always thought that homophobia was the reserve of a past generation of closed minded people who chose to label their fears and the things that they didn't understand as taboos and immoral abominations, instead of trying to understand them. Obviously, he was wrong.

"But how can you say that, dad. You guys are doctors. If anyone were to understand this, I would like to think its people like you and mum. I don't think they're sick or crazy or taught to be who they are!" his tone was rising now. "It's not fair to kill people and hate them because of how they're born!"

"Ethan!" his mother shouted. "Lower your voice. I will not have my son shouting the roof down at night."

"It seems you strongly feel about this topic, Ethan. Are there gay people that you know of? See son, it's a developmental gene abnormality during the formation of a baby in its mother's womb that makes the child more susceptible to be swayed in its decision making abilities as a person. Other corrupt people take advantage of that weakness in such people to teach them how to be gay. Ask your mother, she's a reproductive health expert. I'm sorry Ethan, but no one is actually born gay. That's just the truth of it."

"Are you suggesting that gay people are abnormal then?" Ethan was infuriated.

"Not quite, but you know, as a scientist, it's hard to overlook an anomaly, right?" Mr. Wamari said and swallowed another gulp of his wine.

"And if you know anyone who is gay or lesbian, just tell them to seek therapy. We wouldn't want your friends being stoned for something that's not their fault son." His mother finished the conversation.

Ethan's face was ripe with an unfathomable rage and a shame for his parents. He didn't know that his very own mother and father were elite bigots and homophobes. He had contemplated coming out to them, hoping that their educated approach to the matter would ease the difficulty of it, but now, all signs read *NO!*

At the Musembis house, Brian's parents had abruptly changed the channel when the debate begun and his father had said something about profanities and obscene behaviors being slapped on morally upright people's faces. Brian said nothing, but only felt his heart sink lower. His parents were religious folks who had morals to protect, tithes to pay, and nothing about men and women loving their same sex to listen to.

"Such nonsense is what is destroying the young people in this country; especially our children, people like Brian and the rest of them. These people need to be stopped." Mr. Musembi said. There was a vehemence about his face as he dropped the words. Brian's mother simply shook her head and agreed. She remained quiet.

After their almost violent exchange, Ethan's parents had said good night, climbed up the stairs to their bedroom and told him not to stay up late. He laid back on the sofa and muted the television. He needed a moment to think. He needed time to let the last few minutes

settle and for him to regain focus on something that made him happy. He thought of his dear Brian. Had they seen the same debate? Had his parents demonstrated their true mean selves to him too? Had Brian tried to defend himself, defended them? He wondered what would happen if it ever came to a life or death situation for them like the many men and women in Uganda and other such countries, where loving someone was a crime. After the exchange they had earlier, he already knew that his parents would not support him or his boyfriend, and that much of the society was fine with creating religious and *moral* justifications for humiliating, banishing, torturing and even taking the life of any of them. *Life isn't unfair*, he thought, *some people are just evil*. He pulled out his phone and started typing again. He wanted to check on him.

The muted faces of debaters on television was a striking semblance to how he felt at the moment—a voiceless puppet for the amusement of a discriminative majority with a desire to cleanse their own wayward *morals*, which interestingly, they all held dear. His world, their world, was one where gay people were easy targets for politicians in need of a scapegoat from their own dismal performances in office by playing the morality card on their electorate. It was a cheap maneuver and he hated them for it, but it was all he could do at the moment. He said goodnight to Brian and sent a million emoticons on his phone, then dragged his body upstairs to sleep.

He was walking past his parents' room when the muffled mention of his name from behind the ornate doors of the master bedroom caught his attention and he halted his steps in the hallway.

"...I told you this would happen, didn't I?" shouted Mr. Wamari through his teeth. "Did you hear his arguments? You should have kept him from that good for nothing boy long ago."

"Oh don't be self-righteous with me Gerald, we both knew he was different since he was born. Maybe that boy brought it out, but for heaven's sake, don't blame this on me."

Silence.

"So what do we do now? We can't have our son, our only child being gay!" She lowered her voice a tone then went on, "We don't know for sure, but we should call Dr. Punjab just in case, he'll know how to treat him. We still have a chance. He's still young."

"I will not have any son of mine being the talk of the town. I need a glass of water!" shouted Mr. Wamari and Ethan heard his footsteps advance in his direction towards the door. He ran into his room, half creeping and shut the door quietly. Mr. Wamari proceeded to the kitchen downstairs.

The night seemed to last an eternity. Ethan tossed and turned in his bed until he heard the first chirp of an early bird from the branches leaning on his bedroom window. He had stayed awake since he got into his warm bed last night, pondering over and over, the conversation he had just overheard and which he was still wishing he hadn't. The thoughts of Brian had offered him a little comfort of the mind but still, they didn't alter the fact that he had learned of his parents' ignorant fears of him and their plans to try and remove the gay out of him. *What kinds of parents would do that to their child?* Ethan wondered to himself as he watched the sky turn hues of color from gray to purplish and now, flame orange. It appeared to be a beautiful dawn and he promised to not let negative thoughts invade his mind. It was time for a run.

Alice wasn't much of a fitness lover, but that morning, she felt a need to shed off some of the weight that had been burdening her mind. She thought the early jog was a good way to let off some steam. Her mother had for some time now been separated from her father and she couldn't be happier. She had hoped through most of her life for the hypocritical mess of a father to clean up his act and leave them

alone but he had stayed on, until when she couldn't handle the abuse and the slapping of her dear mother by a drunk, adulterous man who called himself her father. He loved the bottle and beating them up. He also loved sneaking into her room at night when her mother was beaten and hurting alone and groping her. And so her innocence had chipped away one bit at a time, in silence as it were, but the rebellion grew steadily and firmly, until one day when she decided enough was enough. He had to leave.

Her ponytail of synthetic braids swung left to right and left again as she ran the track around the estate and through the park. On her mind was the brilliant picture of Brian and her in the middle of nowhere, her hands in his and blushing to his stupid jokes. To her, he was the only one that treated her like a girl. He was sensitive, and he listened to her endless talk. He was caring and most of all, he had waited all this time to undress her. She was well aware that people mockingly called her *Holy Alice* behind her back and that they thought she was easy and shallow, but over time, she had grown selectively deaf to cheap talk. She had developed a persona and an alter ego. She had learned to give them the Alice they wanted—the one they thought they knew—but all along, the real Alice hid inside her somewhere, content in her shroud of mystery and waiting to be found, until Brian came along. She smiled. He was the only one she wanted, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

She seemed to have appeared to him from the blues and Ethan quickly halted to avoid running into her. He himself was immersed in his fair share of mind boggling thoughts. He swallowed hard and greeted: "good morning Alice."

"Hey Ethan, morning to you too," she bent her head to catch a breath, "haven't seen you in a while."

"Yeah, I've been a bit busy with stuff." He already felt uneasy, and now he had nothing else to say to her.

"Remember Jeri?"

"I think so, wasn't she at my birthday party?"

"Yeah, she still asks about you. I think she likes you or something. So I told her you're single for all I know and...you know, maybe it wouldn't be bad for you guys to know each other." She had that smile on her face. The one a lion has when its prey's death is imminent.

"She seemed nice but I'm not really looking for a boy...girlfriend... I mean girlfriend!" he gasped.

She didn't hear it, and even if she did, she didn't exactly show it.

"It's okay, I'll just tell her you're dating someone else, cool?"

"Yes, that's better."

They stood awhile in silence, each still panting from the jog, then she started again, "I know about you and Brian."

Ethan twitched, literally. "What...what do you mean by Brian and I?"

She came up closer to his face, a stern look on hers, then it faded into a somber look and she continued, "I think Brian has another girlfriend. And since you're his best friend, I thought you might know and you're covering it up for him."

Ethan, relieved, cleared his throat. "I don't think so Alice."

"Are you sure?" she was almost crying now, "I just love him so much...and I can't handle him cheating on me." She wiped her hand across her eyes and Ethan believed her.

"Look, I don't know everything about Brian, but I know he's the most loyal and truthful person I know. As to another girlfriend..." he cleared his throat again, "I haven't any idea. If there's anything to say, I'm sure he'll tell you in time Alice."

Silence.

"Good!" she exclaimed, all happy again. "Because if I find out he's been lying, the other bitch will hope she never messed with me." Her face changed again.

"Sorry Alice, I have to go. It's good seeing you though," Ethan said and quickly ran off. He didn't like the way she pronounced her last words. He kept running.

When he returned back home, Ethan's parents were sited at the dining table with the only audible sounds being the cutting knives and forks as they ate their breakfast. Maria had already come in as her presence was announced by the sound of cutlery and running water in the kitchen. He greeted and proceeded up the stairs to his room.

"Take a shower and come sit with us. We have something to talk to you about," Mr. Wamari called out.

"Okay, I'll be right down."

Brian had decided against running that morning, and instead, he did his body flexes in his room. He was through now, and he couldn't wait to call Ethan. He figured if he'd gone for a run, he would be back home at about that time.

"Hey handsome, good morning!"

"Morning to you too," Ethan laughed, "hey, I was about to call you too. How'd you sleep?"

"After that debate I was sure I'd have a bad night, but then I had good dreams, so...I'd say better than good." Both giggled.

Ethan lowered his voice and peeked at the door to see if someone was coming then went on: "I'm from the shower, just trying to dress up. What did you dream about?"

"Oh man, if I start, I'm afraid if I tell you, you might stop invading my dreams and I don't want that. I need you in them, I need the sweet dreams! Pretty bad though, all that stuff about gay guys being killed." he laughed heartily and Ethan did too.

"I know...Still trying to wrap my head around it but, what can we do from here? You know that I love you Bry, so I'll do you a favor and keep invading your dreams. Just don't bite. Hope I have enough time before that bring that madness over here." Another laugh.

"Maybe you should write about it sometime. You're good with words. Maybe someone will read it and feel the need to do something. Damn it, I wish I was there, I miss you." Brian confessed.

"Yeah, you could help me get dressed. I'll try writing some stuff but I'm no vigilante. I don't think I can do much. When am I seeing you today?"

"Rosie is staying with Aunt Marion this weekend until next week and my parents have their church thing today till late. You can come over and hang with me."

"It's cool, is that going to get you into trouble? I know your dad thinks I'm trouble."

"E, stop that. You're not trouble to me or anyone, okay? You're my boyfriend, that's what matters. Around six, is that cool?"

"Yeah, sure. I love you, I've got to get dressed quickly; dad's calling me downstairs."

"I love you too. See you later."

He lay on his bed for a moment in his soft towel and let the tumescence between his legs soften up. He still couldn't understand how talking to Brian alone could elicit such an intimate physical reaction. Hearing his voice lit him up like a Christmas tree.

In the Musembi house, Brian's mother knocked and walked into her son's room carrying the clean and folded laundry. She had stopped outside the door for a while out of curiosity, to eavesdrop on the conversation on the mention of E—that troublesome Ethan. She couldn't hear Ethan's side of it, but neither could she believe or understand what she heard exactly. What she was sure of however, is that there was an apparent change in her son recently. She smiled and said hello to Brian then walked out. He had caught her attention and she was going to sniff the rat out very soon.

"We have delayed the issue of your going to school far too long. We have made all the plans necessary for your stay in London. School begins in a week, and you are to leave in three days. I wanted to let you know." Mr. Wamari said.

Ethan's mother looked on, with half a worried look on her face and the other half her perfect poker face. Ethan himself stood there motionless, listening but not hearing. He heard it all but his mind was still stuck on the unfathomable idea of leaving their home just now. He couldn't. Not now.

"I'm not going to London, dad." He casually said.

"What are you talking about? What's this nonsense Ethan?" he was visibly angry.

"I said I'm not going. I will study here. The education is as good as any."

His mother thought it's her turn to chip in now: "But Ethan, you can't compare the schools abroad to the ones here. Stop this foolishness. Barely a month ago, you were so excited about going to school there. What has changed?"

"You will do as I said, young man. Get your mind ready!" Gerald cut in again.

"Gerald please, let him talk." Mrs. Wamari pleaded with her husband.

Silence.

"You two are just...I don't understand you half the time! You are my parents for Pete's sake!" Ethan blurted.

"Hey watch your tone young man, this is still my house!" his father commanded.

"For all these years, I have done exactly what you wanted me to do. You kept me away from all my friends, you always chose what I say, what I wear, how I wear it, who I talk to! When is it my turn to decide? I am nineteen years now..."

"...so you think you're too old to be told, is that it?" Gerald cut in again and Mrs. Wamari urged him to silence again.

Ethan went on: "I have friends here dad. Mum...none of you asked me how I feel about just walking out of the life I know here. I have feelings too you know! I'm no longer the sweet Ethan who smiled all the time even when you didn't show up at my birthdays because you were half across the world hunting fame! I am not going anywhere, this is where my life is."

They all went silent for a while. The delicious food on the table played host to a pensive mood laced with angry undertones of years-long disappointments and damaged egos. Maria peeked from the kitchen door down the hall, a napkin on her wet hands and she felt her heart breaking within her. To have such a wonderful son and never once let him know how important he was to you or that you loved him, she thought, was a crime as good as any and her heart reached out to Ethan. To her, the Wamaris were a wonderful family whose only problem was their own misunderstandings of each other. He was standing in front of them as Gerald stood up and left the house calling his wife to their early meeting in central Nairobi.

"We'll talk about this when we come back, okay Ethan?" Mrs. Wamari put her hands on his cold face.

"No mum, we won't. I'm staying."

Without another word, she grabbed her tablet computer, her briefcase and her coat and followed her husband outside, where Mohammed was waiting to drive them out. As the deep growl of their posh vehicle made the last sound off the compound, his cheeks felt hot again. That could have been the one that would break the camel's back.

Maria slowly and cautiously walked up the hallway from the kitchen and delicately sat on the dining chairs. She looked at Ethan with the warmth of a mother to her new born.

"Come sit with me Ethan." She called. He hesitated but did.

"I know why you don't want to leave. I've known for a while now." She started.

Ethan's face quickly grew interested and he sat up facing Maria. She put her soft hands on the sparkling dining table and went on, "I was a little older than you when I got married. I had only the chance to attend basic education. A small school tucked in the middle of bush land and acacia trees. My parents were not rich, but they loved me so much, and unlike other parents who sold off their daughters as early as thirteen to suitors for cattle and a few thousands, mine had the wisdom to know the value of education. It was while I was in my last year of primary school that I met Annie. She was a transfer student from western Kenya and we quickly became friends. She came from Busia. Her parents had been moved to work as teachers in my home area. Our time in school didn't last long before it was over, and by the time the year ended, we both knew that ours was beyond simple friendship. We were in love, and the mess of it all was that she was leaving to another town with her parents where she would proceed to secondary school." She paused to clear her throat. She spoke so calmly and there was a radiance about her brown face that Ethan hadn't seen for years. Ethan listened on, rigid and expectant.

"I begged and pleaded with my father to send me to secondary school too, so I could join Annie, but he said he was sorry, my brothers had to go to secondary school but not me."

"So what happened then? Did you see her again?"

"We wrote each other for some time, but then after a while, the replies stopped coming. Years later, I was married off to a merchant from my town as with traditions and I bore my lovely daughter, Wanja. Her father was a good man who loved us, but I didn't love him; at least not in the way I should have. After two years of marriage, I left him and took my daughter with me to this town where I didn't know anyone. Your parents hired me then and allowed me to stay in the servant quarters until I could pay my own rent." Tears were now forming in her small eyes. "I saw Annie a few years back and she said she never could forget me, that she still loved me, but then there

was little we could do but take what life offered us. We were African women, and we were to behave as such.”

Ethan wiped his eyes too.

“I have practically raised you as my own son since you were an infant. I know that the friendship between you and Brian isn’t just that. You love each other and while saying that in this country and this continent of ours may get you killed, you must know that you’re not the first, and neither are you alone. The only time you barely smiled even as a child is when he came around. Your parents would go off for even a month and only he and I could make you stop brooding. And that smug face you used to make,” she smiled a little and held his cold hands.

“Ethan, I couldn’t be more proud of the man you have grown to be. Life hasn’t dealt you the best hand, but you have fought back hard and that’s why you are here today. I have loved, but we didn’t have the courage to hold on to our love. Excuses are easy to make and live with sometimes, but they cost you in the end. Sometimes they eat at your soul. All Annie and I have now, are the memories and wonders of what life could have been had we made different choices. Your parents may be doctors and elite but still not understand. But son, they are still your parents. If you really don’t want to go to school in London, then explain quietly and speak from your heart. You may not want to disclose your affections with Brian now, but with time I know you will. But whatever you do, follow your heart.”

Ethan shot up, went around the huge table and hugged Maria tightly. She was simply the best. “I’m sorry about you and Annie, I’m surprised I must say, and sorry too. It’s funny, sometimes I thought I’m the only one, or that I’m crazy.”

