

Prologue

Black kites circled above the city, the birds effortlessly suspended on early monsoon winds. To the north, clouds gathered above the Aberdare range, not threatening but full of promise. Soon, the sweet-sour air of the city would be clear and fresh and its environs, the mulched volcanic soil, would be fertile again.

Inspector Sam Wamiru shrugged off a feeling of irritation as he crossed the courtyard to where a young constable waited behind the wheel of a jeep. Wamiru had just left the newly appointed Chief-Superintendent's office where he had been greeted with a false smile and a crushing handshake. 'Insecurity,' Wamiru muttered as he eased into the passenger seat of the jeep. The new chief was small for a policeman but well-spoken: too full of friendly pretence. A charade, an affectation from his colonial days; superiority all too firmly atop of any managerial agenda he might have brought with him from Nakuru. Overblown, like a fruit with worms inside.

The constable at the wheel of the jeep was young, slender and unknown. 'Kitonyi, sir,' he introduced himself, before edging nervously into the chaos of Nairobi's traffic.

'Garissa Road,' Wamiru said. The words a request rather than an order, he felt uncertain, looked grumpy and knew that the boy was nervous. Nairobi was no city for nervous drivers.

'I know it, sir.'

'Do you know Katamara village?'

'No, sir, I am new here from Mombasa but already I know Garissa Road.'

'Pass Thika Town and keep going until I tell you when to turn off.' Wamiru knew the village, knew the hospital and most of the people there, but did not know why he was being sent. The chief had been vague. All he had told him was that 'something serious' had happened close to the hospital and people would be waiting for him there. Was this new man from Nakuru trying to unnerve him, put him to the test? Well, he had a pad and pencil, a young constable as witness, and years of experience. The new chief was going to have to do better than this.

The driver started making conversation; talking about the coming rain, hoping it would be prolonged and steady. His driving was proficient and Wamiru had decided already that he liked at least one of the new kids on the block. 'It's here now,' the driver said with a smile as large raindrops began to splatter on the dusty windscreen. As the jeep pulled into the teaming current of Tom Mboya Street, the inspector's attention was caught by a *Daily Nation* placard and his immediate thought was to tell the driver to pull over. But the traffic was heavy and the young man was still nervous. Did he need a national newspaper to tell him something he already knew? No, in his heart he knew well who the body was and his heart was heavy with all the things he kept in there. All action must come from the brain, never from the heart; a Kenyan policeman cannot survive unless he knows that rule. *BODY IN THE MORTUARY IDENTIFIED*, the placard read. The body was that of his friend and things bothersome and burdensome moved from his heart to his gut. He felt sick.

His friend – the last time he had spoken to him was on the steps of the Nairobi Hilton Hotel. He was off duty at the time but, knowing that J.M. was due to leave a conference, Wamiru had waited for him to emerge. Embracing warmly, the words they spoke were few but friendly and they agreed to have a few beers together later that day to catch up. That was weeks ago and his friend had not been seen since.

A charismatic man, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki had been a *Mau Mau* freedom fighter, eventually to become an assistant minister in Kenyatta's government, a man destined for great things but far too outspoken. He was overtly critical of Kenyatta's extended family and their penchant for dealing in gemstones and trading in land purchases; it would have served him better to have behaved circumspectly, kept those things in his heart, but he was a politician, not a policeman and he had to appeal to the masses. And appeal he did. His cry of '*land for the landless*' roused the people to his cause and his, all too public, mantras made him nationally loved but too outspoken to survive. Loose cannons are dangerous to fledgling governments and a facially disfigured corpse had been found by a *Maasai* herdsman in the Ngong Hills; now the corpse labelled '*Unidentified African Male*' had been identified.

