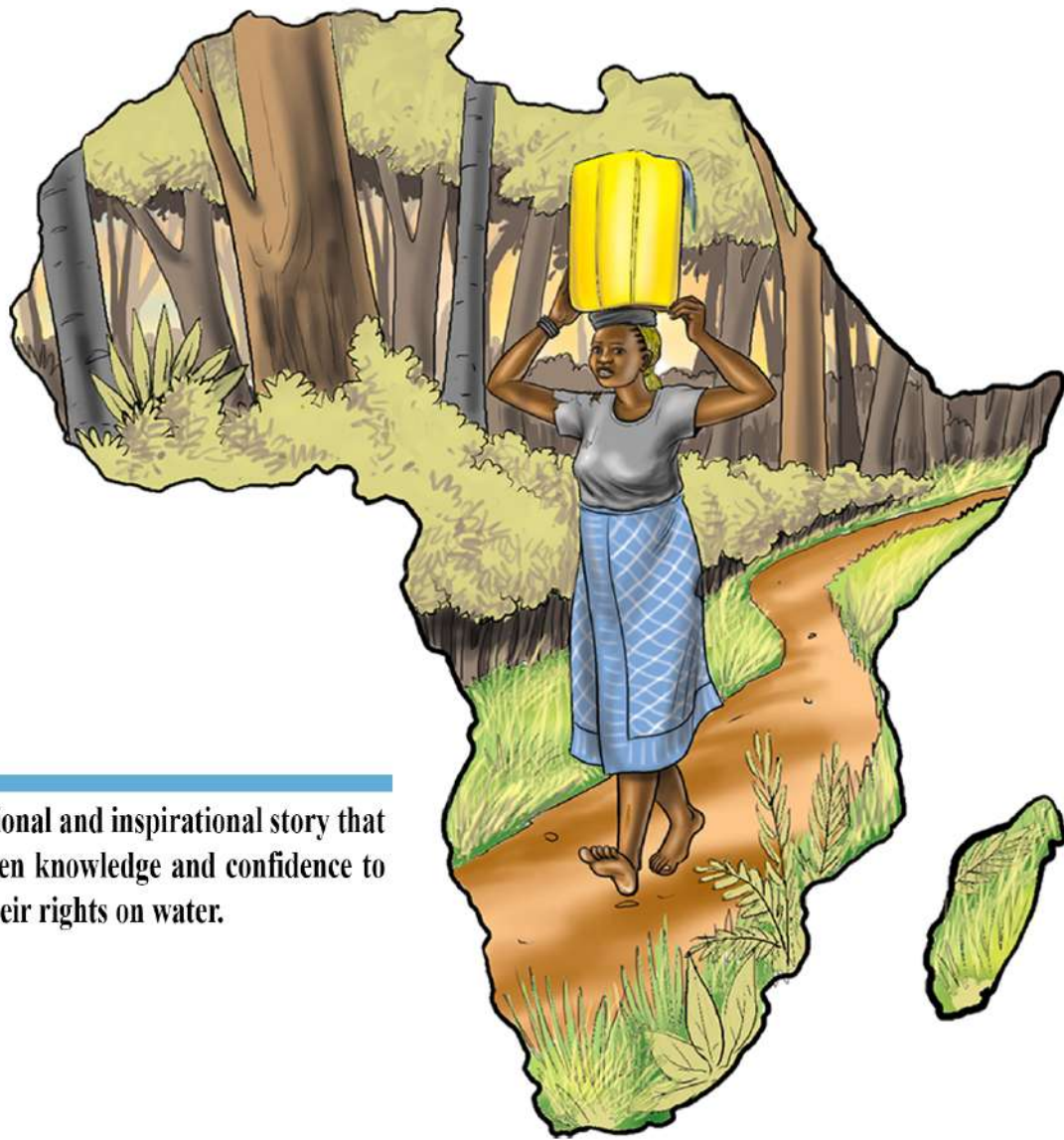


MANDIGA'S WELL



An educational and inspirational story that gives women knowledge and confidence to demand their rights on water.

Mohammed Hammie Rajab

MANDIGA'S WELL

Story of a powerful woman who struggles to save her community from a water crisis.

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First edition: 2023

Published by:
Africa Proper Education Network
Mbezi Beach, Old Bagamoyo Road
Samaki Wabichi House

Editor: Amanda Harley

ISBN: 978_9976_88_095_3

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DISCLAIMER

This book reflects the reality of water shortages faced by women, especially in rural areas. But it does not refer to any particular individual or incident. If any similarities do exist, it was not the intention of the author.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the women of the world who are faced by the problems of the lack of safe and clean water.

Millions of women must stand in line and wait a long time for water. They often have to walk long distances in search of water. So, they have little time to get involved in other development activities.

In addition, as the struggle to access water for their families, women often face many dangers because of the distance between their homes and the water sources, let alone the safety and cleanliness of the water itself.

Don't despair. Help is on the way.

INTRODUCTION

After narrowly escaping being raped on the way home from the well which is far from her village, Mandiga is determined to stand up for the rights of her village and her fellow women to have access to safe and clean water.

As she courageously stands before a public meeting to explain what happened to her, she brings to light the suffering endured by the women of the village over water shortages.

However, her courage is rewarded by the threat of divorce from her husband. In addition, Mandiga finds herself in a new struggle when she exposes a huge scandal involving a water project which puts her life in danger.

Will she succeed?

An educational and inspirational story that gives women knowledge and confidence to demand their rights on water.

CHAPTER 1

It was the path she took every day, and it was only a short distance back to her village. But today Mandiga was afraid. On other days she would walk long distances without any concern at all. She was used to it. But not today. Today, she knew that someone was following her, and her all senses were screaming at her to run.

Mandiga turned the corner, and she saw three people. There was no doubt that they were men. They had draped themselves in dark cloth and were advancing on her. Her mind flashed back to a conversation with her friend, Mama Mboni, who had told her that there were rapists in the village. Rapists who disguised themselves with black sheets.

Her first instinct was to drop the jerrycan and run, but she quickly dismissed the thought. She had walked all this way to draw the water, and she didn't want to lose it so easily. There was still some distance between her and the men. She increased her speed to almost a run so that she could at least draw nearer to her village, Kikwawila in Ifakara.

Mandiga's faster pace seemed to send a signal to the three men. They realised that she had guessed their intentions and they also sped up. Mandiga's fear caught in her throat as she turned around and saw how close they were to her. Several times she staggered under the weight of the jerrycan, but she did her best not to fall. Her eyes peered through the gloom, which got darker every minute.

When she turned around again, she saw one of the men was ahead of the others. He seemed determined to be the first to attack. Mandiga's heart was pounding. She started to run faster, concentrating on not dropping her jerrycan, because she was nearly at the end of the path.

Only a week ago she had been told about a woman who was attacked and raped by two men in the bushes while the woman was coming back from drawing water from the same well.

According to Mama Mboni, after the rapists finished cruelly raping her, they gave her a clear warning. They threatened that if news of the rape leaked out, they would make sure they would rape her again to humiliate her. Mandiga was not going to take that. She was ready to die fighting rather than be brutally raped.

Suddenly, Mandiga was violently pushed from behind. She had no idea how the man had reached her so quickly, but the push made her stagger. Only her natural toughness stopped her from falling. When the man tried to close in on her to trip her up, Mandiga took advantage of the moment.

She moved backward holding the jerrycan with both hands. Summoning up all her strength, she lifted it from her head and threw it at her attacker, who was now only one pace behind

her. The jerrycan landed directly on the man's chest. Her move was so unexpected that it knocked him to the ground with a thud.

Astonished, the two other men stopped in their tracks, before running to help their friend who was now rolling around on the ground in agony. One of them tried to lift him up, while the other chased after Mandiga, who was now in full flight and screaming as she ran. He chased her to the point where he saw it was not safe to do so. Then he ran back to his companions.

Mandiga raced down the hill in front of her. She ran without looking back, feeling the cold sweat of fear trickling down her back. She paid no attention to the villagers staring in amazement at her terror as she passed.

She finally reached home, pushed open the front door, and rushed inside. She slammed the door shut and bolted it. Flinging herself down on the mat.

She didn't even see her husband who was sitting outside.

CHAPTER 2

Kibwana, Mandiga's husband, didn't understand why his wife flew past him like an arrow without greeting him. He was confused. This was not like his wife of two years.

'What has happened to her?' he thought. He got up from his wooden chair and followed her inside.

They had parted peacefully that evening. As was the custom, his wife had taken the empty jerrycan in the morning when they went to the farm. And when they finished their work, he would take the path home, and his wife would take the jerrycan to the well to fetch water.

When Kibwana tried to open the door, he realised it was locked from the inside. "Woman, open the door!" he shouted. But his voice was a little uncertain. He knew there was something wrong. He had never seen his wife behave like this.

Kibwana was old enough not to be called a young man anymore. In another four months, he would be forty years old, but at a glance, you might think he was still a thirty years old. He was still tough and strong from his work.

Kibwana had begun to farm when he was seventeen. When he completed Standard Seven, he did not get the chance to go to secondary school, so he had to take responsibility for his own life, given the tough conditions in their village. He was Mndamba, one of the ethnic groups in Morogoro region. He was born in Mngeta village, and his full name was Kibwana Mwelenga.

He met Mandiga at the community market, which was held four times a month in Sululu, village a little outside Ifakara town, Morogoro. After getting to know each other, and becoming friends, their relationship had blossomed, and they got married. They still had not been blessed with a child. The patron of their marriage was his uncle who lived in Kilama village.

Mandiga was also a Mndamba, who was born and grew up in Mkasu village. She left school in form two, as her family was too poor to continue her education. She had to give up her studies and look after the family after her father died. Her mother was still alive. After marrying Kibwana, they decided to start their life together in Kikwawila village, Kibaoni Ward in Ifakara.

Mandiga lay frozen in terror on the mat where she had flung herself and was still panting from her flight.

"Kibwana?" she called out in a shaky voice after hearing a continuous knock on the door

"Yes! Who else do you think it is?"

She didn't get up immediately. She thanked God. She hadn't realised that her husband had arrived home. She stood up slowly, brushing down her dress, and pulled back the latch of the door to let her husband in. She felt calmer, but her heart was still racing.

"What's wrong?" Kibwana asked. Mandiga was not able to reply at first. Her tongue felt heavy. She looked at her husband as if she was seeing him for the first time. "What's happened to you? Why are you like this?" Kibwana asked again.

Mandiga raised her bowed head and shook it unhappily. She now believed she was at home and safe. "Something terrible almost happened to me, my husband," she said. Mandiga took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I was almost raped on that path leading up to our home."

Kibwana showed no shock. Instead, he looked at his wife scornfully. He shook his head sadly, and then let out a grunt. "Where is the water?" he asked her.

"You mean you didn't hear what I said, Kibwana?"

"I am asking you where the water is, and you make up a story," Kibwana began to raise his voice.

Mandiga was shocked and stared at her husband in silence for several seconds. Licking her dried lips, she burst out. "What did you just say? A story? You mean that I am making this up?"

"Yes," he replied angrily. "You are making this up. You went to spend all your time with your lovers and then you run here to try and fool me."

"So today you think I am a prostitute Kibwana," Mandiga said mournfully. She turned away as tears filled her eyes, and her body was wracked with sobs. She couldn't hold back any longer.

Kibwana glared at his wife. He was so filled with rage he could only whistle contemptuously. "Cry, and shake your head, but you are coming from your lovers. Since you forgot your jerrycan there, you decided to pretend to run home. You don't fool me Mandiga." Kibwana raised his voice even more so that anyone outside would have heard him.

Mandiga didn't reply. She continued to sob.

"Spare me your tears. The night is falling, so don't bring me your bad luck from Mkasu. Tell me where you left your jerrycan. Then I will know which man you were with."

He took Mandiga by the shoulders and shook her.

Mandiga realised that her husband intended to beat her and cried out in fear.

"Tell me the truth Mandiga," Kibwana shouted angrily.

Mandiga was shocked at her husband's jealousy. They had never fought like this. To be shaken and shouted at made her numb.

She pulled away from her furious husband and she stepped back, facing him.

“If you had any respect for me, your wife, you would listen to me. You would not suspect me of this stupidity and want to beat me, Kibwana,” Mandiga wailed.

She could not believe that she had just escaped from being raped and managed to return home, only to be beaten. *‘What have I done wrong?’* she asked herself. She began to wipe her tears with the kanga she was wearing.

“So, I am stupid?” Kibwana asked furiously.

“I did not say you were stupid. I am shocked that you want to beat me for no reason.”

“So, you don’t know why I want to beat you?”

“No, I don’t know. I haven’t even finished explaining, but you burst out accusing me of all sorts of terrible things and then you want to beat me. Why don’t you listen to me? I cannot have any lover outside the marriage, Kibwana, you know that” her wailing continued.

“You want me to listen to you? Okay. Tell me, where the jerrycan is then? When we left the farm, you had a jerrycan. Every day you return from the well with the jerrycan, so where is it today, and why did you come running? Tell me!”

Both fell silent. Mandiga wondered how she could explain herself when she was already a suspect? Her thoughts were reeling. She needed to be listened to calmly so that she could explain herself again.

Inside, she was still screaming. A short time ago she had run off like a madwoman to save herself, now a few minutes later she was shaken and threatened with a beating while she was still trembling from nearly being raped. All this only made her even more frantic.

“You see, you have nothing to say.”

“It is not that I don’t have anything to say Kibwana,” Mandiga burst out. “I am hurt because you are suspicious of me, my husband. I was almost raped fetching the water which we need here at home. I know it is my duty but today I had to face this ordeal. Do you think I am happy about the shortage of water?”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “How could I go to fetch water five kilometres away and then come back empty-handed? You think I have gone to lovers. Don’t I also have struggle with the lack of water? I feel betrayed when you come up with these lies against me. I am your wife, so listen to me and understand me. You should have been the first one to comfort me, not what you are doing to me.” She could not go on, and she burst out crying twice as loudly as before.

Her words were followed by a long silence. Mandiga retreated into the bedroom and left Kibwana fuming.

CHAPTER 3

Mandiga went straight to the bed and sat down. She continued to cry as she thought about her husband's words. '*What wife would put up with being insulted like that? He thinks I didn't go to fetch water but went to my lovers*'. This thought made her cry even more bitterly.

She knew that she had never had another man outside marriage. She respected her husband and herself ever since they got married.

Although she was now 35, she was still as attractive as ever. Mandiga was beautiful and could drive crazy any man who met her. She was tall and well proportioned. Despite the hard work on the farm, her household chores and her long trips to fetch water, she took care of herself.

Her parents had brought her up well. She followed their moral teaching, believing that it was the true basis of life in the community. So, when she decided to get married to Kibwana, she knew her place as a wife.

Suddenly, her husband burst into the room. There was no door but a long frayed curtain which swept the floor. The light from his torch spread out before him, the torch he usually switched on at night to get some light. Their village did not have electricity.

Mandiga took her kanga again and wiped away her tears then she looked at her husband standing next to her.

"What time will the food be ready?" Kibwana asked.

She held her breath. If it wasn't for the respect she had for her husband, she would have responded with a reply which would have led to her being divorced that same night. How could he ask what time food would be ready? Where was the water to cook with?

Mandiga realised that he was still looking for a fight, and this time he had come with the excuse of food, as he knew that cooking required water.

Just then, she remembered there was still a little water in the pot.

"Please point your torch elsewhere, the light is hurting my eyes," Mandiga asked. Kibwana angrily did as he was told.

"Thank you. Now, please let me go so that I use the little water in the pot to cook something for us to eat."

Kibwana, who was spoiling for a fight, found he had nothing to say. If he thought that pretext would make the conflict worse, he was wrong. Mandiga went outside, leaving her husband still angrily standing in the room.

She was tired. In the morning she was normally the first to wake up to clean the house. If there was water, she washed the dishes and the clothes. Then, she and her husband walked two kilometres to the farm where they worked.

In the evening, while her husband went home early, she had walked several kilometres to fetch water from the well.

As if that was not enough, at the well she had to wait for the women who arrived before her to draw water. Even to get that water they had to wait for some time until there was enough of it before they could start to scoop it up using a small bowl so as not to stir up the mud. Each woman could manage to fill only one bucket or jerrycan for cooking and bathing. Then they would leave without waiting for one another. Each woman who had filled her jerrycan, put it on her head and left for home.

On the way, one might meet the women walking slowly, but that day, unlike other days, by the time she could leave with her jerrycan, the sun was already setting, and she did not meet others making their way home as usual. Many were already home.

The gathering darkness was the time for rapists to attack and rape women. If she had not heard about the rape of another woman a week before, she probably would not have been so afraid. Still, the way they had covered themselves with sheets and the way they approached her would have alarmed her.

The picture of her fighting to save herself kept running through her mind. She cooked the food lost in thought. Her heart was heavy as she thought of her honour. *'What would it have been like if they had managed to rape me?'* she asked herself again and again.

She froze like a video paused by the remote. The question made her think hard, and even more fearful. It was as if she saw those rapists carrying her into the bush. They would have covered her mouth so that her cries could not be heard, then they would have tortured her and ripped her clothes off and made her lie down and then ... she didn't want to think about what further they would have done to her. She felt disgusting and found herself whistling with nausea.

She remembered the woman who had already been raped and threatened. The day Mama Mboni told her about that woman, she felt sorry for her even if she didn't know her. Even Mama Mboni did not know her, as she had heard from a fish seller, who also told her that the information was not to be divulged.

She could hardly finish the cooking, but she had to. If she had not been married, she would have chosen to go to bed hungry. Maybe that same night she would have also gone to the village government to report how she was nearly raped so that a search to catch the rapists was carried out.

She thought, if a woman had already been raped in the village and she had nearly been raped today, what was there to say that other women had not been nearly raped, or raped and threatened like the first woman. What was there to stop this wave of attacks from continuing with other women as well? The questions lit a green light in her head.