“You’re not the only ones Ethan. Many people live their lives on a completely different angle than we can see. Regrets riddle marriages and family relationships. Happiness is in loving and being loved in return. You have that already. The world is changing, people are beginning to see what really matters and the foolishness in hate is quickly eroding. It’s a great time to be African Ethan, trust me.”

"Why do you say that? People are being killed Maria, I don't think there's anything good with that." Ethan lamented.

"I say so because change is coming son, and change is inevitable. You'll see. And those who have perished shall remain fondly remembered by all those who loved them. I know Annie still loves me, and I love her still, but our time to walk into the sunset may have gone. You have a chance to be happy. Just know that I support you all the way." She was laughing now, "come on and come help me grate the carrots."

Ethan smiled and followed her to the kitchen. The day felt much newer and the strength he had lost earlier seemed to have flooded his body again. He still couldn't believe Maria's story.

At nightfall in the Musembi house, Brian sat opposite his boyfriend. They sat on their legs as Ethan narrated Maria's story to him. He couldn't believe it too.

"I was so sure she knew something this morning when we woke up, like she was hiding something." Ethan said. "I still can't believe all she's been through. I thought we are the only ones."

Brian held his hands, "we are never alone, E."

Ethan also told him of the encounter with Alice that morning and her revenge-seeking attitude. He couldn't fathom what a scorned woman may do and especially if that woman was Alice.

"Come on, let's go outside, the moon is out tonight. Stop stressing yourself. Enjoy the now." Brian said and they walked out to the bright skies above. There were a few stars studding the heavens and they sat closely, Brian's head wrapped in Ethan's arms on the small bench on the porch.

"I think we would make a great family, don't you think?" Brian joked.

"I think so too, but stolen moments barely make a happy home. You've got to go all in." Ethan laughed.

"Hmm...marriage?" Ethan joked.

"Whatever! As long as I've got you, I'm good. One day soon, all of this hide and creep-around stuff for us will be history and we'll have a chance to love openly like all other people do. I'm much happier with you around." Brian popped another piece of the crisps into Ethan's mouth.

"I feel you on that one, though whether it's dark or bright, this dude still loves you, you know." More giggles floated off and Brian pulled closer to Ethan. "By the way, I told my parents that I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving you."

"E, you can't stay because of me. You need a good education." Brian urged him.

"You also need a good education. And a good love. And a good boyfriend. And a good life." He kissed him. "I know you will still love me even if I'm gone, but this is my choice. When you love someone, you free them to choose and you have done that. I choose you. I choose to stay."

Brian only said, "I love you so much!" and held on closer to Ethan. And they sat there for a while telling jokes and Ethan pinching Brian's ear and Brian kissing him back as the warm air bundled them in an intimacy that only they and the stars of heaven could understand. It was love and each of them felt the shelter they found in each other.

Chapter Five

DR. PUNJAB was a tall, thin man with less hair on his eyebrows than most Indians Ethan had seen before. Ethan had attended the best schools since pre-school and there, he had interacted with people of all races; at least those whose parents could afford to pay huge amounts of money for a world class education. His accent was lighter though, unlike most Indians he'd known, that perhaps he owed this to his time at Harvard University, as evidenced by the three well framed degree certificates on the walls of his plush office, behind his comfortable, long back chair. He swiveled around and gave Ethan a shrewd warm smile.

"Hello Ethan, I am doctor Punjab. Please have a seat." He said and gestured him to the sofa across the room.

Ethan only smiled slightly and took a seat on the spongy sofa opposite the doctor's glass desk. There was an aura about the place that didn't quite irritate or infuriate him, as it did intrigue him. *How does a person dedicate their life to listening to other people's problems, or answering the age old questions that flood every person's mind? How does one stomach sitting for hours on end, listening and trying to remove the baggage that downs humanity?* He didn't like the profession around mental health, and more and more, he instantly felt uncomfortable with Dr. Punjab. Whether it was the chair, or his khaki pants and sweater that are almost synonymous with all psychologists, or the extreme extents to which he went to ensure that his office looked top notch and meticulous; he simply didn't like him.

"Would you like something to drink?" the doctor asked. He had now settled into a smaller chair in front of his desk, closer to Ethan, his pen and notebook in hand.

"No, but thank you. I won't be staying long." Ethan spoke for the first time.

"So, tell me Ethan, why did you come today?"

"I don't know...because my parents insisted that I do?"

"And do you know why they asked you to come?" he had now started scribbling something on the little book, and Ethan felt uneasy.

"Am not sure." He lied.

"If I asked you to guess the reason, what would it be?" the doctor pried on

"Look, I don't like guesswork, much less from a self-proclaimed panacea to mental health and human problems." Ethan blurted out his contempt.

The good doctor raised his head and stared at Ethan, but his face was blank and expressionless. He didn't say a word. After a moment, he went on with the scribbling as Ethan played with his manicured fingers.

"Ethan, if I asked you to describe your feelings as at this moment, what would you say? Are you angry, disappointed, happy; maybe sad?

Ethan laughed. He laughed hard and loud then stopped abruptly and picked a tissue from the glass-top coffee table to wipe his teary eyes. "I'm great doctor. Am better than ever."

They both kept quiet for a moment before the doctor spoke again. "I see your nails are well manicured. Would you say you lay importance on looking presentable or fashionable, maybe even attractive?

"Attractive to what? Ethan asked. He seemed attentive now.

"You know...maybe other people, to your friends." Dr. Punjab drilled on

"I have few friends and the ones I have do not need my impression."

"So you could say it's out of what, that you highly polish your nails?"

"Maybe I should also ask you, why it is that you wear khakis. Is there a real question here, or what are you fishing for mister!?" Ethan was flaring once more. *How does he have the capacity to unravel the worst in people?* He wondered to himself. "How much do you charge my parents for this session?"

"My fees are not the question here Ethan. You are dodging my questions to you."

"So this is what you do? Invite people to your office to ask them a bunch of stupid questions about why they polish their nails? If I should ask you doctor, how is my appearance of importance to this session? This isn't why my parents asked me to come here. Am sure of that."

"But just a while ago, you told me you didn't know why they sent you here, now you confess to know what reasons weren't, meaning you know the reasons why. Are you a liar, Ethan?"

"I'm done with you, am leaving, this was a useless waste of my time." Ethan arose to leave. He grabbed his jumper and started for the door when the good doctor, who by now hadn't shown any signs of aggression or impatience, called his name again.

"How is your friend Brian doing?"

Ethan froze, then slowly rotated his body like an old earth mover and sat back on the sofa. "How do you know Brian? What is it to you how he's doing? And why do you care about Brian anyway?" he spoke them out like a lieutenant commanding his army.

"You seem agitated." Dr. Punjab had a sly smile on his deep brown face now. "But just so you know, I'm not a stalker, I enquired a little about you from your parents before you came and that's how I know he's a dear friend of yours. That, plus you mentioned earlier that you have few friends." He spoke calmly, as if he knew a game they were playing and he had all the rules and Ethan had no idea of the game's existence, his part in it or the rules to play by. Ethan wanted so dearly to strangle the life out of the man.

"What do you want to know? What do you want from me, so I don't ever have to come back here?" Ethan was visibly angry now and Dr. Punjab rose from his seat.

"I will ask Lisa, my assistant to bring you a Cola. You need to relax Ethan, you can lay on the couch if you like."

"I don't take carbonated drinks. I'd like some water."

"Well, even better," said the doctor and he pressed a button on his desk phone instructing Lisa to fetch his patient some water, then he went on, "it's very nice that you are careful of your health, many young people these days don't care much."

"I am Ethan, so I don't know of other people." He was now sitting at the corner with his shoulders slouched and his hands had grown much colder than they usually did.

"Being healthy and maintaining it at your age is very important. Soon, you will get married and bear children, presumably." He paused a while then went on, "the healthier you are, the better chance your children will have at getting your best qualities."

The doctor waited for a rejoinder to that, but Ethan remained mute and he didn't grab the doctor's undertones immediately as he chewed on the thoughts of Brian that were now crawling in his mind. He only retraced Dr. Punjab's last comments when he saw him start scribbling again.

Lisa brought in the water. She was a typical assistant—wary of her employer and dutifully courteous in her manner with the clients. Ethan thanked her, picked up the glass, took a sip and put it back on the table. The fingerprints from his sweaty palms were visible on the impeccably clean tumbler and the doctor wrote something down.

"Are you nervous, Ethan?" he asked.

"Why do you ask? Although that seems to be your work, asking the obvious things." Ethan retorted.

"The markings on the glass, when do your palms sweat? Is it sometimes or always?"

Ethan decided that the only way to deal with the insufferable doctor was to go with it and ride along to his annoyance. He would answer for the sake of passing time, impress his parents and avoid crashing the glass on the doctor's head. He wondered where Brian was at the moment.

"I sweat when am scared or nervous sometimes."

"Okay. What is making you nervous or scared today?"

"I'm not sure, maybe you are." He drank another sip and held the glass on his laps this time. He wore a pair of shorts and beautiful rubber shoes. His hands were pale blue around the nails and his wristwatch seemed to be wearing his wrist instead. He avoided eye contact with the doctor, but only he knew the reason why.

Doctor Punjab smiled for the first time since Ethan came in and he blinked his eyes in a manner suggesting a modest man who rarely appreciated compliments or flattery, however sarcastically or figuratively it was offered.

The silence went on some more and Ethan felt a calming sense over his body as the conversation dwindled into silence. Dr. Punjab had his eyes on Ethan and tried as best as he could to decipher the young man's mind. He had seen many patients, most in their teen years who had the usual type of issues like drug abuse and suicidal tendencies brought to his office, but Ethan struck him as neither. If anything, it was his initial conviction that Ethan was an astute individual, who much like himself, enjoyed keeping his thoughts to himself. He was obviously intelligent and an introvert.

"You shouldn't assume things about people. Its better when you ask the questions you want answered directly." Ethan spoke without a change in his body, his eyes still on the brilliant view of Nairobi's central business district from the tenth floor.

"Did I assume something?" the doctor asked with apparent interest.

"You said I should be healthy for when I have children. Not everyone may want children, Dr. Punjab."

"Why wouldn't you want children, Ethan?"

"I didn't say I don't want children. You should be more attentive." Ethan smiled now. He would play the doctor's game, but by his own rules.

Dr. Punjab smiled again and paused for a minute. Ethan had now leaned forward, his hands clasped in together and resting his elbows on his laps as he curiously explored the doctor's face. He

decided that if Moses wouldn't come to the mountain, the mountain would invade Moses.

"How old are you doctor?" he asked.

"Is that important here?"

"I'm not sure, maybe it is. How old are you?" Ethan pressed on.

"I'm not the patient here Ethan." Dr. Punjab simply answered.

"Neither am I, but still I have to insist. You've asked me so much. Now it's my turn. Don't you agree? We wouldn't want this to turn into a monologue." He was enjoying the session now.

"Okay, I am twenty eight years old." He finally caved. "May I ask why that's important?"

"No. Second question, are you married?"

Realizing that it was easier to catch flies with honey, the doctor decided to play Ethan's game. "No I am not. As you can see, I have no wedding ring on my finger."

"Like I said, I try not to assume." Ethan paused a moment and they faced each other a long while. Then he threw the last one: "are you gay?"

One Week Earlier

After watching the stars with Brian at their house that night, Ethan had decided to leave before Brian's parents returned from their church meeting. They had parted with kisses and the usual to and fro of new love birds parting for even a while. Two days later, Jeri had invited Ethan and Brian to their house in a neighboring estate for her cousin's birthday party and there was promise of enough booze and music for all her guests. A special invite was extended to Ethan by Jeri herself through a text message and the first thing that crossed his mind wasn't the invite but, *who gave her my phone number?*

He had declined to attend and asked Brian if he was going. Out of his need to avoid Alice feeling left out and possibly reproaching him

later, Brian had agreed to make an appearance. He had planned to show up for a few minutes as a courtesy then sneak off for the night and go see Ethan. It would be a welcome surprise.

At the party, Alice wouldn't let go of Brian's arm around the house. The girls giggled and blushed intentionally as the magical Brian Musembi walked by. To them, he was sex on a stick and the only hindrance between them and the painfully handsome guy was Holy Alice. So they bad-mouthed her after smiling at her and justified the sneering with the usual gossip of her shallowness. The loud music and the shameless stares from hypnotized girls and jealous lads made Brian uncomfortable and he whispered to Alice if they could sneak out and sit in the backyard where only a few of the party animals were enjoying their time.

"I have a better idea, come with me," Alice shouted in his ear amid the loud music and dragged Brian upstairs.

"Where are we going, Alice?" Brian kept asking.

"Just chill babe, we are not doing anything wrong." She smiled, took another sip of her drink and kept him climbing until they came to the last bedroom down the corridor.

Brian stood by the door as Alice—drink in hand—sat on the bed and smiled suggestively at him. She had a certain glow about her cheeks and only then did it occur to Brian what her intentions were. He stepped back and started leaving.

"Where are you going? Come on Brian!" she called and ran after him.

He stopped and turned around. The boom of sound in the living room downstairs was now audible and she came up close to his ears, her hand on his hard stomach and tried to speak as moderately as she could: "just come back. I just wanted us to talk a little, that's all. What did you think I was up to?"

"I don't know, Alice. It seemed to me like you had other ideas. I just came to hang out, that's all." Brian said and straightened his face.

"I know that babe, what ideas do I have?" she smiled at him and he couldn't avoid smiling back, "maybe you're the one with ideas." They walked back into the room.

The lights had been lowered and the sound of the music was minimal from up there. She asked him to sit beside her on the bed and she stretched herself out on her back so that her perky breasts pushed at her low-cut tee-shirt. Brian sat with his hands between his legs and tried not to look at Alice lest she misreads his stares.

"So what's up Alice, are you sure you don't want me to take you home, you seem like you've drunk a bit too much."

"Just chill...why are you always in a hurry for everything? Is it because I am not good enough for you?" She sounded like she was about to cry and Brian suddenly felt guilty.

"Of course not Alice, look...you're by far the prettiest girl here, that's the truth. And I am not in a hurry, I was just being worried for you." He was trending on egg shells and it felt like their surfaces were beginning to crack.

"Sometimes I feel like you remind me of my dad. Always there but never really there." She said and let out a slight burp.

"Sit up, you might vomit and you could choke on it, it's dangerous. You drunk too much." He held her up and she stared right into his eyes and kissed him deeply.

"Brian struggled to withdraw from her hold but she couldn't let up. She pulled him onto her and laid back on the bed panting. Before he knew it, she was grabbing his shirt off, pulling his warm hands all over the inside of her shirt and between her burning legs, struggling to undo his trousers, grabbing him between his strong thighs, and all this without letting a single kiss on those lips go to waste. She was possessed and Brian had no idea how to exorcise her demons.

"Alice, wait..."

"Just shut up and do it Brian!" She growled, her eyes still closed and her legs now strapped on his back—he wasn't going anywhere.

"I have a condom...here!" She pulled a pack of condoms from the bed side drawer with her one free hand as the other held her

dream man by the neck, with his face buried in her chest. She waved them in his face and asked him to get rid of the trousers while she removed the rest of her clothes; at least the ones that were still intact. Brian felt a mixed rush of emotions all over his face and fearing what *this* Alice might do, he obediently cut off the condom's wrapper.

Ethan had paced back and forth in his room that night in a dilemma of whether or not to attend the party. He was beginning to feel lonely in the house with only his parents and no Maria to have stupid conversations with. He didn't relish the company of his elite parents as much; and much less with their recent display of bigotry and the conversation he had overheard.

He finally decided to go look around and probably get another chance to speak to Brian. The night was still young anyway and Jeri's house was only a few minutes away; besides, Jeri came to his party and she had been nice to him. Climbing down the stairs, his father dropped his face an inch and peeped at him from above the frame of his glasses, while his mother lifted her head from the tablet computer and they both silently stared at him like he was a messenger of the gods.

"Hey, I want to go out to Jeri's party for a while. She had invited me earlier and I got a bit late finishing up a book I've been reading." He spoke with his hands clutched tightly behind his back and licking his lips more than usual.

Mr. Wamari was the first to speak. "Aren't those pants too tight for you?"

"Gerald, let the poor boy go and have some fun. But no alcohol young man, clear?" his mother rescued him this time. He had no response to his question.

"Yes, thanks mum. I'll be back soon."

"Do you want Mohammed to take you?" she asked.

"No need, I'll be alright, it's just close by." He smiled.

"Take to the Volkswagen then. Your father still hasn't paid for your car's repair. Drive safe!"

"Okay, thanks again mum.

When he was out of earshot distance, Gerald turned his head to his wife and visited upon her a suspicious look.

"What?" she enquired.

"Nothing." He shrugged and continued sipping his wine.

When he got to Jeri's house, the liveliness about the place aroused his senses and he actually felt like his spirits had been lifted. He wore a beautiful leather jacket, a pair of jeans and a pair of sneakers that his mother had bought him a year ago. It was Jeri who saw him first as he entered the house and she jubilantly scurried to him with a drink. The cheapness of the alcohol was well noticeable from a mile, but out of the need to please his host, Ethan smiled and said: "thank you, Jeri."

