



RIGHT ON TIME

BOOK ONE OF THE TIME SERIES

FAITH IJIGA

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to everyone going through any kind of emotional pains... I pray that God will comfort you and meet you at the area of your need.

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PROLOGUE

POLICE STATE COMMAND HEADQUARTERS, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

The present Rivers State Commissioner of Police, Abubakar Abdulrahman, plopped down with a massive sigh on one of the leather-strapped chairs in his office which was located at the State Command Headquarters. He kneaded his temples, dreading the imminent ringing of his phone which signaled one of the calls he detested receiving. It was the call from the Inspector-General of Police, Ahmed Kabiru.

The Inspector-General just urgently requested a conference call through his Personal Assistant (PA, for short) with him and three other commissioners, which were the police commissioners of Lagos State, Kano State, and finally, the Federal Capital Territory. He had five minutes of freedom left before his own PA would connect him to a live video call with the IG of police and the other commissioners.

He already knew what the call was about, even though the meeting was impromptu.

But he was trying his best, wasn't he?

Obviously, his best was no good. That was what the IG was going to tell him and the other commissioners. He would blast them with how the president had been seriously breathing down his neck and how they must "Act fast!"

Well, that seemed to be the word of the day. "Act fast. Act faster than lightning. Time is of great essence." Those weren't just the IG's words. They were the governor's words which he reiterated the last time they spoke, which was just yesterday.

The Governor of Rivers State had been so bent on achieving this goal before his administration was over. He wanted it to be etched in history's record that an imposing mountain was conquered during his administration. It would bring him more honor from his people, and he would be revered in the whole of Nigeria for a long time. It would also boost his future political career.

What the commissioner of police was about to discuss with the three other commissioners and the IG of police was one of Nigeria's greatest headaches. Any political figure who could use the police or any other means to provide the solution would be highly esteemed in the country. That was why the governor was pressurizing him. Besides, the IG of police was receiving the same fire from the president.

And today the IG would also repeat the same line which he was already tired of hearing. "Act fast, oga commiss. Time is flying."

Of course, he wouldn't pronounce it as "commiss"; he would pronounce it as "commish".

"Act fast, oga commish."

His phone's alarm, which he had set in order to be punctual, rang. It was time for the conference call. A shudder ran through his shoulders.

Mr Abubakar's PA, who was a computer whiz, connected him to the virtual meeting after a rapid succession of strokes on the keyboard. In no time, he could see the faces of the other three commissioners and the IG of police on the screen of the computer.

Mission accomplished, his PA walked out of the commissioner's office, leaving him all alone with the gadget.

He wasn't particularly computer literate and that was why he saw what his PA did with the computer as a perfect case of manipulation. What other word could be used for it? When a human being could compel a bleeping machine to do whatever he wanted with just a few taps on a keyboard or touchscreen and some vocal commands.

His brain groped for another suitable word but he couldn't find any at the moment.

Manipulation.

No, there was definitely no other word to qualify it. Or so he thought.

This was what he perceived the politicians in the country were doing to the police. We are just puppets in their hands. They try to make the police do their bidding for their own glory.

This was why they were currently on this conference call. That was Nigerian politics for you, he thought wistfully.

Come to think of it, just like the computer in front of him which had been designed to serve its handler, wasn't that what the police and every other military personnel in the country had signed up for?

To serve Nigeria by protecting the citizens' lives, properties and more.

Yes, this was what they were meant to do, regardless of any politician or government administration's good or bad motives.

And this job they were doing was for as much glory to the police as it would be to any government in power.

"Good day, ladies and gentlemen," the Inspector-General of Police greeted the four commissioners.

CHAPTER ONE

FIVE YEARS BACK.

NEW LIFE SECONDARY SCHOOL, PORT HARCOURT
RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.

The tropical June sun was already mid-ascent in the pale blue morning sky, overlooking the SS3 students of New Life Secondary School that stood in a wobbly queue at the entrance of the large PTA hall. They were there for the West Africa Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE).

The school atmosphere was lit with the jubilant and smiling faces of the SS3 students. Some of the SS2 students passed by the WASSCE exam hall, staring at the SS3 students in awe and a sprinkle of envy. Oh, to be one day on the brink of the open cage called school, about to fly free like these opportune ones were!

Some of the junior students who passed by the exam hall observed the seniors with different expressions on their faces. The comments that these wannabes blurted were the most fascinating spice in this setting.

From the well wishers: "Congratulations, seniors! I'm so happy for you guys."

From the jumpy sanguines: "Oh, I wish I were you, seniors."

From the curious investigators: "What does it feel like to be writing your final secondary school exams?"

From the impatient: "When will my turn come?"

From the prayer warriors: "The God that did it for these SS3 students will also do it for me."

From the truants and bad boys: "I'm glad to see these blasted seniors go. I don't like them one bit."

From the pessimists: "God no go shame una ooo. Hope you sha have plan B?"

From the lazy: "School na scam."

From the motivational speakers: "Life na turn by turn ooo."

The exam of gloom-glory had started a month back. Today, ninety percent of the students would be writing their final papers. Too bad for those who had selected Woodwork as their compulsory vocational subject for that was to be the very last paper.

Among this cluster of WASSCE finalists was a pretty, petite, sixteen-year-old girl who bore the name Ayanate Green.

Like every other student in her class, she was thrilled to be writing her final paper.

Before leaving home that morning, her mother, Mrs Righteous Green, had hugged and congratulated her in advance. Her only brother, Preye Green, who was a 200 level Computer Science student of the University of Port Harcourt, had even promised to take her out for fun and ice-cream after her final paper. So excited was she about his promise that she couldn't wait.

She had studied frantically for this exam, and in her mind, she could see herself receiving her own question paper, going through the questions, and answering every one of them perfectly well, so well that it could be used for a marking guide. The thought made her chuckle under her breath.

Her eyes scanned her environment. She knew that after her graduation she would dearly miss this place that had become like a second home to her. Now was the time to slowly drink in the sight that would soon be tagged her Alma Mater.

The blaring colors of the immaculately trimmed and lush ornamental flowers that accentuated the ridge of each building were not lost to her optical sense. The classroom blocks were painted white and orange, a partial contrast to the school uniform—navy blue blazers, white skirts for the girls, white trousers for the boys and a matching blue and white striped tie.

It was 9:30 a.m., exactly thirty minutes before the exams commenced. Some of the junior classes had already started their second lesson period for the day, the class being the much detested nightmare of average students—Mathematics.

Her gaze moved to the school's sports field, a few meters to the right side of the hall. She saw a gang of boys in her class laughing and chatting. Her heart skipped a little at the sight of these macho beauties.

"Stop it. You're embarrassing me," she chided her heart.

But her heart refused to acknowledge her warning.

In fact, when her eyes caught the frame of a certain lanky, young, male student chilling with some of the guys in her set, it bounded up an extra two fifty miles per hour, like an antelope being chased by a tiger.

There he was, standing in an imaginary spotlight, sparkles flying all around him, with his God-given features distinguishing him from the crowd. Anyone seeing him for the first time would immediately take a second glimpse because he was so different. He had a peculiar aura about him.

He was none other than Munachimso Onuoha, the school's male Senior Prefect.

As far as she knew, she had been crushing on him since forever.

She couldn't hear what he was saying as he chatted with the boys, but she could see from the smile spread across his face that it was a conversation that made him happy. His smile made her smile as well. His joy made her happy. Wasn't that what love was about? To be happy when the one you love is happy, and to feel their pain when they are sad?

Munachimso was quite tall for his age. about 6'1. He was indisputably handsome. He seemed to be moulded from a different cast with his rare androgynous look. Lacquered and enameled by the sun, he radiated energy and brio. His mountain-peak cheekbones appeared chiseled with the dexterity of a master sculptor. With eyes as bright and spell-binding as lodestars, he bewitched all those who fell under his steady gaze. His dark brown eyes danced and twinkled, with cute dimples appearing on both cheeks when he smiled.

To top it up, he was also among the school football team's best and first eleven players. Those who were Ronaldo's fans called him Ronaldo, and those who were Messi's fans called him Messi.

He had what it took to attract ladies to himself, like a magnet would nails. One would think that a person of his caliber would turn himself into the greatest playboy of all time, but no, he wasn't a womanizer. He treated

the female folk like innocent, fragile vessels and casual friends, not like toys to be fiddled with. And that was one of the many qualities Ayanate adored about him.

He was a focused and serious-minded student. One of the best the school had ever produced. Ladies swam around him like bees about a nectar-producing flower. Many were ready to go to great lengths to express their feelings for him, but he still treated them like friends or sisters. It was either he was a fool, or he was oblivious of his screaming qualities and the starry-eyed feminine company they attracted. The latter was most likely.

He had none of that because he wasn't a heart-breaker or a game-player. Besides, one of the female students had actually captured his heart. She was Mary Obiora, the female Senior Prefect. And they were in a dating relationship already. Head Boy plus Head Girl. As they say, two heads are better than one. The students saw it as a match made in heaven.

Still, some of the female students who were crushing on Munachim disliked the head girl for taking over what they believed was their rightful position. These were determined to either have him for themselves or share him with Mary.

As Munachim kept on discussing with his fellow classmates, he seemed to have a premonition that someone was staring at him because he shifted his gaze and caught Ayanate admiring him. Alarmed at being discovered, she swiftly and stylishly wheeled away.

Ayanate's chocolate skin flushed in embarrassment and she tried to hide her burning cheeks. What would she say to the inquisitive parrots if they caught her looking so flustered? That the school's Head Boy had just caught her red-handed checking him out?

"Oh my world! What must he be thinking of me now? I hope he doesn't think that I'm one of those cheap girls who are foolishly crushing on him? I still have my pride to uphold. He may be sizzling hot, but I will never stoop low for that jerk to take advantage of me. He is so not my type," Ayanate protested mentally in denial.

Voices in her head screamed back their reply, "Liar, liar, liar! You're the one who isn't his type."

She covered her ears with her palms, trying to drown out their taunting and ugly voices. As if that would help. The voices rang from inside her.

"Oh, but why is that stupid girl dating him? That ugly, fat girl! Why did she have to be the privileged one? That wench!"

Feeling suddenly ashamed for her horrendous thoughts, she repented. "Oh, God, forgive me for calling someone foul names. I just can't help it. That Mary girl is a con."

Before she could finish crying out that prayer, the voices started spilling their vile words in her head.

"You want to know why he is not dating you? You want to know why he is in love with the Head Girl and not you? You want to know why he would never admire someone like you regardless of your beautiful singing voice and talent?"

She gulped, knowing what would come.

"Well, that is because you are a simple Arts and Humanities student while the Head Girl is a Science student. It is also because you are a Pentecostal, which invariably translates to the fact that you're too fanatical a Christian for him to come close to."

Yes, that last accusation was the plain truth. She was a Christian who took her spiritual conviction seriously. But the Head Boy? Munachim was also a Christian, only that he was one of those who went to church for going's sake.

No doubt, Ayanate was a super-talented singer whose melodious voice could easily melt an ogre's heart, yet, she didn't see herself as one of much worth all because she wasn't as curvy, as smooth and light-complexioned, nor as gorgeous-faced as Mary, the Head Girl. A few brave male admirers had asked her out, but she declined every single one of them because her heart was with another who didn't notice her. A perfect case of unrequited love.

The school bell finally chimed and she snapped back from her thoughts that were almost swallowing her into its dark, cyclic chasm.

It was time for the students to enter into the exam hall, but not without undergoing a thorough search by the invigilators for any incriminating material banned by the examining body, West African Examination Council (WAEC).

Before her turn came to enter the exam hall, she noticed that the sun was beginning to go down and the cloud was getting darker as though it was about to rain heavily.

But there was something strange, discomfoting even, about the weather. It was hot, as usual, and she could feel the clamminess of her armpits and palms. Everywhere was getting dark, but she couldn't feel the cold breeze that normally heralded rainfall.

She hoped she was alright.

Could it be symptoms of Malaria? Well, if it was, she would deal with it later. Now was the time to concentrate on her final paper.

The clouds kept growing darker and she still felt the hot sensation. Surely she wasn't the only one experiencing this. Nobody was saying anything about it so she decided to also keep quiet. She hoped and prayed that whatever the weather was up to, there wouldn't be a serious downpour. That would mean getting home late and possibly drenched to her bones.

She finally entered the hall and slowly pressed her way to her seat number. Students were also doing the same, and she could see the foggy outlines of their figures.

She was really struggling to see far. She hoped the light bulb would be turned on because the students could definitely not write their papers in the dark.

The hall was hushed as the unsmiling examiner entered with the students' question paper. Since their WASSCE started three months ago, this was one of the head invigilators who always walked into the exam hall with a strong, scowling face like a stone statue as if to say, "I am the tyrant of this jungle. Who would dare to cross my path?"

Bam! The sound of a large palm striking a plastic desk filled the hall.

Startled, Ayanate jerked abruptly. One of the invigilators had angrily slammed a question and answer sheet on her table and stormed away to the next student.

She was confused at that strange reaction from the invigilator. How come she hadn't seen the invigilator approaching her table when she did? How possible was it that the woman could move around without any light to illuminate her path?

She knew it was because she hadn't seen the invigilator handing out the question paper to her and hadn't collected it fast, as she should have, that the woman had angrily slammed it on her desk and stalked over to the next student. But it wasn't her fault. The weather was dark and she had honestly not seen the invigilator.

She could barely see her hands in front of her, but she could hear the voices and the sounds from the footsteps of the invigilators as they moved to and fro in the dark. Were they using night vision goggles? Even if they were using it, shouldn't they be considerate enough to turn on the lights so that the students would be able to write their exams?

Ayanate's seat partner, Lizzy, who had been observing her strange behavior—the squinting, the widened eyeballs, the darting of her face all around—gently tapped her.