The sound of the door being opened shook her out of her musings. It was some time since Mandiga had come to do the cooking, and now Kibwana came out with his torch in his hand. He went straight to the wooden chair he had been sitting on when his wife had dashed past him. Mandiga glanced at him and returned to her cooking.

As he sat there on the chair, Kibwana glared furiously at his wife. He still believed that she had been unfaithful to him. There was nothing to convince him otherwise. He completely dismissed the idea that she had nearly been raped. He saw her story as mere trickery.

When he was still young in his village Mngeta, he had a lover who he met secretly at the well. *'She must have her lover there at the well too'*, he said to himself. He was haunted by the lingering guilt of his meetings with his past lover, to the point where he was sure Mandiga could do the same.

When the food was ready, they ate in silence. When they finished eating it was already late. So, they went to bed in the usual manner. But that night each one slept on their own side of the bed and nursed their anger. Mandiga's eyes were dry, and her head buzzed with thoughts.

She turned her face to the wall and lay unmoving. She recalled everything about the incident of that evening. The shadow of the person who kicked her came back to her again and again. *'Without that jerrycan I don't know what I would have done'*, she thought and felt miserable again. She cursed the man inwardly.

'So, the men are going to use the shortage of water here in the village as an excuse to rape women?' she asked herself. *'How have we wronged the men of Kikwawila? If it is water, we draw for them. So now they think that is not enough and they rape us?'*

She finally resolved that early in the morning she would go and report to the village government. She was determined to initiate a search for the men who had tried to rape her, to help the other woman who was raped and threatened, and to warn all other women of the danger in the village.

The only problem was her husband, Mr. Kibwana Mwelenga. Whatever she did, he would find out. Her biggest fear was that Kibwana would not understand her, when he refused to believe that she had narrowly avoided being raped.

She decided to sleep on her fear until morning.

CHAPTER 4

When she suggested her idea to her husband, it sparked a new argument, just as she had known it would.

“Let me see you go and give your lying report!” Kibwana warned.

His voice croaked a little. He cleared his throat and went on. “You want the whole village to laugh at me, don’t you? That Kibwana’s wife was nearly raped? Where will I show my face if you shame me like this? Are you out of your mind?” he started shouting.

“What is all this about being out of my mind, my husband? Why can’t you talk to me without shouting? You’re going to wake up the whole neighbourhood. You still don’t believe me? And what if I was really raped?” Mandiga replied quietly.

“But you weren’t raped, so just calm down.”

Mandiga faced her husband calmly. “To tell the truth, I can’t. I don’t see any reason why I should not go to report. Even you can’t give me any valid reason.”

Kibwana stood up. “You want to be the boss? Don’t forget I am your husband. If I say no, it means no. You think that if you go to report to the village government, they will help you? Do you know how mean-spirited the Chairperson is?”

He looked at his wife in the bed. “You are not going anywhere. Wake up, get dressed and let’s go to the farm. That’s the end of the story.”

Mandiga shook her head sadly. It had turned out exactly as she had predicted the night before. Her husband was the stumbling block.

“I can’t go to the farm,” she said. Mandiga raised her head and looked at her husband who was fuming with rage, hands on hips. “I don’t feel very well after the way I had to run from what happened yesterday. So please let me rest.”

“Woman, I don’t know what you want. Did I marry you just to rest at home?”

“I am a human being my husband.”

“So, what if you are a human! Who am I to you?”

“My husband.”

“Then why are we arguing?” he asked her.

“We are not arguing. I am telling you the truth. I am tired, have some sympathy for me.”

Kibwana breathed in sharply and let it out slowly. If there was one thing he wanted to do at that point, it was to go to Mandiga and give her two hard slaps.

But at that time in the morning, early and cold, he knew she would burst into tears and not stop till the sun rose. The evil wish left him.

Instead, they glared at each other, and then he picked up his tattered farming trousers that were hanging from a nail on the wall and put them on. Then he took his shirt from another nail on the wall and put it on too.

He left the house, leaving his wife still in bed. After a few seconds, he came back with a hoe, axe and small basket. He found Mandiga still lying quietly in bed.

“I’m off. Stay here if you are not feeling well. But I forbid you to report to the village office. If I do, I will divorce you, and you will have to leave.”

Mandiga said nothing. But her heart missed a beat and the mention of divorce.

‘Divorce on what grounds’ she thought. Kibwana turned and left.

She let out a deep breath. She felt as if she was finally rid of the heavy burden weighing on her all that morning. She stayed in bed to think. She couldn’t understand what it was that made it so hard for her husband to understand. This was not like him. *‘What is it really that makes this man not believe that I was nearly raped. Is it jealousy or something else?’* she asked herself.

She considered the order she had been given not to go and report to the village office. She compared it with the need for the safety of her fellow women in the village and even her own safety, and she did not feel at peace. Her conscience troubled her.

She was not ready to live where there was no peace. Her peace had already been shattered. To her, being nearly raped was the same as being raped. Those rapists may not have succeeded, but they would continue to hunt her. Maybe she even injured the one she threw the jerry can at.

She remembered her jerry can. *‘Will it still be there on the path?’* she wondered.

If she had remembered it early enough, she could have told her husband to go that way in the morning on the way to the farm. She let out a groan.

But then, she thought, how could she tell him when he didn’t believe her. It would probably only create more quarrels.

She still believed that if she reported the attempted rape to the village office, there would be a search for the perpetrators and legal action would be taken against them.

She remembered her husband’s words. *‘A divorce!’* He had never threatened her with this in all the time they had been married.

She did not take his threat lightly, but after thinking deeply about it, she decided she had to follow her conscience and accept the consequences.

CHAPTER 5

The sun beat down on her head on the way to the village office. Fortunately, she found both the Chairperson and his Village Executive Officer in the office talking to another villager. When she knocked, they asked her to wait outside until she was called.

Within ten minutes, the other villager left, and she was called in.

“Enhe! Mandiga welcome.” Mzee Gangile, the Chairperson of the village said. As a result of the small number of people in the village, the Chairperson was able to know many of the villagers including Mandiga.

From his appearance, you would think that he was permanently short-tempered, but nothing could be further from the truth. He was quite short and light brown. He always wore a kufi cap. He had been Chairperson of the village for three consecutive terms. He was a native of Kikwawila, although people said his parents originally came from Iringa but decided to settle there.

“Shikamoo Mzee Gangile.” Mandiga greeted after being invited inside.

She also greeted the village Executive Officer, Mr. Magome Mteketa. He had a squint so whenever he looked at you, you would think he was looking to one side. He was fairly light-skinned and wrinkled. Since being transferred to Kikwawila by the government seven years ago, he had not been transferred again. His first post was in Mtwara.

The two men were both sitting behind a long table with only a few items on it. When Mandiga entered she went straight to the bench against the wall.

“Welcome, we are listening.” the village executive invited her.

Before starting to speak, Mandiga thought for a few seconds. Then she broke the silence. She recounted everything that happened to her on the path yesterday. But she kept silent about the quarrel with her husband.

“It distresses me greatly to see those men ambush women when they are on the way back from the well, and with the aim of doing such terrible things. I want to know what action you will take as leaders,” Mandiga concluded.

The Chairperson and his officer were taken by surprise. They looked at one another while Mandiga was explaining what had happened, and it was clear that they realised this was a serious issue which required wisdom in finding a solution.

“First of all, we are sorry for what happened to you. It is very distressing as you said, and very shocking. But Mandiga, have you come here to make a complaint, or to know what we will do after receiving your complaint?” the Chairperson asked, sinking down into his chair.

“Both.” Mandiga replied.

“All right.” The Chairperson responded and turned to his officer. “Have you heard this? We are being asked, as leaders, what we will do about this, bearing in mind that we don’t know who these would-be rapists are.” His little voice betrayed some sarcasm.

“I have heard you. Let me just say, Mandiga we have heard your complaint and we give our apologies again.” He turned to the Chairperson. “I believe that this must be followed up seriously.”

“Absolutely! But what? That is why I get a little tongue tied by the question from Mandiga here, about what should we do.” He cleared his throat and turned to Mandiga, who was sitting calmly on the bench.

“All right Mandiga, as our officer said, this office has received your complaint with both hands, or is there something else?”

“I want to know what actions will be taken.” Mandiga insisted.

“That is the office matter. Isn’t that right, Executive Officer?”

“Correct, Chairperson.”

The officer turned to Mandiga. “I want to know whether you have gone back to take your jerrycan which you say you threw at the person who tried to knock you down during the struggle”

“No, I didn’t go back. I am not sure whether I will find it if I go back. It could have been taken by the rapists.”

“I am asking because it is evidence,” the officer insisted.

“I will ask my husband when he comes back from the farm, as he uses the same path. But please do not tell him I came to report. We had a big argument this morning as he claimed that reporting here is to shame him. I will tell him myself at the right time. Although I know that to report is my basic right,” Mandiga said.

“Fine, if that is what you want,” the Chairperson responded hurriedly.

Just at that moment, a woman wearing a multi-coloured cloth which covered her face entered the office. They all recognised her. She was Mama Hamza, the only woman in the fifteen member Village Council committee.

Originally all the members were men, but six months ago, one of them died leaving a vacancy. She was highly recommended for the post by the central committee but had only

scraped through due to the domination of the Chairperson and the Executive Officer. In the Kikwawila village, Mama Hamza was known as a tough, but fair woman.

Although she had no experience, she was praised for the way she fought against male arguments. The fact that they were in the majority in the village council did not frighten her, she stood for what she believed was right. Often, she was only defeated in argument because of the saying ‘the majority is right’.

“Welcome Mama Hamza, you have arrived at the right time.” The Chairperson greeted her.

“Thank you. What do you mean right time?” she asked, joining Mandiga on the bench.

“*Hawije mhumbo* Mama Hamza,” Mandiga greeted her in the Ndamba language before the Chairperson could reply.

“*Hawije* Mandiga, *ukaiimuka*?” Mama Hamza responded to the respectful greeting before asking her how she was.

“*Ngaimuka* Mama,” Mandiga replied, meaning she was fine.

“All right, there is an issue here brought by your fellow woman. Maybe you can hear her and then we decide what to do.” The Chairperson brought them back to the discussion at hand.

“Right.” Mama Hamza responded.

“Mandiga can you tell us again in brief?” the Executive Officer said this time.

Mandiga explained again what brought her there. Mama Hamza was clearly affected by her story and interrupted her with a whole series of questions.

When she finished, Mama Hamza did not wait to be asked to speak by the Chairperson or her Executive Officer. She immediately suggested that the issue be presented to the Village Assembly so that every villager should hear and agree on a plan on how to address it.

“Why take it to the village assembly?” the Chairperson asked.

“I have heard there is another case. A woman was raped, but she is afraid to bring this issue to the village government because the rapists have warned her that if she does that, they will rape her again,” Mama Hamza said bitterly.

The Chairperson and the executive both looked shocked. In her heart, Mandiga thanked Mama Hamza for raising the issue. She wanted to bring it up herself but was afraid she would be asked where she had heard the story. It was better that a member of the Village Council raised it.

“Chairperson, we really do not need to wait until more women are raped here in the village. We should take action, starting now!” Mama Hamza urged them.

“Mandiga I think you can go now. Your question about what we leaders will do has been answered. I agree with what the member said here, we need to bring this to the Village Assembly,” the Chairperson supported the idea.

“I also agree we should do this, Chairperson. Where there are many, nothing can go wrong,” the officer added.

“What day will you call the meeting so that I don’t go to the farm?” Mandiga asked.

“Why don’t you go home? Then when you have time, you can come back here to find out the day of the meeting, as we leaders must discuss among ourselves. Will your husband stop you coming?” the Chairperson asked Mandiga as he looked at her.

“Yes, he will. I told you that my husband doesn’t want to be shamed.”

“Shamed!?” Mama Hamza exclaimed in surprise before continuing, “shame of what? This is a serious issue my daughter, it must be exposed. Today you managed to escape, but another woman has been raped, and these incidents might well continue. There is no shame. Tell your husband you came to report.”

“Okay Mama, I will tell him,” Mandiga replied politely.

“I think Chairperson that, as this is an emergency, there is no need to waste any time. With respect, once Mandiga leaves here we will have to call the other Village Council members to advise and agree on these issues going to a village meeting. What do you think about holding it in two or three days? The crier should inform the people so that the meeting can be held,” the officer advised.

“Good. Mandiga, please leave us now, the meeting will be held in the next three days. I will have to call the other members to give their assent.” The Chairperson also agreed to the plan.

Mandiga had nothing more to say. She said goodbye and left. She believed her issue would be now dealt with. After all, the office had already received another report of a woman being raped and threatened by her attackers.

She went straight home without stopping.

After Mandiga left, the Chairperson started to call the other Village Council members who arrived quickly at the office to discuss the issue with the Executive Officer and Mama Hamza.

Eight members were sufficient to form a quorum to decide on the village meeting, although a few excused themselves saying they were in their farms at that time. Those who did attend were told what had happened to Mandiga and the other woman. All of them were shocked by the two incidents that had taken place in the village.

The members felt that the Council had a duty to fight for the rights of the people, especially the women. And when the Chairperson proposed to call an emergency village assembly, no one opposed the idea.

After discussing the issue for about an hour, they agreed that the meeting be called after a week, not three days, and there should be one agenda only. **The threat of rape for women going to fetch water from the well.**

Mama Hamza, who kept silent during most of the meeting, was told that she should do her best to come with the woman reported to have been raped and threatened, so that she could tell the meeting what happened to her.

CHAPTER 6

Mandiga knew she should go to fetch water from the well, but she didn't have the courage. She was afraid of the rapists, and it was already getting late. She would not be able to go and return safely with the sun already setting.

She thought of Kibwana. She knew that when he came back from the farm the bitterness would continue. *'He knows the situation, I will tell him that there is no water, and I am afraid of being raped,'* she told herself.

After changing her clothes, she decided to take the radio to the sitting room to listen to what was happening in the world. She took the mat from behind the door, unfolded it and laid it out on the floor to sit on.

While seated, she began to twist the dial of the radio on her lap. Finally, she was able to tune into Radio Sikika, a long-standing community radio which broadcasts from Ifakara town. Nearly all the people of Ifakara liked listening to it, as it broadcast news that was relevant to them. The local people did not call it by its official name, Sikika FM. They referred to it as *'Ours'* meaning that it was the radio with their news.

As soon as she tuned in, she found it in the middle of the 6-o clock news. The male announcer was reading the news within a confident and authoritative voice. He was just finishing one news item before starting on the next.

He began to read the news about the visit of the Deputy Minister for Water to Morogoro Region. Mandiga's attention was drawn by the opening lines, and she turned up the volume so as to hear properly.

"In his visit which ended today, the deputy minister said that access to water continued to increase. The number of people getting safe and clean water in the rural areas had increased from 47 percent to 70.1 percent between 2018 and 2022. In urban areas, it had increased from 74 percent to 82 percent from 2018 to 2022. He added that Morogoro was one of the areas of Tanzania which had benefited from the increase in access to water. So, there was no reason for the region to have a problem of water, as there was an abundance of water sources." The announcer finished and moved on to other news.

'Mmhh these people!' Mandiga thought she was hearing some news from outer space. She couldn't take it in at once. She wondered whether the deputy minister was crazy.

She was here in Morogoro, and their village faced a serious shortage of water to the point where there were cases of rape. *'How come there are many water sources, but the water here is a problem?'* she asked herself. She sighed and dismissed it as just politics.

'They must be liars, if there is no water for years and years, then they say water provision has increased,' she said to herself.

But after a few minutes, she began to believe it. She thought about this phase of the current leadership. She heard that it was a government that did not play around. It would be difficult for the deputy minister to cheat the people.

Deep in thought, she was slow to respond immediately to the knock on the door. Her husband had entered, and it was now very dark.

"I knock and you don't hear?" Kibwana said throwing down the bundle of firewood in the sitting room.

"Forgive me my husband, I didn't hear you. I was completely focused on the news."

"So, you think the news is more important than opening the door for me."

"No, my husband. I was shocked by the news. The Deputy Water Minister claimed that here in Morogoro there are so many water sources, there is no reason for us to have a problem of water. Isn't that a surprise?"

Her husband was putting the hoe and axe in their place. He wasn't even looking at his wife as she talked. When he was finished, he turned to her.

"So, you are married to water or water is now your husband. Why is this happening? Where are my words of comfort after a long day in the farm?"

"Sorry my husband. Welcome home. Let's not start arguing again."

"Prepare some water for me so I can take a shower." Kibwana told his wife.

Mandiga fell silent.

She knew the quarrel was about to start all over again. She thought for a moment before replying. She had already resolved to let come what was to come. She let her breath out slowly, while her thoughts about the news flew around in her head like swallows.

"But Kibwana, where do you think this water will come from?" Mandiga replied sadly.

"What did you say?" he replied furiously.

"There is no water."

"What have you been doing the whole day here at home?"

"My husband, how can I go to fetch water from the well on my own when I was nearly raped? Don't tell me you still don't believe me Kibwana."

Mandiga's words seemed to rekindle her husband's anger. He glared at her.

“Listen Mandiga. I didn't pay the bride price for you to make fun of me. Why didn't you go to fetch water, when you had the whole day at home?”

“I am not making fun of you. I am telling you the truth. I couldn't go because yesterday I was nearly raped. Why don't you understand? Or you don't care,” Mandiga burst out.

She stood up tall and strong. And Kibwana sensed that this was not the Mandiga he was accustomed to. She seemed to be ready for anything.

“Is that the way you talk to me?”

Angrily he moved forward and slapped his wife.

Shocked, her hand flew up to the cheek as her pain flared. She began to cry.