"Oh, so you remember my name!" she exclaimed.

"Of course I do. You're the only one who said happy birthday to me at my party and actually meant it. Well, the second one." He laughed, sipped on the alcohol and immediately wanted to spit it out.

"I'm sorry I mentioned you to Alice, I didn't mean to be creepy or anything. She can be such a big mouth sometimes." She said apologetically.

Ethan found her one of the most genuine people he'd ever known, after Brian. "It's okay Jeri, you did nothing wrong."

She gestured him to a seat on the big sofa directly facing the big plasma TV. "We can sit here."

Bernice and her circle of groupies immediately, and expectedly, drew their made up faces together and started whispering to each other and throwing knowing looks at Ethan and Jeri. Ethan felt their eyes biting off his very skin, but he was not about to let a bunch of beautiful, yet nosy girls, spoil his night.

"Don't mind them," Jeri said. "They are like the wind. Everywhere but never really anywhere."

Ethan was surprised at her rather philosophical reduction of the girls and he smiled at her. "You are so cool to hang with!" Jeri shied away from his face and the girls bent their heads together again. One of them texted her: *hey bff, new bf ☺?* She laughed it off and made faces at her friends.

"Have you seen Brian around here?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah, I actually saw him earlier with Alice."

"Alice!?" he almost shouted. "Um...where is he now?"

Jeri noticed the change of tone and gazed at him for a while before pointing upstairs. "I think they went upstairs."

"Who else is there?" he asked.

"I don't know for sure. My cousin I guess. She's saying thanks to her friends for coming to the party."

Without another word, Ethan had climbed the stairs in a flight pausing momentarily in the corridor to avoid creating attention. He quietly unlocked the door to the last room and he suddenly felt his knees turn to jelly. They were spooning in the bed, under the covers and damn it, Brian seemed comfortable holding her. Before Alice—who was now softly speaking to Brian—could see him, he left the door ajar and ran downstairs. Only Brian had seen him. Ethan quickly thanked Jeri on his way out and ran for the car.

On reaching the door, his shirt halfway buttoned, Brian only saw the tail lights of the lavish Volkswagen sedan as Ethan exited the compound. He knew he had blown it all, and all because of Alice. He sat on the verandah outside and cursed the moon.

Alice dressed up in a rush and ran downstairs.

"What happened Jeri, where did Brian go?" she asked.

"Ethan came up there looking for him, then he came running down looking angry and Brian followed him outside half naked. What happened there, Alice?" Jeri was baffled. Everyone was staring now.

Alice was smiling. Jeri thought she was crazy and she was afraid to ask her.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked again.

"You wouldn't understand Jeri, but I think I just found the other bitch!" she bit her lower lip and ran back upstairs.

On getting home, Ethan hurled the car keys on the sofa, lunged for the bottle of wine on the table and took a whole swig at it then climbed upstairs. His parents, dumbfounded, speechlessly marveled at the being in front of them and wondered to themselves what had happened to their son, who only barely an hour ago had been smiling out of the house. A moment later, before the shock had yet settled, they heard a crack in his bedroom and they ran upstairs.

"Ethan! Son, are you alright?" Mrs. Wamari asked worriedly.

"Go away! I don't want to talk to anyone."

"Ethan...talk to us. Whatever it is, we are your parents, and we can fix it." Mr. Wamari pleaded with his son through the door.

"What happened?" his mother queried him further.

"Go away. You guys think you can fix everything? Guess what, you can't fix me. I don't need you to fix me, because I don't need fixing." He sounded like he was crying. Mr. Wamari held his wife by the shoulder and felt her pain. He had been a bit too hard on the boy lately and he felt guilty and responsible for their son's current state. Although he had no idea what happened.

"The lights inside the room went out and they realized there was nothing they could do now. "We are here for you Ethan, if you want to talk." His mother said and reluctantly walked away with her husband.

In the morning, Maria walked into a somber house and something informed her that something bad had happened. The TV was still on, a half empty bottle of a 1990 wine was sitting solemnly on the table and the Wamaris were snoring on the sofas. Mr. Wamari was the first to hear the door open and he rose up quickly followed by the Mrs.

"Baba Ethan, *habari ya leo (how are you today)*?" She shockingly scanned them from head to toe. "Everything okay here?"

"Yes Maria, we just fell asleep watching a program on TV. Nothing to worry about." Gerald answered quickly, but his wife opted to spill the beans instead. She ran into Maria's chest and said: "He's gone crazy Maria. My dear son just snapped!"

"What?!!" Maria exclaimed.

"It's not as bad as she makes it sound, trust me, Ethan is fine. Really." Gerald interrupted again.

"What happened, where is he?"

"You talk to him. He listens to you Maria, I am sure he will tell you what the problem is. He just went to a party for a few minutes yesterday, then ran back here screaming and drank the wine Maria...he drank the wine! I didn't even know he drinks!" She was hysterical, actively shaking Maria and nudging her more and more to attention. It would seem as if someone had died and only she had the secret why. Maria did the sign of the cross on her chest and said: "I'll go see him, if it's okay with you."

"Go then!" she screamed.

"Go on Maria." Mr. Wamari said and held his wife. "He's fine, Janet. Just relax, he's a grown man now, he can surely handle himself."

"Aren't you curious to know what happened to our son?" she crept back and forth on the impressive rugs until her husband made her sit down.

"Of course I do. Maria will handle it, she always knows how." He simply said and exhaled deeply.

"Ethan, open up please. It's just me, Maria." She knocked on his door.

After a minute, she heard the shuffling of feet approach the door and she waved at Mrs. Wamari who was now peeping down the hall to go back or else Ethan would recede her invitation. She walked

into his spacious room and gasped at the mess it was. Broken pieces of what used to be his phone lay all over the carpet. The closet was open and half of his clothes lay on the floor. He was still wearing his clothes from yesterday and his feet were still buried in socks. She didn't speak a word, but only held his hand and sat by his side on the couch at the feet of his bed.

After the silence had lasted about five minutes, Ethan started talking. He was staring blankly at nothing in particular—a trance. "I saw him Mama Wanja. I saw him with her. It wasn't love Mama Wanja. You were wrong. And I was stupid." Then he went silent again.

"I knew this has something to do with..." she stuck her neck out to see if anyone was listening in the hallway, "I knew it had something to do with Brian. What happened Ethan?" She asked.

"He likes her and he cheated. That all. I'm fine now Maria, you can go away. I want to be alone." He stood up and a seriousness engulfed his face. Maria felt the weight of his sadness weighing him down and her with him. She hurt deeply and felt sorry for Ethan. Trying to say a few words of comfort to the young man would have been the appropriate thing to do, but having known Ethan for as long as she did, she decided against it and gave him his space. She patted his shoulder and silently walked out.

"What did he say? Did he tell you what's going on?" They ambushed her at the entrance to the living room.

"Your son is fine. He is just having a hard time with some things, Mr. Wamari." She said impatiently, wanting to get to her handbag.

"What things, tell us!" They accosted her again.

"It would be best for you as his parents to let it sink in and when he's ready, he will talk to you. But if you badger him at this point, you may not like where this goes." Those were her last words on that. She had grabbed her handbag and headed for the kitchen. Soon, the smell of bacon and eggs sagged around the house and the Wamaris decided to heed to her advice. She was Maria after all—she knew things.

Maria hoped desperately as she punched the dials on her cell phone, that the number was correct even as her attention was split between dialing and watching the hallway to the kitchen. She wouldn't want the Wamaris, who had decided to cancel their work day today so as to take good care of their son, to catch a whiff of what she was about to do. Soon, the phone was calling and she held her breath.

"Hello," the voice on the other end answered. "Who is this?"

"Hello there, I am sorry to bother you, this is Maria from the Wamari house. I'm calling for Brian." She spoke cautiously. She was aware of the tensions that lived between the Wamaris and 'the others'.

"Why do you need to talk to Brian? I don't want my son to have anything to do with that house anymore. All you people ever give him is trouble!"

Brian walked in quickly on the mention of his name and asked who was on the line. "She says her name is Maria, from Ethan's house. Is she the same Maria that used to work there some years back?" She asked Brian.

"Yes, mum. Let me speak to her please." He begged her.

"No. I don't want you associating with people from that house. They are all bad news." She was holding the mouthpiece, but Maria could hear all the background conversation in the Musembi house.

"Please mum, I know this is important, otherwise Mama Wanja wouldn't have called."

"Okay then, but make it quick, and tell them not to call here again. I don't need any trouble." She handed him the receiver and walked out to the living room.

"Hello, Mama Wanja, this is Brian," he spoke quickly. "What's going on?"

"Young man, what did you do to my boy, huh? He is all broken up, trashing everything in his room and acting like he's got a case of the crazy around the house." She was speaking vehemently now.

"I can explain Mama Wanja, please. It's not what he told you. It didn't happen that way." Brian was gesturing with his hands as he spoke. He didn't see his mother attentively listening behind the drapes that shielded the rest of the house from the living room.

"Listen, I don't care what happened Brian. You know how much you mean to him. Come over here and fix it! Otherwise, I will have a problem with you!" She finished the conversation and ended the call.

"Tell Ethan that I am so sorry and I will..." he was halfway and realized Maria had disconnected him. That was so unlike Maria and he immediately knew that this one was big and smelly; and it was all on him.

In his room, Ethan had avoided the food and juice that Maria had brought him. He preferred to lay on his king size bed and wallow in his own misery. He had seen them. He had, and it had changed everything. He tried—tried his best—but the image of Brian warmly holding Alice, naked in bed just couldn't escape his mind. The flashes kept recurring like a terrible nightmare, the kind that steals your dreams until you learn to live it; only he had no idea of how to let it sink in, and he was still unsure of whether he indeed wanted to stop remembering. *Love is blind...and dumb too!* He thought. *All this time I have been wearing my rose colored glasses, seeing him only in the light that I wanted to. How foolish was I to believe that I could be so lucky for someone like him to fall in love with someone like me? I did this to myself. I trusted like a fool and congratulations Ethan, here we are, I am the fool all over again.* The pain in his heart spread like a cancer through his body and mind, numbing and jamming his reception to any and all other stimuli around him. His mind was set on a loop of activities lasting less than twenty minutes at Jeri's house and he

fought hard to end the loop. Finally, he covered his face with his palms and screamed.

His parents rushed to the door again and repeated the same routine and he gave the same cold responses, and soon, after confirming he was still alive, they returned to their room and closed the door.

"I think we should call him now Gerald. I am starting to feel scared." Mrs. Wamari confessed.

"Is he back from Spain?"

"I think so. Let me call him." She fetched her phone from the vanity and dialed. "It's ringing, thank God!" Gerald looked on in anticipation.

"Hello doctor Punjab, how are you doing my friend?" She started.

Brian had been sneaked in through the back door by Maria as the Wamaris conducted their lengthy call with Dr. Punjab. He crept through the hallway and didn't knock on Ethan's door. Without bothering to see who it was, Ethan grunted and said, "Go away! I don't need anything."

"E, it's me, Brian." He whispered from behind him on the edge of the bed. Maria gave a stern look at Brian, like a prisoner would to a new cellmate, closed the door and then she left and hurried back to the kitchen.

Ethan jerked upwards and looked at him in disbelief. His face lightened a little with a smile and Brian thought to himself, *at least it's not as bad as Maria made it sound*. At that very moment, Ethan slapped him hard across the face, grabbed him by the neck and pinned him on his bed shaking and banging his head against his pillows while shouting, "How could you!"

"E...E!" Brian struggled to speak from a closed up throat but Ethan wouldn't let him go; not until when he saw him close to

suffocation and he released him, throwing him off the bed onto the carpet by the window side.

"Ethan! What was that?" his parents came rushing in and Brian ducked under the bed before the Wamaris could see him.

"We heard a bang, did you fall or hit yourself?" Mrs. Wamari was almost in tears now. She could see that something had happened to her son and there was nothing she could do to help. His father had only exhaled with each new wave of outburst since the previous night and held his wife closer. He feared touching Ethan, afraid that he might make things worse.

"I said I am fine, mum. I'm fine. If you really want to help me..."

"Anything you want Ethan, anything..." she interrupted him

"If you want to help," he rose from the bed and hugged her mother and father, "just give me space and time to think. I'm not going to kill myself if that is what you're worried about."

"Okay son. Yes, please don't do that...I know you can't. If you need anything, just call Maria...or call us, call us," said Mr. Wamari and they once again left the room. As they walked back, he told his wife to instruct Dr. Punjab to make the earliest appointment, it was urgent.

When they had left, Brian slowly slid out from under the bed, panting for breath, both from the awkward position he had lain in, and the strangling he had received from Ethan. He had never seen him like that before. Ethan came at him again, grabbing him by the collars.

"Ethan, I can explain what you saw. Please hear me out." He was whispering.

"Why would I want to hear anything your sweet, lying mouth says, huh? I saw you Brian! You had sex with her, right after you lied to me that you didn't even want to go to the party. How long have you two been planning it?" He threw him back.

"We didn't plan anything. I went over there and she dragged me upstairs and before I knew it, she was all over me." He came closer to Ethan. "Please, E, you have to believe me."

"And what were you doing naked in bed with her." Ethan seemed calmer now.

"I wasn't...look I wasn't naked. I still had my trousers on. She came on to me, she had it all planned out but I didn't know. She even had the condoms but when I unwrapped it, I decided I can't do it at all." Brian was really struggling to make sense.

"But since you unwrapped the condoms; that means you actually thought of doing it, right? So what changed?"

"You did! I couldn't do it, E! Don't be like that man. Not that I can't...you know...hit it like a man, but I just couldn't do it. She's not you, no one is you and no one will ever be." He was standing right in front of him now and holding his shoulders. "You know I love you, right? Please tell me you know that Ethan. I swear, I didn't do it." Brian's eyes were red and watery.

"I don't know Bry...I just don't know what's going on..." he shook his head repeatedly.

"I'm not lying...what do I do to make you believe me?" Brian pleaded his case.

"Just look into my eyes and say you didn't do it."

Brian stood an inch from Ethan's nose and looked right into him. He was trembling and Ethan held his shaky hands in his while looking deep into his eyes. His heartbeat had slowed down a little now and he couldn't refute that he was telling the truth. He knew him like that.

"Okay Bry, I believe you. But don't fucking do that to me again. Or just tell me if you want an open relationship then." He said and hugged Brian, sighing and heaving. Brian tried not to let him hear his own deep sighs of relief as well but decided against being mucho in the face of love, he would never win.

"I don't want an open relationship. I only want you."

He loved Ethan, and he knew he hadn't betrayed him, and having Ethan understand, accept and forgive him, was reason enough to let his joy show.

"Hey," he said disengaging himself from Ethan who was still holding on to him, "I can't stay long because of your parents. I am sure

they wouldn't want me here at this time. You rest, I'll call you when I get home and we'll talk, okay?"

"Don't go, just stay. I could lock the door and act crazy till tomorrow and then you'll sneak out then," Ethan smiled and Brian smiled back.

"If only I could babe, look...I love you. Don't forget that. I'll see you soon and make all this up to you." He promised.

"Okay then. I love you too Brian. Wait, what about Alice?" Ethan asked.

"Don't worry, I'll handle it. She bit off a little too much than she could chew this time around. We'll be fine, trust me. He kissed Ethan for a minute before Maria showed up at the door saying it was time to go.

"Thanks a lot Mama Wanja," Ethan and Brian thanked her and she sneaked him out of the house again as he had come. The Wamaris had no idea of anything that happened.

Present Day

A week later and Ethan now sat in a quiet office on the tenth floor of a city building, staring into the beautiful eyes of Dr. Punjab.

"Why would you ask if I am gay?" the doctor asked in honest dismay.

"To rattle you a bit, but let's cut the run around the bush and state why I am here, shall we?"

Dr. Punjab only nodded.

"My parents think that I am gay and suicidal owing to a recent outburst I had at our house. They also believe that Brian is bad influence on me and that he has been..." he made air quotes, "...*introducing* me to bad habits like drinking, drug abuse, possibly even homosexuality."

The doctor didn't say a word. He only jotted something down and listened on.

“And you,” Ethan continued, “have been gracious enough to play the devil’s advocate and vouch for my insanity to them. Look, I am a normal nineteen year old man, undergoing changes in my life. I am not a drug user or addict and I certainly haven’t been introduced into cultic perversions, as they call them, by anyone! Brian is a dear friend of mine and I don’t need permission from you or anyone else to make friends.” He finished off and went back to sipping his water, in his position at the corner on the sofa.

The doctor observed him for a moment then put the notebook and pen down. He drank a mouthful of his own water and wiggled into his chair again, put his left leg over the right and started: “From the moment you came in, I knew you are not crazy or under influence. However, it was and still is apparent to me, that you are dealing with deep emotional problems.” He paused and Ethan adjusted his back to sit upright.