The rain increased and the driver kept talking but Wamiru was not listening. There would be an investigation, the people would demand it. So would the police, the government and the establishment and there would be a cover-up. Would the new Chief Super be involved in the cover-up? Of course he would: a man made for cover-ups. Wamiru had been angry at what had happened and he had shown it. He should never have shown that he knew so much. Should never have told a superior, never have threatened to go to the newspapers. Now, what he should have kept in his heart was in his gut and it was churning and a false smile and a false handshake had sent him to an incident without telling him anything about it.

The rain was heavier now and the wipers worked frantically on the rain-lashed wind screen. On Garissa Road, the pot holes of the short rains had been filled and tarmaced over but this was the start of the long rains and the pot holes would return in days. Kitonyi slowed the jeep. All traffic slowed except for the honking, laden *matatus*, busses underwritten, as they were, with divine indemnity; 'JESUS SAVES' and 'TRUST IN JESUS' emblazoned on their roofs, hellbent on adding to the carnage that was Kenya's

roads. The faster they went the more money they made. Monsoon rains were good for business.

Thousands of miles away, the rain had started with southerly winds in the Indian Ocean; strong sea breezes growing stronger as they pressed towards the coast of East Africa. Over the ocean a measureless raft of moisture had been drawn up by the sun and cooling, had lowered to a thick, black shapeless stratus which would soon become the long rains. When the clouds reached Kenya they emptied on the coastal towns of Malindi and Mombasa and then the clouds swept inland: a leaden mass stretching all the way between the Sabaki and the Tsavo rivers to the south and the great Tana River to the north, before they advanced to saturate the Tsavo plains and beyond to the Chyulu hills. Torrents of rain would soon be reviving the temperate Rift Valley, the central highlands, the cities, towns, villages and their environs, a weight of water thundering down from the Aberdares and the Ngong Hills to swamp the grasslands. Instantly, little fresh streams would multiply, to muscle their way through the loamy ground to gorge streams and tributaries until they swelled and rolled to join the Galana and the Sabaki rivers; back to the Indian Ocean; back to where the rain began. In all of Africa, nothing is as welcome as the coming of the long rains.

'What is your name?' Wamiru shouted above the thunder on the roof.

'Constable Kitonyi, sir, new here from Mombasa.'

'Your Christian name?'

'Peter, sir.'

'Peter, we are going to a hospital in a village called Katamara. It's a hospital and school run by Catholic nuns, "The Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood" they're called. All the new chief would tell me was that something serious has happened.'

Peter Kitonyi, his head thrust forward, stared motionlessly through the windscreen. Only his lips moved, 'You know this place well then, sir?'

'Last year I was sent there to investigate the death of a child.'

He was found hanging from a window cord.’ Wamiru lowered his voice, he appeared to be musing and Kitonyi had to tilt his head to hear what was being said. ‘It was a mystery. An accident, it couldn’t have been anything else. Only God knows how that little boy came to die.’

‘One day, I might be in charge of such an investigation,’ Kitonyi said wishfully.

‘The children there are badly handicapped. Maybe it’s another child but whatever it is, it must be serious or I wouldn’t have been called for. A local boy, a corporal called Adonis, he would be dealing with it.’ Once again Wamiru seemed to be talking to himself.

The driver switched off the demister so that there would be no need to shout above the rain. ‘Or maybe a *musungu*: a dead white at a hospital, very serious.’

Wamiru disliked intensely the inherent inferiority of the man’s remark but silently he agreed. If murder was involved then a dead white at a hospital would be very serious indeed. Colonialism had gone, but unfortunately residual inequality remained.

‘Are there *musungus* at the hospital?’ the driver asked with a glance sideward.

‘The nuns are Kenyan but there are three whites,’ Wamiru answered. ‘Two English guys are building a new accommodation block for the nuns. I’ve met one, Charlie Carter, but I’ve never met the other. And there’s a nurse, Jennifer Collins from Ireland—’ He was going to say more but stopped himself.

‘Maybe it is the *musungu* woman who is dead,’ Kitonyi suggested sombrely.