"Why are you not writing, Ayanate? All the students have started," the dark-skinned girl whispered in haste.

Ayanate faced her blurry seatmate and frowned. "What do you mean by 'everybody has started writing? How is anyone able to write in the dark?'"

Lizzy looked at her with an odd expression. "What are you talking about? Have you turned blind? Can't you see the hot sun that is shining through the window? Can't you feel the hot weather?"

Ayanate felt angry and insulted by that question. "What are you saying? Can't you see that everywhere is dark? I can hardly see you and you're asking if I'm blind!"

Lizzy's eyes widened as a sudden thought sprung up in her head. No, this wasn't happening!

Frantic and not wanting to jump into any dangerous conclusions, she quickly raised up her hand and called the attention of one of the invigilators.

Ayanate remained seated, wondering if something had truly gone wrong with her. Indeed, she could feel the hot weather, and sure, she was still perspiring, but her eyes kept telling her something else. She didn't understand what was going on, so she decided to allow her seatmate to call for the attention of one of the invigilators. Perhaps they were the only ones who could solve the puzzle.

By then, some of the students that overheard the conversation between Ayanate and her seat partner had stopped writing in their answer papers and had begun to look towards the two girls. Whispers filled the hall. The students' minds were already forming the same strange theory in Lizzy's mind, but they couldn't accept it. They wanted it to be confirmed first by the approaching invigilators before they could believe it.

The invigilators confirmed the students' theory, much to Ayanate's shock. That day became one of the most horrible days of Ayanate's life.

The beginning of her darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

BACK TO PRESENT DAY.

OIL MILL MARKET, PORT HARCOURT.

Wednesday in the metropolitan city of Port Harcourt hosted the usual hustle bustle of a midweek day. Private vehicles, taxis, buses and trucks laden with an overload of goods plied the tarred roads. Traffic was at its peak and not even the sweating, arm-flapping traffic wardens could tame it.

The sun was up, spreading its orange-yellow, blazing-hot, stinging rays on everything below. But this did not deter the traders and buyers who were trading in the crowded Wednesday market popularly known as Oil Mill Market.

Traders were ready to sell various goods in surplus quantities. The colorful, eye-catching wares displayed on counters, stalls and trays were luring the eager buyers to buy them. Wheelbarrow-pushers and load-carriers made their services available for the buyers who had purchased bulky goods too heavy to be borne by the hands of a single, worn-out person.

The Oil Mill market was like every other typical Nigerian market. Dirt and debris littered the ground. Dirty, stinky water puddles dotted many parts of the market. The straight walkways could barely accommodate more than two persons at the same time. A deafening noise filled the hot air.

The market hooligans bounced around in gangs, doing their own share of the work by being nuisances. They took advantage of their victims' vulnerabilities by picking pockets, threatening passers-by, snatching traders' goods without paying, and perpetrating other petty crimes.

Different associations, both approved and non-approved by the local government, moved around the market asking traders to pay various tax fees and handing both valid and invalid tax tickets to the traders who had no option but to flow with the system if they expected to make any profit in peace today.

Those 'associations' also had the audacity to ask buyers who had purchased bulky goods to pay for the land space on which they had dropped their goods.

Although she was a buyer, Mrs Righteous Green had just received her second ticket for the day, all because of her pile of goods which now sat in nylons and cartons on the baking sand.

She had been searching frantically for a load carrier to help take her goods to her car for close to twenty minutes. It seemed as if those load bearers had gone on break because none was in sight. And no, she couldn't bear to pay for a third ticket in one day.

Plus, she was dying to escape the scorching sun. Her high-heeled sandals were hurting her feet. She could feel the blisters forming already. She couldn't wait to get into her car and rip off the tightening necessity from her throbbing feet.

Amid many other markets in town, Oil Mill market was her first choice for shopping. Here she found all she needed to buy and restock her family supplies. Apart from clothes, shoes, jewelry, body and hair cream, which she usually bought from a fancy supermarket adjacent her neighborhood, this was where she came twice a month to get groceries, kitchen utensils, electronic appliances and many more. It was closer to her house and she could conveniently bargain prices to the barest minimum and get quality goods at the cheapest rates.

Clutching her handbag—which enclosed her purse, credit cards, phones and other accessories—very tightly to herself, her eyes kept scanning the length and breadth of the lightly-crowded area where she stood for a load carrier, one who seemed healthy enough to carry her load for a fair price. She couldn't afford to lose a dime further to those ravaging money-suckers that claimed to be dishing out tickets for orderliness. Truth be told, it wasn't as if she didn't have money to bar off their undue pestering, but she wasn't in a good mood to deal with any drama.

At the moment, she was extremely irritable—something that became second nature with her after the unexpected blindness that almost shut down her daughter's life five years ago. Mrs Righteous had become more sensitive and emotionally exhausted ever since the unfortunate incident. Before heading for the market today, she had been depressed. Now that her depressed state was coupled with her tiredness and irritation, she was afraid that she would slap the next person that dared to bring any ticket to her.

She heaved a sigh of relief when she finally spotted a male load-carrier striding a few meters to her far left. She immediately ran after the man, not minding the pain that shot through her pulsing ankles and soles, shouting and waving above the market din in order that she might grab his attention before another frustrated prospect did.

She finally got through to him, panting. Without even proceeding with the usual bargaining spree with the man, she asked him to take her load to the trunk of her car. She led the way to where she had parked her Camry, limping on her sore feet. The man followed her, slowed down by the weight of the goods he balanced, both on the wooden tray on his head and his free left hand.

After her groceries had been fully secured in the trunk of her car, she paid the man his fee. She slipped in and buckled her seat belt across her torso. Only then did she let out a deep sigh. Finally, the torture was over. For now.

She inserted her key into the ignition and twisted it once. The car coughed to life. She maneuvered her Camry out of the cramped parking space after she had also paid the fee for the parking slot her car had occupied.

As she drove out of the market entrance and slipped into the Aba Express road, all her thoughts slowly latched onto her numerous challenges, both past and present. She was absolutely oblivious to the black Mercedes-Benz that was steadily trailing her.

The driver of that innocuous-looking Mercedes was a much-wanted personnel in the country, known by his first name, feared for his nickname.

Not much was known about him, only that he was a deadly, yet almost invisible, criminal. The leader of one of the top syndicates in the country—Alpha Shadows. A crime syndicate that wasn't as famous as the Russian mafia but almost as deadly.

His name?

Savior. Alias Tiger.

CHAPTER THREE

FORCE HEADQUARTERS, LOUIS EDET HOUSE, SHEHU SHAGARI WAY, ASOKORO, ABUJA, NIGERIA.

"My apologies for the short notice," the Inspector-General of police said after the commissioners replied to his pleasantries. He was a grim-looking man with a pot belly, which he tried unsuccessfully to tuck away into his trouser. He sported a tuft of hair he called a beard on his chubby chin.

The commissioners in attendance silently nodded their heads. All of them, seated in brown leather chairs in this room, looked like reluctant children that had been forced out of bed to face chores on a harmattan holiday morning.

They all knew the Inspector General well, at least to a certain degree. And he was anything but apologetic. The little speech he delivered was just for formality's sake.

Having no more elaborate preamble and no more time to waste playing polite, the Inspector-General got down to business.

"So, ladies and gentlemen, I want to know where we are with the discovery of the main hideout of this syndicate and the capture of its leader," the Inspector-General of Police stated as he leaned forward from his seat and steeped his fingers on his burgundy table.

The Commissioner of Lagos State, Flourish Bambi, who was a tall and athletically-built woman in her late fifties, spoke up first.

"Sir, I'm afraid that a lot of things about these people still remain a mystery to us. We haven't gotten enough information about them. Even the little Intel we have on them hasn't gotten us far."

The IG frowned deeply, clearly annoyed by the flimsy report from the police commissioner of Lagos State.

"I can't believe what you're telling me, Flourish. The last time we had this meeting, you told me that your best hands were working on this. You told me that they were following every trail these snakes forged. That your team was picking up forensic evidence. As a matter of fact, I clearly remember you telling me that plans were in motion to capture these people." He wagged his finger at her for emphasis while he addressed her.

"Yes, sir, I did and that is..." she started to explain but the IG cut her off.

"From what I can remember, you're not the only one who gave me such assurances." His eyes, narrowed and intense, scanned the other commissioners as he said, "You all did."

His gaze lingered on each one of them, challenging them to deny his accusation. When no one did, he resumed talking.

"So, you are telling me that since our last meeting, you've not been able to gather any actionable Intel?"

The question was particularly directed at the Lagos State police commissioner but since he didn't specify her name, Flourish kept mute, partly from embarrassment and partly because she had nothing to say.

"What about you, John? What do you have for me?" the IG asked the Abuja Police Commissioner as he leaned back and crossed his arm over his chest.

John squirmed in his seat as he anticipated the angry retort that he was sure would come from the Inspector-General when he gave his own answer. "Sir..." The commissioner stuttered a little, regained his composure by clearing his throat, and continued.

"Sir, these people have been covering their tracks so well that we haven't been able to follow any lead. But I can assure you that we are trying our best to give these criminals a taste of their own medicine."

"False assurances again," the IG replied sharply, glaring at the commissioner. "These people have been operating for how many years now? Instead of doing the needful, all you've been giving me has been mere words. How long, commish? How long will Nigeria continue to accept only words as assurance? When will you put your words into action and bring me the desired results?"

He was livid now and his voice rose. "Do you know how many people are depending on you? Do you know how many people are depending on me as Inspector-General of police? Do you know how many people are depending on the Nigerian Police Force to carry out the annihilation of this syndicate? Do you know that every second, minute, hour, day, week, month and year that passes by without the capturing of these people means the victimization of another innocent citizen out there? Do you know that it is the destruction of another innocent citizen's property?"

The Inspector-General was rattling on and on with his torrent of questions that came in consecutively and the commissioners dared not interrupt him. Even the boldest among us them sat mute, not wanting to unplug yet another fuse of rage in the IG.

Finally, he seemed to pause for breath, then, his gaze leveled on the Rivers State Police Commissioner. "Please tell me you have a better report for me, Abubakar?" the IG asked with a sliver of hope, rubbing his temples.

The commissioner, who had been sitting on the edge of his seat due to agitation as he watched two of his counterparts being berated by the Inspector-General, quickly began his reply.

"Sir, my men and I are onto something. Just give us more time and I promise you that we shall hit pay dirt." That statement from Abubakar was a little ruse and even he knew it, but he hoped he sounded convincing to the IG.

"We've made them our higher priority. I can assure you that we've been making progress. All we need is more time. Just give us more time, sir," the commissioner finished. Sweat leaked on the ridge of his mustache and he resisted the urge to clean it off with his palm lest he showed his nervousness.

"How much time do you need, oga commish?" the Inspector-General asked, looking at Abubakar squarely with his beady eyes.

"Don't you know? Don't you know that time is of the essence?"

"I do, sir, but..."

"But what, oga commish?" the Inspector-General asked in exasperation.

"Sir, at the moment, we are..."

"Can't you see that time is what we unfortunately don't have on our side?"

"Yes sir, and..."

"Whatever you are doing, do it fast! Have I made myself clear?" the IG bellowed, slamming the table.

"Yes, sir," the Commissioner replied meekly like a drenched and whipped cat.

"Act fast, oga commish! Time is of the essence. How many times do I have to say that before it sinks into your skull?"

And without waiting for Abubakar's reply, he immediately turned to the Kano State Police Commissioner whose name was Aisha Yesufu and asked her the same question he had asked three of her counterparts.

This commissioner was the only one that seemed to have a bit of good news for the Inspector-General of police.

At the age of forty-two and also a graduate of the Kano State Police College, Aisha Yesufu was currently the youngest state police commissioner. She had earned her current office through her diligence, consistency, dedication and hard work.

Before being promoted to the rank of a commissioner, she'd worked with the counter-terrorism unit of the police force to bring an end to a lot of heinous crimes that was being perpetrated in the country. She'd been rewarded with a double promotion after she successfully led several covert operations. She'd also won three integrity icon awards among others and had been part of several United Nations peacekeeping troops.

Aisha was the youngest in this conference meeting but apart from the Inspector-General of police, she was the one with the most accolade.

FIRST ARTILLERY, ABA ROAD, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

As Mrs Righteous Green continued driving back to her home, she felt as though the weight of the world was crashing down upon her, threatening to bury her alive.

She thought back to the events that had taken place within the past five years and fresh tears of gut-wrenching sorrow streamed down her face. She let them flow freely, sobs whacking her chest. She managed to keep her hands steady on the wheels as she drove through a blur of tears.

What's happening? How did I get to this rock bottom point? And, and why?

"God, why me?" The question came out as a whisper.

She cursed in frustration—something she trained her children to never do—and mentally chided herself.

She groaned and slapped her steering wheels hard with both hands.

"God... God, I ask you again. Why me?" Her voice, though quavering from the tears, was louder this time.

She bawled, out of the blues, and nearly collided with a Highlander moving ahead of her. She veered her steering just in time to avoid a collision.

Thanking her stars that her carelessness did not cause damage to her car and her body, she sniffed and quickly wiped her tears with her sleeves. She resumed her tirade of questions to God again, breathing steadier this time around.

"God, do you still love me? No. Have you ever even loved me?"

"Yes, my dear beloved. I love you so much, more than you could ever imagine," the still small voice replied to her but she found it hard to believe.

"Oh, my daughter... My baby girl... Ayanate didn't deserve what happened to her."

"She loved you," Mrs Righteous whispered bitterly. "My sweet baby girl still loves you and yet, you idly sat down and allowed this to happen to her. Why? I demand to know why you've been so cruel to us? Is it because of my sin? Then you should have punished me instead."