“You speak to me rudely like that? Who told you I don't care? First, why should I care when you tell me lies. I passed by where you said you were nearly raped, I saw nothing. So, tell me, where is the jerrycan?” Kibwana shouted angrily.

That evening, the neighbours and passers-by on the way home from their farms heard everything.

Mandiga didn't know how to reply. She rubbed her cheek as she continued to sob. She felt the whole world descending on her. She had never been beaten by her husband before. She didn't understand why he had slapped her when she had just been telling him the truth.

It pained her to be judged for the truth which had protected her husband also. She thought to herself that if she really had been raped and infected with a disease, the first person to be infected by that disease would be Kibwana. ‘*Why can't he see this*’ she thought as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

CHAPTER 7

'Where is the jerrycan?' She thought this was such a stupid question for her husband to insist on. The rapists would never leave the jerrycan there and even if they had not taken it, any other passer-by could have done so. She remembered being asked the same question at the village office.

Whatever! She would stick with her truth and her God. She wiped away the tears and looked at her husband. She took a deep breath and turned to confront him.

"Why are you beating me? How have I wronged you?" she asked, tightening the cloth around her waist. Kibwana also stood firm, although he knew he had lit a fire. He had aroused the Kikasu devils in his wife.

"You don't know how you have wronged me?" Kibwana said moving closer to his wife.

Mandiga did not retreat but stood there firmly. She had nothing to fear if she was to be beaten, she had already had one slap.

"I am shocked by you Kibwana. My own safety means nothing to you? What kind of husband are you that doesn't care about his wife's safety? Do you think that you will be safe if I go out to fetch the water and get raped and infected?"

Mandiga spoke slowly and firmly. The slap from her husband had given her the courage to speak up.

"I want water nothing else." The words flew out of Kibwana's mouth without thinking.

"Forgive me my husband. I love you, but I can never be your slave. You hit me and then you expect me to go off and fetch water. I have explained to you that I did not go for my own safety, which is your safety as well as mine, because if I am raped you won't be safe. And then you raise your hand and beat me? I am not going. Beat me, kill me right here in our house." Mandiga tightened her kanga and stood firm. She went on.

"I did not get married to be humiliated, turned into a slave and mistreated. I am a woman and I know my worth. If you don't think there is a problem with water in the village, go somewhere else, or we go together. The way you are treating me is not fair."

Kibwana realised he was in it up to his neck. He had never seen his wife like this. She was always polite and did whatever she was told. But now things had suddenly changed.

"Why did you spend the whole day here at home and not go to fetch water. If you were afraid of going on that path where you say you were nearly raped, why couldn't you take the path through Lungongole village?" Kibwana asked her.

His question showed Mandiga that her husband had now begun to understand and was looking for a way out. But she swore to herself that she would not agree to reconcile as easily as he thought she would. His slap still stung her face and her spirit.

“I did not spend the whole day at home.”

“If you didn’t spend the whole day at home, where did you go?”

“I went to the village office to report.”

Her words left Kibwana open-mouthed. He was like someone who had swallowed boiling hot tea.

“Mandiga, Mandiga, Mandiga why? What did I tell you this morning?” his voice rose.

“About not going to the village office to report? If my own husband cannot support me in such a terrible incident, what did you want me to do, Kibwana? What did you want me to do?” Mandiga responded raising her voice to match her husband. She went on.

“Not Mandiga, no! Be thankful that your wife was not raped. There is another woman, like me who was raped and threatened by the rapists. Do you hear me? So, if you are tired of me, divorce me, don’t look for excuses. What kind of man are you? Trifles are important to you and important things are trifles. Divorce me!”

Mandiga’s words hit Kibwana in the face like punches. They stung him. He had been trying her out. He never expected that Mandiga would come to the point of asking for a divorce. He was the one who threatened with divorce as a way of controlling her. And now she was demanding it herself.

His clothes felt too tight, and his breathing was difficult. They glared at one another. According to the elders of the village, when a woman wants things which she never wanted before, then she has reached the end of her tether and there is no going back.

Her husband’s shock confused Mandiga. She didn’t know whether he was bewildered by the news of the rape of another woman in the village, or because she had asked for a divorce. The silence grew longer and longer. Kibwana looked like a fish out of water.

So many things flashed through his mind, over what had happened from the start when he rejected her story. He began to feel regret.

“Why do you want me to divorce you, my wife?” He broke the silence, and his voice showed a perplexing mixture of regret, fear, jealousy and love.

Mandiga took her time replying. Instead, she looked to one side like someone deep in thought. *‘That’s the end of him,’* she thought. She tried to gradually cool the anger in herself. When she breathed out, she became a wife once again.

“Kibwana you are not being fair to me at all. I am your wife, remember. How can I lie to you about something like this? Don’t you see that I am fighting for my own safety and the safety

of my fellow women here in the village? If that woman who was raped was your sister, how would you feel?"

Silence overtook them. Kibwana felt ashamed. His mind began to comprehend the seriousness of what his wife had told him, while he still fought the truth of it. He began to sense his manhood was shaken. He knew he needed wisdom. He realised he should have agreed with his wife from the start and avoid things reaching this stage. It was true he had not been fair, but how could he concur so easily?

"But why didn't you tell me calmly, my love?" he improvised.

The words 'my love' gave him victory. It brought a small smile to Mandiga's heart. Her husband had not used this endearment for a long time. Mandiga's spirit soared. A smile of the heart cannot be concealed by the face. Kibwana didn't lose the moment, he took the chance to restore his manly defences, which he felt had been shaken. Half whispering, he asked her to forgive him.

"I didn't hear what you said," Mandiga pretended. She wanted him to say it out loud.

"Forgive me. Maybe jealousy misled me because of love. So now tell me how you were nearly raped."

Mandiga was reluctant to re-live the experience with the rapists because it brought back the fear every time. But there was no way out, and she told him everything.

"My wife. I am sorry. If I catch the rapists, they will regret the day they were born." Kibwana promised.

"And where will you catch them? That is why I went to the village office to report so that they start a hunt for the culprits."

"Enhe, so what did the village government say after you told them."

"They said they will call a village meeting to discuss this in public. It would be good if we both attend the meeting. They will probably ask me to speak."

"Fine, my wife. But have you forgiven me?"

"Yes, I have. But never beat me again. It is completely wrong. If you beat me again, I will go straight to Ifakara town to make a report to the gender desk," Mandiga said.

"Eeh! That is too much, woman. If you go to the gender desk, your husband will be sent to jail."

"If you are afraid of jail, don't beat me again." But this time Mandiga smiled as she spoke.

"I won't beat you again my wife. I promise."

"Good. Thank you. But please understand that for now, we are in a war. The reason I even went to report was that I was very upset. I narrowly escaped but, as I told you, my fellow

woman was raped and then threatened. We women, are being raped because of the same problems of which nearly caused us to split. Now I need your support my husband. If only our village had water, then I am sure there would not be any of the brutish behaviour of ambushing women in the bushes and raping them. It is inhuman. Water must not be the source of this violence against women. We also have our rights, and we must fight for them. I will stand up in the Village Assembly if given the chance and I will explain this issue openly,” Mandiga said bitterly.

Kibwana was amazed at the brave words of his wife. Her words touched him. He no longer saw her as the Mandiga he knew. This was a new, mature Mandiga with a great vision. He began to feel proud of having a wife like her. In his heart he recognised that he didn't get a wife but, a wife and a half.

Mandiga continued. “What kind of life is this my husband? I go to the farm in the morning, then when I leave, I walk five kilometres to fetch water, and when I get there, I have no guarantee that I will find any, no. I must wait for a long line of women from the village as the water is already drying up. And still the water we get is not clean and safe for human use. As if that is not enough, men wait in the bush to rape us. This is totally unacceptable,” Mandiga spoke heatedly.

Her husband swelled with pride. He walked over to hug her, and she returned his embrace, not caring about his farmer's sweat.

“It's all right my wife, that's enough. It's already dark. What are we going to eat if there is no water in the house?” he said as he pulled away from his wife.

Mandiga remembered her neighbour Mama Mboni. She agreed with her husband to go and see her. She told her about what happened to her yesterday and the problem of having no water that evening. She didn't tell her about the fight she had with her husband. If Mama Mboni did hear the noise from their clash, she would ask her about it one day.

She was able to get one bucket. She set half aside for her and her husband to bathe and used the other half to wash the dishes and cook the evening meal.

On the days that followed, Kibwana escorted his wife to the well to fetch water, every day after working on the farm. Mandiga was not ready to fetch water on her own.

She was still afraid of being raped.

CHAPTER 8

The Village Assembly was called one week later, as agreed upon by the members of the Village Council.

In advance of the meeting, the village crier went around announcing that all the villagers should congregate outside the office of the village government where meetings are held. Outside the office was a large ground with two big mango trees in the middle.

The Kikwawila village crier was a young man of 24 years known by the name of Makalinga. He made sure he went round all the three smaller villages to inform people of the emergency meeting.

On the day of the gathering, a large group of people answered to the call and began to congregate at the ground. Although the sun beat down on them, they didn't care. The agenda they had heard from the crier had caught their interest. **The threat of rape to women going to fetch water from the well.**

Every person arriving at the meeting was keen to know what was going on. They were sweating as the midday sun beating down on their heads. There were people of every kind, old and young, men and women.

“Will you really speak?” Kibwana asked his wife as they went to the meeting together.

“Why not? I am the reason this meeting is being held. Unless they don't give me the opportunity, but I must speak,” Mandiga replied confidently as she wiped away the sweat with one of the kangas she had covered herself with. They had both agreed the night before not to go to the farm that day, after hearing the crier.

Mandiga had waited impatiently for the announcement. She had begun to fear that maybe her issue had been put aside. If her husband had not stopped her, she would have gone to the village office again to ask. She couldn't wait for this meeting to be held.

She wanted the law to take its course and the village leaders to catch the suspects for every case of rape or attempted rape against the women. Fortunately, the following night, she heard the crier and she calmed down.

“It will be the worst kind of shame.” Kibwana was nervous. Nervous that his wife would not have the courage to speak in front of the whole crowd when given the chance to speak. He didn't have faith that she could do it.

“My husband, if I don't speak, who will?” Mandiga replied again confidently.

“If it turns out there are many victims, why not let others speak?”

Mandiga slowed down. She was irritated by the way her husband was now insisting that she should not speak at the meeting after they had already agreed. Why did he want to turn against her now?

“Why have you slowed down?” Kibwana complained.

“I don’t understand you. You are now insisting I don’t talk, while yesterday you permitted me.”

There were both silent for a few seconds. Kibwana also slowed down and they were walking side by side as before. He looked at his wife.

“So, you are determined to speak?”

“It’s not a question of being determined my husband. I am a part of the community and I have the right to speak up so that this threat is wiped out. Are you happy about having to escort me to fetch water every day?”

Kibwana said nothing until they reached the meeting ground. A large crowd of people were already there.

They joined the crowd and looked for a place in the shade to sit down. Some were standing and others leant against their bicycles or the few motorbikes that were there.

In the front, they could see the village leaders, the Chairperson, the village Executive Officer and the members of the Village Council. The members were sitting on benches behind the two chairs of the Chairperson and his officer. Mzee Gangile with a red Maasai blanket draped over his shoulders stood up and waved his hands to signal to the people who were whispering among themselves that he wanted to be heard.

Although he was not a tall man, people saw him and settled down to listen. His experience of being a Chairperson for three consecutive terms helped him to know how to draw people to listen to him. When he coughed, they settled down even more, as many were afraid of him.

“Citizens, I now declare the opening our emergency meeting to discuss the threats against women going to the well.” He paused a moment and let his eyes roam over the people, then he continued. “It is now one week since we received reports of women being threatened with death on the way back from fetching water.”

He paused again and his eyes fell on Mandiga. He was a little surprised to see her with her husband. *‘Didn’t she say she had a quarrel with her husband?’* he wondered.

Mandiga leaned forward next to her husband, concentrating on the words of the Chairperson.

He continued. “After we have heard people’s views and testimony, the aim of this meeting is to decide what to do.” Mzee Gangile spoke in an assured voice.

He swallowed and looked at the Executive Officer who was writing in an old exercise book in order to record the minutes. He raised his head and looked out.

“Maybe someone will ask about the village defence and security committee? Isn’t that their task? I want to tell you that for the committee to do its work, the Village Assembly has to pass a resolution regarding the issue.”

Mandiga knew that she would be the first to be called upon to speak. She turned to look at her husband.

“Don’t stop me Kibwana,” she whispered.

“Fine, but I am ashamed my wife, can you really talk in front of this whole crowd?” Kibwana asked.

Mandiga had already suspected that, this was the real reason his husband was worried. He was afraid that she wouldn’t be able to stand up and speak sense in front of a large audience of men and women.

“Have faith in me,” Mandiga said. She went back to listening to the Chairperson who was explaining why this meeting was important. It would validate actions to be taken on this new threat facing the women in the village.

After he had finished talking to the Assembly, Mzee Gangile whispered a little with his Executive Officer and then took a piece of paper. He did not waste time but began to read it. It was the report of the meeting with Mandiga a week before in his office.

“My fellow villagers. Our village has been invaded by people who do not wish us well. They are carrying out shameful acts of raping our mothers, and now women are afraid of going to the well because of the disgusting behaviour of these people.”

People in the meeting started whispering to one another, women more loudly than the men. The Chairperson told them to keep quiet.

“Citizens, we need to listen. I opened the meeting but there are people I want you to listen to, as they are the ones who are already the victims of this in our village.”

He looked at where Mandiga was sitting. “Mandiga please come to the front and talk with your fellows. Tell them what happened to you so that we know what to do.” Half the Assembly turned towards the spot the Chairperson was looking at.

Mandiga looked at her husband and without saying anything, she stood up and started making her way to the front, followed by the eyes of all who watched her. It wasn’t that she had no fear, no, but her fear was overcome by courage, and she wanted to make sure that the shortage of water should not add to harsh life they already had in the village. She saw rape as the highest form of inhumanity.

The only chance she had was to expose this problem so that people looked for the solution. That way, they would only be left with the one issue of water, and not the added one of rape.

Her husband wished the ground would swallow him up where he was sitting. He could not stop his wife, but he saw it as the beginning of all kinds of troubles. He sat there bewildered,

not knowing what to do. He looked at his wife pushing people aside to get to the front. The Chairperson welcomed her, and she greeted some of the leaders and smiled when she saw Mama Hamza.

After she had finished greeting people, the Chairperson asked Mandiga to speak.

CHAPTER 9

“My fellow villagers,” Mandiga began in a quiet voice like someone who did not want to say more, but who was determined to tell speak the truth.

“I am standing here before you,” she went on, after seeing that the silence enabled her voice to be heard even by those right at the back of the crowd.

“I am one of those who have had the misfortune to experience what most of you only hear about.”

Her body tingled as her heart beat faster and she felt full of courage. It was her first time to speak before a large meeting like this. She remembered she had not introduced herself, so she stood more firmly so that those listening to her could hear every word she said. She went on.

“For those who don’t know me, I am Mandiga Lijama, wife of Mr. Kibwana. I am a native of a neighbouring village, Mkasu. I came to live here with my husband after we got married. So, I am your child. Since coming here, apart from our long-standing problem of water, we have been very safe. But last week, I only just escaped from being raped when coming back from the well.”

She said the word raped loudly which led to some murmuring in the crowd. Some said sorry, while what others said could not be heard.

The commotion and the murmuring caused her husband to stand up. He saw that his wife was now spitting fire which might burn even him.

When the Chairperson saw that the murmuring was getting too loud, he stood up and asked people to calm down. When they did, Mandiga continued.

“I went back home terrified but when I told my husband he was furious as if I had asked for it myself. I am thankful that he has understood me now and is in full agreement that I come to the meeting and speak.” Mandiga took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Kibwana poured with sweat as he heard his wife mentioning him, sure that now he was being shamed.

“So, I decided to go to our village leaders and report. In truth, let me say the problem of water threatens the security of all of us women, because we are the ones who go to fetch it. I was very hurt even though I managed to escape. Maybe to talk about this issue in a meeting is the way of getting a solution. I escaped today, but tomorrow your sister, your mother or daughter could be raped. So, this is an issue for all of us and we must put an end to it. My fellow women here, I ask you to recognise this danger. Today it’s me, tomorrow it’s you. Our men and our leaders must tell us what they are going to do. They are our protectors. I am asking myself so many questions regarding this challenge and I see that our safety here in the village has been seriously undermined,” Mandiga said.

Her words set off another unexpected round of murmuring. Mandiga's words touched many of them. They hadn't expected her to have the courage to lay out the bare facts. The commotion did not disturb Mandiga. She felt that the knife had reached the bone. She went on raising her voice until the Chairperson stood up and stopped the commotion.

"I see you don't want to listen to the words of this woman. But you all know the procedure in a Village Assembly. If someone has something to say, they should raise their hand and the Executive Officer will write down your name so that you will be given the chance to speak when the previous speaker has finished. But now I just see the commotion. Let me ask, is there someone who wants to talk after listening to what Mandiga said?"

The question from the Chairperson added to the commotion. People were no longer whispering, but shouting, women and men. Everyone wanted to speak. Things seemed to be getting out of hand. The Executive Officer also stood up to support his Chairperson. It took them a whole minute to bring the meeting to order.

When the crowd quietened down again, the Chairperson spoke.

"Would you please just calm down? This issue has been brought here so that we discuss it, because it has not touched Mandiga alone. Other women have also been affected and some have been raped and threatened. All in all, our village is not safe, and we should not wait for more problems before agreeing on what to do," the Chairperson said, looking fiercely at his people.

"We can't make any decisions if we don't listen. This is not an issue for one person but for the whole community. Let us hear from another woman."

The Chairperson turned to look behind him to where the Council members were sitting. His eyes met with those of Mama Hamza who was sitting near a middle-aged woman. He signed to the other woman to come forward.

