

CHAPTER 1

THE UMEJI-GAMBO ROAD was dry and dusty, deep potholes marking its surface, patches of asphalt testifying to its once tarred state, its red, brown, and clay-colored soil rising up in puffs of dust, spiraling upward with the passage of cars, buses and trucks, forming a thick brown smog, coating the run-down vehicles and their weary occupants. On either side of the road, shrubs lost their green hues to the brown layers of dust. Empty plastic water bottles, torn plastic bags, empty juice boxes, cans, rags, and broken bottles colored brown by dust competed with the vegetation—remnants of travelers gone by. Overhead, the sun pursued its downward course, having exerted its full force for the day, burning the earth, grass, and shrubs. Steam hung suspended in the air, and the wind held still, shirking its errands. The trees and their branches stood at attention. And the brooding skies were heavy with thick grey clouds that promised much, ever so much. But the parched earth waited in vain.

The dry season had just begun. The rainy season, recently ended, left abundant evidence of its prowess. Torrents of rain had gnawed at the earth, and the flood water had carted off as much soil as it could, creating deep gullies by the sides of the

road, where no path had been made for it, forging its own way voraciously, further narrowing the one-lane road. The blatant act of nature exerted its influence—unimpeded—where man could not, or would not, oppose it. Cars, buses, and trucks whizzed past each other, barely able to avoid contact, weaving in zigzag patterns to avoid the gullies in the road. The speed limit was solely at each driver's discretion. The vehicles in different states of disrepair sped on, each driver being the sole determinant of his vehicle's roadworthiness.

The brown Volkswagen bus, its sides emblazoned with the inscription *who knows tomorrow*, was loaded beyond capacity. Twenty-two people were squeezed into a space built for twelve; each single-passenger seat accommodating two, to increase the profit for the transporter in this unregulated business. Of necessity rather than choice, passengers sat with their hips squeezed against each other. The interior panels of the bus had peeled away in parts, exposing the bare metal frame. A hole where a section of the bus floor had rusted away let in as much dust as the open windows. The door of the bus—loose from its hinge—clanged. The open windows did not relieve the stifling interiors. A stout man seated by the window wiped his face and neck repeatedly with a drenched, once-white handkerchief. Others sat in their tight quarters, resigned to the sweat pouring down their faces and necks. Breathing had become a conscious exercise. The air in the bus was stale.

Asa Adu, his long legs cramped in the close confines of the seat, shifted his weight to ease the pressure from the passengers on either side of him, but this physical torment paled in comparison to the mental pressure that had become his daily experience. At twenty-five, he was tall with broad shoulders, a college graduate of four years, a mechanical engineer, hardwork-

ing—jobless. His parents were poor, and he had never owned a new item of clothing. His mother always bought used clothes that came from Western countries. Their meals were limited and the only time an identifiable morsel of meat appeared on their plates was at Christmas. Despite all that, Asa never felt deprived, not until he graduated from university and was faced with the disappointment of unemployment.

He was friendly, a reassuring combination of easy smiles and cool confidence. Although born of poor parents, he grew up with an “I can conquer the world in my underwear,” a “never out when down” attitude. He had grown up on hope, and he had hoped for a better future, believing that hard work, dedication, and a good education would lead to a better life. As the months after graduation quickly turned to years without a job, Asa began to realize that not all expectations become experiences.

Asa’s father was seated in the row in front of him. He could see from the crooked position of the man’s shoulders that he too was cramped. *Fifteen more minutes to our stop, he thought, fifteen more minutes.*

The jolly driver, the only one not sharing a seat, whistled a happy tune. Stripped naked, perhaps for comfort, and wailing from hunger or discomfort, a toddler with a large head on his thin neck, skin stretched tight over conspicuous ribs, swollen feet dangling from spindly legs, sat on his mother’s knees. Tears streamed down his face to join beads of sweat on his distended belly. His mother fed him a piece of mango. The child turned his head away from it but later capitulated, perhaps realizing that that was all there was. Still, he wailed at intervals as he nibbled at it.