The question kept bubbling from her grief-ridden heart and spilling through her lips. She didn't stop. If only he would answer her with something more concrete than all that I-love-you talk. Did he even listen to her anymore?

No one, not even a sworn enemy, deserved to go through what she had gone through in her life.

She hadn't asked for this, at least not intentionally. She didn't bargain for it. Now that life was overdosing her with an ample share of its sour grapes, she was dead tired of everything.

Her woes began in earnest when she came in contact with Henry Green.

CHAPTER FOUR

Righteous got married to Henry at the age of twenty, when she was still a third-year law student of the University of Nnamdi Azikiwe.

Her parents were vehemently opposed to her marriage with Henry Green and did everything in their power to dissuade and stop their daughter from marrying him.

They even went as far as rejecting Henry's bride price, refusing to bless their union if they ever got married without their consent.

Righteous had gone ahead to beg and cajole them, but still, her parents did not budge.

When she finally confronted her parents, questioning their love for her and why they were opposed to her happiness in life, they had simply replied, "Can't you see that he is a fraud? We don't trust him and we don't think he is the will of God for your life."

"Will of God indeed," Righteous had replied angrily.

"This is someone you barely know and haven't even taken out much of your time to examine him closely and carefully, yet, you have the boldness to question his motives and sincerity?"

Her parents had simply stared at her blankly.

"I can't believe this. This is ridiculous, outrageous, absurd, ludicrous, preposterous, farcical, risible, horrid, and every form of imaginable and unimaginable hideousity."

Her parents remained quiet all through her ranting. They let her spray all her grammar at them. When she was done using her literary-prowess—the same education they sponsored her through—to mask her foolishness, they would talk sense into her skull. She was, after all, their only daughter and they would not open their eyes wide and allow her to walk into fire.

When she finally stopped, they spoke up, and they did so calmly.

"My dear," her father began with his hand on her shoulder, "You know you are our only daughter and we care a lot about you. You should know that as your parents, we would never do or say anything that would hurt you. Please, we need you to consider things from our own point of view."

Her parents tried their very best to make her see things their way. At first, they thought they were getting through to her because she seemed to be ruminating deeply about what they had said.

They were however shocked when they realized that she was drawing up her own conclusion. A very wrong conclusion.

"I think I know why you don't want me to marry Henry."

Her parents looked at her questioningly as if to say, "What are you driving at?"

"Yes," she said, snapping her fingers as though certainly perceiving their thoughts.

"You don't want me to marry Henry because he is from a different state and a different tribe, right?"

Her parents' facial expression shifted from quizzical to incredulity. They were astonished at the insinuation she was conjuring up.

"I'm from Akwa-Ibom State while he's from Rivers State. Isn't this why you don't want us to marry? As your only daughter, you want me to marry from our tribe."

Unable to bottle in her consternation at their daughter's accusation, her mother immediately spoke up.

"I can't believe this! I can't believe that you could actually accuse your father and I of gambling with our daughter's life for the sake of tribalism."

"I'm not accusing any of you. I'm just stating the obvious reality," Righteous snapped back.

"That's not true and you know it," her mother said, poking her finger in Righteous' direction.

Seeing that her parents would not admit that her theory was correct, she decided to strike from another angle, all in a bid to drive in the nail.

"If what you're claiming is correct, then why did you allow your first son, Anietie, to get married to his wife who is from the North, but you won't allow your only daughter to marry from another tribe? Why did you allow your second and last son, Andino, to get married to his wife who is from Rivers State, but you won't allow me?"

"I'll tell you why. That's because your sons are able to go outside and marry more women into your tribe but your daughters are not permitted to marry and populate other tribes." Then she turned to her father, who was gaping at her, and said, "Just like you married Mother who is from the West."

Her mother stood up and gave her a resounding slap. Righteous winced, startled by the pain that spread through her cheeks, all thanks to her mother's hardcore palm.

"Don't you dare speak such nonsense in my presence again, did you hear me?" her mother boomed.

"Am I understood?" her mother thundered again, but Righteous did not affirm her compliance. Instead she nursed her face and gritted her teeth, her mind hardening all the more.

"Am I understood?"

When Righteous did not answer the second time, her mother, furious at Righteous' rudeness, wanted to shove more sense into her brain through another resounding slap, maybe some strikes to her back and a sharp twist to her deaf ear.

Before she could carry out her intention, her husband pulled her back by her right elbow.

He persuaded his wife to sit down and let the matter be settled calmly. When everywhere became quiet, he called Righteous by her native name and began admonishing her softly.

"Adiaha, we know you have come of age to make your own decisions and face the outcome. Especially decisions that are as important as getting married to a life partner. But if only you could pause for a minute and consider the warnings we have given you, you might want to rethink this particular decision of yours."

Silence enveloped the room again. Righteous looked up and noticed the thoughtful expression that was etched on her father's face before he finally spoke up.

"We thought we might be protecting you by keeping this away from you, but you are our daughter so I'll just go ahead to explain everything to you. There's no need hiding anything from you since it is your life and you are entitled to doing anything you want to do with it."

Righteous plopped down quietly on one of the sofas adjacent to her parents but her left ear still rang from the hot slap her mother had served her.

She had thought that her parents loved her but now she could see them for who they were. They never loved her. They never cared for her feelings, disregarding the fact that she was their only daughter whom they were supposed to pamper like an egg. They were just selfish oldies that wanted to satisfy their ego.

She sat still as her father continued talking. Underneath her expressionless face and her taut skin, her blood was boiling with rage and resentment for her parents. She struggled to keep her fuming concealed.

They could go on and say all they wanted to say from now till thy kingdom comes. She knew she would still do what was in her mind whether it violated her parents' principles and moral standards or not. Her mind was set and there was no turning back even if an angel appeared to convince her otherwise.

She would show them that she was a grown-up now and they couldn't boss her around as if she was still a kid. She had to prove to them that she was right, that Henry was the best man and the only man for her.

The thought of carrying out her defiance didn't give her comfort, though. It only agitated her the more.

She bawled her fists and placed them on her laps. Blood rushed into her ears, making it more difficult for her to hear what her father was saying. Her heartbeat accelerated. Voices cried out to her in rapid succession to stand up and defend the man she loved before her parents. She closed her eyes to block out the noise and headache they were giving her.

Her father continued talking, oblivious to the storm his words were stirring in her. It was all she could do from standing up and screaming bloody murder.

"We know you love this young man, and to be honest, we were happy the day you brought him home to us."

Righteous snickered. *As if.*

"I can still remember that day vividly as though it was just a few minutes ago. There was this radiant look on your face. That day, your mother and I looked at each other and smiled because our daughter had apparently fallen in love. The feeling of love is something that is so strong that no matter how much anyone tries to stifle it, he or she will fail miserably at such an attempt."

"We saw it in you that day—that innocent and child-like love. And without asking you, we knew he was your first love. I mean, the first after your Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ."

His words were beginning to enter in.

Righteous gazed into her father's eyes for the first time since the beginning of this charade. All she could see was a tenderness and concern that shook her to her marrow. Perhaps she had misjudged them. Maybe they'd let her go on with the love of her life. All she needed was to be more convincing.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Mrs Righteous Green turned into another intersection on the road, the car trailing her followed from a safe distance.

She was still in deep thought, remembering the day her foolishness started. Her driving became sort of an automated running through the motions.

Righteous agreed with the statement from her father. She loved Henry deeply. Her feelings for him had a profound effect on her, even to the extent that her pulse sped up at the mere thought of him.

He was her first love, her first experience at the game called love, and she couldn't help but feel like she'd been reborn into a new world. A world that could only exist as a fantasy. Her own perfect, happily-ever-after fairy tale.

Oh, but this was no game. No fantasy. It was as real as the skin covering her bones.

Henry latched onto her thoughts ninety percent of the time. She once contemplated that she could be obsessed with him. Even if that were the case, which she believed it wasn't, she wasn't sure of what she would do about it because she never wanted the feelings she'd developed for him to taper.

"Your mother and I were so happy for you for falling in love. We became more pleased when you confided in your mother and explicitly told her that you've never had any sexual relations with Henry," her father continued. "We believed you, not just because you told us but because we can still see the innocence we saw in you prior to your relationship with him."

That statement from her father was also true. At the start of her relationship with Henry, she'd told him in no uncertain terms that she wanted no sex before marriage.

She had also told him that she wanted to live that way because it was part of her moral standards and her Christian conviction.

That was when she noticed the surprised look on his face and how it had morphed into eagerness to hastily marry her.

Without a waste of time or any engagement ring in hand, he had dropped on his knees, proposing marriage to her, telling her how much he loved her and how he would die without her in his life. He had implored her to say yes, promising that he would immediately rush off to buy her an engagement ring that same moment. A gorgeous engagement ring. Silver, gold or diamond. Henry asked her to name her choice, telling her that her wish was his command.

She didn't detect any negative signal from his abrupt behavior, only that the moment made her feel special, wanted and loved by this man whom she would gladly give her life for in a heartbeat.

His impatient and funny behavior made her laugh gleefully. Without a second thought, she replied with a "yes" to his marriage proposal.

Henry had excitedly pushed himself up from his kneeling position, swept Righteous off her feet, whirled her around and smothered her face with kisses, shouting happily on top of his lungs as he did.

For Righteous, that moment was a time of pure ecstasy and she made up her mind right there and then, that he was the only one she wanted to love and give her heart and body to.

It was supposed to remain like that but her parents stepped in to dissuade her from carrying out her heart desires with the love of her life.

"At first, at first we didn't have any problems with you marrying Henry," her father continued, "But there was this unusual unrest that fell upon us like a heavy blanket each time he visited with you or whenever his name was mentioned in the house.

"We thought it was that overwhelming feeling any loving parents always have each time they came to the realization that their children had come of age and would be moving from under their control to begin a life of their own. But as time went by, the weird feelings became more intense. Your mother and I could no longer ignore it.

"Your mother and I privately discussed our concerns. After a lot of contemplation and consideration, we made a firm resolution to table our worries before God. We asked if he was the one demanding our attention about your marriage or if this was a distraction from the devil.

"We prayed for a couple of days. Then God opened your mother's eyes and began showing her unpleasant things about Henry.

"You have always known that God gave your mother the gift of seeing visions. Over the years, he has revealed a lot of things to your mum through visions, and I don't have to tell you how it has directly and indirectly helped this family, our loved ones, distant relations and even people we barely know.

"So, when your mother received several unpleasant visions about this young man, we decided to put our feet on the ground and vehemently oppose your marriage to him."

At that last remark from her father, Righteous became more furious that she could no longer sit down in silence.

"And how am I sure that you people are not just worried over nothing? How are we even sure that the vision you claim you saw was real? How can you prove that your supposed vision wasn't induced by your gratuitous concerns?"

No word could accurately express the hurt feelings that were aroused in her parents' hearts as she unabashedly questioned the legitimacy of her mother's vision for the first time in her life, all because of the man she had fallen in love with. Their only daughter was rapidly stepping out of their grasp and gliding into dangerous waters and they were feeling powerless to stop her.

"This man told you that he is a businessman who trades in the spare parts of different vehicles, right?" her father asked.

"Yes. What does that have to do with anything?" Righteous asked, unable to remain seated.

"Sit down, Adiaha," her father commanded.

For a while she remained standing, contemplating if she should do as she was told or otherwise.

"Sit down," her father repeated and this time, she grudgingly did as she was told.

"Have you ever paid him a visit at his working place?" he asked.

"He took me there once but he told me that he didn't like mixing his professional life with his relationship and I shouldn't bother coming to visit him at his workplace."

"Can you listen to yourself, Adiaha? He told you not to visit him and you believe that it was for the same reason he gave you?"

"Why shouldn't I believe him? What reasons does he have to lie or deceive me?"

"Because he is not just after your personality but he is also after the financial benefits he stands to gain via his marriage to you. He knows you're the only daughter of rich parents and you have financially buoyant brothers who love you and are willing to do anything in their capacity for you to make you happy. He would like to use you as leverage to ensure a financial flow for the rest of his life. We need you to please listen to us and call off this marriage before you dive deeper. That man is nothing but a gold digger. Trust me, when opportunities like this present themselves to gold diggers, they never fail to take full advantage of it."

Instead of listening and laying the matter to rest, she had quickly countered her parents' arguments with her own points.

"What you're telling me is contrary to what I have seen in him. I know Henry loves and cares for me because he expresses it in every possible way. Talking about him not being rich and taking advantage of rich families and the rich girls, don't tell me you haven't seen him driving different cars. So tell me, could a man pretend up to that level that he could change cars? The last time I checked, to own a car in this life, money is needed to purchase it. Unless you want to tell me that he has been stealing those cars, and that will sound preposterous to the ears of any reasonable human."

"Oh, Adiaha, my child, you are so innocent," her mother cried in consternation. "What if he had been borrowing or hiring those cars?"

She let out a high-pitched cackle, throwing her head back as she did. When she realized what she was doing in the presence of her parents, she quickly regained her composure and asked, "I'm sorry to ask but where are the both of you getting this whole notion about Henry?"

"They are not our notion. They are revelations, given to us by God and if you think we are not being truthful, why don't you verify for yourself by paying him a surprise visit?"

"What? What are you suggesting that I should do?" Righteous asked, barely keeping the trauma she felt from her voice.

"You want me to disobey his orders so that he would think ill of me?"

"Did we just hear you correctly? He hasn't even married you and he is already ordering you around."

"Uh, um, uh, I never meant it that way. I was just saying.." she stuttered while her parents shook their heads.

Then, Righteous decided to go soft on her parents. She stood up from her seat, went towards her parents and got down on her knees.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Mom and Dad. Please forgive me for my irrational behavior. I'm so sorry. It's just that I'm so much in love with Henry and as you already know, he is the first and only one I have ever loved. Please, I beg you in the name of God, love of God and everything you hold dearly, please give me and Henry a chance. I'm sure he won't disappoint."