“Deep emotional problems, huh?” Ethan scoffed.

“I can almost tell that this is an issue of the heart, and when an issue comes to that, there’s little that I as an expert can do to help you. As a psychologist, most of my work is to help you help yourself. And to do that, I have to be sure, or at least comfortably secure in observation to know that you will unearth the root cause of your problem so that you can deal with it.”

Ethan fidgeted about and drank another sip of water.

“The symptoms that your parents talked about—the sudden mood swings, talking back at them harshly, shouting, drinking in their presence—they all point to a deep-seated anger that has only recently been ignited in you. Something happened in the last two weeks, and in my opinion, that’s why you...snapped, in a manner of speaking. As for your question, the answer is no; I am not gay myself. Not that I am obligated to answer that question, but for the purposes of building trust between us, I decided to answer that. My advice is, come back next week and tell me about how you grew up and about your family.”

Ethan had grown sad now, and the water felt too cold to hold any longer. He set the glass on the table and only said: “thank you

doctor. I am sorry I misdirected my anger to you. That was inappropriate."

"No need to apologize. I have seen worse." Said Dr. Punjab modestly, as always. "One more thing before we finish. Do you have any hobbies?"

"Um...yes, I do. I love writing when I'm tired or idle or just stressed." He was toying with his fingers again.

"Then do it more often. If you'd like to share or read some of it to your friends or parents or just keep it to yourself, it's okay, but write whenever you feel held up by emotions. It's a safe way to vent out." Doctor Punjab was now smiling broadly and Ethan felt easier. He had somehow misjudged the man, and that alone made him feel ashamed.

"Thank you doctor. So much. May I ask what you will tell my parents?" he asked

"I am afraid I can't tell you that. But be sure that whatever you have said here today is confidential." He answered.

"Okay then, thanks again."

"You're welcome. See you next week Ethan."

Ethan left a happier man. He didn't really know why, but talking to the odd psychologist had helped him feel better. He got the lift down and he was well surprised to see Brian in the lobby downstairs, smiling and looking stylish as well.

He shoulder-bumped him as men do, whispered some vulgar compliment in his ear and they both laughed and walked out the revolving doors.

"So nice of you to come get me. I had no idea you were coming!" Ethan said joyfully.

"You thought I would let you deal with such a guy alone? Mama Wanjia told me where you are. She's so nice I swear. I know how counsellors drive people nuts. I had a counsellor for two weeks in high school. She was a nuisance!"

"What had you done then?" Ethan asked.

"Trust me, you don't want to know, I was a bad boy back then."

"I think you still are, that's also why I love you." They both laughed again and Ethan ran his hand on Brian's back, unconscious of the many people walking up and down the street. "Dr. Punjab isn't half bad as I thought he was. He is quite attentive, not so judgmental. Plus, he has beautiful eyes."

"What!?" Brian exclaimed and slapped Ethan's back, who laughed in return, "don't tell me you were mentally cheating on me with your doctor."

"Chill, you know no one has eyes more pretty than yours. He's cool though."

"He better not try anything." Brian said smiling.

As they came to the intersection of Kenyatta Avenue and Loita Street, Brian asked what they were to do with the rest of the day.

"We'll go see a movie together." Ethan answered.

"Sounds great to me. But that is right after we get something to eat, I am so hungry." They crossed the intersection. "Are you still thinking of Alice?"

"A bit, yes. Sometimes she actually does scare me. The way she talks or does things" Ethan confessed.

"Everyone is fighting a fight of their own, Ethan. She is too. One day soon, I'll tell you about it. It's what she was talking to me about, when you found us. I am starting to understand her." Brian said.

"Don't mind it for a minute, she tried to mess us up but we're still standing. We still get to walk in the sun. And I love you and only you! Temptations will always be there, but we will face them all together, strong."

"I love you too man." Ethan said as Brian put his hand around his neck and they walked on laughing and patting each other's shoulders, their legs basking in the afternoon sun under beautiful shorts. Soon, they merged with the throngs of people dashing about the city streets, their happy laughter still hooting in the air.

Chapter Six

DR. PUNJAB smiled more now. It had been three months since Ethan's first visit and their rapport had significantly improved. Ethan was telling him of the first day he joined high school and how the rumors of bullying had caused him insomnia for a whole month. He feared everyone then, and his introversion hadn't helped the matter. The good doctor nodded silently and smiled shyly as a new bride would to her husband, in a graceful manner.

"Did you ever tell your parents or the teachers about the bullying?" he asked Ethan after the narration.

"No. I never did." He simply answered and rubbed his palms together. The laughter seemed to dwindle now and an air of seriousness crept into the room.

Outside, the hot sun rays beamed and reflected off the glass panes of Nairobi's mini skyscrapers and gave Ethan a warm feeling in his heart. These were good days to have ice cream or simply walk down a street with Brian, talking about things that other people would deem stupid. He smiled. The doctor noted something in his big notebook.

"Why didn't you?" he asked.

"Didn't I what?" Ethan asked, startled.

"Why didn't you report the bullying to anyone?"

"I wasn't bullied myself. In fact, I never witnessed any bullying as such. I suppose most of the hype was meant to scare the new guys into fearing the senior students."

"What did you hear the form of bullying was from those who were harassed?" the doctor pried on. He was always nosy like that.

"Nothing major, just a few stupid questions and calling of names. No one got beat up though. That's all I feared." His eyes were still fixated on the brightness outside and he spoke with a distant tone as if Dr. Punjab was a voice inside his head.

"Ethan, any form of treatment that harasses and is aimed at demeaning, making fun of or making one feel unimportant is bullying.

And it should be reported to the authorities. Regardless of the reasons the bullies offer for their cowardly behavior.”

“Those who did it were mostly the big guys; not the small ones. They were not cowards. Everyone was afraid of them.” He kindly corrected the know-it-all doctor.

“In psychology, such behavior as of bullying emanates from a point of low self-esteem or phobia that is misdirected to undeserving people. Bullies mostly target those who are of a lesser status than them in authority or stature. And they do it to hide their own insecurities about themselves and redirect attention from those insecurities by making fun of others or causing them pain.” His look was stern now. He meant it, Ethan could tell.

“I never thought of it that way,” confessed Ethan, “and it actually does make sense now.”

“Next time, make sure you report bullies. But right now, I want to hear about you and your progress at home. How are things?”

“Things are fine. Mum is a bit worried, I can see it, although she likes to put on a poker face.” He said casually.

Dr. Punjab smiled and studied Ethan’s face for a while. In the last three months since his first visit, he had tried to steer Ethan, albeit cleverly and slowly, towards opening up to the core of his anger and hostility towards his parents. He was impressed. Not with Ethan’s readiness to open up, but by his acuity and sharpness to grasp his intentions and evade any leading questions that would unmask his secrets to the doctor.

Ethan, in his turn, stole glances at the handsome doctor and wondered what was going on under his tastefully made hair. It was slicked back in gel or something, so that his forehead seemed more prominent and his face appeared more visible. His eyes were dark glassy balls on white canvas behind hairy eyelids. His face was clean shaven and only the line of dark shade from cut hair follicles was visible above his lips and on his jaws and chin. He was a lover of finesse and a true gentleman. Ethan had for long wondered what exactly he had found so appealing in the man. From the last two months, he had

discovered that it was nothing sexual. It wasn't a crush either. Only now did he realize that what he admired most in Dr. Punjab was his style, his simple elegance and the grace with which he carried himself. He never overreacted to anything and he was always modest, even in his best moments. For an instant, he wondered within himself if he should study psychology, but in a second, he loathed the idea because he couldn't imagine delving into peoples' minds.

"And how's your father?" Dr. Punjab asked.

"He is himself. As always."

"What does that mean, Ethan?"

"You know...quiet, distant. We barely talk. I think he's mad at me."

"Mad at you for what?"

"For not going to London. He really wanted me to go there. He still keeps touch with the school. Last week he said I will still have to go soon, during the next intake."

"Okay. And I suppose you still don't want to go?" Dr. Punjab became animated. Ethan was opening up.

"I still don't want to." He said it with a finality that seemed to close the way for any more queries, then woke up and stood by the large window gazing outside at the tip of the KICC building in the city center.

"Ethan, I hope that by now you understand and see me as your friend and not merely a spy for your parents into your life." Said Dr. Punjab.

Silence. Ethan's posture didn't change.

"I only mean well by asking, what is the real reason you changed your mind about going to London a few months ago, while before that your parents say you were happy to leave?"

Silence.

A minute passed. The doctor observed him closely but he didn't react. After a while, he slowly walked back to the couch and lay down with his hands folded into a headrest behind his head.

"Because I fell in love." He simply said and continued to gaze at the ceiling.

The doctor put his notebook down and twirled his glossy pen between his fingers.

"Do you mind telling me about it?" he queried.

"About what?" Ethan asked

"About you and falling in love."

"Why should I?" the games begun.

"I am simply curious. I know from experience that love makes people do the seemingly impossible." The doctor's face portrayed a seriousness that Ethan thought was legit.

"Impossible things like what? Have you ever done any of these impossible things yourself?" he asked contemptuously.

Dr. Punjab laughed and lowered his head in a thoughtful bow. A moment passed and he regained his posture. "My girlfriend's name is Akoth. She is Kenyan. Half of my family lives in the United Kingdom and the rest is in India. I shouldn't be telling you this, but in the spirit of openness I shall." He paused to assess the look on Ethan's face. He was obviously curious to hear what new trick the doctor had up his sleeve to unmask him.

"I was supposed to marry a woman from my home and the wedding was arranged. However, I fell in love with a beautiful lady from your country while at Harvard. After my studies, I moved here and stayed with her against my parents' wishes. We are getting married soon. So yes, I know about love being difficult to understand sometimes." He finished with a smile on his face. "Your turn now. What's her name?"

Ethan smiled and said: "I told you not to assume things when I first came in here, remember?"

"Have I assumed something?" the doctor asked.

"Yes. *She*, is actually a *he*." Ethan said and held his breath to watch the doctor's reaction.

Dr. Punjab didn't show a single sign of shock or amazement on his face. *I suppose mother's poker face has rubbed off on him too*, Ethan quietly thought to himself.

"I see. What's his name?" he asked curiously.

"That's as much as I was going to share with you. And doctor, this is a most private thing I just told you, I hope you keep it to yourself." He warned.

"As I said before, whatever we discuss here is protected by doctor-patient confidentiality. I cannot repeat what you say to another person unless these revelations pose a real threat to another person. So what you say to me stays between us two."

"And what of my parents; what do you tell them when they call?" Ethan sat up now and fixed a stern look on the doctor who had now resumed scribbling in his big book.

"I only tell them what I deem necessary. So don't be afraid to share."

"Okay then."

"If I may ask, can you tell me more of this boyfriend of yours? Like, where does he live? How did you meet him?"

"Perhaps another day doc. I have told you enough for today. I really need to go now." Ethan said and rose up.

"But the time is not up yet. Your parents are paying me for two sessions instead of one now. They really want you to be okay." Dr. Punjab complained.

"That would be true if I was unwell to begin with. We both know better, don't we doctor? Well then, it seems like you'll be free for the next hour. Tell them I am fine." He started for the door.

"Say hello to Brian for me." Said Dr. Punjab as Ethan unlocked the door.

"I haven't seen him in a while," the lie sounded funny even to him.

"Don't lie Ethan. I know he accompanies you each time and sits in the lobby until we are done when he isn't at his part-time college study. But that's just between the two of us." He smiled. Ethan smiled

and left the office hurrying for the elevator bank. He didn't want to be late for their meet up.

Since the outburst three months ago, the Wamaris had become stricter with his movements and required Mohammed to drive him whenever he went outside of the gated neighborhood. He wasn't to see Brian or any of those bad influences that made him chug down a whole mouthful of wine and smash phones on walls. They were good parents who knew how to protect their precious child from bad people like Brian and his legion of goons.

Brian rose from the waiting area on the ground floor with a welcome smile. Only Ethan knew how good it felt to see that broad grin each time. They bumped into each other in an awkward yet familiar way of greeting, one that didn't require a formula to it, but was well understood and received. It was as easy as eating in the dark; the spoon never misses the mouth. A few tricks to dodge Mohammed who was waiting in a car outside, and they quickly joined the constant flow of human traffic on the city streets and dissolved into the commonness of them.

On the tenth floor, inside Dr. Punjab's office, the phone rang.

"Has he left?" Dr. Punjab asked.

"Yes, same as always. The other boy waited here the whole time. They just left."

"Okay, thank you."

Alice spun around in her floral skirt and admired herself in the large mirror. She wore a well buttoned up blouse so that the usual cleavage in her chest area was left to the imagination. The yellow and white prints on her skirt, coupled with the flat shoes she wore, completed the conservative look she was aiming for. A little more lip stick but not too much and she loved the final image. She knew her hosts well enough and in order to complete her mission successfully, she had to play to their fantasies and win them over to her side. She

knew if one was to play a perfect courtier, it was best not to look like the devil's advocate. She had read the *48 Laws of Power* too.

Mrs. Musembi opened the door with a big smile on her face and hugged Alice welcoming her in. It was Saturday, and although Alice had truly hoped the mister of the house would be in while she shot her bullets, Mr. Musembi was engaged elsewhere. The house was neither big nor small. Petite but ample in its own way. Much like their own house. Along the white walls were well framed photographs of the Musembi family, like a time-indexed chronicle of their lives. The line started off with a young Mr. Musembi cozied up to his then beautiful girlfriend in big thickly framed spectacles, followed by wedding pictures with Mrs. Musembi in a horrible-looking wedding gown (*back then that was cute*, thought Alice). Then came the family pictures with the new born Brian, and so on until the latest ones of his sister Rose. They seemed like a normal family to Alice. For her, normalcy at home was a Greek vocabulary whose meaning, literal or implied, was never defined. However, there was a particular one that seemed to capture her attention. It was the portrait of a beautiful, plump little boy with a gaping toothless mouth. She came closer and stared blankly at him; something felt good inside of her.

"Oh! You kids grow up too fast these days, that's Brian. He was only nine months at the time." Said Mrs. Musembi smiling satisfactorily. She came in from the kitchen carrying a wide tray. She served tea.

"He was very handsome even then." Alice said and gently sipped her tea, careful not to spill it on her beautiful dress.

"Even then? So you still think he is?" Mrs. Musembi smiled at her and she blushed coyly. The plan was working out well.

"How's your mother doing? I haven't spoken to her in a few days now."

"She is doing well Mama Brian. She sent her greetings. She said she will see you in the *chama* later today." She sipped at the tea again and carefully replaced the cup on the white saucer.

It was time to throw the hook.

"How is Brian doing? I haven't seen him in a while now myself." She asked Mrs. Musembi.

Brian's mother stared at her absentmindedly as if she had just called her a stupid goat. She seemed deep in thought, more of a trance-like state with her tea cup still midair between her mouth and the sparkly saucer. Her eyes looked tired and weary as contrasted to the silvery wedding ring that glinted in the morning sun rays filtering into her beautiful home. She snapped back.

"Sorry, Brian? He is still around and doing very well. He is helping a lot in the church activities these days. He is barely here." She sipped her tea. "I'm surprised you ask, because I believe you two must see each other every day in the church."

Alice smiled in her heart and knew that the iron was hot enough for the hammering now. "Brian is never in church these days. I suppose he is back to spending a bit too much time with..." she paused and assessed the look on Mrs. Musembi face.

"With who? Tell me please," she was begging.

"It not my place to say, but that Ethan isn't as good a friend for Brian as he thinks." She could barely hold back the evil smile on her face as she sipped her tea again.

Mrs. Musembi seemed worried. Like someone had pronounced a curse or an evil spell on her family. She knew that Wamari boy was nothing but trouble and she didn't need Jesus or the bible to collaborate her fears that the boy was a bad influence on her good son.

"Why do you say that Alice?" she queried on.

"I'd hate to gossip, but there have been rumors about that Ethan in the neighborhood. I hear he is in a cult or something. They say that's why he always keeps to himself. I'm not really sure, but...again, this is mere speculation from what I've heard." She put on a worried face and laid back on the sofa. Her work was done here.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Mrs. Musembi, she was always cautious of calling the Lord's name in vain. It was a sin. "I have always known there's something wrong with that family. I must speak to

Brian and warn him about getting close to that boy! I will not have my son dragged into madness and devil worship.”

“I think it’s a good idea, Mama Brian!” she simply said.

“My son is a good boy. God fearing too. He wouldn’t be drawn into the devil’s snare blindly. And you’re a good friend for telling me. You two have become very good friends lately. I like that you keep watch over Brian. He should keep friends like you.”

“Well, Ethan seems to be taking all the time these days. Brian and I don’t really speak much now.” She put on the I-am-just-a-poor-lonely-girl face. She was a master of deception and she loved that she could manipulate anyone at will.