Beside Asa sat Odera, a final-year university student and political science major from Asa’s alma mater, Asa would soon

find out. Once he boarded, he spoke above the din to Asa of his hopes for the future. He had an uncle in the city and planned to move there after graduation. He had high hopes and Asa remembered feeling exactly the same way before graduation. He had believed that after his dedication to his studies, armed with a university degree, opportunities to make a living would open up for him.

“I think job prospects are better out there, and I will live with my uncle until I find a job,” said Odera, and his warm smile radiated the naive expectation of youth as he smoothed the knees of his brown checkered pants.

“What does your uncle do for a living?” Asa asked in an effort to make conversation. He didn’t want to discourage the younger man with tales of his own exhaustive and wearied attempts at job searching. He glanced at the checkered pants and remembered when his mother bought him a similar pair from the used clothes stall at the market the year he went to college. He did not care for checkered pants, but after she talked enthusiastically about how great a bargain they were, he wore them to please her, until they were aged and threadbare.

“He is a teacher at a high school,” said Odera cheerfully.

“Is he getting paid regularly?”

“That is one problem they currently have. He has not been paid in four months.” Odera’s eyes shifted downward momentarily. “But I don’t plan on being a burden for too long,” he said and smiled.

“Really? Just four months? That’s better than most of the country!”

“That indeed is a challenging problem. Of course, our purpose in getting an education is to contribute to society, but we also need to make a living.”

“Our society has a lot of challenges and...” Asa’s voice faded, overshadowed by a thundering boom that reverberated through the bus. His eyes bulged and he shot the driver a glance. The driver crouched forward, gripping the steering wheel; knuckles tense, muscles taut, he wrestled the wayward bus. Passengers were flung around. The erratic bus careened on its side and flipped over the edge of a huge ditch by the roadside. Passengers grabbed at whatever they could—the seats, metal frames, or fellow passengers—as the bus tumbled. Screams arose from every corner, at first many, then a few, until silence. The door flew open and the bus spilled passengers into the ditch. With a crunching thud, it landed leaning on the driver’s side, crushing passengers beneath.

Asa opened his eyes, and the world spun; he closed them again. *I am alive!* he thought with relief. Suddenly realizing that he was lying on a motionless body, he rolled away from it in dismay and opened his eyes again. Feeling steadier, he crawled out of the bus and searched desperately for his father. He scanned the interior of the bus, but his father was nowhere to be seen. Bodies were scattered everywhere. *I must find my father,* he thought, urgently calling out again, searching among the bodies. Suddenly he saw his father waving at him from a seated position at the farther end of the ditch. Awash with relief, he ran to him. “Are you all right, Dad?” he asked, as he knelt and placed a hand on his father’s shoulder.

“I’m all right, son, except for a little pain on my left side. At least, I’m doing better than these people.” Mr. Adu lifted his chin toward the bodies strewn around them. Asa sprang to his feet as his eyes followed his father’s gesture.

Personal belongings and bodies sprawled in different positions of deformity littered the ditch. They were old, young,

dead, dying, silent, screaming, a tattered backpack, a crooked shoe, an old book, a wooden walking stick, a torn plastic bag, mangoes ripe and unripe. One woman lay on her belly motionless while the toes of her right foot pointed skyward; another yelled for help, unable to move her legs. An old man groaned, clutching his mangled leg, his bone exposed. A young man had a large gash on his leg, blood spurting to form a puddle beside him. Asa took off his shirt, tore a broad strip of cloth from the lower end, and tied it on the young man's wound. The toddler lay beneath the still body of his mother, his face peaceful. A man yelled for help from within the wrecked bus. Asa ran to the bus. Two pairs of legs were visible beneath the vehicle, but they were immobile and one had brown checkered pants. The stout man with the drenched handkerchief was trapped and around him were several motionless bodies. He yelled again when Asa came to him, but his attempt to free the man was unsuccessful, and he realized he could not do it by himself. The driver was wedged in his seat, head slumped and the steering wheel jammed into his chest. A large gash on his forehead had stopped bleeding.