After all her emotional display, her parents still didn't give their consent.

Righteous went into her room that night depressed. Suddenly resolute, she made a decision that changed the course of her life.

CHAPTER SIX

Righteous packed up her things, lied to her parents about an early resumption date for her school, and left a week earlier before the university's resumption date. Her parents gave her money for her school fees and allowances, believing that their trustworthy daughter was going back to school.

Little did they know that their assumption about her was wrong for the first time.

With her luggage well secured in the trunk of her car, Righteous climbed into her driver's seat and drove out of her parents' compound with a steely resolve she never knew she was capable of making.

She was both excited and scared at the same time. Excited for the anticipated positive end result, and scared for venturing into such an enormous decision for the first time in her life on her own.

She was doing a bad thing for running off before the school's resumption date. A very bad thing and she knew it.

She should return to her parents now, her mind told her over and over again but she didn't want to listen. She had been listening to her mind for the past twenty years and now she thought she could act on the contrary for a change.

After all, she was doing this for the man she loved, for Henry.

Love meant sacrifice, and she was doing her share of it right now. She wasn't on the wrong side because she was for love. Her parents were the one who were currently on the wrong side of the divide because they were against love.

'I have become a bad girl. I've lied to Mummy and Daddy and eloped, so what does that make me? Definitely a bad girl. Bad, bad, bad.'

'Stop whining, Righteous. I'm not a bad girl. I'm doing this for Henry, for love. There's no turning back now.'

On and on, the internal argument transpired all through the drive to Henry's house.

To make the idea look more appealing, holy and justified in her eyes, she deduced that she was sacrificing, just as Jesus Christ did, for love.

The very notion struck her as an absurd and out-of-context comparison, but she quickly pushed it to the back of her mind.

For love, for Henry. For love, for Henry.

On and on, it continued, and soon, it became more like a mantra. It was what fueled her drive till she got to her destination.

Henry was surprised to see her in the front of the apartment which he shared with the original owner who was not around at that moment.

Righteous noticed a shadowy look that crossed his face when she told him that she would be staying for a while. It disappeared so quickly that she couldn't decipher it.

That night, they laid down together in the same bed for the first time. Before they slept, they talked about the imbroglio that they had involuntarily been drawn into.

She again noticed an uncanny expression that creased the lines on his forehead as they discussed. She didn't know what to make of it so she had concluded that he was as much worried as she was because of their love for each other.

At that point, she felt it was high time she told him of the idea that had been forming in her mind.

She reached out her hand to hold his face and told him that all will be alright, that she thought she had an idea that could help.

When Henry, out of curiosity, asked her to tell him the idea, she'd tabled it down with so much certainty, believing that it was their best shot at coming out of their precarious position.

She carefully laid out her plan in a well-rehearsed speech. When she finished, she couldn't help the satisfaction that she felt inwardly. She even let out a small smile, believing that Henry would definitely go along with the plan.

One look at Henry and she knew she had terribly offended him with her idea.

"This is the dumbest and most foolish thing I have ever heard in my entire freaking life!"

To say that Righteous was dumbfounded would be putting it mildly. She hadn't done anything wrong, at least not in her own opinion. She had only suggested that they should elope and get married without her family's approval.

Henry started calling her unpleasant names and screaming obscenities at her. He raised his hands and was about using it on her but the horrified expression on her face made him realize the significant damage he was doing to himself.

The realization stopped him cold. After calming down, he decided to take a new course of action by apologizing.

Righteous was so frightened out of her wits and frozen in her spot about the display she had seen from him that she couldn't let out any coherent word.

He scooted closer to her and gathered her up in his arms, still apologizing. It sent a strange feeling to every fiber of her being.

It gave her a strange feeling because no man had ever held her the way he was holding her that night. He tenderly looked into her eyes as if he could see the depth of her soul.

This was not what her parents expected her to get into, but it was a whole new experience and she was finding it very difficult to tear herself away from it.

Her emotions were being drawn by a magnetic force and that magnetic force was Henry.

She wanted to leave; she wanted to stay. She wanted to bolt away from him; she wanted to remain with him. Go or stay?

She found herself in a great state of turmoil between her moral convictions and her feelings for Henry. Unable to choose sides, she buried her face in his chest and began to sob uncontrollably. It was a gut-wrenching sob. Her world was spinning and her life was in a downward spiral, all because of Henry. Henry.

"That's okay, my love. Please stop crying." Henry gently pulled her face away from his chest and began wiping her tears with his thumb.

His touch filled her with unexpected warmth and she wanted to lean in for more. She had never been here before but now that she had come this far, she wanted to dive in head long.

A gentle but firm voice was telling her to turn away and return home to her parents, that it was not too late, but she shut out the sound of the voice. Right there, she made up her mind that she would go to the ends of the earth with Henry.

"Shush, stop crying, babe," Henry cooed and she quickly complied, wiping off the remaining tears from her eyes.

Silence fell on the room like a heavy blanket and for a while, no one said anything.

"I think I have an idea," Henry piped up in excitement.

"Yes, baby, I think I have a great idea." He punched his fist mid-air.

Righteous looked at him with surprise and curiosity. A few moments ago, she had given him what she thought was the best solution to their problem by suggesting that they elope and get married without her parents' consent. He'd been so furious at her that he almost slapped her. Now, what plan would he come up with that could remedy the situation?

He's a fool, she thought incredulously. I'm in love with a fool.

But after he had convinced her about his idea, her perception about him changed.

Henry started by telling Righteous that he was too responsible to take advantage of her love and willingness and marry her without her parents' consent. Imagine what it would do to her parents, he reasoned with her. When she asked for his idea, his reply chilled her to her marrow.

He had suggested that he should get her pregnant and then they would return to her parents when she was three months gone so that when they saw their daughter's state, they would be forced to give their consent.

"Are you—, are you saying that you want to sleep with me before marriage?" Righteous stuttered in surprise.

He had quickly cut her off saying.

"No, no, Babe, don't say it like that. I'm not just saying this because I want to have sex with you. But can't you see that it is our only solution out of this tussle? Carefully think about this, darling. Can't you see that it is the only way your parents can accept me as their son-in-law?

"Would you like to give birth tomorrow and not give your parents the opportunity of holding their grandchildren all because they disowned you? Think about it, sweetheart, think about it."

He had quickly cupped her face in his palms and stared directly into her eyes.

"Don't you know that I love you so much? I can't afford to see you separated from your parents all because of me. And if you love me, then please do this for us. I want to live with you for the rest of my life, with the peace of mind that I didn't come between you and your parents."

Henry spoke with so much conviction in his voice that Righteous felt as though he was speaking directly to her soul. She looked him in the eyes and realized that she loved him so much that she couldn't deny him any request. Then she made up her mind that she would do anything to make sure that Henry and her family became on good terms, even if it meant giving him her body.

And she did.

While he gazed into her eyes, she kissed him passionately.

The experience was what she would never forget in her life.

Neither would she forget the satisfactory smile on Henry's face as he slept beside her that night.

They continued the sexual intimacy for the rest of the week, hoping that she would get pregnant quickly. Guilt gnawed at her, but she stifled it under the cloak of the momentary pleasure each night and the hope of a blissful tomorrow with Henry. When the time came, she left for school.

Henry called her at least five times everyday, asking if she had been confirmed pregnant. As time went on, it became their major topic of discussion each time he called her, which always ended with him promising heaven and earth to her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Righteous had been too scared to go for a pregnancy test but after a lot of pressure from Henry, she finally made her way to the nearest hospital almost four weeks later. She was confirmed pregnant.

The pregnancy confirmation made her shiver in her boots. She was afraid. She knew she had made a terrible mistake and had failed heaven. What if Henry backed out now? That would be hellish. However, when she cautiously divulged the news to him over the phone, he shrieked excitedly at the top of his lungs. Then, before disconnecting the call, he inadvertently told her that he was going out to drink himself to stupor with his friends.

Righteous was so caught off guard and astonished that before she could react to his last statement, the call went dead in her ear.

Righteous frowned and stared in shock at the phone she still held. "Wait a minute, did Henry just say he was going out to drink himself to stupor with his friends?" she asked no one in particular, unable to make the statement register. She shook it off. Maybe it was a slip of his tongue due to his excitement. Yeah, that must be it.

When Righteous was two months gone, Henry could not wait any longer. He called her one hot afternoon and told her that it was time to go to her parents.

The earlier, the better.

He told her he loved her so much that he could hardly go through a day without her. She believed him. She believed every word that came from his mouth.

When they broke the news of her pregnancy to her parents, Righteous felt ashamed because of the pained expression she saw on her parents' faces.

Her mother, who had been putting up a strong bravado since the ordeal started, finally broke down in tears and fell ill for a week.

But when the storm was over, her parents still loved her and treated her like their treasured daughter.

"You have forced our hands, Adiaha, and we have no choice than to grant you your wishes. We want you to know that this won't change anything. No matter what, we will forever love you.

"But you are now all grown up to decide what is best for you. You have made your decision and no matter how terrible we think it is, you are still our child, a beautiful gift from God and we can never send you away."

And that was how her parents had accepted an impostor who had forced himself to become their son-in-law. That was how Righteous tearfully reconciled with her parents.

Her brothers who still loved her regardless of the recent ordeal decided to spoil her as the only princess of the family by organizing a lavish wedding for her and Henry.

The D-day finally arrived and Righteous was finding it hard to believe that it was truly her wedding day. The day she would be getting married to the love of her life and with her family in full attendance and support. Her heart desire was being fulfilled in front of her eyes and she couldn't help but be grateful.

Henry was beaming from ear to ear.

It was time for the presentation of gifts. One of her brothers paid a five-year rent for a three bedroom bungalow apartment and handed them the keys as their wedding gift. The other bought them a BMW and paid for a two-week honeymoon vacation on an exotic beach house. Her parents gifted them with a six-figure cheque while the smaller gifts were from the other attendees and Henry's family who were innocently happy for their son's good fortune.

Henry was thrilled. He had gotten what he wanted. It was just the beginning.

Righteous didn't know why but she had felt a bit uncanny about the way Henry quickly transferred all the money that was given to them into his personal account.

During the honeymoon, Henry continued to treat her like a new husband should, but she began noticing some changes about him.

He went out very often to the hotel bar and each time he returned, his eyes were bloodshot and he reeked of alcohol.

When she confronted him about it, he told her that he drank a little and a little could not hurt.

"But you told me that you didn't drink, not even a little," Righteous snapped with irritation in her voice.

And that was their first and the beginning of their real quarrel. Seeing that he had nothing to lose, Henry began to shed his chameleon skin and reveal his true self.

He told her that he was the man of the family, the head of the house, and as a woman, she should know her place and respect his authority over her.

He also told her that the money he was using to drink was his own money and the sooner she got it into her head, the better for her. Yes, he imbibed alcohol and he would continue. Period.

At that moment, her eyes finally opened and she saw Henry for who he was. Her parents had been right all along but she had been too blind with her feelings for him to see it. She had believed him above her parents who had loved and taken care of her for the past twenty years of her life. She began to take the blame for the nightmare that was unfolding before her.

She kicked and chided herself mentally as realization dawned on her.

That night, she cursed herself for the first time, crawled under her covers and cried herself to sleep. Her husband turned his back to her and snored away like a trailer with a bad engine as he slept.

Righteous thought she had seen everything about Henry during their honeymoon. She began to recall that all the signs and symptoms of irresponsibility were there during their dating time, only she had chosen to ignore them blinded by love. When they finally settled into their matrimonial home, she slowly began to understand that all Henry had shown her so far was simply the tip of the iceberg.

Everything her parents said about her husband was unfortunately accurate.

He didn't have any steady job, as he had claimed, and all the cars he used to visit her back then were either borrowed or hired.

The business he claimed he owned, which he had shown her, was actually owned by one of his former employers who had to fire him due to his lackadaisical attitude.

The most dangerous thing about the whole ordeal was that, while he promised her parents that he would take good care of her, he was actually placing her in a precarious position where he'd use her to financially extract from her family. And that was exactly what he began doing.

He never gave her money for her school fees and allowances, instead he asked her to take from her brothers. Instead of her husband, her brothers became the breadwinner of her family. Her brothers apparently understood their sister's situation and knowing that they couldn't stand to see her suffer in the hands of a monster, they happily took up the responsibility of taking care of her family, financially and otherwise.

Unknown to Righteous and her brothers, they were dutifully playing into Henry's game. Keep the cash dripping, baby.

Things turned from bad to worse.

They quarreled verbally more frequently, until one day, Henry decided that it was time to start using his fists. He beat her blue and black and threatened to do it all over again if she so much as offended him.

She lost every reason to live, but her unborn child gave her a sliver of hope. So she decided that for its sake, she would live one more day. Everyday for the baby's sake.

She had been too ashamed and embarrassed to return to her parents and truly apologize and tell them that they have been right all along, and for long she suffered silently. Till she could bear it no longer. When she scraped up enough strength to go face her parents, they didn't hesitate to forgive and welcome her back like the prodigal daughter. She fell into their arms and wept.

They wanted to continue holding her. They persuaded her to divorce her husband since the marriage was built on falsehood. They asked her to return home and let them take care of her and they could become a one big happy family again.

But Righteous perceived in her heart that she was too far gone to return.

Her family might never criticize her but what would others say? People would definitely make mockery of her and speak negatively about her parents, accusing them for not training their child well even though none of this was their fault.

She could tolerate any insult or mockery directed towards her, but she couldn't stand it if any garbage was thrown at her parents. She made up her mind that it was only her mistake and she'd bear the responsibility alone.

So she assured them that she had to go back to her matrimonial home and that she'd be fine.