“Don’t worry Alice, drink your tea. I know what to do.” Assured Mrs. Musembi who had a thousand plans in her mind already. And Jesus too. Jesus and the truth was on her side and the evil darkness in the name of Ethan Wamari rising over her son would not yield any power over him. She would deal with that boy and his family accordingly. And she would win.

Soon, Alice had gulped down her cup of tea and although she could barely finish it—she hated tea—she smiled and thanked Mrs. Musembi a million times for it, reaffirmed her commitment to fighting Ethan the devil’s messenger with her, and courteously left the compound. She couldn’t turn around lest the stupid woman saw the large grin on her pretty face.

What a nice girl, thought Mrs. Musembi.

Twenty three years ago tomorrow, the Wamaris said their marriage vows fresh out of university with a great optimism for the years ahead. They had just been posted to their work stations and earning hefty salaries going by the economic situation then. Three years later, Mrs. Wamari was with child and their dreams were quickly taking shape. Back then, there was no easy way to know what the child’s gender was. In fact, they hadn’t cared. They knew they would

love him or her with everything they had. Mr. Wamari loved working with children and treating them and so it had been a huge toll on him seeing beautiful bundles of joy delivered into the world and cry for their first time and not have one of his own. They had tried and tried and tried for about two years after the marriage to conceive but there was no hope.

Then one cold day in June, after they had agreed on starting the adoption process for their first child, Mrs. Wamari had woken up with a nausea and a dizziness that she hadn't felt before. Being doctors, and good ones at their jobs, they immediately thought that she had caught an infection from their last trip to the coast. Gerald was only beginning to make a name for himself back then, and so they travelled widely for work. Besides, doctors were very few. The money was good, and they both loved their work.

It was only later that day in the hospital, that Janet's doctor confirmed to their amazement, that she was indeed pregnant. They both cried. It was too much a joy to hide. They cancelled the adoption and waited with an impatience and a love that bore no comparison for their little boy or girl and Mr. Wamari made sure that everything was arranged and taken care of for the coming child. That is when Mohammed was hired as Janet's chauffeur and they were happier than ever when finally, in the fourth year of their marriage, a little Ethan cried in the delivery room of the prestigious Angel of Mercy Hospital.

That was nineteen years ago. Now, they sat quietly in their living room listening to the cateress talk about the big anniversary party they were holding the next day. Gerald seemed a little interested in the drones of the nice lady in their living room who kept asking about deserts and juices. He was more fixated on the big, gold framed photograph in their living room. It was taken twenty three years ago outside a quaint, little church in Hardy, Karen where they said their marriage vows. They looked very happy and he missed that feeling.

Back then, he was livelier, he thought. He had loved music and often, after work, he would bring his new bride to the John Maple Inn

where all the new money in town, colonial remnants who still ran businesses and flower farms, and the expatriates used to hang out. They had danced to fast *rhumba* music there and he recalled holding his wife as tenderly and closely as the soft melodies of Marvin Gaye and Dolly Parton serenaded the small tavern. That was love. He had felt fit there, with people who spoke good English and could hold a conversation with the nasal accent of pot-bellied British tycoons—the life he had always wanted. Now, they rarely had a moment for an intimate conversation between all the trips and flights to talks, summits and special treatments for well-paying clients all over the world, let alone a simple dance. He quietly wondered what the anniversary was for. Twenty three years had passed, but he wondered what they had meant to him—to them. He snapped from his reveries with the shake of his wife’s hand on his shoulder.

“Yes, yes dear. It’s alright. Do whatever is necessary. Just make the party a success. Thank you Jennifer, for everything you’re doing.” He said out and feigned a quick smile, then excused himself to their room upstairs.

“Mama Ethan,” it was Maria, “you have a guest.”

“Who is it? I’m in the middle of something here.” Mrs. Wamari asked in a rather disgruntled manner.

“Her name is Alice. She says she really needs to talk to you.”

“Okay Maria, tell her to come in. Tell her to wait for me as I finish up here,” she said and went back to the plans for her party.

“Alright.” Maria walked back outside with a burning forehead. She knew the girl meant trouble since she heard Ethan mention her name a while back. She was the one trying to drive a wedge between Brian and Ethan and she would be damned if she let her. She was here now, looking pretty and mannered in her little black skirt with the cute floral prints. Like an angel.

“You can come in.” Maria said simply. “She’s busy, you’ll have to wait for some time. Would you like a glass of juice while you wait?”

Alice could already feel the disdain for her oozing out of every pore in Maria's body and she couldn't care less. She had a job to do here. Ethan had crossed her, and no one gets to do that.

"You must be the maid that Ethan talks a lot of!" she smiled. "He loves you so much. I can see why. You're so nice. I will wait, I am in no hurry, and thank you for the juice. I will have some mango, please." She spoke eloquently, without the slightest hint of sass or sarcasm, but Maria was no stranger to chameleons; she could tell a green one from a mile away in the middle of a grassy field. She headed for the kitchen.

"Thank you so much for your help Jennifer, I couldn't have arranged all of this alone. I'm sure the party will be great. If you need anything else, let me know." Said Mrs. Wamari.

"Okay, thank you Janet. I will do my best. And congratulations again. Twenty three is no joke!" Jennifer, her longtime friend joked as they headed for the door. Mrs. Wamari laughed and assured her that every waking day with Gerald was bliss. She almost laughed at her own conviction of the lies she had grown acquainted to. She thanked Jennifer again and went back to see this new visitor in her living room.

Maria fumbled with the phone in her hands, caught between searching for Ethan's number and sticking her long neck in the hallway to the kitchen, looking out for anyone who might hear her conversation. It finally dialed and she held her breath.

"Hey Mama Wanja," greeted Ethan. Courteous as ever.

"Ethan, *uko wapi* (where are you)?" She asked quickly.

"*Niko* town (I'm in town), what's going on?"

"There's a girl here, her name is Alice and she came to speak with your mother. I think it's the same girl you mentioned some time back who was with Brian."

Ethan sounded bothered now, "how does she look like?"

Maria stuck her neck out again, scanned the hallway and then resumed her conversation with Ethan that rose and fell in both tempo and pitch as she deemed fit. She was Maria. She could do that.

"She looks beautiful. But evil, in a way. I don't like her. Come back *haraka*."

"Okay, I'm coming."

She quickly replaced the phone in her handbag, poured some mango juice in a glass and took it to the living room, where Mrs. Wamari was now in what seemed to be an interesting conversation with Alice.

"Oh, thank you mama Wanja. You're so kind." Said Alice. And smiled. It was important that she smiled and acted nice here.

Without any regard to Maria, Mrs. Wamari resumed her conversation while she was still in earshot distance. "So you mean to say that this Brian is involved with hooligans and thugs? Is that who my son is hanging around with?" she was agitated.

"I am so sorry Mrs. Wamari, perhaps I shouldn't have told you all that. Ethan is a nice person. It is Brian and his company I'm worried about."

"I made sure he isn't going anywhere near that useless boy, but he keeps evading his driver and sneaking to go to him. I'll deal with Ethan. And if necessary, that Brian boy too. He will not waste my son's life just because he does not have one. You are a very nice girl for telling me all of this Alice, thank you. What Ethan needs is to go to school abroad as we had agreed."

"No need to thank me Mama Ethan. In church, we are taught to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers. I am only doing what any good Christian would do. I just want Ethan to be safe."

Alice put her knees together, pulled the already long skirt even lower, sat upright as Mrs. Wamari did and sipped her juice with the tip of her tongue; careful not to have it trickle on her lips and put the glass back on her well-manicured fingers. She smiled at her host righteously and seemed concerned for her predicament with Ethan. She had started two unstoppable comets on a dangerous course in one day. All she had to do now was sit back and watch the collision, hoping that Brian would end up on her side of the wreckage.

Maria, who had been pretending to wipe on the already spotless dining table, slowly walked away, careful not to elicit any attention from her employer and headed back for the kitchen. She wanted to strangle Alice, but reminded herself that she was a mother, and mothers don't strangle errant children. They spank them. They don't strangle them. She would deal with her accordingly.

What an evil girl, thought Maria.

Ethan's walk in, would only be best described as a sprint. He had the pounding in his chest and a dryness in the mouth that wasn't due to the quick walk. The living room was empty and Maria signaled him into the kitchen down the hall.

"Where is she?" he asked under heavy panting.

"She just left. She was here for a few minutes talking to your mother." Maria said.

"What did she say to my mum?" he was rubbing his palms together subconsciously now.

"I wouldn't say for sure. I was only able to hear a bit of the conversation..."

"Please, just tell me mama Wanja."

"She was discussing you and Brian. She didn't say everything I thought she would, but it appears she was laying ground for you two to be separated. I must say she's really good." Maria raised her brows and exhaled deeply.

Ethan, who had now been leaning on the cooker, slowly walked to the laced curtains by the kitchen window and peered outside into the front lawn of their compound. He remembered a few days ago when he had said goodbye to Brian on the front steps; that was the day he realized that he indeed loved him. Maria was puzzled, the sudden change in demeanor surprised Maria who had expected a more actionable response from Ethan.

"What will you do now?" she asked calmly. "This girl seems determined to keep you apart. And I am afraid that she will drive a wedge between you and your parents along the way."

"I'll have to talk to Brian first. We will figure it out. Like always." Ethan had no idea how they would keep things under the radar anymore. From the conversation Maria had overheard between Alice and Mrs. Wamari, it was obvious that she knew something about Brian and him, and that she was counting on the very delicate nature of that relationship to scare him away from Brian so she could keep him to herself. He wondered whether to call Brian first or cleverly enquire from his mother on the nature of her discussion earlier with Alice. After a moment of deep thought, he called Alice.

"Hi Alice, how are you?" he pursed his lips together in anticipation.

"I'm good." She simply said.

"I hear you came around...to my house earlier." Silence. "It seems I just missed you."

"Yeah I was there. Just thought of having a word with your mother." She was thoroughly enjoying their chat.

"I didn't know you two know each other."

"We didn't. Well, not until today."

"What's going on Alice?" Ethan was tired of the run-arounds.

"You know what's up. Keep off Brian. I know about you two. The only way I am going to keep my mouth shut is if you quit dogging around him and get a life. That's like so creepy!" she sounded serious. Ethan fidgeted.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Ethan protested. Maria maintained her odd posture, her hand on her chin and her beautiful eyes wide open.

"Okay. Then wait until my next punch and you'll learn to keep off other people's boyfriends." She warned and disconnected the call.

Ethan was worried. Visibly so. He called Brian next—immediately. Maria excused herself and went to the living room. She pretended to wipe on the already clean tables and knew that a storm

was brewing in the distance. She kept her eyes away from the kitchen but her ears remained highly alert. She worried for the young men and prayed that she could do something to help but she knew that meddling too much would be both awkward and unhelpful, eventually.

"Hey E, what's up?" it was Brian. "I just got home myself. That was some good afternoon, although I still have that certification exam tomorrow."

"Brian," he swallowed hard, "Alice came to see my mum today. She talked about us and tried to convince her that you're a bad influence on me. She claims that you might be involved with thugs."

"What?!" Brian was startled.

"Yes, it's serious. I called her just now to ask about it and..."

"What did she say?" he sounded impatient. Worried too. The realness of the situation was only now revealing itself.

"She blackmailed me...or tried to, I'm not sure." Ethan ran a hand over his mouth and regained a focus on the green lawn outside."

"That's too much now. I'll talk to her in a bit. Don't worry, okay. I've got this." Brian assured him. It felt like a peace.

"Thanks a lot Bry. I know I'm not afraid to tell the truth, but not this way. I want to tell it in my own time and on my own terms too."

"I know E, just chill, let me call her now, alright?"

"Okay."

In the Musembi house, Mrs. Musembi busied herself in the kitchen trying not to explode on his son who had just come in. However, despite the calming smell of lemon-scented dish washing liquid on her hands, she couldn't quell the storming anger and disappointment in her head with her son, concerning the issues that Alice had brought to her attention. She had for some time now known that something fishy was going on with her son since she overheard the phone call from the Wamari house. She didn't trust them and she

knew she had a duty—a God-given mandate—to protect her son and the sanctity of her family from bad influences and tampering by the evilness of the Wamari boy and any other ‘forces of darkness’ as she liked to call them. When she could no longer pretend, she stormed into the living room where Brian was now ending his call to Ethan.

“Sit down Brian. We need to talk.” Her tone was the midway between anger and fury. Brian, in awe, and fully cognizant of the fact that that tone never carried good riddance with it, quietly sat on one of the sofas opposite his mother.

Silence.

“What’s going on with you and Ethan?” she queried.

“What do you mean, mum. Ethan and I are friends. Always have been.” The words slid out shyly, slowly, cautiously. He licked on his lips. He was nervous and he knew it.

“Alice came to see me today.” She paused and observed her son. “She says Ethan is becoming a bad influence on you, Brian. I have never liked those people. You know that. She said some very disturbing things about that boy and I want you to be honest with me. Have you been introduced to any cults or evil things son?”

Brian fumbled for a thought or a word, but the sheer madness of the claims was numbing. He struggled to breathe while still caught up in the tug of war between a crazy outburst in protest and the respect he had for his mother. He chose calmness. It was hard, but necessary.

“It’s a lie, mum. Nothing of the sort has happened or ever happened. I don’t know why she would make such claims.”

“Does she have a reason to?” Mrs. Musembi pried on.

“I don’t know. Ethan is a good friend of mine. For many years. And you know this.”

Mrs. Musembi lay back on the comfortable sofa and let her gaze shift to the sun brightness outside. The silence inside the small house compounded the awkwardness that ensued their earlier talks and none wanted to be the first to resume. Brian knew better than wake up and walk away from the inquisition. He also now knew what

game Alice was shrewdly playing at and in his own way, gave it up to her. She was clever, but as he had discovered in his lifetime, everyone has a thumbscrew; the twisting of which always resulted in a shift of power dynamics. Alice had gone too far to involve his mother. Now was her turn to feel the pinch.

"Are you a homosexual Brian?" she suddenly asked, her eyes now squarely on Brian.

He coughed. And felt dizzy.

"What?! What do you mean?"

"Alice said Ethan is teaching you how to be one. Do you now see why I told you to keep off that boy and his family? Do you?"

"Mum, I really need to go."

Brian rose and briskly walked out of the house. The last thing Mrs. Musembi heard was the banging of the front door on his way out. She knew that something had changed in their relationship since that moment. She could feel the distance growing with his every step towards the gate, and for a moment, she pondered the wisdom of ambushing her son on unsubstantiated claims. Had she made a mistake? Was it permanent or could they, in some time to come recover from it?

Within a minute, Brian was out of the compound and into the world outside. She exhaled loudly.

Chapter Seven

TODAY, 11:00 P.M.

THE BLURRED vision, the splitting headache and the flashing lights were simply, and excruciatingly, confusing and tormenting for him. His eyes felt like hot pokers stabbing at his nerves and his body lay still in a weakening pain. Best as he tried, he could only make out caricatured forms of human faces hovering over his moving body as they shouted out numbers. He tried to move his arms and legs but nothing budged. For a moment, he was convinced he was in a lucid dream; the kind that makes one come to, screaming and kicking insanely into the air, thinking that they are falling off a skyscraper. But no. He tried to shake his head to force himself snap out of the delirium but the only response was a cutting pain, sharp and sudden from his neck area. His whole head and neck felt a ton heavier and he dared speak out a few words to the people running beside the moving object on which he lay, but the words held their ground inside his mouth, refusing to come out or even come close to his lips. Suddenly, the lights fizzled out, the motion remained, but the blurry beings were no longer in sight; only their incessant drone of incomprehensible chatter remained.

"Quick, we are losing him! BP is dropping fast, he lost a lot of blood. We need to transfuse immediately!" Dr. Okumu commanded his nurses and the interns under his instruction for the night. "And get me the emergency officer who brought him in, now!"

The nurse quickly moved towards the lobby, half run and half walk, her small figure like a fluid particle flying in the disinfectant-drenched air that encapsulated the whole Casualties and Emergencies wing. In a flash, she ran back into the restricted area with the skinny emergency response officer in tow. She signaled Dr. Okumu who was still issuing more orders for emergency treatment of the critically injured patient.

"Hi, I'm doctor Okumu, what happened and where did you pick him up?" the doctor spoke fast. Like an animation.

"I'm Mathews. The crash was at the intersection of Lishoni Estate Road and Thika Highway. We assessed a broken collar bone, fractured leg and arm. I didn't smell any alcohol on him though." The young man spoke with a surety and a calmness that pointed to a long time in the business of reporting on accidents. "I also found this wallet in his pocket. Luckily, he is a regular blood donor and his information is in there. Also there's another doctor's card too. No information on the parents or close relatives yet."

"Thank you, that's good. Anything else about the patient I should know?"

"Nothing I deem critical, although he kept calling a name between his lucid moments and the slipping."

"What name?" asked the doctor impatiently.

"Bry. He kept saying, 'I am sorry Bry.' I think it's a short form for Brian?"