Wamiru could not reply for this *musungu* woman inhabited his mind. She had done so since the day she asked him, quite blatantly, if he had another woman – and etched in his mind were eyes that clearly hoped, then briefly shone at his denial, reminding him that she was single too, inviting, and awakening in him, once again, the urge to bond with a woman. He had lost his arm. With his arm his confidence had gone too and only bitterness remained. The bitterness was diminishing and he knew

in his heart, that with this woman at his side, it would soon be gone. She was a puzzle. Entering Kibera to aid a sick woman is tough. But she was weak too. A trembling, weeping weakness because of what was assailing her at that time. He had helped her to overcome her problem and she had done something just as great for him; helped him in overcoming his. His mind went back to the suddenness of her question and the things, unspoken that had flowed between them at that moment: the stream of promise, honest, almost child-like, its flow unimpeded by the jutting rocks of vacillation and dilemma. That night in the Jaffa bar they had got to know each other, like each other, and they could build on that. In this lovely stream there was no perplexity. He thought he had lost her to Charlie but now he knew he hadn't. The next weekend he was meeting her for dinner in the city; there was excitement in her voice when she accepted. His first date for a very long time; he wasn't making a mistake this time. Surely he could never make that same mistake again.

'Yes, I am thinking it is her.' Kitonyi's jaw set grimly.

Wamiru looked out of the window into the streaming mist of rain. It couldn't be. It mustn't be. If this woman was dead, then hope had vanished from his life. Let it be no one. Let it be Charlie, or this Freddie who he had never met. Or maybe another child, no, no, another dead child found in the arms of Nurse Collins, not that. Anything rather than for him to have to investigate her again, question her about another child. His mind sprang shut like a trap, the concept too awful to contemplate.

'The body in the mortuary sir, I think it is Josiah Kariuki, did you see the placards?' Kitonyi had changed the subject.

'Yes, it is Josiah, I'm sure of it.'

'It was rumoured.'

'I knew him well. In fact, he was a friend of mine.'

'Then for the people it is sad but it is more sad even, for you.'

'Yes it is very sad for me.' Wamiru wanted to talk because he dared not think. Thinking made his stomach churn. He had done what had been asked of him and still managed to stay loyal to his

friend. Over beers that day, J.M. had told him what might happen to him and who would be responsible. It *had* happened. Wamiru had tried to do what he felt was right: big mistake. He had gone to the Chief, the old Chief, and told him what he knew. The old Chief had understood but had retired suddenly, too suddenly, and now this new man, who he didn't trust, had taken his place. Those actions had not come from Wamiru's brain but from his heart, bigger mistake. Relax, he told himself; he was being paranoid.

To the left, they were passing the mist-shrouded town of Thika. Before them, to the right the cloudy mount of Kilimambogo closed on them from out of a drab sky; a bleak, wet landscape. Katamara village nestled at the far side of the mountain, another half an hour on the rain-swept road. Wamiru liked the young man hunched over the steering wheel, unblinking eyes fixed straight ahead. He was quite scrawny for a copper, his uniform too big for him. Who the hell had fitted him out? He didn't like the doffing of the man's cap to something his country had fought so hard to rid itself of but that would take time. Colonial days were not quite over for the *wanachi* but they were for Inspector Wamiru. But he liked the young man's innocence, his enthusiasm fresh from the unequivocal dogma of training school. How long before it was turned to cynicism by corruption? Did he have the right kind of heart, the kind to hide things in? He was thinking again, he must stop thinking.

'No respect, not even for police,' Kitonyi grumbled as a *matatu* overtook them, a wave swamping the jeep.

'See the mountain? That's Kilimambogo, Buffalo Mountain,' the inspector said, nodding across the driver to the right. 'In a while we'll pass Muka Tano, then the next sign will be to Katamara, then it's about two miles to the village. The road is black cotton and you know what that stuff's like. You're going to have to slow right down and drive real careful in this rain.' They drove on, no thunder or lightning, no fanfare, just slate-grey slabs of cloud assuaging the thirsty earth. 'Doesn't look much, does it, the mountain? but all the way south from here there ain't a bigger

one. Next biggest mountain south is Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.’ The inspector kept nodding at the mountain. ‘Just over seven thousand feet, not much of a mountain really, but the people around here are mighty proud of it. You’ve got to be proud of something if it’s all you’ve got.’