Regardless of her refusal at first, her parents insisted that the least they could do for her since she was bent on staying with her husband would be to start sending her monthly allowance and continue taking care of her as they did before she got married.

Before she left their home that day, her parents embraced her and reassured her that she was still their beautiful and priceless daughter whom they loved regardless of what happened between them.

And that was how Henry became completely dependent on his wife's family money. That was how everything about Righteous, from her school fees down to their baby diapers became provided by her parents and brothers.

Words could never explain the joy she felt when she gave birth to her first child, Preye. When she held her baby in her arms, she made up her mind to survive every day for his sake.

Righteous had thought that the arrival of a new born baby in the family would change Henry's behavior but she was so wrong.

Three years later, she graduated from law school and also gave birth to her second and last child, Ayanate.

She fell in love with her baby girl and instantly gave the tiny life her English name.

"Welcome to the world, dear Ayanate Righteous Green," she cooed, smiling and kissing the top of her daughter's forehead. "I'm now a proud mother of two."

Immediately she uttered those words, her emotional dam broke and she didn't bother restraining the tears.

She made a mistake but instead of punishment, she received forgiveness and blessings.

Righteous continued going through several life struggles every day as she took care of her children.

She was also working as one of the lawyers in a well-known law firm in Port Harcourt.

Her children and her job gave her more reasons to live and as she made progress in her work, she started relieving her parents and brothers of their financial responsibilities over her regardless of their initial protests.

Her family continued to be good cheerleaders, encouraging her to reach out for new heights and she did.

They adored her children and thus, she made sure to send them to visit their grandparents during the holidays to shield their innocent eyes from seeing the domestic abuse that was being carried out on her by their father.

Six months prior to the expiration of their house rent, the landlord started sending them notice. As usual, Henry asked Righteous to start calling her brothers to tell them to renew the rent.

That was when something snapped inside her.

Deciding that she'd had enough of Henry using her for his financial gain, Righteous made up her mind that something must change.

She did call her family as Henry had asked her to. Only this time around, she didn't ask them for money.

She told her family that she loved them so much and she would not be used to extort money from them anymore.

Even though they begged her not to do it, she severed all ties with her family and deleted their numbers from her phone and Henry's phone so that neither she nor Henry would be able to call them even if they wanted to. She also took Henry's and her SIM card out of their phones and flushed them down the toilet.

She told Henry what she did and finally concluded by telling him that they'd be packing out of that apartment to a smaller one that her meager salary could afford.

He was enraged. He stood up fuming, with the intention of beating her to a pulp.

He rushed her but before he could get to her, Righteous spoke like an aggressive mad woman. He could see the fire that blazed in her eyes and the kitchen knife that she gripped tightly in her right hand as she threatened to kill him if he raised even a finger on her.

Realizing that the event had taken a drastic turn, Henry grunted and stormed out of the house and out of her life as well. That was the last time she ever saw him. Righteous was left all alone to single-handedly train up her children.

She moved into a smaller apartment, having lost every means of communication with her husband.

Righteous held tight unto her maker that she had formerly ignored. God became her husband, best friend, confidant and her all in all. And together, they trained her children in the way of the Lord.

With time, she grew more successful in her job. Within a few years, she climbed the ladder and became one of the best lawyers in the state and country.

She finally decided to resign from the law firm she was working with to start up her own. She became financially buoyant enough to relocate to a better apartment in an estate.

Life was moving well for her regardless of some challenges that came with any new taxes.

She thought that her troubled days were over until five years ago, when her daughter returned home from school, blind. Since that day, her life had never remained the same again.

"Oh, God, why?" Righteous muttered amid tears as she kept driving.

She got to the second Artillery and veered to old Aba road. When she got to Slaughter Market, she took the road that led to Trans Amadi, which was close to the location of the estate where she resided.

Behind her, Tiger, who was stalking her, had not been suspected or sighted so far.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FORCE HEADQUARTERS, LOUIS EDET HOUSE, SHEHU SHAGARI WAY, ASOKORO, ABUJA.

The Inspector-General of Police was evidently satisfied with the report from the Kano State Commissioner of Police, Aisha Yesufu, and had even rewarded her with a smile of approval. The prodigy definitely knew what she was doing.

He had listened with rapt attention as she revealed to him and the other commissioners that her team had discovered seven of their hideouts, permanently blew it up into smithereens, shot and killed those who tried to escape and arrested the rest, keeping them in custody for interrogations.

The Kano State police and forensic scientists were working hard. Their relentless detectives were sniffing for any strong lead like hound dogs. In those areas where they were lagging behind, they unofficially used the help of private agencies to cover those loopholes. Right now, Kano state was becoming more of a hell hole for the crime syndicate and soon enough, she reiterated, the remaining hidden ones would soon be scampering out of the state.

The Inspector General of Police took over when the Kano State commissioner finished.

"We have thirty-six state commissioners. When you include the commissioner of the Federal Capital Territory," his eyes moved towards Commissioner John Kolawole, "that will make you thirty-seven in number. But do you know why, out of these thirty-seven commissioners, I have summoned only four of you?" the Inspector-General asked as his gaze leveled down on all the commissioners.

"That's because your state and the Federal Capital Territory are apparently their major place of operation, and I'm sure you know why," the IG continued.

"These four cities are part of the top most developed areas in the country and thus, it is mostly the locations where you will find a handful of rich guys.

"So if these locations which are under your jurisdictions are their major targets, then why is it still difficult for you people to capture, annihilate, extinguish, and vaporize these people who are apparently living under your noses?

"I want to know why these gangbangers and wannabes who barely have any military training would come into a firefight with the military and escape unscathed? Why would these rascals be in possession of firearms that only the military has access to?"

All the commissioners in the conference call obviously knew the unspoken answer but no one dared voiced it out. For all they knew, anyone who was present in that conference meeting could be the actual culprit.

Perceiving that the commissioners knew what he was driving at, the Inspector-General decided to get straight to the point.

"I want the four of you to gather your most trusted hands and fish out the officers who have been aiding these people and immediately bring them to book. Am I understood?"

"Very well, sir," they replied in unison.

"I've gone through some of the previous documents you sent where you noted some of the supplies you need. When the paperwork is done, you shall receive more armored personnel carriers, Hiluxes, machine guns, assault rifles and other high-powered rifles in our arsenal, grenades, teargas, bulletproof vests and any other ammo you requested for in those files.

"Any other thing you need to get this job done, do not hesitate to table your request to me. Fish out these double-faced officers and remember to watch your backs," the Inspector-General of police concluded.

"Roger that, sir," came the apt reply from the commissioners.

"Now, before I let you go, is there any question for me?"

Silence. Everyone shook their heads.

"In the absence of any question, let me bring this impromptu meeting to a halt. Report back to me soon of your progress. Until then, I wish you all the best."

The IG finished and the live video feed was disconnected.

POLICE STATE COMMAND, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

When the video call got disconnected, the Rivers State Commissioner of Police swore under his breath.

Once again, he had entered a meeting with the Inspector-General with nothing substantial to present. Once again he had made himself look like an incompetent fool, and he detested himself for it.

Those nefarious syndicates were terrorizing and destroying the lives and properties that he was meant to protect, and it seemed as though he was powerless to stop them.

He hated this feeling of powerlessness. He hated those perpetrators of evil. He was a man of action and he knew he should be sweeping off those iniquitous people with every vigour he had in him and not sitting like a sack in his office, brooding over his incompetence.

"Think, Abubakar, think. You were not promoted to the rank of a commissioner for nothing. You were not appointed a police state commissioner in vain." He scratched his forehead as the wheels in his head began churning rapidly.

"Where are you, foolish gangbangers? Just give me a hint on how to capture your maniacal leader and I'll squash all of you like a tiny bug." His fists clenched as the thought built momentum.

An light bulb idea blinked in his brain. A soft, wry smile of momentary glee crept up his face.

But when his gaze inadvertently collided with the beaming light from his computer monitor, he scowled as the full weight of his mission crashed upon him once again. What could the tiny idea do to help in this humongous task ahead?

Irritated and exhausted, he called for his PA. "Jerry? Where the hell are you?"

His personal assistant rushed into his office when he perceived the intensity in the commissioner's voice as he called his name.

"Yes, sir." The personal assistant saluted.

"Come and turn off this piece of garbage," the commissioner growled.

The PA hastily did as he was told. One thing he had come to learn in time as he worked with this man was that the commissioner was not one to be trifled with, especially when he was in a sour mood.

CHAPTER NINE

OLD ABA ROAD, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

Savior.

He hated that name. Why in the goddamn world did whoever bequeathed this name to him give him such a crass name?

Tiger.

Now, that sounded more like who he really was. The kind of high he gets whenever he hears people—even the media and his antagonists—cower as they call his name was something he wouldn't trade for anything.

Tiger was a killer. A ruthless one for that matter. He didn't care one bit about how anyone felt.

When it came to the bad guys, he chose to be extremely brutal because they deserved nothing less. He strongly believed that it was the only way to destroy them by paying them back in their own coin.

Presently, notwithstanding the fact that he was young, he was the second most influential personnel in the country's top crime syndicate.

He was also in the police's most wanted list, but it never bothered him for once. The fact that they could never catch him no matter how hard they might try made it all the more fun for him.

He knew he was like a ghost. No, strike that. He was more like a breeze and that was why they could never apprehend him.

You can feel the breeze on your skin but you can't touch it. So was Tiger.

Savior was in the country, smoothly and perfectly carrying out his operations, and the Nigerian police knew it, but just like the breeze, he could never be caught unless he willingly turned himself in. He had no intention of doing that anytime soon.

After all, he wasn't the real enemy here. Just like the police, he too was hunting down the actual enemies. Too bad the police disagreed with him.

Really, it didn't matter to Savior if the Nigerian police and majority of the society agreed with him or not. He wasn't asking for their opinion.

It didn't matter how the enemy was being destroyed. He was doing his job well in bringing down the enemies and that was all that mattered to him. And he'd continue to do it faithfully to the end.

'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' was his motto.

This was obviously what the law and constitution did not totally understand. Sadly, that was why good, harmless and innocent people were the ones dying and bad people kept increasing as they continued darting about the face of God's green earth, causing chaos in the society.

But this was why Savior was born. To let justice prevail. He often chanted the mantra to himself.

He was born to correct all those mistakes, by sending the bad guys into extinction and preventing the good folks from dying a gruesome death in their hands.

This was his destiny. It was just unfortunate that he didn't realize it earlier than he did. It took the death of his father in the hands of those monsters to draw his attention to that realization. His delay in taking action against those scumbags was something he would forever regret. Perhaps if he had known earlier, he could have prevented the death of his father.

A lot of people didn't have any sense of living, but this was his own purpose. It was why he was still alive, currently at the right place at the right time, tracking this woman driving slowly in front of his car from the Oil Mill market.

Don't worry, madam. I ain't gonna ever hurt you.

He only wanted to trail behind the woman to her location so that he and his gang could plan how to carry out their next operation in two weeks' time.

It would also be the perfect location and circumstance where he would eliminate more scoundrels without drawing too much attention. His plan was to gun down two boys who were stooges of those filthy bourgeois during this particular operation. He would send them to hell where they belonged. Let justice prevail.

Who are you, Tiger?

I am justice and justice is me. Justice loves me and I love justice.

Savior had joined the syndicate during his days in the university shortly after his father's death. With the sense of dedication and resolve he possessed, he had worked his way up to the hierarchy and successfully earned their respect and trust. Not just that, but he had manipulated his way to become the second big thing in the syndicate in less than five years from the time he joined them, making him answerable to only its founder and current leader.

The crime syndicate was the highest in the country. Its members were scattered nationwide and in some other parts of the world. It certainly wasn't as big as the Russian mafia but it could be almost as deadly.

Because of his current position and influence he had on the group, he was one of the most trusted. He was also revered by the younger ones who were looking up to him. If only they knew that he was their biggest nemesis waiting for the right time to explode.

Well, I'll show them. Show 'em all who's boss, Tiger.

An image of his late father's innocent face turned up from his memory and danced in his imagination. He involuntarily winced at that.

Don't worry, Father, I know I'm making you proud wherever you are right now. I might not be doing this the way you like it but I'm still getting the job done. Just continue to watch and see how your boy will make you mighty proud.

Still deep in his thoughts, Savior almost lost track of the woman he was trailing as she began to veer into an interstate highway. He was jerked back in time from his musings to his current mission.

He riveted his eyes on the car, determined not to be distracted again as he kept following her thirty yards behind.

After driving for about two miles, the woman began to gradually slow down. Savior noticed it and also stepped on his car brakes to match her pace. He kept a considerable distance, never taking his keen eyes off her.

His gaze moved past her car and he could see an estate ahead of them. It occurred to him that the woman might have been slowing down because she was going to drive into that estate.

He hoped it was truly where she resided. Like a confirmation to his thoughts, the woman turned on her left indicator.

Not long after, he watched the woman turn towards the entry gate. The gate was opened by one of the security men and the woman drove inside the estate.

Savior tapped his finger on his steering wheel, smiling contently to himself.

He pressed his right foot hard on the accelerator and speedily drove past the estate gate just as the security man locked the gate after the woman drove unceremoniously inside.

"Very good. Another job well done," he muttered to himself.

Savior turned on his Google map and typed in the name of the estate. After two seconds, his phone screen displayed most of what he already knew about the estate.

Having grown-up in the city of Port Harcourt, he knew the city like he knew the back of his palms. At the moment, he knew that this was one of the new and developing estates in Rivers State. Sometimes, places like this were usually vulnerable and easy to penetrate by people with ill intents.

He had successfully completed his first task by discovering and choosing this location. Now, he just needed to get back to his secret hideout, review the map and carry out some other assignments to look for a loophole before they would carry out their operation. In the next two weeks or less, he would kill his next unsuspecting victims.