"Okay, thanks a lot Mathews. We'll find out the next of kin and do what we can."

The doctor excused the emergency response medic and ordered the nurse to file the wallet and its contents at the reception. He further ordered that they call the listed number for Dr. Punjab Kuthraman, the only contact they had for now. He quickly disappeared through the double doors marked 'RESTRICTED'.

"Hello," came the groggy voice on the other end. "Who is this?"

"I am sorry to disturb you this late. I am calling from the Angel of Mercy Hospital. Are you doctor Punjab Kuthraman?" Enquired the nurse.

"Yes, that's me. What's going on?"

"A patient was brought in a few minutes ago and we found a card with your name in his wallet. We are hoping you know him or can help us track down his relatives." She spoke softly.

"Who is the patient?" Dr. Punjab sounded more awake now.

"Ethan. Ethan Omar Wamari."

"Yes...yes! I know him. What happened, is he okay?"

"He has been in an accident, and is in critical condition. Mr. Kuthraman, are you his family? We need to speak to a family member immediately, please."

"No, I am his therapist...but I know his parents. I will call them on my way to the hospital."

"You don't have to come sir, just give us the number and..." the line went off.

YESTERDAY, 5:16 P.M.

Brian's head was blank as he left his home's compound. He needed to call Ethan immediately and tell him what had happened with his mother, but the last thing he wanted was to cause his dearest love worry or undue anxiety. It was Alice that he needed to confront. Ethan would be okay for now. He walked faster. Breathed harder. His mother's voice replaying on a loop in his head, *"are you a homosexual, Brian?"*

Suddenly, the usual faces that he saw every other day morphed into his mother's. Mama Oti, the one who runs the big grocery store down the street too had his mother's face. Jared, the short movie guy who talks too much also had his mother's face. They all judged him, they were all ashamed of him, and they all despised his silence. *"Are you a homosexual, Brian?"* they kept asking. *"Are you a homosexual Brian, speak for yourself you coward!"* the odd faces taunted him. The voice kept asking. He stopped and took a deep breath.

Alice's home was quiet as always. Theirs was the small house on the western end of the gated Korongo Park. Brian hesitated a moment before his clenched fist actively banged on the door. He was sweating. Unusual. As the shuffling feet got closer to the door, he kept reminding himself that no violent outbursts were necessary here, but then again, the risk of having Ethan ridiculed, painted as a deranged pervert on a gay recruitment mission simply didn't sit well with his

heart. His temples pumped harder with each step Alice made towards the door until when she unlocked it and Brian stood there smiling.

Inside, Alice could not hide her happiness at having Brian back to her side, as she expected. Her plans had obviously worked if he was here now, on his will. With her.

"What did you intend to accomplish, Alice?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" She seemed surprised at the question.

"You went to see my mum today. You told her a bunch of crazy lies. What is wrong with you Alice? I try so hard to understand you, but you're just so complicated. I told you, I didn't want to go on with our relationship, or whatever that was! But you never let up, do you?" Brian tried so hard to resist the rising tone in his voice. He wanted a civil chat.

"Ethan is a freak! And you know that Brian, I love you." She came close and rested her soft hands on his upper thigh. He recoiled. "You see, he turned you against me. You know I have always loved you, Brian. Ethan is just filling your head with all this twisted, psycho stuff. I know he's making you gay. But you're not babe, you know that..." she tried to kiss him. She just couldn't stop herself. He was Brian after all. Something feral emanated from his angry state for her, something primal and sexual. Like she needed him to tear her apart in that very moment.

"Tell me you don't believe such nonsense Alice. You're either one very sick person or a terribly good actress." He stood up and stepped back from her. "I don't love you. Not as my girlfriend at least. You know I don't. I never have and I think you've known that I'm a little different. Sorry, if I'm blunt, but you've taken your whims too far this time Alice."

"I know you don't me Brian. You love another guy." She stood and came closer to him. "Are you a sissy now?"

"At least I am an honest sissy, Alice. I don't lie to myself like you do. I don't transfer my daddy issues into an obsession with any guy who pays me genuine attention because I don't think myself worthy of love; real love. Like you Alice. At least," he came up to her

face, "I don't have to destroy every good thing that I can't have. One of us needs help. And it isn't me. Keep away from my boyfriend, and our families. Yes, I said boyfriend!"

Alice stagnated in a moment. His words drove the big blade deeper into her clogged up chest. He was angry, she could tell. But why couldn't he see her sacrifices as they were—plans for their future together. She could feel the ground beneath her naked feet crack apart as he retreated towards the door, but it was what he said as he left the room that made her heart skip a beat.

"And if you dare pull that stunt again, I won't think twice about uploading that little video I made when you were all over me." Brian hated himself for having to say that, but desperate times call for disgusting measures.

Alice froze. He closed the door behind him and walked away.

At her home, Mrs. Musembi paced back and forth. The phone was ever between her hands and her ear but there was no reply. Her only comfort was the voice of her son on the voicemail receiver. She felt awful. Perhaps there was a better way to deal with the issue. She questioned her motivations to blind sight her own son and try to coax a rather uncomfortable confession from him as she did. *But I am his mother*, she told herself. *He is my son, I should be able to ask him whatever I want to know, right?* She paced some more and exhaled a lot harder. Dusk was approaching and she worried for him. He seemed angry, heartbroken perhaps for his mother's invasion. And she worried even more because young people are unpredictable in their reactive behavior. She wished her husband would get home faster. There was a lot to discuss.

Ethan's mother knocked softly on his bedroom door and he invited her in. She was expressionless, but then again, Ethan was used to her poker face. He immediately knew that they were not about to hug and reminisce about good old days. There were none in close memory anyway. She looked tired, haggard in a way. Her beauty remained, but Ethan could see that the years were starting to get to her. He had been trying to call Alice again and again but the calls went unanswered. Brian was unreachable and he was almost about to call Dr. Punjab for a chat, however much he dreaded and abhorred that, but the silence was simply torturing him. Just then, Mrs. Wamari had knocked on his door.

"Hello son, how are you?" She sat on the edge of the big bed. Her eyes dashed about the walls and floors, scanning, like a hawk.

"I am alright mum. Haven't seen you much today." He fidgeted.

"How was the session earlier today? Dr. Punjab tells me you are making good progress."

"Does he? Well, it was all good mum."

"You like him, I see. You don't like a lot of people easily." She smiled. Ethan laughed a little. Silence. She was holding his hand and Ethan felt warm inside. He loved his mother. That was never in doubt.

"He's not bad. I think he understands me. He's good to talk to."

"You know son, I only want what's best for you. Your father and I have been talking and we think that you should join school in London as from next week. Everything is arranged and doctor Punjab says you are in a good emotional state to continue from where we left..."

"But mum, I thought we all agreed I should just study here. I don't think the schools in Europe are any better than the ones that we have here." He complained. Mrs. Wamari shook her head and peered into her son's eyes.

"Ethan, you are only so young. An education abroad will assure you of a bright future whether you return to this country or work abroad. I am not saying that it is better, but you need a change of

environment, challenge your mind, see new places, new people, and learn another culture. Your father wants you to be like him; a cultured gentleman. A citizen of the world. But not just that, we must maintain a family legacy through you as our only son. You know we love you more than a lot, Ethan, that's why we channel all of our resources into ensuring that you have the best life you can have." She was pleading with him now, but careful not to arouse protest. Gerald was counting on her to convince their son to leave town. The storyline was a good education, and perhaps they meant that, but deep down, Janet knew this was all to do with that useless boy Brian. She needed to save her son from him.

"Mum, you studied here and you're an exceptional doctor. Dad did too before going abroad for postgraduate studies! If you just want me to attend a *nice* school, then enroll me in one of the good private universities here. I will do just fine. I don't need London."

He stood up and walked to the big window facing the backyard where the gardenias bloomed at the bottom. The large tree and its wide branches slowly caressed his window panes and Ethan couldn't help but feel nostalgic. He remembered that day when Brian had slept over and they had laid so close to each other on the rug downstairs, with nothing but his father's good wine, a bag of potato chips and a quilt. The money and financial disparities between them had still been there then, but they had mattered not. In that moment, all that mattered to Ethan was that Brian's hands were around him in the middle of the darkness and that waking up, he had seen his handsome face. Prestige and privilege had not won over love then, and he assured himself that they wouldn't separate him from the one and only person he had yet loved.

His mind shifted to the morning after. As the tree ruffled its tender twigs on the spotless glass panes, he could almost feel the brush of Brian's soft yet firm hands on his skin lathering him up in the shower. He quivered and a smile stole a dance on his lips. The sparkle in his eyes was only a small figment of the joy that his memories lit up in his heart. He was in their zone, a place only the harmonized beat of

their distant hearts could recognize and comprehend. He only snapped from the reveries with the repeated call of his name by his mother. He shuddered at the thought of his mother even imagining what he was thinking of. She would be in a fit. He smiled.

"Ethan...are you okay? Did you hear anything I said?" She seemed worried. "Are you okay?"

"I am fine mum. I am okay. Tell dad I really don't want to leave." He crept back and sat beside her again.

"Can I ask, why is it that you really don't want to leave Ethan?" Janet queried her son. She hoped he would mention Brian or a 'friend' so that she could have leeway to ask the tough questions that had been in her head since Alice left earlier.

"I have all my friends here mum, plus...you know, I love my country," they both laughed. Patriotism to Kenya was a good thing, but Mrs. Wamari knew her son better than he knew himself. He was hiding something.

"Okay, I will talk to your dad again. Let's see what he says." She rose to leave.

"Mum..." Ethan called out and stood up. Mrs. Wamari turned around curiously.

"Congratulations on your anniversary tomorrow. I just wanted to say that before all the visitors dilute it. I love you mum." He moved to where she stood by the door and hugged his mother.

"I love you too son. Don't forget that. Thank you so much. You have made all the years worthwhile. Why don't you invite your friend Brian and his parents over too? There's a lot of food." She smiled again, patted his cheeks and stepped into the hallway to her bedroom.

"Ethan closed the door behind her and lay back on his bed. It was time to catch up with Bry.

"Hey, what's up handsome?"

"And what would I call you now, if I'm the handsome one." Laughter. "Listen, what happened with Alice, did you talk to her?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah...I went to her house and told her to stop bothering us."

"So she knows about us now?" there was a seriousness or a worry in his tone.

"E, don't fret about it, okay. Just be cool. She's not unreasonable. I made sure she won't be visiting our parents with gossip again."

"Bry, what did you do?!"

"I told her if she doesn't quit, I'll upload her nude stuff online."

Silence.

"Oh my God, are you crazy Brian! Why would you say or do that? And how do you have naked pictures of Alice?" he sat up fuming.

"Chill boy, I don't actually have anything, and I wouldn't even if I had any. I just told her that to scare her so she can stop bossing us around. I made it clear that I am not into her at all." Brian was struggling to explain. Again. "I would never do such a thing E, you know me."

"Good. But still, that's a horrible way to scare someone off. You are starting to worry me. I think this thing is getting out of hand in a way."

"She won't bother us again E. And stop worrying, I've got this. I'm not that evil, of course I would never hurt Alice that way but she threw the first punch and I can't stay down."

Brian was trying to show control over the matter. However, he himself was very unsure of what recourse Alice would result to. She was after all a determined and stubborn girl. Oddly enough, Brian loved that in her. If only she could focus that energy into cultivating healthy relationships.

"But for how long? How long must we keep it under wraps?" Ethan lay back on the bed again, "I don't suppose we will have to lie all our lives. Unless of course you don't plan to go the long haul with me."

Silence.

Silence.

"Don't ever say that again E. Don't you ever doubt my seriousness about us again. I have risked everything to build this and so have you. Because I love you, and the worst you can do now is tell

me that you have doubts about my commitment to us, okay? What is it that you keep telling me, huh? You say to me, 'don't let your mind grow fickle', remember? Or some clever thing like that."

Ethan laughed awkwardly and flipped his head over to the other side of the room. It was always an adventure talking to Brian. It was always a journey into another space, another universe and another plane. Like he could actually be himself.

"I will never doubt you again. I know what you did with Alice was hard for you, but you did it for us and I love you for that. But Bry, don't you think that maybe we can just come out to our families and deal with whatever comes having told the truth. I wouldn't want anyone dragging me out of the closet or you, but I don't want anyone else telling my truth and my story either."

"I know what you're saying E, but maybe it's not time yet. Besides, you know my belief is that closets are for clothes, right? We'll tell them in time. No rush."

They chuckled.

"When then? Ethan asked.

"I want the best for us, but when the time comes, I will be there with you as we tell them. That okay?"

"Sure Bry, I like that." he was smiling again.

Brian laughed on the other end and a silence ensued. They had both learned to treasure the unspoken conversations they shared.

Sometimes, it was simply listening to the steady breaths of each other on the phone or kissing in the lonely quietude of their private time. Or simply, very simply, lying on each other chests and listening to their hearts speak in informal languages. They were both learning to care for another person, learning to be selfless, to be a team and make compromises along the way. In the grand result of it, each was finding and discovering themselves more in the other. It was an adventure not devoid of mishaps and problems, but one that availed an alternative view of life. A view he loved, because he was in love and nothing else came as close to heart.

"My mum says I can invite a few of my friends over for tomorrow. I want you to come."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? You know how much your parents like me." Brian said sarcastically.

"Knock it off! You're coming. I want you to come. As my guest. And I am sure mum has already sent invitations to your parents too."

"I am not sure that's a good idea yet, but alright, I'll come. For you. Because I already miss you too much!"

"Oh please! You were bored with me this afternoon..."

"That could never happen you know, me bored with you? Dude..."

The conversations went on and on and on. There was no more reason to feel worried. Only the fuzzy warmth of speaking to a loved one. The 'on top of the clouds' feeling that seems to invade and barge into the mind when one finds reason to live, to look forward to tomorrow, and for Ethan, it was the courage he was slowly growing to chart a path for his life, and to make a solid decision for himself without the fear of annoying his parents. It was a freedom.

TODAY, 7:27 P.M.

They came in all manner of grace and glorious outfits. They drove in in Mercedes, BMWs, top of the range sedans and so on. One brought in a current model Porsche. They looked like money, smelled like it and acted the part. Mrs. Wamari would every now and then walk to the door to invite the latest arrivals and parade her beautiful smile alongside her husband as they welcomed in their friends and relatives. The party had been shrunk in size since Gerald was not feeling very upbeat about it lately. He had grown sentimental since last week and Janet felt it better to accommodate his newly found alter ego; the one that was closer to a human being. She loved her husband. Perhaps to a fault.

Mrs. Musembi had almost wrestled her husband about their coming tonight, but when she finally broke her walls and informed him that their visit to the Wamaris wouldn't be one of a social nature

but rather a diplomatic one, Mr. Musembi was on board. They arrived in a taxi. A good looking one, at least. Brian's mother looked pretty in a conservative dress and a simple shawl on her shoulders. Her hair was curled backwards and she wore no jewelry, except for the beautiful gold earrings her husband bought her on their last anniversary. It had cost a lot for Mr. Musembi but his wife deserved the best. Mr. Musembi himself, was in a suit, no tie, but he complemented his wife's look with his handsome appearance and a very graceful gait. Ethan was coming down the stairs when they came in. He held his breath as his mother waved him over and said, "Ethan, come say hello to Brian's parents."

"Congratulations to you two!" the Musembis said to the Wamaris, and the pleasantries were well received.

The tension was undeniable, but they all knew better than display their discords in public. Maria shuttled between the dining room, the living room and the kitchen, helping the caterers with anything they needed, but she could not help but take a moment to see how the awkwardness of old and unwarranted rivalry would thaw. Brian came in a second later after his parents and Ethan wanted to rush over and hug him, but he simply said: "hey Bry," and they all walked over to the living room.

After the dinner, all the guests had left except the Musembis who now moved to the sitting area with their hosts and their sons to discuss the matter at hand. Slowly, the mood grew pensive, expectant, like a meteor was falling to the earth and this was their last supper.

Silence.

"We are grateful for your invitation here, but I must say that we are quite uncomfortable with the friendship between your son Ethan and Brian." Mr. Musembi started.

"And we have the same concerns about your son with ours." Said Gerald.

Another silence crept in.

"I know, and we all know, that they have been friends for a long time, but he now seems to be taking my son in a wayward direction. He has started drinking, going to all these parties and he's just rude all the time! Like some child who wasn't taught any manners."

"Are you trying to say that I didn't raise my son right?" Mrs. Musembi roared. It's your son who wants to introduce Brian to cultism and a host of other perverted indulgencies! How dare you?" she turned her gaze to Ethan who now sat cowed by the corner on the large sofa next to Brian.

Janet felt the discomfort reach its peak and she stood: "There will be no shouting in this house. Call Maria for me, Ethan." She ordered.

Maria came into the living room with her hands in front of her apron and stood sturdily. Ethan resumed his seat next to Brian under the hawk eyes of all the other people present, except his mother who now turned to Maria.