Ashaneza did as she was told. She was sitting with the members because she had come with Mama Hamza, as agreed in the internal meeting a few days ago.

She was quite plump, of average height and with a brownish skin. She covered herself with blue kangas around her waist and over her head. After passing the members in front of her, she came to stand before the Chairperson who was standing next to Mandiga.

"Welcome sister Ashaneza" Chairperson, Mzee Gangile politely welcomed her. He had already been given her name by Mama Hamza. The Chairperson pulled out his chair and sat down, leaving her to stand alongside Mandiga.

Before starting to talk she greeted Mandiga in a low voice then she wiped away the sweat that was beginning to flow by using a corner of her clothes.

"My name is Ashaneza Kindwangi. I don't have much to say but what I want to tell you is not a story, it is a painful and shameful truth. As I was going to the well, I saw two men following me. I didn't suspect them until they approached me." Ashaneza paused then said in a low voice in Kindamba "*waba... waba... wabambo wala wang'wila, wang'wisha pasi,*

wang'onjeka," meaning that they knocked me over and raped me. The murmuring started again.

"Mama tell us in Kiswahili what they did," the Executive Officer interrupted.

Ashaneza did not reply at once, waiting till the murmuring died down. "They raped me and did unspeakable things to me which I cannot describe in public," she replied. "Then they threatened me that if I reveal this secret, they will come back to rape me again."

"How long is it since this happened?" the Chairperson asked her.

"I have been living with this for about four weeks now," she replied, and went on. "I couldn't stand it, so I told my close friends in secret. When I returned home and told my husband, he decided to divorce me. I was totally bewildered. Instead of supporting me he caused me even more pain. He told me I caused it myself."

Ashaneza kept silent for a moment as the tears began to well up. She took courage and continued.

"That day I felt a total weakling. My dignity, my self-worth had been trampled on. I asked myself what I had done wrong to the men who raped me? I will not forget it for the rest of my life. So, after being given a divorce, I left the next morning to go to my parents. They also wanted to know why my husband had divorced me. I was afraid of telling them because of the threats of those rapists. I was having nightmares. I thought I would be a disgrace to my parents, but I didn't know I was depriving myself of justice. I told them the day before yesterday after Mama Hamza came and told me about this meeting. So, I should not be afraid as, if the rapists are caught, that will be one way of getting justice." Her tears welled up again and ran down her cheeks. Mandiga who was standing beside her tried to comfort her. When she stopped crying, she started to speak again.

"As I stand here today, I don't know whether I am uninfected or not. As you know, even our village dispensary does not have sufficient equipment. You know the life we live here. I wanted to check up on my health even but up to now, I haven't done a single test. I am suffering." She began to cry again. Mandiga did her best to comfort her.

Mzee Gangile stood up quickly and went to stand between them.

Before speaking, the Chairperson allowed a little time to allow the murmurings fading as people expressed their sadness at Ashaneza story.

But a man suddenly stood up and began speaking in a harsh voice.

CHAPTER 10

“How can it happen to just these two? These are lies, Chairperson. We are wasting our time for the stupidity of these two people. These women should know that to fetch water is their responsibility, so what are they complaining about?”

The words of this man who wore an oversize worn-out coat and mud-caked trousers created a disturbance among those who believed the words of Mandiga and Ashaneza. A shouting match ensued.

Kibwana was one of the people who was heard shouting harshly at the man who said the stories were lies. The time he had sat listening to his wife and then Ashaneza’s testimony was enough for him to learn and believe.

He now understood what his wife was fighting for. He saw it was not a time to feel ashamed. It was not the time to leave his wife to struggle on her own, or to keep silent and leave it to the village government alone. He knew the government was weak, starting with the Chairperson. He knew it was time to come together and find a solution.

In his heart, he remembered the words of his wife that if she had been raped, even he would not be safe. He connected it with the words of Ashaneza who feared for her health. In his heart, he thanked God and he thanked his wife for being so courageous in fighting against the rapists.

The commotion increased as two opposing sides emerged. One side supported the man who dismissed the words of Mandiga and Ashaneza and the other supported the women. Each side shouted their arguments, believing that they were right.

All those who seated were now standing. The members of the Village Council had also left their benches and were standing. The Executive Officer also stood up and joined the Chairperson there in front. Mzee Gangile had to order two young men, who were the community police, to restore order by ordering the people to calm down so that the meeting could continue.

These young men were dressed in civilian clothes but were known to the whole village as police. They did as the Chairperson had told them, although it took them more than ten minutes to restore order.

It looked as if they could be overwhelmed by the large number of people and the Chairperson very nearly decided to close the meeting. Finally, the crowd began to calm down and he used his wisdom to ask one of the most respected elders in the village to speak.

“I request Mzee Sanane to speak first before anyone else.”

Mzee Sanane who was sitting right at the front stood up slowly, wiped the seat of his trousers and so as to be heard, turned the face to the people rather than speaking to the leaders.

"Mwayangu!" he started calling the villagers "My people". Then he continued. "I feel very ashamed at all this commotion." He paused briefly and gazed at the people.

He continued, "This issue requires us to be united in looking for the solution. I accept that everyone has the right to give his views but what kind of people are we if we don't accept the truth. Or does it have to happen to you, that you or your child is raped before you wake up and believe? What was done to these women is shameful. One of them narrowly escaped, while the other was raped. She worked up the courage and sacrificed herself to come and speak here before you all because she doesn't want others to suffer the same fate. Mandiga was even more involved. Think about how she narrowly escaped but she still decided to report. Without Mandiga there probably would have been no meeting."

He turned to Mandiga. "My daughter Mandiga, I salute you for your courage. There are few women with such a heart, bearing in mind also the trouble you faced with your husband. I know he is here, and he hears me, and I salute him too for understanding you. Chairperson, show us the way, I don't see any lies here. Thank you for listening to me," Mzee Sanane finished and returned to where he was sitting.

As the Chairperson stood up and prepared to speak, a loud voice was heard from among the women's group. A woman stood up and shouted.

"There are many ways the shortage of water is killing us in this village. My husband beats me every day, saying I went to a lover while I am struggling to get water," she said bitterly.

Everyone turned to look at her. She was carrying a child on her back. Just looking at her, you could see the tough life she faced, her natural shine was almost lost.

"A woman in this village has no value. We struggle to help the family, but we get beaten if we say we are tired. Your husband asks if he has paid the bride price for you just to come and eat? Insult after insult until the desire of being a wife leaves you. Then ..." she was interrupted.

"Liar, I have never hit her, not once. She goes to the well in the afternoon and comes back at night. She thinks I don't know her tricks. Women, you should know that fetching water is your job," a man's voice interrupted.

It was her husband, who was not sitting with her in the meeting. It was obvious that each had come to the meeting on their own, as they were not on good terms. Everyone turned to look.

"So, do you beat your wife?" the Chairperson asked.

At that moment, when so many people had ignored the proper procedure by standing up and giving examples of how they had suffered violence over a lack of water, he didn't know which issue to highlight first.

"I have never beaten her," the man replied.

“Mama continue, you were interrupted,” the Chairperson turned to the woman who had started to complain.

The woman went on to explain bitterly that her husband demanded to have sex even on the days when she returned tired from fetching water in order to prove that she had not had sex with someone else. This statement upset the listeners. Some bent down out of a sense of shame, and some were so upset that they murmured how sorry they were.

Mandiga couldn't bear it. She thought things were getting more serious than she expected. She moved away from Ashaneza after whispering something to her and went to the woman who was speaking, the words now came out with a mixture of sobs and hiccups. Mandiga went to console her.

“This woman is just a troublemaker, she's evil! Why are you telling lies that I beat you and force you to have sex? Ahh, the world is coming to an end.” Her husband started to leave the meeting after seeing his wife pour out the secrets of their married life.

“Please don't leave. This is a lawful meeting and if you leave without following the procedure, you will have broken the law. Your wife has raised her complaints so as to be given help. Please sit down, we need to see that people can live peacefully without any violence,” said the Chairperson. He ordered the militia to stop the man leaving.

When Kibwana saw his wife going to console the woman, he left where he was and followed her.

“You spoke very well my wife,” Kibwana praised her in a low voice when he came close. All his fears of being shamed had evaporated. Mandiga did not reply but just smiled.

“Now I will not allow anyone to speak until I give them the chance to do so. I think you have all heard these cases arising out of the shortage of water, so we need to collect them so that we can look for a solution. If there is anyone else with an issue related to water, please raise your hand so that I can give you the chance to talk,” said the Chairperson.

Hands flew up. Everyone wanted to speak, particularly the women. The Chairperson saw one woman who seemed to have a long-term complaint. She was saved by being given the chance to speak, otherwise she would have stood up anyway.

“Thank you, Chairperson, for letting me speak. I see one man here tried to leave to make it look as if the truth about him was just backbiting. Thank you for stopping him. Men of this village must understand what we suffer from going to fetch water. The incidents that happen because of the water problem are many.” The woman, who was wearing a long, faded dress was waving her arms as she spoke. After swallowing, she continued.

“I was divorced because of water. I went late to the well and when I got there, there was no water, so I returned with an empty bucket. I told my husband that the well had no water that day and that, as it was getting dark, I was afraid for my safety, so I decided to return. He was furious with me and insulted me and told me I was not a woman. There are other women who would be better for the family. When I said it was just the problem of water and nothing else, I ended up being beaten and told to take my laziness to my parents.”

“So, as I speak, I have been staying with my parents for almost a year now. In brief, water is a source of trouble in the village and men have decided to use this to do things that are wrong. We are being abused. We are being raped, trampled on, and divorced with a lot of insults. Why? Today we have to get to the root of the problem. You are the decision-makers, there are many of you, show us you are men,” the woman shouted angrily.

Her statement caused another commotion. A large group of men began to shout, saying that the aim of the meeting was not to accuse and blame one another. Others were warning their wives not to raise their hands. Once again, the crowd was divided between those who supported what was said and those who opposed.

The meeting had become very heated, and the security was clearly insufficient. The two community police couldn't cope. As a result, the Executive Officer and the members of the Council stood up. The Chairperson was not prepared for such a commotion.

He whispered with his officer then he came forward shouting, without asking the people to calm down.

“I see today we cannot come to an agreement. People are shouting all the time and there are some people who are dragging their wives back home. Now the sun is already setting. I ask the Village Council members to meet in the office so that we continue to discuss this and come to an agreement. So, I am postponing this meeting for three days,” the Chairperson announced.

As soon as he had finished, people began to disperse, but the commotion continued. Ashaneza who was still standing at the front, went back to join Mama Hamza.

Mandiga didn't want to leave the woman she was consoling, so she asked Kibwana to escort her to her house before returning home. Kibwana did not refuse.

On the way home, Kibwana felt terrible, he reflected once more, and saw the harm he had caused by not listening to his wife and how he would have been even more harmed if he had divorced her. For the first time, he saw himself a lucky man to get a wife with such vision.

As they mingled with other groups returning home, Mandiga heard a voice behind her.

“Many congratulations sister Mandiga,” said a woman.

Before replying, Mandiga turned round to see who was speaking to her.

“Thank you so much,” she replied.

“You have really saved us. These problems with the water are bringing us another disaster.” The woman continued. She was now two steps behind them.

“Things will end. Once the rapists are caught, and we will be free, although the issue of water will still be facing us,” Mandiga replied.

Then the woman who was talking to her went past.

“Water is the misfortune we have learned to live with, but God will protect us,” the woman said as she hurried on.

When they reached the house of the woman who argued with her husband in the meeting, they found her husband already at home. Kibwana used the opportunity to talk to him and educate him that the way he was treating his wife was wrong.

Kibwana used his own example of how he did not trust Mandiga, their fight and finally coming to understand one another.

“There is the gender desk at the police station. If she goes to report there, you will be in trouble my friend. Please do not beat your wife,” Kibwana urged him.

The two men talked for over half an hour, and although the husband resisted the idea that he had wronged his wife, in the end he seemed to understand.

Mandiga and her husband left there, sure that they had restored peace to that house. On the way home, Kibwana moved close to his wife with a broad smile, and Mandiga received that smile with joy. It was a long time since she had seen her husband in such a happy mood.

They held hands as they walked on.

CHAPTER 11

That night as they sat on the mat in the sitting room preparing the evening meal, Kibwana looked at his wife who was serving the food. It was as if he was seeing her for the first time. Then he smiled.

“Hee! Stop looking at me like that, I might drop the food,” said Mandiga jokingly.

“If you drop the food, I will cook some more.”

“Since when? And with what love?” Mandiga asked laughing.

“You just spill it, and you will see.”

They both burst out laughing.

Just a few days before, it had felt as though the house was on fire. If Kibwana had not seen that he had been wrong, Mandiga would have been back at home in Mkasu now and he would be left all alone, with no one to laugh and joke with. They both were thankful that they finished their differences peacefully.

“Come and wash your hands, and let’s eat,” Mandiga said.

“Thank you.”

He washed his hands and Mandiga washed hers too, then they started to eat.

“You cooked really fast today. I’m impressed.”

“I knew we would be late back from the meeting so this morning while you were chopping the firewood, I decided to boil the cassava, so that when we returned it would be easy to add the coconut, that’s why you see things have gone fast.”

“You are a very intelligent woman; I will never regret marrying you.”

“You are talking too much Kibwana, eat.”

It was a special meal that day, cassava cooked in coconut and ginger tea. Silence reigned for a few seconds as both chewed thoughtfully. Kibwana raised his head and looked at his wife.

“Truthfully, my wife, in all the years we have lived together, I have never mistreated you the way I have done these last few days. My spirit is heavy every time I remember how I ranted at you and refused to believe that you had nearly been raped,” Kibwana said.

“That testimony I heard from those women in the meeting today has taught me a big lesson. As our ancestors said, if you see smoke coming from your house, know that your neighbour’s house is on fire. The situation is bad here in the village. Forgive me my wife, you are a heroine, and I will never do what I did to you again.”

All this time, Mandiga was listening to every word of her husband. She realised that the piece of cassava she had been chewing so fast was now being chewed slowly as a result of the words of her husband.

“Thank you, my husband. I have already forgiven you. And I thank you for being so receptive. I didn’t expect you to agree to escort that woman home, I was worried about her husband, he seemed to be so aggressive, and I was afraid that he would beat her again when they got home,” Mandiga said softly.

“And I knew what was in your mind, which was why, when we got there, I began to teach her husband a lesson. I am sure he understood me, and they will be peaceful now.”

“Right. You did a really good thing to tell him about what we went through.”

“I thought it was the only way to get him to understand. Even so, you know when you got up in the meeting to go and speak, I thought that was going to be disgraced in public. I thought of how I, Kibwana, would be shamed.” His words were punctuated with laughter and his wife joined in. They were both laughing.

“So, you still didn’t believe in me, Kibwana?”

“Yes! You know it’s because I have never seen you speaking in front of a large crowd like that, but you proved me wrong. I was left wondering, is this Mandiga, my wife or is she Ummu Mwalimu?” They laughed even more as Kibwana compared her to one of the Tanzanian Ministers.

“Rape is a serious issue my husband, I had to find all my courage to be able to give a clear message.” They both went on laughing and eating. It was a time of happiness for them. Even the angels were probably happy.

When they stopped laughing, Mandiga said.

“What you should know is that my heart is very heavy because of all the violence here in the village. I have sworn to stand firm on this issue, so I must be brave, especially when fighting for rights. If you ask for it and you don’t get it, then you must demand it forcefully.”

“I understand you, my wife. And on this, I assure you we are together. You have made me feel like a new man. I know some of my fellow men haven’t changed with regard to abusing women, which is why I made a start with that man. I will continue to raise awareness so that, everywhere in the village, rights and equality prevail,” said Kibwana who began to eat again.

“That will be wonderful. But why have I never heard of a meeting being called to discuss the problem of water here in the village?”

“I don’t understand either. We both moved here as you remember. I don’t know if it is true, but I hear people talking about the Chairperson and his Council members. I remember hearing from my uncle in Kilama.”

“About what?”

“About this same issue of water and digging a well. But let’s leave it at that as I am not sure whether it is true.”

“But give me a hint at least Kibwana.”

“Let’s eat, I will tell you later,” said Kibwana. He took another piece of cassava. “I was also relieved to see Mama Hamza leaving with that woman who introduced herself as Ashaneza. It shows that she is very understanding.”

“Yes. I met her the day I went to report. She really encouraged me. She was clearly touched by my issue, and she was the one who said there was another woman who was raped and threatened. The same as I had heard from Mama Mboni. I think that when they held their meeting after I had left, they agreed that she should also be at the meeting. Now Kibwana please eat, the food is getting cold my husband,” said Mandiga. They looked at one another and went on eating.

Suddenly they heard a knock at the door. *Who is knocking at this time of the night?* It was almost eight o clock. Kibwana washed his hands and went to open the door.

“Welcome.”

CHAPTER 12

A girl aged between 13 and 14 years old entered after Kibwana had opened the door. She was Mboni, the child of Mandiga's neighbour and best friend. They were amazed to see her at that time. It wasn't so late, but she should have been at home at this time, considering her age and the fact she was still a pupil.

She was given a stool in the sitting room. Mboni was in standard seven in Kikwawila primary school. She wasn't so tall, but she was full of life.

"Mboni what's up? At this time?" said Mandiga her hand in the plate of cassava.

"Nothing auntie. I wanted to talk to you," said Mboni settling on to the stool.

"Good. Have something to eat," Mandiga welcomed her.

"Thank you, auntie," Mboni replied.

Kibwana had already gone back to his place. He washed his hands again and went on eating.

"Does your mother know you have come here at this time?"

"Yes, I told her I wouldn't stay long."

"Anha! Shall we talk while we eat or talk first before eating, as I don't know what the problem is?"

"It's not a big problem," Mboni seemed to be hesitating.