Kitonyi smiled proudly, ‘Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa, and the next highest is Mount Kenya and me, I climbed it. How many Kenyans have thrown a snowball? Me, I’ve thrown snowballs from the top of Mount Kenya, imagine.’

Wamiru laughed. Kenyans did not climb high mountains. Why would they? Only stupid *musungus* and paid guides did that, but this scrawny policeman had. Good luck to him. The jeep shuddered as its wheels hit a rough patch of road, a pothole succumbing already to the rigours of the rain. ‘How long did it take you to climb Mount Kenya?’

‘It took three days and two nights. Even then, we did not make it to the highest peak. We needed special equipment for that, but we reached the snow.’ Proudly, he talked of his adventure, sleeping under the stars and how he saw lions and elephants on the lower slopes. Then, as the rain continued unabated, they were signalling right towards the village of Katamara.

Here the dirt road was slick and dangerously slippery as Wamiru had warned and after engaging four-wheel drive Kitonyi struggled to keep the jeep at centre. Black cotton soil is impermeable and treacherous when sodden and it took almost three-quarters of an hour to reach the outskirts of the village. Nearing the hospital, the first building they encountered was unfinished. ‘That’s the building project the two whites are working on,’ Wamiru told the driver. ‘It’s a new accommodation block for the nuns. It’s a big building but I’d have thought they would have been further on with it by now.’ Kitonyi slowed and stopped the jeep outside, eyeing the building which looked derelict and ominous in the rain.

‘I need to relieve myself before we get to the hospital. Is that OK, sir?’ the driver asked. Wamiru motioned that he would join him and Kitonyi jumped from the jeep and opened the door po-

lately for his superior, spreading his jacket high above his head to afford protection for them both. The rain slammed into the jacket, cascading at either side in streams.

Together they picked their way over higher ground towards the doorway of the building. It was then that Kitonyi noticed the flapping left sleeve of the inspector's jacket and jerked his eyes away.

'Don't tell me you didn't know,' Wamiru laughed. It was impossible to stay together under one jacket and with one hand he pulled the collar of his own jacket above his head. 'I thought everybody knew.'

Kitonyi was dodging puddles a couple of paces in front of him. Upright, he looked even scrawnier, his uniform even bigger. Even his trousers were too big.

Kitonyi murmured apologetically, 'I didn't know, sir.'

'Sam Wamiru has only one arm: only one-armed copper in the whole of Kenya, maybe in the world. Even in Mombasa it is well known that Inspector Sam Wamiru only has one arm. I can't believe you didn't know.'

They had reached the comparative shelter of the building and both men let their jackets fall down about their shoulders.

'I'm sorry, sir.' Kitonyi said. Then he ventured, 'Can I ask how?' he allowed the question to fade away, as if suspecting his superior's reluctance to answer.

'Happened some time ago,' Wamiru answered, jumping a large puddle to the shelter of a corrugated *mabati* section of roof. 'Maybe I'll tell you on the way back to Nairobi. See what time we get finished at the hospital.' He would tell him something, the usual; he would tell him that he got bitten by a spitting cobra.

They were both beneath the small, roofed area and, facing opposing walls, unzipped their flies. Wamiru thought it strange that this policeman had never heard of him. Maybe he wasn't as famous as he thought he was. He shuddered at the thought of

what might lie in store at the hospital. Finished, he shook himself and looked around at the stark walls and the beginning of the roof. 'Something serious' had happened; the words resonated. Someone had been murdered, he knew it. He shuddered again. From this day things would not be the same for someone. Awful things happened in life, and sometimes so suddenly, so unexpectedly. A story was about to unfold and in one shattering moment he knew why the young policeman had never heard of him.