"I am made to understand that you have been the go between for these two in their plans and communications." She pointed to her son and that good for nothing boy.

Maria quipped, stuttered, then straightened her back and said: "That is true."

Gerald put his left leg over his right and folded his arms on his belly then gave a watchful eye from above his designer glasses to the Musembis. They disgusted him. "So you basically decided that I don't know what's best for my son when I said that he is not to associate with this...this...this one?!" He was caught between apportioning an equally disgusting adjective to the disgusting son of the disgusting people in his house and keeping his cool. *Cool* was a terrible understatement of his state now.

"I am sorry, Baba Ethan," she apologized. "I just felt that Ethan seemed sad and alone all by himself in the house and so I suggested that I could invite Brian here. I did that, not him. I am so sorry."

"You don't have to lie for me, Mama Wanjia..." Ethan started.

"You shut up and sit down!" Gerald was having none of it.

Mrs. Musembi gave Maria a side eye and turned to her husband: "She is the one who called Brian from our house the other day as I told you. She even allowed him to get late in this den and sleep over here."

"What?!" The Wamaris flared up together. Two sticks of dynamite. "When did he sleep over in my house?" Asked Gerald, embittered, his nostrils puffed out and his glances shifting randomly amongst the other five people in his house except his wife who was equally appalled.

"You two, what is really going on? What have you people been plotting against my son and my family? I made it very clear that he is never to set foot in my house again." Gerald was not soon to quit.

"Can we all please be civil here? Is there even a real offense or crime committed by these two? Have we any evidence of actual harm brought about by their friendship? Perhaps we need to assess the real issue here." Mr. Musembi spoke calmly.

"And what's that?" asked Janet.

"That we have for long been unfriendly with each other for no real cause. We are of course mere civil servants, but I don't suppose that's the real reason why we don't get along." Mr. Musembi went on.

"What are you talking about?" Gerald was puzzled.

"I am talking about the fact that our sons are too close to each other. You dislike that their friendship may have gone beyond the social acceptances. I am worried as well. And I think beneath all this issue about cults and what not, there's an untold story there."

"Alice Nyoike is the real problem for these two families." Maria spoke up.

"What is happening here? Who is Alice Nyoike?!" Gerald was in a fit.

"We are right here, you know. You could just ask us what is going on." Ethan said. Brian pinched his hand to silence from under his shirt on the sofa. He was not sure of Mr. Wamari's reaction with the turn things had taken so far.

"I forgot to tell you dear. Alice is a girl who knows these two. She came to see me yesterday and told me that Brian is a thug and a hoodlum who is poisoning our son's mind." Janet said, cautiously.

"What?!" Mrs. Musembi's turn to flare came. "No, she came to see me yesterday morning and told me that it is your son, Ethan, not mine, who is the bad one! She told me he is in a gay cult. She said that he wants to introduce my good Christian son to it. Lord forbid!"

Ethan almost bust a gut in laughter, but he knew that would only worsen the matter. The sheer preposterousness of the claims Alice went around making was too much to be mad at.

The heat in the room grew exponentially. With each new bout of confusing information, Gerald Wamari had sat closer to the edge of the sofa and peered harder and angrier at the disgusting people in his mansion—the others.

"Alice claims to love Brian, but..." Ethan couldn't be quiet any longer. "It's obvious that she has played us all into her whims. Brian and I..." he paused. Everyone turned their curious looks to them, sitting like a pair of lost doves at the corner. Maria held her breath and prayed to her God that no blood would be shed in the house tonight. Brian swallowed the hard lump in his throat.

"We love each other. There, I said it. I am just so tired of the back and forth and the lying...gosh, the lying! Everyone, that's my truth...our truth. Brian is my boyfriend. Maria did nothing wrong. I told her about us and she has been so kind and understanding. See what happens when you actually care about people, dad...mum? You get to know who they are. Oh, and I am not going to London. I am simply tired of you bullying me into everything you want! Doesn't that feel better for everyone?"

The silence wasn't the problem now. It was the solid tension that was fattening in the air between them all. Somehow Maria was grateful that they had finally found the courage to do what she couldn't do herself many years ago. Still, she knew the walls were now crumbling in and Lord help them if no blood was going to be shed. Mrs. Musembi felt the disappointment of raising a weak son, while

Gerald simply wanted to unhear everything Ethan had just said. Janet held her husband's hand tighter and prayed in her heart that she could hold him down in the pending outburst that sat in waiting.

Brian was beside himself with both fear and concern. First of all, they were the visitors that *had* to be invited. Second, he had now been outed as the guy kissing on the Wamaris prized jewel and 'hoodluming' with him. And now, he could see the engorged eyes of Mr. Wamari plotting how to murder and obliterate him from the face of the earth.

No one saw the large physique of Mr. Wamari fly over the glass-top tables to the corner where Brian and Ethan sat and lunge straight for Brian's throat. The women screamed, Mr. Musembi rose to the defense of his son, Maria screamed harder, while Ethan helped Mr. Musembi rescue Brian from his father's talons. Mohammed came rushing in.

"Get the hell out of my house, all of you! And you, he turned to his son, get up to your room, now!" Gerald was boiling up. Brian shouted: "I love you E!" as hard as he could when the big man finally let go, then he ran out of the house leaving his parents behind. They followed him in a rush calling out to him, but he was out of the Wamari compound before they got to him. They soon left in the taxi that Maria had called in anticipation for the worst.

Ethan was done taking orders and he only said: "I love you mum," and walked out into his car and sped off. He would find Brian. He needed him now. More importantly, he needed him to be okay. The flashing headlights of other vehicles on the road and the confusion he was in all merged into a loud bang after about five kilometers in the direction that Brian had left in. Ethan Wamari crashed into a speeding lorry at the intersection of Lishoni Estate Road and Thika Highway. He blacked out.

Brian got to the intersection in a shady *matatu* on his way to the city center. He was going to stay with his aunt for a few days while he cleared his head when he saw the mangled wreck. With a skipping heartbeat, he recognized the plate number and called the driver to

stop. It was Ethan's car. *God please!* He rushed towards the wreckage that was only a few minutes ago, a beautiful car. He spoke to the ambulance services. Ethan had already been moved, but they offered him information on the hospital he was headed to. There was no time to waste. Ethan needed him now.

TODAY, 12:13 A.M.

Dr. Punjab arrived only a few minutes before the Wamaris ran into the emergency room at the Angel of Mercy Hospital. The comfortably furnished lobby could not hold their worry, and neither could the overly courteous nurses. They needed information on their son. The doctor appeared.

"Are you Ethan's parents?" Dr. Okumu asked.

"Yes, how is our son. Oh God please...how is he?!" Mrs. Wamari was uncontrollable.

"I am Dr. Punjab, Ethan's therapist." Dr. Punjab was shaken. Apparently he too could feel emotions.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wamari, could we speak in private please?"

"Doctor it is fine, Dr. Punjab is Ethan's therapist. We can speak here. How is my son?" It was Gerald.

"He is in critical care. The injuries he sustained are bad but fairly survivable. Still, I am going to insist that we need to keep him under observation for as long as possible before making any rush decisions. The next few hours will be critical for his recovery. We are going to assess nerve damage afterwards. It's too risky now. Your son sustained a broken collar bone, he fractured his leg and his arm as well. It is my understanding that he was not in a seat belt at the time but..."

"Will my son be okay doctor?" Gerald asked.

"We will do all that we can Mr. Wamari. We have the best doctors here and they are doing their best under my instruction. I have to go now, but we will have more information soon. The police will be arriving soon, of course, to conduct their investigation of the accident."

They huddled together. Janet thanked Dr. Punjab for calling them and he consoled them as a friend, as well as a therapist. Just as the pain was beginning to settle, Brian Musembi rushed in, oblivious of the Wamaris and headed for the reception desk.

"Hi there, I am looking for a friend of mine who was brought in a few minutes ago...his name is Ethan Wamari." He fumbled with his fingers on top of the huge slab that formed the reception area.

Gerald muttered something to his wife and headed for the reception. The nerve of that insolent boy!

"So it is not enough for you to confuse my son, now you want to come and kill him with worry, huh? What is really wrong with you Brian?" He lunged at him again before the hospital security calmed him down and pulled him from poor Brian. He was shaken. Mr. Wamari didn't scare him one bit now. It was the thought of losing Ethan that made him shake in fear. In a minute, the Musembis walked in, hurrying towards the reception area.

Janet rose too and headed to the center of the lobby where the confrontation had now been moved. Dr. Punjab was at task to quell the simmering feud and he did well to calm everyone down.

"All we must care for now is Ethan. All of us. He is in there fighting for his life and the last thing we need is any of us assuming to be more important than that. Please, we all need to calm down. If you want to shout at someone, call God." He was equally pissed and worried.

"We will stay with you," Mrs. Musembi assured Janet and held her hand. Somehow, their womanhood and motherhood had found common ground in the tragedy of her son and they cared little for feuds, cults, London or even homosexuals. They cared that a young man fighting for his life would be strong enough to open his eyes again, their main worry was that they would hear his voice again, and see him again. Alive.

Mr. Wamari and Mr. Musembi retreated to a more private part of the lobby where they seemed to make their peace or deliberations. Feuding in the middle of crisis was not very manly. Not here. Not now.

They assured each other. Dr. Punjab fetched them some water. It was going to be a long night. Maria was the last to arrive and her worry could not be overstated. Her eyes were wet and her handkerchief travelled between her eyes and her nose. Her dear Ethan was in trouble, and pain, and that meant that she was in trouble and pain. Alice was next to arrive, followed by her mother, who rushed over to Mrs. Wamari and Mrs. Musembi to offer her condolences.

NOW, 5:39 A.M.

The nurse came rushing to the lobby and they all rose from their seats.

"He's awake now, the doctor says you can see him, but he only asked for one of you," she said. Mrs. Wamari stepped forward.

"I am sorry, he asked for a Brian." All eyes on him. He didn't say a word, but simply followed the nurse through the double doors. Janet cried into her husband's arms.

The first thought that Brian had in mind on seeing his Ethan lying so weakly on the hospital bed was that he was a coward himself. Ethan had been so brave to say the unspeakable in their home and their continent and brave enough to survive a car wreck. He moved closer and held his hand while sitting on the very edge of the bed, wary not to disturb the tube that ran into his body.

"Hey E, I'm here. It's Brian." He whispered.

Ethan tried to speak but only managed to say: 'Love' and 'Bry', before slipping under again. He was heavily sedated. Brian sat with him, holding his hand in his and saying a silent prayer in his heart.

Soon, the door opened and Dr. Okumu led the whole lot of them into the room. They all swarmed around Ethan's bed, giving their spoken words of comfort and touching his hands in a solemn condolence. They said how brave he was and that he would be well very soon. The doctor excused himself but warned that they couldn't stay long. Ethan needed a lot of rest.

"I don't really understand all of this," started Gerald, "but my son almost died tonight." He paused and looked around the room.

“And the worst part, is that he would have died angry at me. Ashamed of my bigotry. Perhaps there is a way that we can all learn to understand these two and live with them. If only to keep them alive, at least.”

Mr. Musembi nodded in agreement and held Brian’s shoulder who in turn squeezed Ethan’s hand. He willed his love to live. There was so much more to see and conquer and many steps behind the road they had travelled so far. He really wished he was awake to hear his father’s words.

Alice stood behind them all, her shoulders heavy with the shame of her actions. She knew her dangerous games almost cost Ethan’s life and for that, she couldn’t forgive herself anytime soon. Dr. Punjab slid close to her and introduced himself. He could tell that there was a story behind her sullen face and her obvious embarrassment; something that he could perhaps help her with in counselling.

“We should pray for him,” said Mrs. Musembi. They all agreed. She led the prayer and they all said: ‘Amen’. The unreligious ones too. It would help, they told themselves.

And so they stayed and shared in their pain, in their hope and good will. And from the east, the first ray of a morning sun grasped the dark sky. It was a new dawn. Ethan was going to be fine, the doctor had assured. A new day was here for all of them.

Epilogue

FOUR WEEKS had passed since the accident and while the relationships of five parents and their children were getting better, the cast on Ethan's leg was getting heavier, more of a nag and he couldn't take the need to soothingly scratch the itch off his leg away. Dr. Okumu had said that it would be removed in a week, but that declaration had only exacerbated the need to strip it off for him.

A day after the accident, Mrs. Musembi and her husband had decided to address the elephant in their own house. Mr. Musembi however, insisted that he does most of the talking. He knew teenagers well—or he had thought he knew them until yesterday—and he was sure that Brian would not be forthcoming with his mother leading the interrogation; what they called *the discussion*. Brian had sat across from his mother and father and felt nothing but numbness in his body. Ethan was lying unconscious on a hospital bed, with nothing but the words of his mother and father whom he loved too much but who never quite saw it sitting beside him. He (Brian) on his part was here, getting ready for a final pounding from his parents and he cared not much about their methods of condemning him. He only hoped that the story of Adam and Eve and that guy Steve didn't weave its way into the talk. It would be unfortunate.

"Brian..." started Mr. Musembi, "I don't think you can possibly imagine how embarrassed, disappointed and angry I am."

Silence.

"Your mother and I..." Mrs. Musembi shifted her weight on the sofa and hardened her gaze on her son. His father went on, "...we have brought you up in a Christian way. You know very well that having feelings for another man is a sin. It's an abomination. The bible clearly says..."

"Is there any juice in the kitchen mum?" Brian interrupted his father. Mr. Musembi paused amid his statement and gazed upon his

son dumbfounded before shifting his stare to his wife who was equally amazed. Brian had never been one to interrupt his parents.

Silence.

"Yes, there's some in the fridge. Why?" asked Mrs. Musembi.

"I'm just thirsty." He easily said and started for the kitchen.

A few seconds later, the kitchen door leading to the backyard opened and closed. The Musembis stared at each other again, then decided to go see who had come in but getting there, the kitchen was empty. Brian was gone. Beside the empty tumbler on the kitchen counter top was a small hurriedly written note:

*"I know what the Bible says.
And I love you two so much.
See you soon.*

-Brian"

They stared at each other again.

Silence.

A moment later, Mrs. Musembi screamed.

Ethan had woken up on the fourth day with a fatigue that was well beyond anything he had felt before. The heavy sedation had overridden his body and all he could easily manage to do was shift his puffy eyes around the white room. On the small drawer next to his bed was a bunch of fresh bouquets of different types, so that the room smelled like a small garden. It felt nice to be awake again, and to wake up to such beauty. The clock on the wall straight ahead read 10:43. Given the shy light filtering through the louvered window shades of his hospital room, he deduced that it was morning hours.

It was the slight snore from the occupant of the chair on the other side of the bed that startled him and he turned his head slowly.

His father sunk sluggishly into the small chair making him look like a giant in a small hut. He was sound asleep. His usually clean face was covered by a sizable stubble and he looked tired. Ethan simply stared at him; at the man he had known all his life as his father, but never quite felt him as a dad. He was to him more of a guardian, one who made sure that he lacked for nothing, but he never got close enough to him; so that he felt like he was a stranger to him—an acquaintance—all his life.

Janet swung into the room in her usual graceful flare and quickly halted, a big white smile on her face. "Oh Ethan! Thank God son, you're awake!" Gerald had woken up when she almost screamed in joy and they both hovered over Ethan on the bed. It was more than relief for Gerald and Janet. It felt more of a pardon granted for a criminal; one who had been sentenced to life in a jail of heartache and agony—without parole. Their prized jewel was awake. She yelled for a doctor.

Alice Nyoike was at first reluctant to see Dr. Punjab, and it wasn't until he insisted repeatedly that she agreed to see him for one session only. It was after all a free session and she had nothing better to do on that day.

"So Alice, tell me...how are you feeling today?" he had started.

"I don't know...I feel fine. I guess. Why do you ask?"

Doctor Punjab had pulled out his notebook as always, hung his left leg over the right and started scribbling.

"I just want to know. That's all." Pause. "If I asked you to describe your feelings right now, what would you say?"

Alice found the question odd. Comical even. "Is this what you do all day...call people in here to ask them how they are feeling? Seems like a waste of time." She seemed angry. *Seemed.*

Doctor Punjab smiled inside. He remembered Ethan's first visit and his almost similar responses to his questions. *How feisty young people are*, he thought to himself.

"Are you always this defensive of yourself Alice?"

"I am not defensive doctor! I am simply answering your funny question."

Dr. Punjab stilled his pen and quizzically studied Alice. "I am happy you came Alice. And you'd be amazed at how much the question of '*how are you doing?*' really means. I hope as we continue to talk, you can be able to see me as a friend who wants to help."

Alice swallowed hard.

"I really don't need help doctor." She retorted.

"Then ask yourself why you came today."

"Mum..." Ethan started, "has...has Brian come to see me? What happened to him since I...you know..."

Janet glanced at her husband who was holding his son's hand. He nodded at her in approval. "Brian was here on the night you had the accident. He um...he was very worried for you, and he even came in here to see you. Everyone came Ethan. Everyone was here for you. Don't you remember?"