"Kibwana I think this is a woman's issue, so what should we do?"

Kibwana looked at his wife, then at Mboni without saying anything.

"No. There is no need for uncle to leave," Mboni said.

"All right, tell me then because you are making me worried," Mandiga replied.

Mboni took a deep breath, then she locked her fingers together.

"Auntie, I was in the village meeting today. The teachers gave us permission to leave because they also wanted to attend the meeting after hearing it was an emergency one," she paused for a moment.

"Enhe!"

“I was so impressed by your courage so I said I should come and congratulate you.”

“Oooh thank you my daughter. But why didn’t you wait until morning?” Mandiga said smiling broadly. She didn’t expect to hear such heart-warming words from a child.

“I couldn’t wait until morning. I told my mum there was something disturbing me, and I want to talk to auntie about it. I told her that through you we can get the solution. She also knows what the problem is, as I told her a long time ago. That’s why she let me come.”

Mboni’s voice showed there was a serious issue.

After these words, Mandiga felt she had eaten enough. After seeing her washing her hands, her husband did the same. When they were finished, Mandiga asked Mboni to wait a minute while she took out the dishes, then she could give her full attention.

“Let me take out the dishes, auntie.”

“Don’t worry, just relax. It’s not a problem.”

“Sorry, I think my words have disturbed you uncle.”

“Don’t worry, Mboni. We started eating a long time ago. I was already full, but I was just keeping your auntie company.”

“I was also full,” said Mandiga after taking the dishes to the rack outside and coming back. “Now, tell me Mboni.”

Mboni turned to Mandiga who was looking at her.

“Auntie, in the meeting, you said that the problem of water was the cause of this other problem of women being raped. That caused quite a stir but that is not the only issue.”

“Oh, so there is another problem?” Mandiga asked in a shocked voice.

The girl began to explain the rape is not the only problem caused by the lack of water in the village. The school children don’t get time to study because they have to spend a lot of time looking for water, which is affecting their educational development.

“Auntie, I know parents don’t have time to follow up on students’ issues because you are always busy with the farm work, but the lack of water is really affecting us as our teachers use us as soon as we arrive at school. We spend a lot of time going to fetch water and taking it to their houses, while water is also needed for the school latrines,” Mboni told them sadly.

She went further and said that it was not only the girls. Even the boys were sent to fetch water. They go together to fetch water in risky areas, they must walk long distances and so they get less time to study in class and even when they do, they are already tired.

“There are times we don’t study for a whole week as nearly all the teachers have no water at home so we have to go and fetch water for them. Any pupil who comes back without water is beaten,” said Mboni.

“Kha! That is serious. So where do you go to fetch the water because I have never seen pupils at the well we go to?” asked Mandiga.

“Apart from the well where most people go, there is another well whose water is dirtier, between our village and Lungongole. The teachers forbade us from going to the well you go to, as they were afraid people will see us, so we had to go to the well farther away,” Mboni said.

“My God! This is terrible. If I had heard this before, I would not have been able to eat. It’s just as well you came after we had eaten. Kibwana you hear what Mboni says?”

“I have heard. I think this is now war in our village. War of water against villagers and their rights. I don’t know what is going to happen.”

“And if you go to that well, you will find a lot of holes as sometimes we have to dig to the side to get at least some cleaner water. It is one torture after another, auntie. So, I said I should come and tell you so that at the next village meeting you should talk about this. We pupils are suffering.”

“What about your safety?” Kibwana asked in an angry voice.

“We wait for one another until we all have water, then we leave. It is as if the teachers have made a duty roster, especially for us in the higher classes.”

Both Mandiga and her husband felt drained. They couldn’t understand how in the village with all its problems, the teachers could take the opportunity to use the children by sending them on long trips from the school to Lungongole to fetch water.

“Tell me Mboni, how many teachers are there in your school?” Mandiga asked.

“There are seven teachers.”

“How many women teachers?”

“Only two.”

“So, you fetch water for them all as you said?”

“Yes auntie.”

She looked at her husband who seemed totally shattered.

“What do you think?”

“I have no strength left.” Kibwana replied.

“I can’t lose all my strength. Mboni has come to give me more courage. I see that I have a debt to pay in my community.” She stood up.

“Kibwana let’s take the girl back home. Mboni, I will go to see the headteacher tomorrow. This is intolerable.”

“Auntie, please don’t tell anyone that I told you.”

“I won’t my daughter. Get up and let’s go.”

They all stood up and went out. As their houses were close to each other, it didn’t take long. They took Mboni to near her home and said goodnight.

“Give my regards to your mother.”

“I will auntie.”

When they got home, there was nothing to do other than prepare for bed. In bed, Kibwana broke the heavy silence.

“What do you plan to do about what Mboni told you?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said tomorrow I must go to the school to see the headteacher. I don’t have a child there, but the children there are like my own and they should be able to study without being turned into labourers by the teachers because of the problem of water.”

“All right, my wife.”

“Please allow me not to go to the farm tomorrow so that I have time to go to the school. When you leave here in the morning, please pass by Mama Mboni. First tell her that her daughter came here, though I know she gave her permission, then tell her what she told us. Then ask her to come and escort me to the school. If there are two of us, it will help when we are talking with the headteacher,” Mandiga explained.

“Wonderful idea, my wife. I will tell her. And I will come back early from the farm to help with some of the household chores. I am beginning to see my role as a husband in this struggle,” Kibwana said, as he looked at his wife. She also turned to look at him.

“Thank you, my husband. You have been transformed. I feel so comforted when you help me with the work. I am sure we will win this war. Water must not be a painful thorn in people’s marriages, in people’s dignity to the point of women being raped, divorced and beaten and now also a bitter pill for our children in their studies. This is not right!”

“Thank you for your brave words, my wife. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

That night was one of peace and happiness.

Mandiga Lijama took another step in the struggle against the problem of water.

CHAPTER 13

The sound of the radio being tuned woke Mandiga up. Her husband was turning the dial which usually tuned Sikika FM.

That morning, Mandiga turned over in bed and saw her husband standing there holding the radio. She was normally the one to turn on the radio, as she was usually the first to wake up and get out of bed. But today she wasn't going to the farm, as they agreed yesterday, so her husband had to wake up first. As he was preparing to leave, he remembered to turn on the radio.

“Why are you changing the station? Please tune back to our community radio Kibwana.” Mandiga's voice was still faint from sleep.

“I wanted to tune in to the Dar es Salaam stations, but you don't like them. Ok, let me take you back to Sikika FM.” Kibwana said as she prepared to get out of bed also.

Mandiga struggled to sit up, she was still half asleep. She managed to remove her legs from the sheet and on the bed.

“What's the time now?” she asked.

“It's just half an hour before seven o'clock.”

“Ehh. I am so late waking up?”

“I know you, it's because you are not going to the farm today. And I didn't want to disturb you, I left you to wake up yourself. Let me leave now.” Kibwana told his wife picking up the hoe and other things.

“Don't forget to pass by Mama Mboni. Tell her to come at seven, I am getting ready now.”

“Right.” Kibwana went out leaving his wife still sitting on the bed.

The seven o'clock news on the community radio Sikika FM found Mama Mboni in Mandiga's sitting room waiting for her to come out of the bedroom so that they go to the school to see the headteacher.

Mama Mboni was a widow. Her husband had died a week after she gave birth to Mboni and she never had the good fortune to get married again. Her husband died from a snake bite when he was going back home from the farm. After the funeral, Mama Mboni gave everything to farming to make sure she did all she could to educate her daughter. She

believed in education, and she thought the only gift she could leave her daughter was to enable her to study up to university so that she could come to support her later.

When her daughter told Mama Mboni, whose real name was Nandaku Ngula, about how the teachers sent them to fetch water for their household use, she felt that her dream of sending her daughter to university was evaporating. She knew Mboni wouldn't be able to concentrate on her studies and would do badly in her exams.

Unfortunately, she had not attended the emergency meeting called the day before because of the farm work. She wasn't the only one. Mboni was the one who told her all about the meeting and when Mboni asked to see Mandiga the night before, she let her.

She and Mandiga had become good friends because their houses were close to one another.

Mandiga suddenly came running out of the room with her radio in her hand. The volume was turned right up as she wanted Mama Mboni who was sitting on a stool to stand up and listen to what was been announced in the news bulletin.

"What is it?" Mama Mboni exclaimed.

"Listen, listen they have just started. When I heard them mention Kikwawila village I brought the radio out at once. Listen to what they are saying." Mandiga said, as she listened carefully. The two women held the radio to their ears.

The female announcer, who introduced herself as Amina Mrisho, read the news expertly, knowing she had her own following of fans.

The first item on the news talked about the climax of the water week celebrations of the previous day. It talked about the importance of clean water services in the villages and stressed that the government had already allocated funds for the digging of wells in four villages in Kibaoni ward three years before.

The announcer continued, "... giving feedback on the implementation of these projects on the ground, the Director of Ifakara Town Council, Mr. Gobo Kilua said that, although the government had allocated these funds, there were still some villages where the implementation was not going as planned."

This was followed by the voice of the director.

"We are not sure, but we are following up as we have heard that the villagers of Lungongole and Kikwawila are still not getting water services when the government allocated funds nearly three years ago. The villages of Kilama and Kibaoni have already completed their wells and the people are getting water."

The announcer went on.

"The director added that water is central to the life of all people but in the rural areas, the women are the ones who have to struggle to get these services as their families need water for cooking, washing clothes and dishes, house cleanliness and other things. If these projects that

had stalled were completed, it would remove a big burden from the women and enable them to participate in development activities instead of using a lot of time searching for water.”

When the announcer finished reading this item, she went on to the next item.

Mandiga’s eyes bulged with surprise as she looked at Mama Mboni who had her hands on her hips. They could not believe what they had heard. Mandiga was about to throw the radio angrily to the ground. She took a hold of herself and put it down slowly, shaking her head sadly.

“Why do we still have such awful leaders to implement people’s projects while the government has already allocated money? Why?” she asked with a furious scowl. She threw herself down on the mat.

She did not expect that her morning would change like this. She woke up with something else in mind and now she had heard something even bigger.

“It’s really shameful. Under this government, people still have the nerve to fail to implement projects? Really?” Mama Mboni said angrily with her hands on her hips. She did not sit down.

There was silence for a moment as each one reflected. Mandiga was breathing so hard that her nose was whistling. She didn’t know where to start. She remembered the words of her husband from last night when they were eating. *‘About this same issue of water and digging a well. But let’s leave it at that.’* She turned to Mama Mboni.

“My husband was talking about the same thing yesterday.”

Mama Mboni responded not knowing what Mandiga meant.

“What did he say?”

“He said he would tell me later. I don’t know why but I forgot to ask him. Let me ask you my friend, as I found you here already living in the village. Have you ever heard of this information at village meetings?” Mandiga asked Mama Mboni, who was going back to the stool she had sat on before.

“My friend! This is the first time I have heard. So, it means our fellows in Kibaoni and Kilama have water while we struggle for water until we are raped. This is not right, no way.” Mama Mboni’s voice was still angry.

“The news said the government allocated money for building the well three years ago, do you think that money is there? Or ...” Her mouth suddenly dried up and she began to cough.

Her coughing made Mama Mboni keep silent as she watched her friend trying to stop. She knew Mandiga, and she knew how much this news item had hurt her

“Sorry Mandiga. Let’s go to the school then come back and do our household chores. But it is good that this issue has been heard on the radio. No doubt some other villagers will have heard it too.”

“All right let’s go. But I won’t give up on this. Whether the villagers have heard it or not I must talk about it in the meeting,” Mandiga stood up.

They went out to go to the office of the headteacher.

CHAPTER 14

Along the way, they talked about what they had heard. What shocked them the most was that they had never heard at previous meetings that their village had been given money by the government to dig a well.

“It’s not possible Mama Mboni. There is something strange going on here,” Mandiga said. She seemed to feel the pain more. “If they were given the money three years ago, then why haven’t they dug the well? The Chairperson has so much respect in the village, how can he fail to supervise the digging of the well. Unbelievable. Or does he and his family not have any problems of water?”

“Our ancestors said, the one you suspect is not the one. He can be good at overseeing other things but have a long arm with regard to money. I don’t want to earn sin but it’s possible this money has been eaten.” Mama Mboni said.

“But that is not right. We can’t have two-faced leaders. I will not give up on this issue, truly Mama Mboni. I know my husband will also be shocked when I tell him,” Mandiga said, then slowed down to greet an old woman who was passing. Mama Mboni also greeted her then they continued on their way to the school.

“You know, with my laziness at attending village meetings, truly I have never heard that the village leadership received money for digging the well. Even the meeting yesterday. Although I didn’t attend, I heard all about what you and the other women said and much more. Mboni told me,” Mama Mboni said.

“Maybe it’s too early to suspect our leaders but they said they will call a meeting to give us feedback on the last meeting. That’s when I will leave everyone open-mouthed, I will throw it down, Pwa!” Mandiga said.

That Pwa! Made Mama Mboni burst out laughing. They both laughed as they carried on with their journey.

Some distance from the school, they met a pupil carrying a five litre jerrycan on her head.

When the pupil saw Mandiga and Mama Mboni, she wanted to run away. She knew them both. That was why she wanted to run after the warning she had been given by the teachers who send them to fetch water. That morning, she didn’t expect to meet anyone. She was on the way back from Lugongole.

Mandiga told the student to stop, which she did fearfully. Mandiga took the five litre jerrycan and put it on the ground.

“Shikamooni,” the pupil greeted them.

“Marahaba,” they both replied.

“What’s your name,” Mandiga asked.

“My name is Hawa Njalang'ona,” the pupil replied politely.

“Where are you taking this jerrycan of water Hawa?” Mandiga asked her.

“I am taking it to school. I was sent by teacher Rose,” she replied in a low voice.

“What time did you get to school?” Mandiga asked her again.

“Six o’clock in the morning Mama.”

“And what time did she send you to fetch the water?”

“As soon as I arrived, she told me to put my exercise books in the classroom and then go and fetch water for her.”

“Do you have to fetch water?” It was Mama Mboni’s turn to ask.

“Yes Mama. They say that for them to be able to teach, they must be sure there is water at home or at school. I am taking this water to her house.”

Trial over trial. Mandiga and Mama Mboni looked at each other and groaned in unison. They were at a loss for words. Mandiga looked at the pupil in a way that made even the pupil afraid.

“So, if you are taking this water to the teacher’s house, do you have water for drinking and cleaning the latrines?” Mandiga asked again.

“This morning we don’t, but there is a group of pupils who will go to fetch water at 10.00 o’clock.”

“And what time do they normally come back?”

“About twelve o’clock.”

“All right, let’s go. We are also on the way to your school,” said Mandiga. She carried the five litre jerrycan.

They accompanied the pupil until they neared the school. Then they told her to go to class.

“Okay Mama. Please let me take the jerrycan to the teacher,” the pupil said.

“No. You just go to class. We will take the jerrycan, all right good child? What did you say was the name of the teacher who sent you?” Mandiga asked her to be sure of the name of the teacher for whom that water was intended.

“Rose Mheteli.”

“All right good child, go now.”

She didn't go but just stood there. She was afraid of being beaten. She had already guessed what these women were going to do. They also quickly understood her fear.

“You won't be beaten. We are taking it to the teacher who sent you,” Mama Mboni said.

The pupil had no option. They could see by the way she left, she was worried. Their aim was to go with the jerrycan to the headteacher as evidence. They believed it would be part of their talks to put a stop to that habit of some of the teachers to send the pupils to fetch water from Lugongole.

They watched her walk back to her classroom. On that morning, everything was in order, nearly all the pupils were in class. A few teachers could be seen in the distance. Mandiga held the jerrycan and went straight to the office of the headteacher. Mama Mboni knew the office as she had come here several times to follow up on the progress of her daughter.

When they reached the office, they knocked and without waiting to be invited in, pushed the door and walked in. They found the headteacher standing up to go to the door.

“Ooh welcome.” The headteacher received them. He was wearing black cloth trousers and a grey shirt tucked into the trousers.

He was not more than fifty-five years. His eyes went straight to Mandiga in surprise because she was carrying that jerrycan.

“Thank you,” they said together. The headteacher showed them the chairs. There were four of them. Mandiga and Mama Mboni, chose two and sat down.

After sitting down, they greeted the headteacher who then asked them how he could help them. He seemed a little shocked at their coming. His voice carried a note of concern. That jerrycan probably disturbed him because he knew where it came from.

“My name is Mandiga Lijama.” Mandiga was the first to introduce herself then she looked at Mama Mboni.

“And my name is Nandaku Ngula or as I am commonly called, Mama Mboni. I have come here several times.”

Mandiga didn't take her eyes off Mama Mboni immediately. All the time she had known her, she knew her by the name Mama Mboni. This was the first time she had heard her real name.

“Good. You are welcome.” The headteacher, Mkobe Mkalimali, said.

“Thank you. We are members of the village and parents,” Mandiga started and then couldn't go on. Yes, she didn't have a child, but she didn't see it as a problem as her time had probably not come yet. She knew that getting a child depends on God's will, but this doesn't

stop her from fighting for other children when they are faced with challenges in their lives, especially in education. She believed that the child of your fellow community member is your child. Mama Mboni understood what stopped her going on and quickly began to speak.

“Our children are studying here,” Mama Mboni said.

Mandiga looked at her and smiled. Silently, she thanked her in her heart.

“Yes, my parents. I am listening to you,” the headteacher sat attentively.

Mandiga began to explain calmly the importance of education and how the pupils should be given the opportunity to do well in class and their final exams. The headteacher agreed. Then Mandiga went to the point of their visit.

“But here, sir, at the school the children are using a lot of time to fetch water, without any supervision. They must walk a long distance to the neighbouring village of Lungongole. We know all about it. And on the way here, we met a girl who is your pupil, coming from fetching water and this jerrycan you see is hers. She was sent by a teacher called Rose Mheteli. Do you know of this?”