Asa glanced toward the road. A few people had stopped and were looking down. Stumbling in his haste, he ran toward them. Two men who had an open-back truck agreed to help transport victims to the hospital. Asa and the two men made another attempt to free the man in the bus but without success. His leg was crushed, lodged between the metal frame of the seat and the interior wall of the bus, and there was no tool to cut the metal. The sun had set and darkness had descended over them. The men decided it was best to transport those they could to the hospital. They lifted the injured into the open-back truck, taking everyone they were able to move. Ten people were loaded into the back of the truck. The cries of the man trapped

in the bus faded behind them as they left for the hospital. Asa sat beside his father for the ride, trying to erase from his mind the cries of the man in the bus and the terror in his eyes as they walked away from him.

Asa grieved that there was no better help for the victims. There were no trained medical personnel who could be called on, no emergency number that could be relied on to send help. He was lucky to have found even these two men able and willing to help.

The ten miles to the hospital felt to Asa like thirty as screams of pain intensified with every jolt of the truck in and out of pot-holes. At the hospital, they were directed to the reception desk, staffed by a young nurse and a doctor who showed them where to lay the victims. The room was small, with a desk and two chairs at one end and a single narrow bed at the other. A metal basin rested on a wooden stool beside the bed; a folded wheeled room partition screen with splashes of dried blood and other stains stood nearby. The walls were bare and the paint chipped. Two windows on opposite sides of the room had been left open for ventilation. The room was lit by a naked light bulb located at the center of the ceiling. Insects swarmed around the bulb and the buzz of mosquitoes was like irksome background music. The odor of Dettol antiseptic lingered in the hot air. A door from the reception room led into one end of an open ward, seventy-five feet long, with windows at intervals along its long length and narrow iron frame beds placed against the walls on either side. The wall at the left end of the ward, close to the entrance from the reception room, bore a round black wall clock. A nurse in a white dress and cap sat at a wooden table at the far end of the ward. With the help of the driver, Asa and the other man began to carry the victims into the ward.

Dr. Zariki, a young man of short stature, two years fresh from medical school, examined the victims, noting their injuries. He had close-set eyes and bushy eyebrows. He meticulously documented every patient's information and complaints on a clipboard.

"And you said you were in the same vehicle as the rest of these people?" he said to Asa, incredulous that Asa came out unscathed.

"Yes," Asa replied as he waited eagerly for treatment of the victims to begin, but the young doctor laid the clipboard on the nurse's desk and informed him that the senior doctors and surgeons would be back in the morning, and there was nothing that could be done until then.

"Not until morning?" Asa said, his forehead creased in a frown. *This cannot be happening*, he thought. *All these injured people, some dying, some bleeding and no help until morning?* "Please, Dr. Zariki," he pleaded, "there must be a way to help these people tonight."

"I would do more if I could," the young doctor replied curtly as he went back to the reception room.

Asa turned his face toward the windows of the long ward. The air was still and the heat unrelenting, even though the sun had long since gone to rest. Outside, darkness had taken the upper hand; the half-moon and the stars were no match for it. Through the darkness, the firebugs busily flashed their light, but their fleeting sparks could not illuminate the dark. Night sounds floated in through the open windows as the toads croaked their song, the crickets chirped their response, and male nightingales staunchly led the solemn ensemble.

Asa's mind went back to the ditch and the man still trapped in the bus. His cries had lodged themselves in Asa's brain. The

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man and those now in the hospital were all trapped in a helpless situation—victims of an inadequate system and an inadequate government.

He turned from the window and looked again at the victims. Those who could not get a bed lay on the bare cement floor. They were powerless and their moans rose up as if with one voice to fill the ward. It dawned on Asa that the nightmare for the victims was only just beginning.