For someone of his caliber and rank, he ought to be relaxing and allow the younger ones to do the menial jobs like picking a spot for the operation. But he certainly hadn't joined the syndicate to be babysitted by some bunch of rookies. And he also wanted everything to run on his own terms.

In this kind of job, trust was a rare commodity. He couldn't play the dice and ended up blindsided.

Starting from now, he would make the game special by involving the police. He had been involving the police alright; it's just that he'd been doing it indirectly. But this time around, he would begin partnering directly with them.

Two weeks, guys, two weeks. That's all the time you have before you'll be ridded of your blasted days on planet earth. Enjoy it while it lasts.

Savior smirked and stepped harder on the accelerator. His car cruised fast as he turned the steering in the direction of his hideout.

CHAPTER TEN

DESTINY ESTATE, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

Ayanate wiped a streak of sweat that coated her brow with her right hand. It had been a really hectic day for her. Her head throbbed.

As was her routine, she had woken up at 4 a.m. and had her morning devotion for one solid hour before diving into the day's activities.

Since her brother, Preye, had moved out of the family house, most of the house chores, if not all, had become her burden to bear.

The only times she got a bit of relief from the workload were times when her mother didn't crow alongside the dawn cocks in a bid to get to work early or if her brother came home to spend the weekend. On other days, she would be the only one to vacuum the floors, do the dishes, the laundry, and attend to other things.

It wasn't like she was complaining. But sometimes, it could be challenging, especially on mornings when she woke up reluctantly to the loud blaring of her alarm clock. She had intentionally placed it far away lest she be tempted to hit snooze. It was usually worse when she had forced her weary self to study late into the night despite having a really tedious day prior.

Five years ago, at the time when she became visually impaired, her mother had employed a maid to run errands in Ayanate's place, going as far as washing her clothes and assisting her with almost everything else.

At first, Ayanate went along with her mother's arrangement because she didn't know how to cope with her peculiarity at that time. Becoming blind was something she never envisioned in her life and thus she wasn't emotionally prepared beforehand for the challenges that came with it. Because she wasn't in their shoes, her mindset had been that people with visual impairment or any other kind of disability were incapable of doing anything for themselves. How ironic that the table was now turned on her! The painful, yet not too unexpected, part was that her peers and even strangers she came in contact with were having a similar view like she formerly did. The warped perspective was all a result of misunderstanding and lack of proper education of the state of special people.

Ayanate had to be enrolled in a special school for the blind and visually-impaired for a program called, "Short Course". Her misconceptions were radically transformed and her depressed self was challenged for the possibilities that this seeming limitation afforded her. She began to perceive all physically handicapped people in a new and clear-as-crystal light. They weren't disadvantaged; they were special.

Two years after her sight issue began, her mother was the one who suggested that Ayanate should come out of her shell and sign up for a help program. Initially, Ayanate had protested, unwilling to face the trauma of battling the real world, but her mother stood firm on the decision. Mrs Righteous started out by making strategic inquiries to ensure that Ayanate would be comfortable in the school she had in mind and that she would face close to no trouble.

After booking an appointment through a phone call, Mrs Righteous met with the proprietor, one Mr David James, in his office. He sat straight, swinging his swivel office chair back and forth as he peered intently at her from beneath his wire-framed spectacles.

"Ma'am, the first thing I must say is that this place is no wonderland. This is a place where only the strong and determined survive."

Mrs Righteous' enthusiasm and hopes of a slow-and-steady-paced learning environment that could pamper her daughter to maturity dimmed considerably. Ayanate wasn't cut out for this, apparently. Mrs Righteous almost regretted bringing Ayanate with her. One glance at her daughter who sat rigid beside her made her heart squeeze.

When she had soaked in the information with a deep sigh, the proprietor proceeded with a lengthy explanation of the system, both within the confines of the school and also in the broader world that wasn't smiling at the visually-impaired.

"However, madam," Mr David James continued emphatically, "these students' welfare is our priority. We go to great extent to ensure the well-being and smooth learning transition of each student under our custody, and this is why we have provided a conducive environment for them."

"But you see, quite contrary to popular view, we allow them to do most things on their own. Including mobility."

Mrs Righteous couldn't believe her ears. Mobility? For blind people? What in the world were they thinking?

"I beg to differ at this point, sir. It is pure cruelty to allow blind, innocent people to walk on their own," Mrs Righteous interrupted, scared and even simmering beneath her skin at the absurdity of their training style.

"Oh, and don't even tell me that you care for these people," she continued, gesturing accusingly, "because if you do, you would be more considerate. A blind person walking unaided is next to impossible. What if they get

injured, or collide headlong into something dangerous? Allowing people who cannot see to be self mobile is like expecting a day-old foal to leap over barriers. This will only expose them to all manners of danger. I, for one, will not allow that to happen to my child."

The man was calm. He allowed her to talk while he simply smiled.

"It's because you don't have a blind child. If you did, you wouldn't sit down here, telling me some outlandish ideas!"

The proprietor sighed, leaning forward as he removed his glasses and looked straight into her eyes. His sunken, brown eyes looked understanding as he replied calmly, "But that's where you are wrong, madam. Actually, three of my five children are blind."

Mrs Righteous' mouth almost hit the floor. That was the gravity of her shock. Everywhere was pin-drop silent as though someone had knocked the wind out of the office.

When she slightly recovered, she stuttered, "Are you... are you saying that..." Her hands involuntarily went to her mouth. "Oh dear... I'm so sorry, I had no idea. I'm terribly sorry for my outburst. I shouldn't have spilled such nonsense. Oh goodness."

Mr David James hushed her. "That's okay. Reactions like this are not unusual and I can understand your plight. I love all my children dearly and if I were in your shoes, I might have exhibited a worse reaction if I didn't know better."

"Um, thank you, sir, for your understanding. I didn't mean to..."

The proprietor signaled her to stop with the wave of his hands.

"Like I said earlier, I totally understand. Come to think of it, my own situation is not the worst. I've come across situations where every member of the family is blind."

Mrs Righteous couldn't imagine how horrible life would be for such a household.

"Do you know that blindness could also be genetic? I've seen people that blindness runs in their family gene and almost everyone from the 4th or 5th generation is blind."

"But that's a topic for another day. Now, where were we?" Mr David James snapped his fingers. "Uh-huh, I was going to tell you about how these things with the visually impaired works."

The proprietor leaned back comfortably on his seat as he began.

"Indeed, we allow the blind and the visually impaired to be independent in most areas of their lives. This is possible because when a person loses their sight, which is part of the five basic senses of a human, the person's brain eventually rewires and enhances the other four senses to compensate for the missing one. What I'm saying is that, an average blind person has more abilities than you and I, who have no special need, to hear, feel, smell and taste."

"This is why they can carry out almost all daily tasks with a dexterity that is unrivaled, even by those who can see. Currently, most of our students are already naturals, while those who are just starting out are gradually getting a hang of it."

To say that Ayanate and her mother were dumbfounded would be putting it mildly.

"Oh yes, Mrs. Green, your daughter has these untapped abilities in her and even more. It's just that she hasn't explored it. But once she does, she'll be flying like a bird."

"Now, I hope you know that I meant to say that last statement as a figure of speech? Since this is a bit of orientation, you might want to accept and believe everything I say hook, line and sinker but before you do, I just want to tell you that I haven't seen anyone who flies naturally," the proprietor grinned mischievously at the two of them. Mrs Righteous got the joke and chuckled.

"The International Eye and Ear Research team discovered that the brains of those born blind make new connections in the absence of visual information."

"That's true. I remember reading something close to that on the internet. They said that blind people have a greater grasp of their olfactory, taste and touch senses," Mrs Righteous chirped in affirmation.

"I'm glad this isn't strange to you. The study also raises some new questions. Does training cause the brain to make these connections? Or, does the brain's ability to make these connections make further training possible?"

"Perhaps both are possible. The researchers hope that this new knowledge can be harnessed toward more effective rehabilitation efforts for blind individuals. Even in the case of being born blind, there is still tremendous potential for the brain to adapt.

"Now, the pivotal question is, if this is true, why do we still need to help them in most areas of their lives?"

"Hmmm..." Righteous compared the figures on record with the reality surrounding her and couldn't reconcile the two.

Where was the discrepancy in the equation?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mr David James, seeing that he was driving home his point, went further to provide the answer to his last question. "This is because they are human beings like you and I. And just like we didn't start doing everything on our own at once as soon as we were born, that is also how it is for them. And of course, like I said in the outset, there will be challenges.

"It is when we render them the help they need and, when they look above their situations and conditions, that's when they succeed exceptionally in every goal they set out to achieve." Mrs Righteous was by now nodding in understanding.

"Do you know that one of the areas visually impaired person's thrive in is sports."

"Sports?" Mrs. Green asked, surprise scribbled all over her face. Even Ayanate's brows shot up in incredulity.

"Yes, sports. They can participate in sports activities like football, tennis, and weight-lifting. I could go on and on to deliver a long list of the sports activities these people have been participating in.

"These are some of the awards we won from some of the competitions our students participated in." His left hand swept in the general direction of the shelf decorated with trophies, laurels and plaques.

"We also have produced sports analysts who are working in several media houses both locally and internationally. You might want to ask how possible it is for a blind person to analyze what he or she can't see. The answer I can give to that is, it could only be a miracle from God and also the uniqueness of the other four senses."

"It is intriguing that these people are not just good in sports, but they are good in other areas like academics, and music.

"As I speak to you, we have a lot of blind DJ's, blind music producers, blind sound engineers, blind musical instrumentalists, blind musicians and rappers all over the world. I can take you to our music department so that you would see how our students sing beautifully and play all kinds of instruments ranging from trumpet, saxophone, bass guitar, lead guitar, keyboard and drum. They even know how to perfectly play the brigade band."

At that point, both Ayanate and her mother were too stunned to speak. The logical part of their brain wanted to discard his words as mere tomfoolery. But the hopeful half of their brains chose to hang on and see. What did they have to lose?

When the proprietor noticed their hesitation, he spoke up. "Alright, I can understand your incredulity. I guess it's time for you to see for yourselves."

The proprietor stood and directed Ayanate and her mother to the music department.

Because Ayanate couldn't see, the proprietor explained to her while her mother watched in open-mouthed amazement as the students moved around, setting up their instruments. The sound engineers perfectly worked on setting the amplifier and connecting the microphones without any help, as though they were seeing what they were doing.

Unable to reconcile what her eyes were seeing with what she had always assumed about these sets of physically-impaired people, Mrs. Green asked the proprietor if she could confirm if the students were really blind. Ayanate knew that her mother felt silly—even she felt embarrassed—but she could sense the rationale behind her mother's request. If all this was a con, it wouldn't be funny for her, now that her hopes were being sparked back to life.

If Mr. James was surprised, he didn't show it. Instead, he just let her go ahead.

And she did. She used the same courtroom intelligence which she had repeatedly honed after several cross-examinations carried out on witnesses and accused persons in the course of her practice as a lawyer. When she was thoroughly done, all her doubts had flown out the window.

The students played a haunting melody on the instruments and sang a heavenly chorus. When they finished, Ayanate and her mother shed emotional tears. And she knew that she and her mother would never recover from that experience.

Before exiting the school's music department, Mrs. Green wanted to apologize for her earlier behavior, but the proprietor wouldn't let her.

Her mother later told her that when she looked at the students' faces, she could see them smiling as if to say, "All is forgiven".

On their way back to the proprietor's office, he told them that what they had seen was not everything they were doing in the school.

"Some of our students are also good with art and craft. They can make handbags, flower vases, sandals, shoes, name it." He gestured with his hands as he continued.

"Talking about blind people being academically successful, before you go, let me tell you that there's something called Braille. It's another system of writing and reading for the visually impaired and we shall be teaching your daughter how to read and write braille before she graduates."

Mr. James took them to a particular class where some of the students were reading with their fingers while the rest were writing with braille machines and other equipment that was specifically used for writing braille.

He told them that the students could also recite the alphabets of whatsoever language they desired in braille.

Her mother looked at the braille writings and wondered why she couldn't make a word out of it. Perplexed, she asked him further about it.

"The reason you can't make out even one alphabet from this kind of writing is because it is not the same as what you are used to. The braille writing is made up of just six dots. Out of the six dots is what is being used to make out alphabets and numbers."

All Mrs. Green could say at that time was, "Wonderful!"

"Yeah, wonderful." Mr. James echoed. "You haven't seen anything yet, just wait until I show you more. I told you that this could only be the amazing hand of God."

"Only six dots?" Mrs. Green asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes, only six dots and your daughter shall be learning how to read and write in braille if she remains with us. And she can come home and read it for you," the proprietor finished with a small laugh.

"And oh, Mrs. Green, you should know that braille is very bulky? Because of that, there are a lot of abbreviations in braille writing for a lot of words. But even at that, it is still bulky even to the extent that every book of the Bible is separate and not bound together like the type a sighted person uses. A braille Bible could be as big as three large cartons, depending on the sizes."

When Mr. James noticed the surprise expression on the faces of Ayanate and Mrs. Green, he quickly added, "Don't worry, madam, I can see the curiosity and enthusiasm from your daughter's body language and I have no iota of doubt that she will make it. She is not the first and neither would she be the last. If others before her did it, I believe that she, too, could do it and even better."

When the proprietor perceived that he had raised their hope a notch or two higher, he decided to proceed with his orientation.

"Let me take you to our next stop for the day. You and your daughter should come with me, madam," the proprietor declared and led the way as they shuffled into another classroom.

What Mrs Righteous saw took her breath away. She saw a blind teacher taking the students on computer lessons.

As was his custom when they entered other classes, the proprietor began another lengthy illustration.