Silence!

The headteacher had not expected that Mandiga would change the topic and touch on a plan they had been using in secret for a long time. He knew the truth, he recognised the jerrycan, he as a leader was the one who should have been the first to condemn this practice before the people came and told him.

The headteacher didn't want to rush into answering the question asked. He scratched his head and thought first.

“Parents, first of all, thank you for coming. And thank you for bringing this issue to my office,” he said, then stopped, scratching his head and put his hand on the table.

“I have to admit that it is true, I know about this, and it is a result of the problem of water here in the school. Most of the current teachers are new. Those who were here before left because of this same problem of water, so when we send the pupils to fetch water, our aim is to give the teachers time to prepare their classes,” the headteacher justified himself.

He took out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped off the sweat. He didn't even know where all this sweat had come from so early in the morning.

“And where will the children get time to study?” Mandiga asked.

“We send the older pupils in standard seven because the water is a long way away, Mama. You all know Lungongole,” the headteacher said, although he knew that his defence had neither head nor tail.

“So standard seven pupils who are soon to take their final exams are the ones you send to fetch water. Will they really pass?” Mama Mboni asked, thinking of her daughter Mboni.

Silence!

The headteacher took out his handkerchief again and wiped his face.

“Put it this way, sir. If you really have good intentions, you wouldn’t forbid the pupils from going to fetch water from the village well, although the water is not clean and safe, and instead you send them to Lungongole. I know that water is needed here in the school and teachers need water too. We are not happy to hear that apart from sending the pupils to fetch water for school use, they are also sent to fetch water for the teachers’ use in their houses. This is not right. How will our pupils be able to study?” Mandiga said looking at the headteacher, who seemed to be tired from the heavy arguments given by the women.

“You should talk about this in your internal meetings. You are the headteacher here. You have the power to put a stop to this practice. No parent likes to see their children being used like this. Even at home, it is we parents who fetch water. Worse still, our children pass through the dangerous bush, teacher. What happens if they are raped?” Mama Mboni asked emotionally.

Silence!

“Teacher, you have been asked what happens if the children are raped? Or haven’t you heard that our village has been invaded by rapists?” Mandiga questioned.

Although Mr. Mkobe had a long experience and the thinking capacity which led him to be appointed to run a school, his heart admitted he was wrong. It was obviously his duty. But what could he do when the problem of water touched every corner of the village? He, himself had sent pupils to fetch water for his house not once or twice. He looked very ashamed. He didn’t know how to reply.

“Headteacher, imagine it was your child studying here and then you hear the teachers are sending them to fetch water. The child is not doing well at school and when he comes home, he is exhausted. How would you feel?” Mandiga asked.

This question shook the teacher out of his thoughts, and he sadly shook his head. He knew he had done wrong. He thought of what would happen if one of the pupils encountered problems when going to fetch the water. He would be held accountable. Neither the parents nor the government would understand.

For a few minutes, he thought about his job which he still needed to support his family in Morogoro town. He thought of how his family would suffer if he lost his job for the negligence they were accusing him of now. He might even be deprived of his pension if he was sacked. Finally, he decided to open his mouth and speak.

“My mothers, I promise you that I will hold a staff meeting today to discuss this issue. I apologise for what is going on. I will take personal responsibility to ensure that no teacher sends any pupil again to fetch water from the well. I apologise again. If it was not for the problem of water, I would never countenance any children being sent to fetch water in Lungongole. On behalf of the other teachers, please forgive us,” the headteacher said desperately.

Mandiga and Mama Mboni looked at each other and together they turned to look at the headteacher who was confessing on behalf of his fellow teachers.

“All right we have heard you. Please do as you promised. Remember you are the headteacher. As you see, we have no electricity in the village. If our children do not study during the day, when do you think they will study?” said Mama Mboni.

“I have understood you, but before leaving can you please tell me this. Here at school, it is no secret that there is a problem of water. If a teacher has no water, and the toilets need water, what can we do?” the headteacher asked.

“Headteacher, you will discuss this in the meeting you call. You can even make a duty roster for fetching water, or you can find and pay someone to fetch water for the teachers and the school,” Mandiga said.

“Where will we get the money to pay someone to fetch water?”

“Call the parents’ meeting here at the school. We will all come to discuss what to do, but not continue this practice of using our children for your benefit. Don’t you see that you are blocking their development?” Mama Mboni responded heatedly this time.

When the headteacher saw how upset she was, he decided not to continue this line of questioning, as he had already admitted his fault and promised to deal with it in a meeting he would call of his fellow teachers.

“Or what about closing the school because of the water shortage? Because an epidemic like cholera might break out, headteacher,” Mandiga said.

“That depends on advice from the parents’ committee. I can’t just decide to close the school myself Mama,” the headteacher replied politely.

“All right. Mama Mboni do you have another issue for the headteacher before we leave?” Mandiga said turning to her friend.

“Yes.” Mama Mboni turned to the headteacher. “The child we met with the jerry can told us that there is a group of students who will go to fetch water at ten o’clock. Please stop that.”

“Right, Mama. From now, you will not hear of a pupil being sent to fetch water. In spite of the ongoing problem of water, we will find another way of dealing with it,” he assured them.

“But we request you villagers to help us. Today I heard on the news that the village was given money three years ago for digging a well, but to date we have been told nothing. Ask your leaders because we do not come from here. I can be transferred at any time. I believe that if there is a well in the village, we at school will also get water.”

“You’re right, teacher. We also heard the news. If you hear the crier calling us to a Village Assembly, come. I will raise this issue. My mind is made up.” Mandiga said as she stood up.

Mama Mboni also stood up. They said goodbye and left. They left the jerry can with the headteacher.

CHAPTER 15

"Fellow villagers, hear me. Firstly, I apologise for the delay in calling this meeting, which should have been called three days after the one I postponed due to the commotion. We had to sit as the Village Council to discuss what emerged and then come to tell you. This is why it has taken six days before calling this meeting," Mzee Gangile, Chairperson of Kikwalila village said.

He looked at the villagers who had flooded into this important meeting. Anyone who attended would not contest the fact that the number of people was much higher than in the previous meeting.

"So welcome to you all. After that last meeting, I called a meeting of the Village Council where key issues were discussed and decided upon. Please keep calm. I am sure those who did not come to the last meeting have heard about that meeting. In brief, the issues of rape and domestic violence have been raised in our village, but the source of the problems is the lack of water. In this meeting, let us stick to these issues and not bring in any other issues."

Mzee Gangile turned to the village Executive Officer who was going through the exercise book to take a record of what would be said at the meeting.

He went on. "We as villagers must oppose violence and every form of evil including the dangers that our mothers have had to face with the threat of rape. I want you to recognise that this is the highest governing body in our village and this emergency meeting has been called to look for a solution," he paused to breathe, and at that moment a man in the crowd shouted out.

"Chairrrr!"

"Yes! I am listening," he replied.

"You have said a lot, but you are still not being clear. We are here to hear what you decided in the Council. We are fed up with this problem of rape of our wives."

"My friends that is the purpose of this meeting, to put an end to this problem. We want to give you feedback on the follow up on issues of violence against women caused by the water problem," the Chairperson responded, licking his lips.

Mandiga moved to get away from the sun beating down on her. She was there with her husband, Kibwana, Mama Mboni, Mboni, Ashaneza and the woman they escorted home after the last meeting. She had also come with her husband.

Mandiga's intention to bring up the news that the village had been given money by the government had not changed. She believed that it was only in this meeting that she could talk openly about this issue which touched the interests of most people in the village.

Although she had heard the radio broadcast, others in the community had not, such as her husband who she'd had to tell when he came back from the farm.

Kibwana was still shocked by the news, even though he had mentioned to his wife earlier about the rumours he had heard from his uncle in Kilama village.

"Ooh my God!" Kibwana said after Mandiga had told him. They were sitting on the mat chatting after finishing their evening meal.

"I don't know why I forgot to ask you after we finished eating. Probably Mboni and her story pushed it out of my mind," Mandiga blamed herself.

"This story has been circulating in great secrecy. My uncle heard it from the Chairperson of Lungongole village. I hear his village also has no well, though the village government was given money," Kibwana said in a whisper.

He began to make his wife afraid.

"Why are you talking like this?"

"I am afraid my wife because I know you will want to raise this issue at the next village meeting."

"Yes. Do you think I will keep quiet about it my husband?"

"This time, please keep quiet. Please. It will cause a big conflict in the village. You will be responsible for causing a wave of hate my wife," Kibwana said, suddenly overwhelmed with fear and worry.

"Hee! Why do you say this? What kind of hate is this?"

"The problem is the Chairperson. I told you once he has an evil heart, despite the image he presents. You can think he is a good man, but he is very cruel. He will do anything to protect his interests, which is why many people are afraid of him in the village."

Kibwana's fear was visible.

"I am not afraid of him. I have nothing to be afraid of my husband. I will raise the issue I heard on the radio. If he wants a fight, he should tackle the journalists who made the announcement. What have I done wrong?"

"You're right, you have done nothing wrong, but he will see that you raised it in public. That means people who didn't hear it on the radio, will have heard it from you so you will be seen as the troublemaker, and he won't hesitate to act against you. If he does anything to you, he will have done it to me as I won't accept it."

“So, what should we do?”

“Leave it. They’ve already taken the money for the well, they have benefited with their families, let’s just go on suffering. Three years have gone by. I doubt very much whether that money is still there.”

“All right my husband, I won’t talk about it.” Mandiga agreed. She didn’t want to argue with her husband and cause a fight that night. She just agreed but she kept her views to herself.

Then she told him what had happened with the headteacher at the school.

CHAPTER 16

“We agreed that this is a serious issue, which needs those who are trained to address it. I was directed by the Village Council to report the matter to the police so that they can help in the investigation. They have agreed to do it. They also stressed that if we heard anything about the rape and similar threats, we should inform them,” the Chairperson said.

The villagers were quiet as he went on to talk about security in the village and that week, they had received no reports about people being raped or threatened with rape when going to fetch water.

However, he still urged the villagers to take their own security measures. In particular, women and girls should not go to the well on their own.

His report was short then he opened the meeting for people to ask questions on what he said.

“Chair, I support the decision to take the issue to the police, it will help us a lot,” said one villager who was sitting at the front of the meeting.

He was followed by other villagers who all supported the chair’s report. He was happy at the positive responses of the meeting.

As many villagers showed they were satisfied by his report, the Chairperson decided to conclude by requesting the villagers to go home bearing in mind the warning he had given them.

But just before closing, he opened the meeting to people who wanted to give any other views, as it was not right to leave with just the one resolution on defence and security.

Mandiga was the first to raise her hand. Kibwana might have pulled it down if he had not been afraid of the eyes of those around them. He had already forbidden her to speak. He could only look at his wife, not knowing what to do. He already knew what she intended. The Chairperson saw her and gave her a chance to speak. This time she did not come to the front but spoke from where she was.

Mandiga started by thanking God, then continued.

“I also thank the Chairperson for giving me a chance to speak at this meeting. I thank him for the actions being taken to address the issue of rape. I am sure the police have a desk to receive complaints of gender-based violence, so they will deal with all those who are violent against women because of the problem of no water in the village which forces us women to walk long distances.”

Mandiga confidently took a deep breath. She knew that what she was about to say would cause uproar.

Kibwana's heart was beating fast.

“Mr. Chairperson, this week many things have changed, and we have learned something new about this village. While women are struggling to find water, a day after the last meeting, the community radio of Sikika FM announced that our village of Kikwawila was allocated money to dig a well three years ago. This was announced by the Director of Ifakara Town Council during the celebrations of Water Week.”

People started murmuring but Mandiga did not hesitate. She continued to speak and raised her voice so that she could be heard.

“I know that not everyone listens to the radio here in our village, but I am sure that some people did hear the news, even by accident. So, if our village has really been given money for a water project three years ago, can the Village Council tell us what happened, as up to now we don't see any project of that kind?”

The murmurs turned to the uproar. Kibwana looked furiously at his wife. It was too late; she had already lit the fire. Mandiga did not seem to be afraid of anything, she was sure that the truth she was exposing will lead to freedom in the village.

The Chairperson who had stood up to close the meeting felt his blood tingle. He leaned over to his village Executive Officer who had stopped writing. They both looked totally bewildered. They were looking for any way to extricate themselves. The commotion continued to grow as people began to demand answers.

“I believe that if this well had been built, women would not be raped and the pupils would not waste their time going to fetch water for their teachers and themselves at school,” Mandiga said loudly.

People began to stand up.

“It is not true!” Another villager was heard shouting.

It was the voice of the woman teacher called Rose Mheteli, the Kiswahili teacher at Kikwawila primary school. She was clearly annoyed by Mandiga's words which were aimed at the teachers of the school for sending the pupils to fetch water.

“No pupil has ever been sent to fetch water from the well,” the teacher said with some hesitation.

The words of the teacher caused those making a commotion to calm down slightly to listen. The Chairperson and Executive Officer also stopped what they were doing and listened.

Fear was in the air.

“It seems you were not informed by your boss. If he is here, I am sure he hears you. I and this woman here,” Mandiga turned to Mama Mboni who was next to her, “came to the school last

week after hearing that pupils are missing out on their studies by being sent to fetch water from Lungongole village. The headteacher admitted it was true.”

She turned to the Chairperson who was staring in amazement. He couldn't believe that such a discussion had arisen and now flamed like a burning piece of coal.

“Every morning, the pupils go to fetch water for the teachers and for the school. We thank God there is no report of them being raped but they must pass through very dangerous areas. Teacher, you should know that the child of another is your child. As a parent, you should be in the forefront of condemning this practice instead of trying to deny the truth in this meeting.”

Teacher Rose, who before looked as if she wanted to put out the fire lit by Mandiga at the meeting, could only remain quiet.

Mandiga ruled the community meeting. “I ask myself, what stopped the well from being dug? Maybe my fellow villagers who have lived in the village longer than I, know what happened. Tell us if in these Assemblies you have ever discussed the water problem and the money allocated by the government for the project which would solve so many of our problems.”

The commotion started again. People shouted to make the Chairperson respond. Kibwana who was close to his wife couldn't believe what was happening. He gradually began to lose his fear after he saw many villagers supporting his wife.

Mandiga's words were like red hot bullets for Mzee Gangile. Neither he nor his officer wanted to say anything. They saw that Mandiga had stripped them naked in public. They began to see her as a bad omen, a sower of discord who was threatening their interests. They regretted ever taking up her issue of attempted rape. If only they had known, they would have dismissed it outright.

The demands of the villagers that the Chairperson respond grew louder and louder because of his silence. The Chairperson turned to look at the members of his Council who were all standing. Their chairs were too hot. They all knew what Mandiga was talking about, except Mama Hamza who seemed dumbfounded. She stared admiringly at Mandiga. She couldn't believe how she could be so courageous.

The Chairperson was puffed up with anger. He looked at Mandiga, who was standing a few paces away from him to his left. He thought she was an evil rabble-rouser. His hatred for her grew but there was nothing he could do there in public. His face was furrowed.

When Kibwana saw the Mzee Gangile looking furiously at his wife, he knew the war was about to start.

“Please calm down,” the Village Executive Officer said.

He did not normally speak but he had to. The Chairperson told him to close the meeting by force. There was nothing else he could do.

“What you heard is just incitement. We want to close the meeting, but let me sa...”

He couldn't finish. The whole crowd was in uproar. They might even have attacked the Chairperson and his officer without the community police intervening and protecting them.

Once again, the meeting broke up in confusion.

CHAPTER 17

It was night, but not so dark that one could not see shadows. If you were easily frightened, you might be afraid of seeing the shadow of a tree swaying in the wind. You may even think you had seen a monster from the way the shadow was bending this way and that. The dim moonlight added even greater beauty that night.

Yes! That night, if you had been unfortunate enough to pass about sixty metres from the house of the Village Chairperson, Mzee Gangile, you would have seen people entering his house one after another like shadows. They were the members of the Village Council who had been summoned by their Chairperson who had something to tell them. Mama Hamza was not among them, her activism in picking up issues disqualified her from what seemed to be a very important meeting.

The reason was simple, that when the government allocated money for digging the well three years ago, she was not yet a member of the Council and so did not get her share. The Chairperson knew that, so to include her in the meeting would be a mistake. This meeting concerned only the fourteen members.

The hearts of the members who were gathered, looked good in the light of day during Village Assemblies, but in reality, they were like witches who turn into cruel monsters at night.

Mzee Gangile, who had lived alone with his wife for all the years in a house inside a large compound, which he had seized for himself illegally, welcomed the members in silence until he was sure that the last one had entered. Then he went outside and looked around to satisfy himself that there was no sign that the members had been seen entering his compound, then he went inside and closed his mninga door.

There was an important reason for him calling this meeting at night.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said, looking unhappy.

The Chairperson faced his members, who sat in a semi-circle in one of the poorly lit rooms which he used for special purposes.

“I think we are all here now. I didn’t tell Mama Hamza because you all know her impetuosity in questioning everything. She is of no use to us in a serious issue like this one. I have called you here to discuss what to do after that woman of Kibwana said things which caused the meeting to break up,” he said.

“I think you all remember that three years ago, we got forty million shillings which we placed in the village account for digging a well. That money led us to sit here as we are doing today to make a plan. I think we all agreed here that we should divide up the money and no one should raise the issue at any Assembly. Everyone got their portion, didn’t they?”

All the members whispered their agreement.

“Things are now in danger of unravelling. You heard what that Mandiga said. She is just seeking popularity, but to me she is stupid. She doesn’t understand anything. She started by opposing rape and now she has turned to the issue of the well. I don’t know why she wasn’t really raped, that bitch. Although the radio did report it, I know many of the inhabitants of Kikwawila hadn’t heard it. They heard about it in the meeting after she talked her nonsense. She is now our enemy,” the Chairperson said looking at the members, one after another.