"No, I don't...But Brian...where is he now?" his tone was slowly morphing from concern to command.

Janet leaned back from him a little and licked her lips in apprehension.

"We don't know son." Mr. Wamari spoke. "No one seems to have seen him in the last two days. His parents called to ask if he came here. They said he just walked out and left. Look son, I am sure he will come back. He probably needs some time to process all this as do we all. Give it time, okay?"

"Meanwhile, you need to eat! Maria is coming in in a minute. I had her make you the pasta you like. I won't have you eating hospital

food at all!" Janet tried to make him smile a little. Ethan loved her and he loved that they were here with him. But there was a space in that smile that couldn't light up. Because the one who lit it was nowhere close to him now.

On the fourth session, two weeks later, Alice had stood by the wide window in Dr. Punjab's office admiring the view of Nairobi. Her mind was away to some years back when her father still lived with them. She had hated the man with all of her being. His own pains and ego had ruined their family and caused her and her mother both physical and emotional hurt. She had learned to surround herself with an impenetrable persona, a cover and a mask that veiled the easy eye from who she really was—a loving young woman, a brilliant mind, and a fiercely loyal person. Men, she had discovered, were susceptible to many things that potentially cause them harm and bring pain to those around them. She knew that it was a man's world she lived in, but she also understood that it was the woman that really drove it. She could spin anyone on her little finger and make a fool of them. She could invest her mind into great plans that executed to her wills perfectly too, but as she had lately learned, she too was susceptible to the same need for control and domination. She was aware that her own pain had caused Ethan pain and nearly killed him. She needed to unload herself and for once, trust a man again with her problems.

She turned to Dr. Punjab: "I am ready to talk."

They talked for two hours, and Dr. Punjab realized that he hadn't scribbled anything on his pad yet. Her stories were so captivating, and the more she spoke, the more he was convinced that Alice Nyoike was an astute lady with a brilliant mind and a terribly damaged view on human relationships. She had trouble trusting. Deep trouble. And from her stories, he could see that she was equally brave to stand up for herself as a young woman and for her mother from an abusive father.

"I am deeply sorry for what I did to Ethan and Brian doctor. You have to believe that. I knew there was something about Brian from the start. He was too nice, respectful...not like most guys I know. At first it was charming, but then I realized why he didn't need me that way and I guess I felt a rage of some sort." She sipped her juice and studied the doctor's face. He remained still.

"I don't hate gay people myself. I just didn't want Brian to be gay, and I know how funny that sounds, because I already liked him too much. And I felt like Ethan was the hindrance to that."

"What about now, how do you feel about it?" asked the doctor. "Ashamed." She smiled shyly. "It's hard finding genuine people like Brian these days. The world is so concerned with appearances and social status, that it's hard not to be swallowed by the frenzy. We all want to be celebrities, date the hottest guy or girl around and have a posh life. Brian didn't care about that." She smiled. Shyly. Like a woman does to a man. The memories made her nostalgic.

"So how would you describe Brian?" Dr. Punjab put the stationery aside now and leaned back into his long back chair.

"Can you imagine, we used to lay on the couch and simply talk? Brian was one to ask me how I am. It is how he asked it that got me. Like he really meant to know how I feel about everything. He's a good guy. The best I have met yet. Ethan too. He was just the unfortunate collateral damage of my rage."

"Is that why you haven't been to see him again since that first day? Because you are ashamed?"

"I think so." She walked to the window again. "Say hello to him next time you visit."

"We can just go together. I am leaving after we finish here. You can go tell him yourself."

"I don't think he wants to see me." She turned around worried.

"Don't overthink it, Alice. You'll be amazed at the capacity of human beings to forgive. Soon, you'll learn that shame accomplishes nothing in the end. It only serves to indicate remorse at our wrong

doings. But to make amends, one needs to drop the shame and do something. That's how you mend the bridges."

"Maybe you're right doctor." Alice smiled broadly.

Present Day

After another week, Ethan Wamari was on his way home with his parents who had now taken leave from their private practice to focus on the recovery of their only son. Motivated perhaps by a guilt or an epiphany of sorts, they doted on him and made huge gestures of affection. Ethan did love it, but mostly felt a little overwhelmed—smothered even—by the rather obvious guilt cleanse going on amongst them all as a family. He too held blame on his part for how he had handled the matter, but silently questioned himself on whether there was indeed anything to be sorry for in telling the truth. His father spoke on and on from the front passenger seat. He was on the phone with a renowned physiotherapist who would help Ethan recover his movement completely over the next few weeks. Mohammed remained quiet as ever. He had only spoken briefly to Ethan as he helped him into the car back at the hospital. Janet wouldn't let go off of her son's hand. She rode with him in the back seat.

As the road behind them thinned into a needle point leaving the city and approaching the greener suburbs, Ethan clung more tightly to the dancing figment of Brian in his mind. The pain medication and the sedatives he had been ingesting at the hospital may have had something to do with the images, but he knew deep down that he missed him, and that being well again without Brian around would mean little.

The trees seemed to bow endlessly on either side as more road widened out ahead. Janet held her son's hand softly. The engine of the lavish sedan groaned more fiercely. Home was getting closer and he could already smell Maria's unbeatable delicacies. Ethan reclined into

the comfortable seat, a blank expression astride his face. "*Where are you Brian?*"

The Musembi house had never felt colder, lonelier or more hollowed than it did now. Almost two weeks ago, Brian had mysteriously left, and the fat lump in his parents' throats was yet to clear. Mrs. Musembi roamed the rooms in her house with an air of mourning about her; face sullen, shoulders fallen and a particular sadness in her eyes that only a mother who loses a child knows. She prayed through the day that Brian was somewhere safe, warm and fed. She wondered and hoped that he would find a way to forgive her intrusion and come back home. She had called her sister Marion a couple of times to ask if Brian was staying with her, but she only said that she hadn't seen Brian in a long while.

They had filed a missing person report at the police station, but the officers didn't seem so concerned. However, that may have mostly been because she had refused to give a small bribe to them to speed up the investigation. Bribes weren't her thing. She believed in God to return her son.

Mr. Musembi buried himself into the construction work in the backyard where he was building a hatch for his pricy birds. He spoke less as the days went by. Rosie, Brian's younger sister, was left in the middle to pick up the stale air of stillness in their house. She missed Brian too. They all did. Each in their own way.

And so when the bell for the front gate rang, neither of them rushed to answer it. The enthusiasm for good news had started to dwindle after five days. Mrs. Musembi thought it must be one of the women from her church dropping by to offer comforting words and pray with her.

She opened the gate and gasped. Brian was home.

The sudden vibration in the air at the Musembi house was undeniable. Mrs. Musembi moved about in flashes, fetching this and that and the other for her son. Brian, only left to gazing, quietly enjoyed the buzz and remained quiet, holding onto the steaming mug of chocolate he was enjoying. Mr. Musembi was quite harder to read. Albeit Brian knew his father to be a man of moderation in whatever he did, he was after all a human being, and emotions occur to them all. Perhaps he was overjoyed to a state of silence over his son's return. Perhaps he was just bitter and seething in anger inside and waiting for a perfect opportunity to reprimand him. Brian therefore tried to avoid his father's indiscernible look, opting to silently follow his mother's flurry movements around the house with his eyes. After a few minutes in the kitchen, his mother returned to the living room and sat close to him.

"I am so happy you are home Brian. I was so worried about you. How are you? Have you been eating...and where have you been son?" She shot them one after the other.

"Let him eat and rest a little first. Don't overwhelm your son with all these questions. He should eat first." Groaned Mr. Musembi from the corner seat where he always sat in the house. Brian gobbled up the delicious *matoke* in an avaricious verve, then proceeded to ask for some juice and they all halted their talks and stared at him. Only then did he recall the *déjà vu* feeling they must have gotten from his question.

"I just need some juice mum, I'm not leaving again." They all sighed in a form of release.

"Okay then." She rose towards the kitchen and brought back a huge glass of mango juice.

Maria ran out wildly to meet Ethan as soon as the car was parked. Her arms outstretched into the warm air, she smiled and

hugged him all too tightly. Her happiness at his return was apparent and Ethan felt happy to be back. Happy to have some semblance of realism again. He loved Maria dearly and he couldn't wait to taste whatever it was that she was crafting in the kitchen.

"Ethan, welcome home!" shouted twenty or so voices from inside the Wamari house. The welcome home party was her mother's idea and she spared no moment to let him know that she did it for him. Ethan smiled and held on to his father as they walked in to the lovely living space inside the big house. Most of his relatives were there and some of his cousins who he barely saw. All confessed their worry for him, and the undying 'we are so happy you are okay' quickly became the chorus to their good will messages. *I am not okay*, Ethan whispered to himself repeatedly.

At the tastefully arranged table, the extended family sat to eat and engage in the usual small talk, but Ethan excused himself for a while and went to see Maria in the kitchen.

"Hey Mama Wanja," he greeted her again, "how have you been?"

Maria turned around from the oven ecstatically on hearing Ethan's voice and hugged him again. Her eyes grew wet and her smile was a labored effort.

"I think I am too happy to see you back and healthy Ethan. I thought we had really lost you." Her eyes looked happy and sad.

"It's okay Mama Wanja. I am not dying anytime soon you know. But I wanted to ask about..." he lowered his voice and peeped into the hallway first, "...about Brian. How is he? Have you seen him? I asked my mother and she said that he left and hasn't returned yet. I just wanted to confirm that from you."

"You miss him a lot, don't you?" Maria asked and laughed. "Well, Ethan, my friend Jemimah who works for Mama Omollo next to Brian's house just gave me the most amazing news!" She pulled him closer into the room. "She says that a boy the age of Brian, one who looks so much like him just came to their home. Brian hasn't been seen for two weeks and my friend thinks that it must be him." She was

whispering now, waving her gestures with the oven gloves in her hands—like a cartoon.

Ethan lit up at once. “And why haven’t you told me this since I came in? I am going to see him right now!” he started for the door.

“Hold on,” she pulled him back in. “You young people are so hasty with everything. I meant to finish by saying that maybe we should wait a while. Going there now before you even settle in could anger your parents again.”

“We are so past anger now Mama Wanja. I love Brian, and if he is back, I am going to see him.” He walked out of the kitchen. Just then, Janet called out for Maria asking her to check on whoever was ringing the doorbell. Maria ran towards the door hoping to stop Ethan from leaving and creating a spectacle for the whole family, most of whom, except his parents, didn’t know about the real cause of the accident, or even of Ethan being gay. He quickly opened the door with Maria behind him and there stood the Musembis with Brian behind them.

“Oh my God, Brian!” Ethan cried out. Every head at the table turned towards the door. Mrs. Wamari felt the gold necklace around her neck suddenly tighten and her face flush with confusion. Brian paved his body between his parents to embrace Ethan whose joy could not be hidden any longer.

“Welcome please, come in...come in please,” Janet welcomed the Musembis into her home. She didn’t quite know how it would all turn out, but she was very prepared to defend her son from anyone, of blood relation or otherwise, who would try to make him feel unloved again. She was willing to stretch herself to embracing him as he was. She could no longer bear the thought of losing her only son. Mr. Wamari smiled warmly as he hugged Mr. Musembi and they clapped each other on the back. From a stranger’s perspective, it would seem the two families had known each other a long while.

As for the rest of their guests, Mr. Wamari, as the man of the house, introduced the Musembis as dear friends and neighbors, pointing out that Ethan and Brian were ‘very, very close friends’. It was

aunt Belinda who spoke first after some more seats were brought in and everyone sat at the dining table.

"It's very nice to meet you all. I have been telling my brother Gerald for years now that I have never met his neighbors...and it's good to meet a friend of Ethan's for the first time. I was starting to worry that he has no friends around here." She joked on and glanced over at Brian who sat closely to Ethan, holding his hand firmly on his lap under the tablecloth. Aunt Belinda was always the nosy one.

"Oh, it's okay aunt. That's because Brian isn't just a friend to me. He is my boyfriend. I just thought you all should know. Let's eat then." Ethan casually said and proceeded to grab the salad dish. No one spoke for a while. The only sound in the room was the clink of forks and knives, and the quiet shuffle of Maria's feet between the kitchen and the dining room.

"It's something we were hoping to talk to you all about when Ethan and Brian felt ready to, but since he has already mentioned it, then you all know now. My son..." Mr. Wamari wiped his mouth and held his son's shoulder, "My son is gay, and he has a boyfriend...Brian. We have had some difficulty accepting that, and even some life threatening falling out, but, as with all wonderful things, we must stretch ourselves to understand it, and to embrace with love, those that we care most for."

"I know you are probably shocked at hearing this, as were we." Janet started and chuckled a bit. "We know that you all as our friends and family have your own opinions on the matter and we respect them all. What we ask is that our son be respected and loved as he is. It is something that we are also learning. And if I'm being honest, I think it's making me a better mother and a better parent."

"So that's all on that, now everyone dig in before the food gets cold." They all smiled and filled their plates.

After the meal, the Wamaris expressed their happiness at the return of Brian, querying his parents of his whereabouts in the last two weeks.

"He only said he had some issues to deal with. Honestly, I am just more than happy that my son is back, and that Ethan is alright." Mrs. Musembi confessed.

They watched them talk outside among the trees in the backyard from the living room window. "I cannot recall any other time when I have been as worried as I was on that day." Mrs. Wamari started, "That's when I realized in a long time, that I hadn't been a good parent. That my son needed his mother and father to listen to him. He wanted me to see him as he is. I am happy that I was given a second chance for that." The four parents nodded agreeably and sipped their drinks.

"The first thing Brian asked about on returning is where Ethan was and how he was." Mrs. Musembi said. "Times are changing. And we either change our attitudes or lose our children and our families to useless hate."

In the backyard, Brian and Ethan sat on the swings chatting. The afternoon sun filtering through the boughs of wide trees, Ethan reminded Brian of when he first kissed him there in the darkness.

"These trees are my witnesses Brian, should you ever choose to deny that you love me or that I love you." He joked.

"I'd only be mad to deny such happiness." Brian answered and pushed Ethan's swing. "How are you feeling though? Does it hurt?"

"Not really. The arm is fine now, but I feel weak sometimes. The doctor said I'll be fine sooner than I think."

"I was so worried E. I don't like remembering that day, because in a big way, I felt like I was dying myself. I didn't know what to say, or even what to do. I blamed myself for being a coward." Brian spoke quietly, his hands holding on to the steel chains on the swing and his handsome brown face towards Ethan. "You know, like I couldn't breathe."

"You did nothing wrong Brian. You were trying to avoid a bad situation for me getting worse. I am alive Bry, that's what matters. Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. You're alive and loved."

"I love you too Brian."

Silence.

"So, do you want to tell me where you ran off to?"

"Maybe in time I will. I had to deal with a few things first. But I called the hospital to check on you every single day but I told the nice nurse not to mention it to anyone. I never once let you out of my mind. I couldn't. I didn't want to."

They smiled at each other. In the kitchen, Maria washed the dishes with a joyful vibe about her. She was witnessing something wonderful. Like a moth beating the hard odds to burst out of its cocoon, love for Brian and Ethan was a beautiful story to be part of, and she knew that things would only get better.

"By the way, Alice came to see me at the hospital with doctor Punjab. She apologized for making our lives hard. She says to tell you that she's sorry for everything when you return. Oh, and guess what? She says there might be someone special already. But she's trying to wait it out and see."

"It's okay. I understand Alice. She was probably also trying to figure herself out and trying to fit in somewhere. The thing is that we really don't need to fit in at all E. That's great for her. I think we all have things we are going through and fights we fight on our own, but we don't have to do it alone. You know, I think that we should visit her sometime." Brian smiled.

"Also," Brian went on, "Dr. Punjab is getting married next week. I hope you haven't forgotten. We are all invited."

"Oh, yeah! Of course I remember. He has been a great guy so far. I wouldn't miss it for anything. And you know I never miss a chance to show you off and dress up." They laughed hard.

"Sure. Funny thing is, I wasn't nervous about their reaction in there," Ethan signaled their house, "I was more concerned about

letting them know who I am and who I love. That's all. So there will be no insinuations and presumptions. I wanted to tell my own story. In my own words."

Brian laughed out loud: "Look at you being all linguistic and mucho! Whatever did they do to you at that fancy hospital? I like you even more now."

"No, you love me even more now!" Ethan shouted out.

They sat there, talking and laughing on end about things been and things to come. The air felt right, the sky seemed a deeper shade of blue and the grass was greener. Something was right. Something was in its right place for the first time in a very long time.

The story of Brian and Ethan wasn't a story. It was a collage of time-stamped awkward moments that transcended a childhood marked with socioeconomic differences and a blurred line of emotions between the two best friends. It was the perfect picture of a covetable bromance between two extremely different people, who had somehow managed, over time, to brace the brunt of familial and social differences, eventually finding shelter, solace and perhaps something more in each other.