

# ANA

I start again.

I lift my right foot off the ground, and place it on the lowest step of the bus. My nerves are an electric lightning storm inside me, fraught and fiery.

The officer waves for me to get on. Her voice cracks with impatience. ‘Hurry up!’

I lift my other foot. Nothing happens. The officer doesn’t yell or grab me or shove me forwards.

I take another step, then one more. I’m up in the aisle now. Zahra beckons me towards her, but she’s already sitting next to Jamileh; there’s no room for me there. The boys are up the back of the bus – I can’t sit with them either. Zahra indicates the empty seat in front of her, and I slide into it, as another officer starts calling the roll. This one is short and Asian, with a clipped, singsong way of talking.

‘ADE036.’

A muttered ‘yes’ and a shuffle from the back.

‘COR005.’

‘Yes.’ Zahra’s voice, bold and grinning behind me.

‘KIN016.’

Silence. He tries again. ‘KIN016? Is that you?’ He’s looking at me.

I manage a small nod. The lightning flashes inside me again.

He ticks me off the list, hurries through the rest of the numbers, then turns to the bus driver. ‘Good to go.’

The roller door in front of us screeches open, and the bus eases forwards. It stops just a few metres in front of where we were; there’s a second roller door blocking our way. The one behind us closes, and for a moment we are locked in a concrete void that is neither in nor out. My stomach churns.

Then the outer door clunks upwards and the bus lurches out onto the driveway. The Asian officer hurries to take a seat beside the female officer, just in front of me.

The bus slows at a boom gate. The final barrier is raised. Then we’re out on an empty road. Smooth black bitumen, painted with a carefully dotted white line straight down the middle. The land around us seems to stretch forever, an expanse of flat red earth. The trees on the roadside are stringy, with leaves like bursts of green fireworks erupting into the clear blue sky. So much green, so much space, and not a single person or building in sight. It’s the opposite of home.

We pass a section of blackened trees, burnt trunks standing like charred sentinels guarding the way to the city.

Then we’re on a bridge zooming across a shimmering body of water. The ocean, vast and endless. The memory of terror grips me and twists my guts into a knot. I gasp.

The Asian officer turns to face me, misreading my panic.  
'First day?'

My nod is as small and fragile as the wings of a butterfly flapping.

He says, 'No need to be scared. You'll like it.' His voice softens even more, as he adds, 'It's a nice school. My son goes there.'

I can't hide my surprise.

He smiles, and his dark eyes crease into triangles. 'His name's Jonathan. He's in Year 10. You see him, you tell him his dad says to help you, okay? If you need anything.' He holds his lanyard up above the back of the seat and says, 'This is me.'

I see his ID photo and his name: Kenny Do.

The female officer nudges him, and he turns back to face the front. I study him from behind. He has thick black hair, clipped carefully in around his ears. His uniform is wrinkled around the shoulders, as if someone only ironed the flat bits. His wife, I suppose.

I've seen him in our compound before; he's one of the good officers, Zahra says.

I silently practise the names I need to remember. Strange sounds. New words.

Kenny Do.

Jonathan.