

CHAPTER ONE

Wamuyu

The morning was cold and the persistent drizzle did not make it any better. The unrelenting wind howled mercilessly through the soggy earth, shaking off water droplets desperately clinging onto leaves and making an already gloomy day even worse for the young girl seeking shelter under a massive mango tree.

“I really must get back into the house,” Wamuyu thought to herself, pulling at her raggedy sweater in an attempt to keep warm. This did not offer any reprieve for the tattered cloth could do little to keep her body from shivering from the biting cold.

“What’s taking them so long,” the young girl wondered out loud casting furtive glances toward the tiny shack she called home, “I need to get back in there or I will certainly freeze to death,” she thought to herself.

Just then, her stomach let out a loud rumbling noise and the young girl paid it no notice for it was a common sound. Hunger was a feeling that Wamuyu was accustomed to, it was a very real part of her existence so much so that a full stomach caused her untold discomfort.

“It seems I will be out here longer than expected so I might as well make myself comfortable,” she thought to herself while looking for a spot where she could sit. This was not easy to find due to the drizzle and the early morning dew that was yet to dry up. She was just about to give up when her eye saw a paper bag tucked into the hollow of the tree.

Wamuyu smiled to herself as she pulled it out, laid it out and carefully lowered herself to the ground. She absentmindedly smoothened the paper around her remembering that she had put the bag inside the tree to cater for the next time she would need to seek shelter here. Leaning against the gigantic tree trunk, Wamuyu thought of what other items she could possibly put inside the tree that was becoming like a second home to her.

The shivering had not subsided and Wamuyu pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged herself. She could hear her neighbours voices as people begun to go about their chores, smoke could be seen snaking its way out of their kitchens and the smell of breakfast soon begun to waft towards her.

Wamuyu knew it was just a matter of time before people begun venturing out of their homes, children going to school and she did not want them to find her shivering in the cold under the mango tree. She did not want to have to deal with their taunts and pitiful looks, not today.

“Mum please, finish quickly I need to get back into the house,” she thought once again looking expectantly at her home, silently willing the door to open.

Seating under that mango tree, knees tucked under her chin, hands clasped tightly together, ears ringing from the howling wind, Wamuyu thought about her life. Fifteen years it had been, years full of constant struggle, of unrelenting almost insurmountable challenges that just wouldn't yield.

Growing up in Gatheru at the heart of Murang'a, Wamuyu knew, keenly knew, that society frowned upon her for being 'fatherless', the daughter of a single mother. As though that were not bad enough, she was the daughter of a woman who the sanctimonious members of society considered as being of loose morals.

But Wamuyu did not judge her mother, did not even think of her as anything more than a woman doing the best she could to give her child a better opportunity. After all, her mother Wanjari was all she had, the only constant in her otherwise unstable life, the one person Wamuyu knew would move hell and high water to keep her safe and happy. She loved her mother, good or bad, she loved her and longed for the day she would be in a position to assist her financially.

She smiled to herself remembering when she approached her mother with the brilliant idea that she could drop out of school, look for work as a farm hand or as a house help to make ends meet.

The look on her mother's face is one Wamuyu would never forget for it was an expression of deep sadness mingled with utter rage.

“Do you think I enjoy doing what I do Wamuyu?” Her mother had asked her, “Don't you know that every sacrifice I have made is so that you never, ever have to degrade yourself in order to earn a living? I want more for you my child, I do not do this so that you can go and be someone's farmhand or be treated like a slave in someone's house, I want more for you,” she had said grabbing her by the shoulders and looking deep into her eyes.

Wamuyu was barely 14-years-old at the time but that conversation had a great impact on her and she determined that the only way to free herself and her mother from the shackles of poverty was through education. Henceforth, Wamuyu gave her undivided attention to school and her mother gave her everything she needed for her studies at the expense of everything else.

When she finally sat for her Kenya Certificate of Primary Education exams, Wamuyu scored 400 marks out of 500 and she emerged top in the district. For once, Wamuyu saw her mother walk tall, proud and with her head held high around the village; for a few days following the exam's release it appeared as though Wanjeri was finally considered a valuable member of society – but that was very short lived.

Wamuyu remembered how her mother scrimped and saved, assuring her that while she could not afford to pay for the national school that Wamuyu had been called to, she was going to go to secondary school come what may. And sure enough, come January, Wamuyu was among the many girls who reported for their first day at Ithigi Girls Day school.

Thinking of school made Wamuyu sit up straight; “Oh no!” Her mind screamed, “I am going to be late for school and we have an exam today! Perhaps I should go knock on the door,” she thought looking once again towards her home.

The thought had barely been processed when she saw the door finally open and her mother hurriedly usher a man out of the house. As usual, Wamuyu remained at her spot waiting for her

mother to call for her because Wanjari usually preferred to clean up the house and herself before calling for her daughter. But today was different for no sooner had the man disappeared round the corner than Wamuyu heard her mother urgently calling out to her.