"This is one of our staff. His name is Thompson Adekunle, and as you might have already noticed, he is blind. Yet, he is one of the best computer geeks in the country. I might be biased, but he is really good."

"Really? That's incredible!" Mrs Righteous corked her head to affirm the strange sounds she was hearing. "What is that sound I'm hearing from the computers?" she asked.

"I was actually coming to that." The proprietor beamed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"You see, that sound is called a screen reader. There are several screen readers for both computers and phones.

The ones we use on our computers are called JAWS, which means Job Access With Speech. There are other screen readers for computers like narrator, VLC, etc."

After a pause, the proprietor called out to some of the students, asking for their phones. Mrs. Righteous was surprised upon seeing the students handing him their Android, blackberry and iPhones.

Before she could ask the pressing question about how the students were able to operate the sophisticated mobile phones, the proprietor resumed talking.

"Just like the computer, phones like Symbian, Android, BlackBerry and Apple phones also have their screen reader and voice commands.

"In Symbian phones, the talking software is called Talks, for Android phones, it's called either TalkBack or Android accessibility suite, and finally for the Apple phones, it is called Voiceover."

Another "wonderful" emanated from Mrs. Green while Ayanate continued listening in silence, drinking in the new information.

"With these screen readers," Mr David continued, "any blind person can literally do anything that's possible for people who can see to do on their devices."

Mrs. Green almost mumbled another "wonderful", but the proprietor beat her to the punch.

"Before you say how wonderful it is again, let me finish what I was telling you.

"With the use of the screen readers, either in their phones or laptops, they can browse the internet, make receive calls, send SMS and read messages sent to them. They also have social media accounts and they can type as fast as you when they want to reply to your messages."

Then he added with a wink, "You could even be chatting freely with some of your social media friends, not knowing that they are blind or visually impaired." At this, the proprietor couldn't hold back himself from laughing out loud and hard.

Mrs Righteous shot him a 'why are you making fun of people's predicament' look.

He replied to her with the wave of his hands. "Oh, come on, Madam. Life is not always hard and serious. You need to cheer up. These people also make light of their situations everyday. You need to hear them joking and laughing sometimes about it. A lot of them are happy people and fun to be with, and they don't get angry over trivial things like this.

"You could also spend some time with them, joke and laugh with them about it. I'm sure you understand that there's a difference between when you are playing with someone and when you're insulting them because of their predicament.

"These people are normal human beings like us and thus, they are not all saints because there are both the good and bad eggs among them, thus it would be wrong to stereotype them because of their physical challenge.

"Oh, Mrs. Green, did I tell you that there are wonderful blind comedians and MC's both in this country and all over the world?"

The proprietor cackled again, this time holding his belly. "You need to hear these people cracking jokes. I assure you that you can't hold yourself back from laughing.

"Besides all these professions I have mentioned so far, there are physically challenged politicians, government workers and on-air personalities that are beautifully doing their work in several organizations.

"A lot of them also work as international translators. I know a handful of blind lawyers and I'm sure you're going to come across them one day in your career. There are also blind lecturers, blind business men and women and some of them are even the CEO of their companies. Most of these people developed themselves from scratch.

The proprietor's voice became more serious as he spoke the next sentence.

"I want you to understand clearly that your daughter's problem is only with her eyes. It hasn't incapacitated her abilities to live normally like you and I. Every kind of feeling and emotion she had before the eye-challenge is still there. This means that if your daughter is currently not in a relationship yet, sometime in the future, she

could fall in love, go into a relationship, get married and have kids if she wishes to. I'm just telling you all this because a lot of her counterparts are happily married with kids, either with their fellow physically-challenged or the non-physically-challenged. So when it happens with her, I don't want you to restrain her because of her condition.

"Your mind might be going to the big question everyone tends to ask whenever this topic is brought up. But before you ask, let me tell you that you shouldn't worry about that because they can also meet up to their partner's sexual needs."

With that information from the proprietor, all the emotions Ayanate felt for Munachimso Onuoha, her secondary school crush, that she thought she had successfully tucked away at the back of her mind began surfacing itself like a water cascading down a hill. Then, unable to push back her resolve anymore, she broke down crying, unable to exactly explain why.

Her mother and the proprietor hastily rushed her back to his office. They retook their seats and she just continued sobbing hard.

Her frantic mother wrapped her arms around her and cried along with her saying, "It's alright now, my baby. It's alright. Mommy is here and mommy will never leave you, okay? It's alright, baby. All will be well now. I promise. We're going to fight this thing till the end and all will be fine. You'll see. I swear, I'll stay with you and fight this monster even if it's the last thing I do on earth."

"I see he left you when this condition started. You must really be heartbroken," the proprietor, who had been stoic since the recent turn of events, remarked with so much care and concern.

Ayanate shook her head forlornly. "No, he didn't leave. I was the one who broke contact with him and the rest because I thought they wouldn't want to have anything to do with me anymore."

She should have felt embarrassed discussing her private life with a man she barely knew before her mother, but it only made her feel better.

"Oh, but I can see that you still love him."

"Yes, I did love him, even though we were never an item, and I still love him," Ayanate mused. "He never liked me before I became blind, and when my sight condition started, I concluded I had lost any sliver of chance I might have had with him."

"Don't worry, dear, all hope is not lost. You are a young and very beautiful girl, and your eyes are still beautiful. Anyone looking at you can hardly tell that you're blind."

"I also want to believe that your heart is as beautiful as well. If you have those wonderful qualities that are expected in the life of every human being, it's only a big, fat, ignorant fool that would still think that you don't meet up to the standard of a human because of your physical condition."

"But like I told you earlier, don't worry because we are here to help you in every possible way that we can. There is so much we are going to teach you if you stay with us."

After encouraging both mother and daughter, they finally processed and completed her registration.

Both mother and daughter tearfully gave each other a hug before Righteous finally let go of her daughter to take her first step into her new world.

Ayanate struggled in her first week in the school, but she finally moved on and succeeded once more to push the thought of Munachimso to the back of her mind.

With so much eagerness and determination, she learned the ABC in braille in one day. After three months, she had perfected all the abbreviations, and eight months later, she could read and write braille flawlessly.

Her mother who was trying her best to provide anything she needed had bought her both an Android and an iPhone. When Ayanate raised an alarm about it, her mother told her that it was because she only wanted her to be comfortable. She also got Ayanate, a laptop computer. In no time, Ayanate learned how to make good use of all her electronic gadgets.

During her days in the special school, she was also able to hear the stories and experiences of her fellow visually impaired crew. Even though her own story was touching, she was moved by the stories of some of the students whose situations were worse than hers.

Apart from the blindness, some of the students were also challenged in other parts of their body.

Ayanate drew her encouragement daily from God and her fellow students who could relate to her situation.

Just like the proprietor predicted, some of the male students approached her and confessed their growing feelings for her, but she simply wasn't interested.

At the end of one year, she was ready to graduate, and she emerged as a whole new person.

She returned home and prepared for her admission into the university. She assured her mother that there was no need of retaining their house help anymore and the lady was relieved of her job.

And she had been doing just fine with managing the house for the past two years.

But it was during stressful days like this that she needed the generous help of her mother and brother. Each time she received assistance from them, she'd chuckle and call them her saving grace. She'd also reward them with a smile of appreciation, and each time she did it, it seemed to hypnotize her brother, making him want to do more.

Oh, my lovely brother, Preye.

It was at times like this that she especially missed him.

With the absence of a father and a lover, he was the only male figure in her life and he was dutifully and benevolently playing that role.

Maybe she should give him a call. After all, she was finally done with her house chores and all her lectures for the day. She was currently doing nothing except waiting for her favorite gospel TV program to start.

And so, she pulled out her android phone and dialed his number from memory.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RUMOLA, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

Preye Green, a computer geek and currently an employee of one of the companies located in Port Harcourt, was seated in his work space which was at a little corner in the technical department. He was tweaking some kinks in one of the company's newly launched software. The week had been very busy for him—not just him, but also for his fellow technicians. Three of the company's software applications had been malfunctioning and it had not been good for the company's business. The stocks were rapidly dwindling, the approval rate was tapering, and the company's management had been breathing down the necks of all the technicians like a hot furnace.

But at the moment, it wasn't this software that Preye and his team were battling with that had his attention. It was the thought of his sister and mother that latched onto him.

He couldn't understand why he was getting that uncanny feeling about them. But there was one thing he knew, and that was the fact that whenever he felt troubled in his spirit about his family, it was a signal to pray for them.

Just like some of the other previous times, he didn't get the specific prayer points. He settled for the safest option as always—praying with other tongues.

It had been a while—almost three weeks—since he had last seen his mother and sister, and with the way things were hot around the company, he knew he wouldn't be seeing them anytime soon. He made a mental note to call them after his working hours. Not that he couldn't call them now—the company permitted short duration of calls as long as it didn't interrupt their job—but he just liked to stick to professional mode while he was working.

His phone vibrated on his desk. He picked it up and checked the caller ID. Talk of the devil. No, think of the devil, and he'll show up. But, this wasn't the devil. It was his little sis, Ayanate.

Professional or not, he couldn't let her call go unanswered.

So he smiled, swiped the green circle on his phone's screen and lifted it to his left ear.

DESTINY ESTATE, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

Nothing could explain the relief Mrs. Righteous Green felt upon driving into her home after what she thought was a depressing day for her at the Oil Mill market.

She drove into her garage, quickly pushed open the door and did not bother off-loading her groceries as she successfully navigated her way around her car into her house. She'd bother about that later.

The house was a white one-storey building that was sandwiched between two other houses with similar decor. A linear array of identical houses stood grandly, opposite the building. A choice of ornamental flowers and bushes sprung up like colorful balloons against a backdrop of the greenest and most well-tended-to lawn the state could boast of.

All the buildings in Destiny estate were similarly designed, giving it a monotonous outlook.

If not for the signages of street names and house numbers, any poor first-timer would be lost in this repetitive maze.

Righteous wearily made her way to the imported, four-paneled entrance door. The sound of her high-heeled shoes gave away her presence with each step she took.

She was dressed in a cherry red top and black jean trouser and was carrying a brown handbag that matched the color of her high heels.

Righteous was a tall and huge woman and her high-heeled shoes made her look taller. She was very beautiful and she still had a smiling face which she was still trying to maintain after all the hardship she'd gone through in life. However, one look at her and you'd know that Righteous was a no-nonsense woman. Even though she was nice, she carried an aura that made outsiders, especially all her employees, love and respect her at the same time.

Apart from the similarities in their beauty and kind heart, Ayanate was the direct opposite of her mother with her average height of 5 feet and 3 inches and well shaped, slender and petite body that made her look a couple of years younger than she actually was. Looking at her today, anyone who knew her five years ago would think she hadn't aged a bit.

Righteous entered into the safety of her living room and quietly closed the door behind her. She spun around and mentally acknowledged the clean and tranquil environment.

All the upholstery, the television, home theater, dining set and the window panes had been dusted. The slightly dirty curtains and draperies had been replaced by clean ones. The cream-tiled floor was sparkling clean. Everything was perfectly in order. As usual, Ayanate had done a commendable job.

The clean and quiet environment incessantly gave her peace and restored her sanity. The house was more like her sanctuary and that was why she loved coming home.

She could never get tired of coming to this wonderful environment that was constantly arranged and accurately managed by her daughter. Her lovely daughter.

"Oh, Ayanate, my sweet and innocent child! What have I gotten you into? A beautiful and priceless princess like you ought to be in the world, exploring and living your life to the fullest like your counterparts. You ought to be out there fulfilling your purpose, meeting new friends everyday and spending some precious time with a man who loved you dearly, whoever he might have been. But here you are, cooped up in this house all by yourself."

She finished muttering to herself and laughed humourlessly.

She got to the archway that led to the dining when she started hearing a faint sound of a television from the direction of her daughter's bedroom upstairs. She instantly knew that her daughter must be in her room. Then she made a mental note to drop by for their usual little conversation before finally making her way to her room.

Dressed in her yellow tank top and black skirt, Ayanate sat cross-legged on her queen-sized bed as the call to her brother's began to go through, the dialing tone tingling in her ear.

He answered after the fourth ring. She could hear his voice on the other side of her phone.

"Hello, baby," her brother's stressed but cheerful voice greeted.

She groaned and slapped the side of her bed in frustration. "Oh, jeez, I thought I told you to stop calling me by that name. I am twenty-one years old for crying out loud and you are just three years older than me, so when will you and Mum stop calling me baby? I'm not your baby anymore. I'm a grown up now."

"Well, good afternoon to you too," her brother quipped, grinning from his end at his success at annoying her.

"This isn't time to be sarcastic, Preye," Ayanate deadpanned.

"Okay, tell me, what time is it, little bird?"

"Oh no, you've just called me yet another annoying name in your archive."

"Uh-oh! I didn't know. I'm so sorry about that."

She could hear her brother softly chuckling on the other side of the phone. He was evidently enjoying her discomfort.

"Stop it now. It's not funny."

"Alright, baby."

"I said you should stop... Ugh... Just wait till I get you."

Her brother swiftly changed the topic. He knew his limit.

"So, how are you?" he inquired softly.

The question made her smile. Now, this was the caring brother she knew.

"I'm fine. I was just missing you so I said I should call."

"That makes the two of us. I was planning to call you in the evening."

"Okay, so will you come and take me to church this Sunday? It's been a while since you came home for the weekend and I'd really love to go to church with you on Sunday."

"Oh sis, I'd like nothing better, but there is so much to do around here and I'll be as busy as a beaver for the next two weeks. Please bear with me for now and when I come home in a fortnight, we'll go to church together, okay?"

Her shoulder slumped in disappointment. She mumbled a halfhearted "Okay."

Ayanate checked her time using her phone's screen-reader and realized it was almost time for her favorite television program.