“So, the person we have to deal with to stop this issue becoming a critical one in the village is Mandiga. She will seriously harm us if we don’t take action,” he ended, stressing every word coming from his mouth.

“Chair, I don’t see any problem here. All Mandiga knows is what she heard on the radio? Is what was said on the radio true?” one member asked.

“Is there a radio which tells lies? Did it lie about the money allocated three years ago? Wasn’t it true? Let’s not fool ourselves. That Sikika FM radio is very popular and is heard over a wide area. The main thing is to find a way of stopping this issue gaining traction here in the village as the Chairperson said,” the Village Executive Officer, Magome Mteketa replied.

“So, what needs to be done?” one member asked.

“Chairperson, I think that as Mandiga has already spoken about it in the meeting, let us think how to get out of this. Do we suspect anyone of having evidence that we withdrew that money from the bank? Didn’t we sort everything out?” another member asked.

“I have followed up several times with the bank manager who assured me that he had already removed all evidence. I hear he is no longer there, he has been transferred.” Mzee Gangile replied.

“So, what can be done?” the Executive Officer asked.

This question provoked a long debate. Everyone gave their ideas. This one was opposed, that one was criticised, and another was agreed, but opposed later. It took them an hour and a half to reach an agreement. In the end, it was the Chairperson himself who suggested that they must get rid of Mandiga for good.

“If we kill Mandiga, everyone in the village will be paralysed. No one will dare to open their mouths again to question the issue of money,” he hissed angrily. He added. “I request Mzee Kamguna, Ngasongwa and the Village Executive Officer to stay behind to think of how we will deal with this woman. As I said, if we kill her, no one will ask anymore. There is already the issue of rape. We will say that the rapists attacked and raped her because they found out she had reported them. Are we in agreement members?” the Chairperson asked.

Then he ordered the other members to leave, reminding them that this should be kept a secret in the same way they kept their dividing up the money for digging the well a secret. All the members agreed and swore not to reveal it to anyone.

Before the members left, they were told that the killers would be brought in from outside the village to do this job, to remove evidence.

When the other members left, the group of four continued to think of how to recruit the killers in secret so as to carry out their plan.

CHAPTER 18

It was nearly midnight. In villages at that time, it is very rare to meet someone outside. Everyone is at home with their family. But that night was different.

Some of the members were on the way home from their secret meeting at the house of the Chairperson. They walked in groups at first, and then everyone made their own way home.

Earlier that night, alone at home, Mama Hamza had not felt happy. Mandiga's news, that the Village Council had been given money to dig the well more than three years ago, troubled and disturbed her.

In the six months she had served as a member of the Village Council, she had seen many things. If she didn't question what she had heard today, she would blame herself. She felt it was better she resign than become part of a criminal gang.

The only person she felt she could talk to about her concerns was the Chairperson, Mzee Gangile. So, after darkness fell, and she had finished all the household duties, she decided to go to the Chairperson's home.

However, as she neared his house, she was amazed to see three people in the moonlight, slinking into the Chairperson's compound. When she moved forward, another two or three steps she saw another two people enter. She immediately felt suspicious and decided to slow down and hide behind a tree and wait.

As she hid there, she saw more and more people entering the compound. She saw the Chairperson come outside and look left and right and close the door.

The way they snuck in made Mama Hamza suspicious. She suspected that some sort of serious and secret meeting was taking place. From where she was, she couldn't see that those entering were her fellow members of the Village Council, but recognised Mzee Gangile from his height and Muslim cap.

When she saw the door close, she waited for five minutes, then very carefully came out from her hiding place and walked slowly towards the Chairperson's house. She crept quietly around the compound until she reached a window and put her left ear to the window to listen, but without success.

Stepping with great care again, she followed the wall again to another window. There she heard the voice of her Chairperson. She settled herself and concentrated. She heard everything that was said in the secret meeting and realised that those inside were her fellow members of the Village Council. She felt devastated.

She did her best not to cry out when they agreed on the plan to kill Mandiga. She stood there shaking, bathed in sweat. Her heart was beating fast and she could hardly breathe. Several times she looked behind her, she sensed someone might come out and see where she was pressing herself against the window.

'They want to kill Mandiga,' she said to herself.

She didn't know why all the members in that secret meeting agreed with the Chairperson, and why no one opposed him. She guessed it was because the money for the well project was divided up between them. They thought killing Mandiga would protect their interests.

When she heard Mzee Gangile telling most of the members to leave, and for a few to continue with the meeting, she realised that this was the right time for her to leave. She moved quickly away from the wall near the window and walked away before the door opened.

She wanted to go straight home, but her heart was heavy. She reasoned that if she let this terrible plan be put into action, she would also be complicit. She noticed her legs getting heavy as she got closer to home. Every part of her was on fire, she would not get any sleep burdened with this terrible secret that they wanted to kill someone.

She abandoned the path to her home.

Mandiga and her husband were chatting at home. Kibwana suspected the situation was not normal after the meeting closed that evening. He knew Mzee Gangile very well. He had been heard many stories of his evil from his uncle living in Kilama village.

He was the one who told him of the rumour that the Chairperson had taken the money for the well project. He had heard it from someone close to the Chairperson of Lungongole village, who was a friend of Mzee Gangile.

He had also heard that he had cut off the hand of the young man who looked after his cattle. It was said that he had carried out this brutal act because the man had lost one of his goats when he came back from herding them. The man was taken away in the middle of the night in order to get rid of the evidence and it was still not known where he had been taken.

That was the reason why Kibwana had forbidden his wife from bringing to light news of money allocated three years ago for digging a well. Now the same person who had carried out these terrible acts of cruelty was the same one who had been looking at his wife with furious eyes during the uproar at the meeting.

"Kibwana, your silence is frightening me. I have tried to cheer you up, but you don't even see me. If you've got nothing to say, I'm going to sleep," Mandiga's voice shook her husband out of his thoughts.

They were in their sitting room as usual. When they finished eating, they began to chat about what happened at the meeting. When they returned home that day, Kibwana didn't let his wife see that he was annoyed by her sharing the story that she heard on the radio, even

though he had forbidden her. He realised that he was wrong to try to stop her talking, but when he remembered Mzee Gangile and his brutality, he was very afraid

“Ah! My wife, I have been thinking about what happened today. The way the Chairperson looked at you was not good.”

“Why are you so worried?”

“I know that old man. My uncle has already told me about his evil deeds. His face is threatening although people say he has a good heart. What you exposed in the village is a serious matter, no man in the village would be able to do that.”

“I had no choice, I had to say it. But he is only one person, and there are many people suffering because of a lack of water. People voted for him believing he would stand up for their interests and not the reverse Kibwana. What do we do?”

“I think we need to be very careful. From now you won’t go anywhere on your own. If it is to go to the market to look for what you need, you will go with your friend, not on your own. For the well, it remains the same, if we leave the farm we go together. Right?”

“Right. But my husband since when have you been so scared?”

“It’s not being scared but ...” He was interrupted by someone knocking at the door. The person knocking started quietly but when she got no reply, she knocked faster and louder.

“Who is it?” asked Kibwana.

“It’s Mama Hamza. Kibwana please open for me,” Mama Hamza implored.

“Aha! Mama Hamza what’s up at this time of the night? All right, wait a second.”

Kibwana stood up hesitantly. He looked at his wife, who also did not know why her fellow woman had come to them that night.

“I had not arranged anything with her,” Mandiga said softly.

Kibwana went to the door and opened it.

Mama Hamza didn’t wait to be welcomed. When the door had opened slightly, she rushed into the sitting room and came face to face with Mandiga. She looked at her in amazement. In her heart, she felt sorry for her. She had no idea that people were planning her death.

“How is the evening, Mama?” Mandiga greeted her.

“I am glad I have found you Mandiga,” Mama Hamza replied. She probably hadn’t even heard the greeting.

After Mama Hamza had entered, Kibwana closed the door. The way she came in without even being welcomed, made him nervous.

“Is everything all right Mama?” Kibwana asked, going to stand by his wife.

“God is great! I have come here for you. I won’t sit my children and don’t bother to give me a stool to sit on. There is something important I have to tell you,” Mama Hamza said.

She turned to Mandiga, who was listening carefully and went on.

“I have just come from the house of the village Chairperson. But in great secrecy.”

“At night, like this? What’s going on with the Chairperson and why in great secrecy?” Kibwana asked.

Mandiga stood up. They were now all standing close to one another, like the palm trees in Mauya valley in Pangani.

“It is quite a beyond belief. There was a secret meeting there to discuss your wife,” she pointed at Mandiga. Kibwana also turned to look at his wife.

“Enh! What has my wife done?”

“Listen to me carefully. Kibwana you are a man, you must be strong. There was a long discussion about your wife. Mandiga has really stirred up things here in the village. What she said in the meeting about the money for the well is true, and the members of the Council divided it up amongst themselves.”

Mandiga and Kibwana looked at each other in astonishment.

“I was shocked by what I heard. I couldn’t bear it, so I thought I would go to the Chairperson and question him, so that, if possible, he relieves me of the membership of the Council. I do not want to be part of this dishonesty. But as I approached the Chairperson’s house, I saw people going in. I wondered what was happening. When they had all entered, I saw the Mzee Gangile come out as if he was checking on security. Then he went inside and shut the door. I went up to the window and heard their conversation. What I heard brings me here. I couldn’t bear the thought of the terrible thing they want to do to Mandiga. I said no way. My feet dragged on the way home so I said I must come and let you know.”

“What is it they want to do, Mama?” Mandiga’s voice trembled with fear.

Mama Hamza took a deep breath and breathed out slowly. She looked at Kibwana whose arms were folded across his chest and then at Mandiga whose hands were on her hips.

“They intend to kill you, my daughter.”

“My God!” Mandiga found herself swaying. Her strength was suddenly gone. Her husband had to hold her and set her down slowly. She felt as though she would faint.

“You mean they have gone this far?” Kibwana asked furiously, making sure his wife was sitting down.

“Yes! Everything you do now you must be careful. I have come and told you so that you know how disgusted I am about this. They believe that killing Mandiga will put a stop to people’s cries, then later they will see how to cheat the government,” said Mama Hamza.

They sat stunned into silence, and she went on. “And you should also know that the issue of rape has gone nowhere. Nothing has been done. They didn’t go to the police as the Chairperson claimed. They are just playing with us. I try my best to struggle with our Village Council, but it is tough. The members are so patriarchal. In the six months since I was elected, I have witnessed so many bad things. Nearly all the members are afraid of the Chairperson. So, nothing happens. Then ...” her words were cut short by a low moan from Mandiga.

“My wife, be quiet. We already know the truth, we will know what to do. All right?” Kibwana tried to calm his wife.

“So now let me leave you. But I’m telling you, you must be very careful. Take whatever steps you can for your safety. What hurt them above all was that Mandiga had interfered with their interests. It seems that speaking up is what caused this problem. The Chairperson is afraid that people will demand an audit of the financial report. That is what frightens him. So, to kill her is their solution. I don’t know when they intend to carry out their plan. If you mention me, it’s fine. I am not afraid of anything. I am fed up. I will be ready to testify. Goodbye.” Mama Hamza left.

Kibwana closed the door then he returned to soothe his wife, who was still crying.

Mandiga wasn’t just crying. She was asking herself so many questions. *‘Where did she go wrong? By fighting for the rights of her fellow villagers to get water? By fighting for the rights of her fellow women not to be raped or beaten? Fighting for the rights of pupils not to be sent by their teachers to fetch water, instead of concentrating on their studies. To ask about the money allocated by the government? Money that she believed would be their saviour if the well was built. It wouldn’t only save her but even those who were plotting to kill her. What had she done so badly wrong that they wanted to condemn her to death?’*

She cried louder and louder.

They didn’t sleep that night. They agreed that the morning should not find them there. It was no longer safe. If there was a plan to kill Mandiga, then obviously Kibwana was not safe. They collected their clothes and a few of their important belongings.

When they heard the first call of the muezzin, they crept out, locked the door and took the path to Kilama village where Kibwana’s uncle lived.

They didn’t even say goodbye to Mama Mboni.

CHAPTER 19

The three young men, who had been secretly hired to kill Mandiga by the committee, went to Kibwana's house three times in one night with their pangas (*swords*) and knives.

None of them could understand what had happened. The house seemed to be empty. Two of the killers had been hired from outside the village and one from the village to identify Mandiga so that the mission could be carried out without difficulty.

After failing to find her the first night, they decided to watch over the house for three days in a row. And on the fourth night, when all was still silent, they broke down the door to make sure. After searching the house, they realised she was gone and went to report to Mzee Gangile.

On the fifth day, the Chairperson and his little committee met again in secret to make a new plan after ascertaining that Mandiga and her husband had escaped from the village. The question they asked themselves was, since they must have escaped after somehow hearing of their plan to kill Mandiga, how did they find out, when they had all agreed to keep the secret in their meeting?

No one on the committee would own up. The Chairperson was furious and swore he would do terrible things to the member found to have revealed the secret. He was clearly very distressed.

The killers were ordered to search for Mandiga in the neighbouring villages, as that was probably where they had run to hide themselves.

On the sixth day, the killers started their search for Mandiga in earnest. This time they were told to kill the husband also, as it was clear he already knew about the plot against his wife. They began to go round the neighbouring villages. They started in Lungongole where they stayed until the morning, observing and bribing and asking the locals if they had seen two strangers.

“In truth, I haven't seen any strangers here. It would be easy to identify them as we are a small village,” one man told them.

They went on to Kibaoni village where they also set up camp in secret. Each one was given the task of going round the sub-villages to ask. They ended the day without any sign of Mandiga or her husband.

They decided to go to Kilama village.

News of the disappearance of Mandiga and her husband from the village began to spread like wildfire in dry grass. After two days, Mama Mboni, her neighbour, began worrying. It wasn't like Mandiga and her husband to let a day go by without coming to see her.

She visited their house to see if they were there and found the door of the house closed. The killers had been able to close the door again after breaking the lock. Mama Mboni took heart that maybe they had travelled.

'But why didn't they say goodbye to me?' she asked herself.

She wished she had a phone to call, but neither she nor Mandiga had such a thing.

So, she remained in ignorance as to where Mandiga and her husband had gone. If only she had been a close friend of Mama Hamza, she would have known. But, as our elders say, what you don't know is like a dark night.

After a week without hearing any news of them, she heard a rumour that they had escaped a threat to kill them, after Mandiga had exposed the issue of money allocated by the government for digging a well. The rumour spread underground because of the fear that if you were heard saying it openly, the Chairperson would deal with you.

When Mama Mboni heard this, she resolved to start looking for her friend. If only she had another place to report that her neighbour was nowhere to be seen, she wouldn't have needed to go to the village office. However, she took courage and went to the office.

The Chairperson, who knew what was going on, told Mama Mboni not to worry. Mandiga and her husband had probably travelled, and she should not listen to rumours.

"Or is there somewhere you think they might have gone?" Mzee Gangile asked before allowing Mama Mboni to leave his office.

"No, but I think she might have gone to her mother," Mama Mboni replied.

"Where does her mother live?"

"She told me her mother lives in Mkasu village."

"All right. Thank you."

Mama Mboni said goodbye and left. Without knowing, she had passed on information that could lead her best friend into a trap. When the Chairperson had made sure she was out of earshot, he phoned the young men he had hired to do the killing.

"Where are you now?" he said.

"We are on the way to Kilama, boss," the killer replied.

"Don't go there. I have heard that Mandiga and her husband have probably gone to Mkasu village. Her mother lives there. So, go there and when you find her, don't hesitate. The orders are the same. Make sure you kill her and her husband. Make sure you don't make the mistake of leaving any clues," the Chairperson said in a low voice.

“Ok,” the speaker on the other side cut off the call.

“What’s up?” one of the others asked.

“Let’s turn around. We are not going to Kilama.”

“Why?”

“The Chairperson said they will have gone to Mkasu. So, let’s go there.”

CHAPTER 20

Three weeks went by without anyone hearing anything about the whereabouts of Mandiga and her husband. Neither Mama Mboni, nor the Chairperson and his committee.

The killers who had been sent to follow Mandiga at Mkasu village spent a whole week there after identifying the house where Mandiga's mother lived. They kept watch in secret, but came up with nothing. Eventually, they decided to return to Kikwawila to tell Mzee Gangile.

After being given the news, he called another meeting to pass on the news to the members of his Council. He summoned them all, just like the first meeting.

"No one knows where these people are up till now," he started by saying.

"How is that?" one of the members asked.

"Those killers we hired have looked for them everywhere. First of all, they realised Mandiga and her husband had escaped. Then I ordered them to go round all the neighbouring villagers to hunt for them. Finally, I got a tip that maybe they had run to Mandiga's mother in Mkasu village but there was no sign of them there either," the Chairperson explained at length.

"Then it's all over, Chairperson," said the Village Executive Officer.

"What do you mean it is over?" Mzee Gangile asked.

"If they are not in the neighbouring villages, then it means they have left Ifakara altogether. As we are talking, they may be in Mbeya or Mwanza," the officer said.

His words gave hope to the members that it could well be true that Mandiga and her husband decided to move away once and for all and were not coming back for fear of being killed.

"So, the one who told them we want to kill her not only helped Mandiga but also us. I don't think Mandiga and her husband will come back here again," the Chairperson boasted.

The members were startled.

"We know that there is someone among us who informed them," he said. "Now I am warning you, if I get to know the one who leaked this secret, I will finish him off. We cannot live with traitors," Mzee Gangile shouted furiously.

His words made every member swear by his Gods to prove that it was not him. The meeting ended with more threats from the Chairperson and his officer. They swore that if discovered the identity of the snitch, they would finish him off in broad daylight.

As time went on, life continued as before in the village. People forgot all about Mandiga and her husband.

Mandiga and Kibwana had hidden themselves very carefully. When they got to Kilama they explained to their host what happened in Kikwawila. Kibwana's uncle, Mzee Omari Nemanja the brother of Kibwana's mother, was shocked by their story, and he agreed at once to hide them.

Mzee Omary knew all about Mzee Gangile, as he had been told by a close friend of the Chairperson of Lungongole village, who was a good friend of his. Both chairs had pocketed the money allocated by the government for digging a well, so they shared the same issues.

When he welcomed them to his home, he was determined to ensure that there was no way his nephew and wife would end up in the hands of Mzee Gangile.

Firstly, they should never leave the house, so he would provide them with all their basic needs. And if they had to go out, it would be with the utmost precautions, by going out at night or hiding their faces with a hat if it was during the daytime.

They had lived like this for three weeks and more now. They were getting used to it.

Then one day, Mandiga had the idea of communicating with the journalists of Radio Sikika. Since it was the radio that had given them the news about the government allocation for a well in their village, they should be the ones to hear how the story had panned out.

"I have an idea, my husband," said Mandiga, while they were sitting in the compound of the house, having eaten the afternoon meal.

"What idea my wife? Don't start again on those things," Kibwana teased his wife.

"If we were still in Kikwawila, what would life be like up to now?" laughed Mandiga.

"I don't know. Maybe we would be dead by now."

"Eeh! God protect us. I don't believe we would have escaped. I will never forget that old man. Mama Hamza saved our lives."

"God will reward that woman. But we are still not safe my wife, we are still in hiding. You see what I was afraid of. Anyway, you said you had an idea?"

"Yes. Why don't we call the journalists from Radio Sikika so that they come to interview us, and we tell them what happened after they announced that news."

"That is a great idea"

Mandiga hadn't expected her husband to agree so easily. She had thought that, as usual, he would oppose at first and agree later. She thanked him.

“If they interview me and tell the whole story of what happened to me and the news spreads, the Chairperson will not be able to do anything. If he tries to do anything, his plot will be exposed,” explained Mandiga.

“I agree my wife. Where can we get their phone numbers?” Kibwana asked.

“They read them out in their programmes which invite listeners to contribute to a discussion or send greetings to friends and family. We can write down the numbers and then call them. Your uncle has a phone.”

“Yes. We will ask him to call them. I am sure he won’t refuse. So, it is just as well we came with our radio. Let me switch it on so we can find out the numbers now.”

CHAPTER 21

Early the next morning, two journalists, one male and one female, arrived in Kilama village. Mzee Omary Namlanji, Kibwana's uncle gave them the directions.

"Are you the ones?" Mzee Omary asked after two motorbikes had stopped outside his house.

"Yes, Mzee. You must be the Mzee Omary we were talking with on the phone," said one of the journalists after getting off the motorbike.

"You are right. I am the one. Please follow me inside."

The smartly dressed journalists followed Mzee Omary inside and were welcomed to the sitting room. One of them was carrying a notebook and pen while the other carried a recorder to record the interview.

Mzee Omary had already explained the situation. So, the way they were ushered quickly into the house did not surprise them. They knew it was to make sure they were not seen by people who could spread the news of their arrival.

Mzee Omary went through to the back compound where he found Mandiga and her husband. He told them the journalists had arrived. And after agreeing on who should talk in detail, they went to join the journalists in the sitting room.

"Welcome. Feel at home guys," said Mzee Omary to the eager journalists who seemed very keen to hear the news about Mandiga and her husband.

After the greetings, they began the interview.

"Start by introducing yourself, then we will ask you some questions," the female journalist said, while the other one was holding the recorder up to Mandiga.

"My name is Mandiga Lijama." Mandiga introduced herself as directed.

"Tell us the whole story of what happened, up to when you heard that you were to be killed," the journalist asked.

Mandiga had already planned what she wanted to say. She told the whole story from the point where she was nearly raped, and how she had brought this to the attention of the village leaders to prevent other women in the village from being in similar danger. She described how the water shortages affected the education of the pupils because teachers sent them to fetch water from the village of Lugongole. She ended by giving the journalist a chance to ask questions.

Mandiga explained about the day she heard the news about water week and some of the villages that had received government money, including Kikwawila, still had no well. She described what happened when she took that information to the Village Assembly and the death threats that had followed.

“Who told you that they want to kill you?” asked the journalist.

Mandiga remembered Mama Hamza. She was afraid to give her name even though she had said it was all right to mention her and she was ready to give evidence, but she hesitated to do so because she knew this would be read out on the radio.

The journalists made sure they had all the details correctly and had captured the voice of Mandiga. When they finished, they said goodbye and left, promising to put this interview on the four o'clock news the same day.

Mzee Omary escorted them outside where they found the motorbikes drivers waiting for them. They got up and left.

The four-o clock news from Sikika FM reached the Kilombero District Commissioner Mr. John Lumuli in his vehicle returning home after a long and hard day's work.

He liked to listen to this station to gather news from the communities in his area of work. He was able to get many important issues from the TV news or from his smartphone through social media.

“Turn up the volume a bit,” he told his driver, who was concentrating on the road. The driver did as directed.

The news bulletin began with the main news item about a woman who introduced herself as Mandiga Lijama. He had never heard this name before. Mandiga was describing how she had been threatened with death by the Chairperson of Kikwawila village after asking what happened to the money allocated by the government to dig a well three years ago.

“Turn up the volume again,” directed the District Commissioner once more, and put his smartphone to one side. He wanted to hear more about this news item.

After the announcer read the next paragraph, it was followed by an interview between Mandiga and the journalist. The District Commissioner, who was also responsible for defence and security in the area, listened in shocked disbelief.

“Find somewhere to park,” he ordered his driver.

He felt he couldn't concentrate on the news while the vehicle was moving.

“Yes, sir.” His driver found somewhere to park by the side of the road.

The District Commissioner was then able to listen to the whole news item up to the end. He couldn't believe what he had heard. It made him feel sick. His day was ruined. He felt the anger rising but he controlled himself and decided to wear the robe of integrity as the

representative of the president in the district. He picked up his phone and called the Director of Ifakara Town Council, Mr. Gobo Kilua.

“Yes sir,” the Director responded.

“Did you hear the news on Radio Sikika?”

“I was just listening to it sir.”

“I remember you told me that Kikwawila and Lungongole villages had experienced problems with implementing the water projects with the government money allocated. Have you followed up again?”

“No sir. There were a lot of other issues. I ordered the District Water Engineer to follow up, but he hasn't come back to me.”

“You see the harm it's caused? The people have started following up themselves and this is the result, they are given death threats. So, I know you have the number of the Chairperson of Kilama village. Call him at once so that he finds this woman Mandiga and her husband and if possible, the house where they are staying should be guarded by the village community police until tomorrow. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then call the Chairperson of Kikwawila village and tell him you will visit his village tomorrow to talk with the villagers, so if they have a way of informing the villagers, they should do so this evening. Do you understand me, Gobo?” he said with authority.

“I understand you completely, sir.”

“Tomorrow morning, you should go and pick up this woman who has been given death threats, along with her husband then go with them to Kikwawila. You will probably find me, and my defence and security committee there. Is that clear?”

He finished the call and without further ado, began to call all the members of the defence and security committee to tell them to be at his office early in the morning ready for an official visit to Kikwawila village.

His tone showed there was a serious issue.

CHAPTER 22

The Chairperson of Kilama village, Abdul Mhuvile, had no difficulty finding Mandiga and her husband because of the small number of households. He left his farm at once after receiving the call from the Ifakara Town Director. He went from house to house until he was able to find Mandiga and her husband in the house of Mzee Omary Namlanji.

He had to explain in detail to Mzee Omary about the impact of the news bulletin from Radio Sikika. He had been directed to find Mandiga and her husband. A village community police would guard the house until morning when the Director of Ifakara Town Council would come himself to meet them.

The next morning the Town Director arrived as promised. He asked them to prepare themselves to leave with him as ordered by the District Commissioner. It only took Mandiga and Kibwana ten minutes to get ready, and they set off for Kikwawila, the village they had escaped from almost three weeks ago. Mzee Omary Namlanji remained in Kilama.

They climbed into the car with the District Water Engineer and the journalists from Radio Sikika who had interviewed Mandiga the day before.

Mzee Gangile began preparations for the emergency meeting by ordering his usual crier to ensure he goes round all the sub-villages to inform people. He was not in the least worried. The director told him he was coming to talk with the villagers on various development issues as ordered by the District Commissioner.

He didn't tell him the real story. The District Commissioner had been wise enough to make sure nothing was given away which might cause the Chairperson to escape. He realised that the news on the radio was serious.

The District Commissioner and his full defence and security committee were the first to arrive in Kikwawila village. Their arrival before the Director of Ifakara Town Council gave Mzee Gangile and his councillors some concern. They began to suspect that there was a more serious issue than what they had thought. It is very rare to have such a large visitation like this in the villages.

They were used to seeing them if there was a visit from a national leader but not when they came on their own.

A few minutes later, the delegation of the director with Mandiga and her husband arrived. Those who had already gathered, turned to look at the three vehicles which parked next to ones that had already arrived.

The passengers in the vehicles got out and went directly to sit on the empty benches at the front of the meeting.

The villagers at the meeting were dumbfounded to see Mandiga and her husband. The murmurings started. Mama Mboni, who was among those present, found herself shedding tears of joy when she saw her best friend. She had lost hope of ever seeing her again. Mama Hamza who was sitting with the members of the Village Council also smiled when she saw Mandiga. *'Now we will get satisfaction,'* she thought.

The Chairperson looked devastated. He wished the ground would open up and swallow him. He knew he was in big trouble. He couldn't believe his eyes to see Mandiga and her husband sitting with the Ifakara Director. He felt the end of the world had come.

The villagers who had started by murmuring now couldn't hold back. The youth began to sing Mandiga's name.

"Mandiga! Mandiga! Mandiga!"

The singing prompted the District Commissioner to stand up and ask them to keep quiet. They quickly did so for fear of the police who came with the delegation. Then the District Commissioner directed Chairperson Mzee Gangile to stand up and open the meeting, according to protocol.

That day, Mzee Gangile's swagger deserted him. When he stood up, he didn't want to speak much, he welcomed the District Commissioner who stood up and told the Village Chairperson to stand where he was.

"I know not everyone heard the four o'clock news from Radio Sikika yesterday. How many of you listen to the radio here?" asked the District Commissioner, John Lumuli. Only four hands were raised in that whole crowd.

"You should listen to the radio, because it broadcasts many items about our Ifakara town. I am not saying you should not listen to other stations, but this is a community radio, and you are the community. Personally, I listened to the four o'clock news yesterday when I was in my car going home, and that is the reason for this emergency meeting today," explained the District Commissioner in a loud voice, making sure every villager heard what he had to say.

"It is sad that this village still does shocking things and the leaders who were trusted by the people still do not take action. And the worse, they are the ones behaving illegally. I congratulate Radio Sikika for broadcasting the news which shows us what is happening. We as leaders need to reflect on our positions. Are we here for the people, or for our own interests?"

The District Commissioner continued talking to give the villagers who were listening to him a picture of why he had come to visit. After a long speech, finally he asked Mandiga to stand and give the full picture so that everyone in the meeting understood the torture she had been through.

Plucking up her courage, Mandiga stood and went before the meeting. Everyone was silent. The District Commissioner moved to one side to enable her to stand where everyone could see and hear her well.

For about twenty seconds she stood there, silently gazing over the crowd. Many of them she knew. She saw Mama Mboni with Mboni. She also saw Ashaneza who was standing very near to the woman she and Kibwana had escorted home. She was there with her husband. Finally, her eyes fell on the headteacher of Kikwawila primary school, Mr. Mkobe Mkalimali.

She hadn't seen all these people for a long time. She believed that the chance she was being given by the District Commissioner was the last blow in liberating the people of her village from the problem of water shortages.

Finally, she broke her silence.

“Let me start by thanking God.”

Her voice was calm. Then, without hiding or forgetting anything in her heart, she told the whole story. She understood that if she didn't say it now, she would never get another chance here on earth, maybe only before the creator of heaven and earth.

When she finished, everyone stood and applauded. No one had expected this. Some of them were shouting furiously at the Chairperson and his members who plotted to kill her. The District Commissioner, who was still standing next to Mandiga, asked her to go back to her seat, then he asked the villagers to remain calm.

If Mzee Gangile had seen any chance of escaping, he would have taken it on the spot. But how could he in this situation? He was in it up to his neck. Those who were watching him looking here and there could only laugh. They knew his machinations had come to an end.

“I think you have heard for yourselves. And I am telling you with regard to the money for digging the well, it was allocated three years ago. Other villages have already got water. And let these words reach the leaders of Lungongole village as you have heard from Mandiga that the pupils of Kikwawila School were being sent to fetch water on the border with Lungongole. As I know, they were also given money for a well, but the water situation is terrible there also. I am also directing that, from today it is taboo for teachers to send the pupils to fetch water. Let the pupils study. And the rapists will be hunted down by the police.”

The District Commissioner turned to the Chairperson who was standing to one side.

“Please come here next to me” The District Commissioner directed.

People started jeering and the District Commissioner had difficulty stopping the villagers causing more of a commotion. The Chairperson did as directed.

“Do you have anything to say before your villagers?” the District Commissioner asked him.

There was no reply

“Is there anything said here about you that is a lie?” He changed the question after seeing the Chairperson had no answer. But still the Mzee Gangile was silent.

“I request the district police commander to take this man for further questioning. Make sure that you liaise with Prevention and Combating of Corruption Bureau.”

One of the four policemen in the delegation stepped out quickly and went to take the Chairperson who seemed to have shrivelled up like a hen soaked with water. The jeers from the villagers started again as he was taken to the police vehicle.

“Please, calm down, please calm down,” the district commissioner told the villagers. And when he saw they had calmed down, he continued. “In addition, the bureau should plan how to question all the members of the Village Council to find out if there is a case against them also, together with the Village Executive Officer who is the government’s representative. Anyone found to have received any money allocated by the government, should return the money and legal action will be taken against them,” he said. The jeers burst out again as the members of the Council were removed from the high table and led away.

The District Commissioner again asked people to keep calm. When they settled down, he continued. “I request the Director of Ifakara town Council make an emergency plan to form a temporary village government and members of the Council so that village affairs can continue.”

The Director carried out the instructions he was given.

Since there was no one to close the meeting after the Chairperson had been taken away by the police for questioning, the District Commissioner closed the meeting himself.

In closing, he assured Mandiga of her safety and thanked her for having the courage to speak out about the problems she faced. He told the crowd that he wanted other people to follow her example.

“There are only a few women with hearts of courage like this sister. I also congratulate her husband for supporting his wife in her activism. That’s how it should be. The husband should support his wife. Husbands should follow his example.”

The villagers clapped to congratulate Mandiga and her husband.

“I know that Radio Sikika journalists are here today. Let them broadcast this news also so that leaders of other villagers may learn.” The District Commissioner took another breath and then gave his final orders.

“Finally, before I leave, a word to the Director. Since the Chairperson and his village Executive Officer are both in custody for questioning, you must make sure your Council allocates emergency funds. Work with the District Water Engineer so that the well is dug as fast as possible to relieve this village from its water shortage. I order that within the next ten days from today, the well should be ready, and these villagers will have access to safe and clean water. So, for now, I close the meeting and ask you all to stay well.”

Shouts of joy were heard from the people. Mandiga, who had been sitting down, stood up and clapped with joy. She turned to her husband and hugged him. She saw that the war she had fought for so long, to the point where she was threatened with death, had finally ended.

The crowd could not contain their joy. Water was officially coming to their village. Many left the meeting in high spirits. The district commissioner's delegation left for Lungongole village, to deal with the water problem there.

Mandiga and Kibwana returned to their house, escorted by a large crowd of people. Mama Hamza wished she could be with them, but had to stay behind for questioning by the bureau.

All the way, those close to Mandiga and her husband were congratulating her and shaking her hand. Their hearts swelled with joy. People looked up to them as the heroes of the village.

The young people sang.

“Mandiga! Mandiga! Mandiga!”

CHAPTER 23

The new well did not even take the ten days ordered by the District Commissioner. In just a week, a large well was dug, and the villagers began to get clean water.

The work was closely supervised by the District Commissioner, Ifakara Town Director and the District Water Engineer. The drilling machines worked night and day until the job was finished.

Happily, on the opening day of the new well, Mama Hamza was set free. When the Chairperson and the other members of the Council saw she was set free, they didn't bother themselves anymore with trying to find who exposed their secret plan to kill Mandiga. They knew it must be her, but they still were left with the question, how had she known?

They were all ordered to pay back the money they divided up among themselves three years before and were given another punishment according to the dictates of the law.

The release of Mama Hamza enabled her to attend the launch of the big well in their village. The Town Director decided she should be reinstated as a member of the Village Council after a transition government was installed. Since all the members were new, they recommended that Mama Hamza be the interim chair of the village. She did not refuse.

A huge crowd attended the launch to witness the moment when they got clean and safe water in their village. Water which they were only hearing about from neighbouring villages. Water which had caused untold suffering for years and years. The source of women being raped, humiliated and beaten in their marriages. Even divorce. Hardworking pupils had been forced to fetch water instead of studying. Even Mandiga's life had been at risk as she fought for the rights of her fellow villages, forcing her to flee her home.

In honour of Mandiga's efforts, the women and men of Kikwawila village raised their voices to demand that the well be called MANDIGA'S WELL.

Mandiga cried with joy, unable to believe that she would be bestowed with such an honour.

No doubt, she told herself, there are no efforts which don't give birth to fruits.

One well led to another. Finally, the problem of water was history.

~ END ~