Her attention was momentarily divided and didn't hear the question her brother had posed to her.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I was just asking if all is well with you over there."

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"What about Mum? Is she okay as well?"

Just then, the door to her room was yanked open and she immediately perceived the soft and pleasant fragrance of her mother's familiar perfume.

"Talk of the devil," she gushed.

Her brother cackled on the other side of the phone. "What did you just say? I hope she didn't hear you?"

Ayanate felt a bit scared as she waited for her mother to react to her using a phrase that even bordered on profanity. Her mother was very firm against that. Her mother sat, either too tired or unaware of what she'd said. Thank goodness.

Then, to her brother, she quickly decided to set him straight.

"I didn't say anything... I only meant it as a figure of speech."

"You didn't say anything, yet you meant it as a figure of speech." Her brother guffawed.

The television programme had finally started, a perfect excuse for her to disconnect the call.

"I have to go now. The TV show I was waiting for has finally started. Goodbye, bro."

"Goodbye, baby girl. Tell mum that I'll call her after working hours."

Ayanate tossed her phone gently on the bed, greeted her mother out of respect and focused on the ongoing television program.

Her mother, who didn't care that she was watching one of her favorite programs, tried to engage her in a light discussion. Ayanate wouldn't let that happen.

"We'll talk later, Mum. The pastor is about to start preaching," Ayanate said, her attention and focus still glued to the TV.

Righteous was quiet for a while. It was obvious her daughter didn't want to talk to her.

"If she doesn't want to talk to me, fine. Let her suit herself. She can watch that boring TV show for the rest of the day for all I care." She hissed under her breath.

She abruptly stood up with a deep sigh from the couch where she sat, spun on her heels and made for the door. She swung the door open, crossed the threshold and closed it with a loud bang.

Ayanate looked up, startled. What was wrong with her Mum?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TWO DAYS LATER.

KIRIKIRI MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON, KIRIKIRI, LAGOS STATE.

The Man. That was the name his fellow inmates called him to his face. Behind his back, they called him 'The man who beat his girlfriend to death'.

The inmates were not bold enough to call him by that full version after he had beaten one of the inmates who tried to pulp. Only the prison warders were able to call him by that full name just to spite him. Even so, they did it with caution, because everyone—although they hated to admit it—feared him.

None of his fellow inmates knew his real name or anything about him apart from the crime he committed. If anyone did, they never called him by his real name or indicated that they knew anything about him.

The tall and burly man's bodily physique was so intimidating that he could pass for a bouncer.

Looking at his height and stature, one might think that he was the leader of the most popular gang in the prison or associated with one, but it was quite the contrary.

At the moment, other inmates and prison warders hardly glanced his way. He preferred it that way because he also didn't want to associate with anybody. He'd done all the socializing he could do for an entire lifetime prior to his conviction. People stayed away from him, not just because they dreaded him, but because of his unfriendly demeanor.

'The Man' was currently in Kirikiri maximum security prison, after being sentenced to life imprisonment for involuntary manslaughter.

According to the law, murder or any form of homicide, except in the case of involuntary manslaughter, if found guilty, would result to a death penalty either by hanging or facing a firing squad.

The man would always be grateful to the defense lawyer who defended his case in the court and saved him from hanging.

Both the prosecuting lawyer and his late girlfriend's family dragged him to court because they wanted him to be found guilty of culpable homicide and sentenced accordingly. Her family wanted vengeance and according to what the prosecuting lawyer argued in front of the judge, it was the only way justice could be served.

At the beginning of the lawsuit, before they went to trial, The man and his lawyer had tried to negotiate a plea bargain with the prosecuting counsel, but it was immediately thrown out because the family of the deceased wouldn't settle for any plea bargain.

Truth be told, The Man had beaten his girlfriend, whom he had been cohabiting with for over four years, to death, but he hadn't done it intentionally, contrary to what the prosecuting lawyer was accusing him of doing.

The prosecutor had made his deceased girlfriend look like a harmless angel while portraying him as the devil's incarnate.

His late girlfriend, whose name was Alex, was the most disrespectful vermin he'd ever come across. A sharp-tongued woman. He was a lazy, careless and short-tempered man who was quick to react in anger at a slight insult or retort. Theirs was a match made in hell. They often quarreled and fought over trivial matters and hurled insults at each other.

They were too proud to seek help. They should have broken up immediately after seeing that there was no synergy between them, but Alex didn't want to break up because she had invested her everything, body money and sweat, into the relationship, and the man also didn't want to break up because he had nowhere to go and he was too lazy to be independent.

But their last day together was the day he had beaten her to death. Infuriated by another slight error of his, Alex had given him another insult of his life. He'd threatened her with another break up, but instead of reacting the way he wanted her to—in tears of repentance and submission—she launched into a long harangue and hurled insults at him, his family, his previous, present and future generations.

What happened next was what he wouldn't be able to describe with words. What he only knew was that he realized himself when it was too late. His girlfriend had died. The police had surrounded his house after being called by a concerned neighbor. And that was how he lost his right to freedom of movement.

Even though he felt he had nothing to live for again since that day, the prospect of being sentenced to death shook him. His eventual, stepped-down life imprisonment sentence didn't give him peace of mind either. He plodded through the days in prison with a bucketful of regrets.

Every day he opened his eyes, he ritualized shutting it back tightly, letting out a string of curses under his breath, while hoping all the gods that were offended could strike him dead and save him from this misery. This particular morning was no different.

Even though a prison environment made it somewhat impossible, he'd contemplated suicide several times, and had even come close to executing his plan. But there was always this restraint he felt. Maybe fear of the unknown, of what awaited him in the next life. Maybe hope that a miracle could offer him freedom. Maybe indifference. He couldn't tell.

With an annoyed sigh of resignation, he heaved his body up from the prison bed and rubbed his aching temples.

If the prison warders had an hint that he was suicidal, he would be placed under suicide-watch with swift effect. But he couldn't afford to be placed under any observation because he knew he couldn't bear the pressure and feeling of being caged further than that was sure to come with. So, he did his best to mask the demons whispering in his mind.

If he died, he was certain there was no heaven waiting for him, as he had severally heard those religious fanatics scream.

Hell. That was what he deserved, what he'd earned. But the terror that came with that thought was as frightening as though he'd been there before.

"Ye are judged. Ye are condemned. Ye are doomed..."

Voices in his head sang everyday. Embracing those voices' verdict was what had turned him into the stone-faced and rock-hearted man that everyone in this prison avoided like a plague.

Sooner or later, he'd go down to the pit and meet the beings that owned the wicked voices. It was inevitable. The only question was 'when?'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ONE WEEK LATER.

POLICE STATE COMMAND, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

The Rivers State police commissioner sauntered into his office with one of the daily newspapers he loved reading every morning he came to work. It has become a habit.

He was always curious to know what the media and the masses were thinking and saying about him and the entire Nigerian Police Force, that was why he often requested newspapers on his way to work everyday. He didn't know why it mattered so much to him, but he just liked reading the public's opinion about him. Sometimes, he even went as far as googling his name.

He finally got to his seat and plopped down heavily before opening the newspaper. His eyes scanned the newspaper headlines. As usual, about thirty percent of the headline was about the military and their 'exploits'. Another chunk of the headline meandered about the corrupt state of the politicians, both ruling and latent, while the remaining part of the newspaper's front page was about foreign affairs, sports and the evil that was being perpetrated in the society.

His scan proved fruitful when his eye came upon something that grabbed his attention. It was about the Kano State police commissioner. His curiosity soared.

KANO STATE POLICE UNCOVERS LAIR OF WANTED CRIMINALS, ARREST MANY. THE POLICE STATE COMMISSIONER SPEAKS ON THE OPERATION.

That woman!

He re-read it three times before finally flipping over to the page where the full story was written.

As he read the whole news, he discovered that a much-sought criminal hideout in Kano had been discovered. Twenty-three of those miscreants were arrested, while two cunningly escaped during the whole jamboree. The commissioner had already sent highly trained search teams for the two escapees and they were following every trail.

"Wow, nice job," the commissioner mumbled under his breath in admiration after reading about the efforts of the Kano State police.

What were the Kano State police force doing? How were they getting it right?

The commissioner looked at his counterpart's picture that was attached to the newspaper headline. There was nothing spectacular about the plain-faced woman, who wore a flowery black and silver hijab under her official uniform, staring back at him with an expression of purpose. He shook his head in wonderment. These days, she seemed to be the only one getting things right.

That didn't come as a surprise, the commissioner thought, seeing how dedicated she was, both to her job and her religion.

Being just a Muslim by religious affiliation, Abubakar had never been devout to the tenets of Islam. By the looks of it, his colleague's piety was aiding her efforts and making her tenure so prosperous. He made up his mind to change his ways and become more pious. He'd make sure he prayed five times a day, facing Mecca on his prayer mat. Maybe Allah would see his sincerity and smile on him.

His eyes shifted to another headline that wrote about the police still not being able to capture the leader of the highest crime syndicate in Nigeria. As expected, the Inspector-General of police had given his remark on that headline.

The rest of the headlines about the military was mostly about the Nigerian army and Boko Haram, bandits and kidnappers.

Even after he moved on to other headlines, the police commissioner's mind still hovered about the report on the crime syndicate now popularly known as, 'Alpha Shadows'.

The Nigerian police, especially the River State police force, had exhausted every possible lead to capture the leader of the syndicate and stop their operations in the country, but all to no avail.

What else were they to do? The commissioner thought deeply as the lines on his forehead wrinkled in confusion.

What was left out? What strategy? What weaponry? Why wasn't the equation balancing itself as it was meant to?

These questions and more ran in consecutive sequence in his mind, but instead of receiving the answers he expected, they only led to more and more arduous questions. Maybe spending a whole day or a whole week doing nothing and asking only these questions might provide an answer. Who knew?

The commissioner could feel that somewhere beneath these piles of questions, the answers were lurking. It was just within arm's reach. If only he could just reach out and grab it. But as of now, the answer was slippery and gliding out of his reach, even at moments when he thought he'd gotten a grip on it. And it was frustrating.

Savior calmly sat on a steel-frame chair in a dark-lit room in one of his hideouts. He held his phone in his hands to place an anonymous call to the Rivers State Commissioner of Police.

There were seven days remaining before he embarked on his next operation. According to his plan, it was the perfect moment to involve the police to work full-time with him.

When he called them, as soon as they agreed to his terms and conditions, he knew he would be fully committed. No looking back. He must be careful and cunning. Thankfully, that was his thing. He knew better than to allow those police guys to wriggle out any lead on who he truly was. Now wasn't the time.

His gaze darted to the coffee table in front of him. And there, on that table, lay the blueprints which he had carefully and meticulously drafted, for himself and the Nigerian Police Force.

The blueprint did not just show how they would bring about the annihilation of Alpha Shadows, but also how they could track down other crime syndicates in the country.

I hope you are ready, Tiger, it's time to flush 'em away from society for good.

Once the police had agreed—with the odds tipped in his favor, of course—once he was all in, he knew this was going to be a full-scale war.

Fighting against evil in the country. It gave him the feeling of true fulfillment and triumph. Like a secret superhero who has to disguise as a villain to capture the crooks.

All those people, like his father, who were on the good side, fighting and dying all because of the evil that goaded the land, were collateral damage.

With his plan set in motion, evil would never prevail over good. It was a law that governed their universe, one that had been established perpetually.

And with a mandate ringing in his heart, he pulled out the commissioner's private number and called it.

His call went unanswered the first two times, but he wasn't surprised or worried about it. He knew why the commissioner wasn't taking his calls. But he also knew one other thing: the commissioner would eventually answer.

And when he finally answered, Tiger would not bother muffling or changing his voice. He would speak normally as though he was either speaking to a friend or business associate. He knew that he had programmed his phone to make his voice sound differently to the person on the other side of the call.

Still in his office, Abubakar gazed wide-eyed at the unknown phone number that was calling one of his phone numbers. It was his private number, inaccessible to the public. It was only his immediate family, select relatives and not more than eight close friends that had it. Even so, they barely called him via that number, except for extreme cases of emergency.

Each time an unknown number called him, it was either because one of his daughters urgently needed his help but couldn't get through to him through her mobile phone. After they had finished calling their father through those unknown numbers, just as he'd instructed, they would immediately delete the number from the phone's call log before returning the phone back to the owner.

Looking at the unknown number that was now calling for the third time, he wondered what had gone wrong this time around.

Mumbling a quick prayer for his family, he immediately tapped the answer button on this special phone just a few seconds before the third call would have gone unanswered.

But as he drew the phone to his left ear, the voice he heard sent cold chills down his spine.

Then, without warning, he began to sweat and his body trembled involuntarily.

"What is this? Get a grip, Abubakar," the commissioner chided himself mentally.

"Hello, Abubakar Abdulrahman!"

He didn't recognise the husky voice that had just said hello to him and called him by his full name. The controlled tone was hard to pin to any face he knew.

At that point, panic began to set in as he feared for the safety of his wives and daughters.

Had the Alpha Shadows figured out that he was on their trail and finally got to his family first? It was no news to Nigerians and these crime syndicates that the Nigerian police were after them. Could it be that the Nigerian Police Force were finally on to something, and so, the syndicate decided to abduct his family as a warning message to the Nigerian police to back off.

He stopped panicking and regained control of himself.

"Yes, Abubakar speaking. Who is this?" the commissioner asked, willing the tremor coursing through him not to show in his voice. Since this person had somehow gotten his private number without his consent, and if they were currently holding his family, there was no need to play hide and seek with them.

He heard the slow and heavy breathing of the man on the other side of the phone before he finally spoke up.

"Do you really want to know who I am, Abubakar?" the voice asked carefully.

"Are you a maniac or something? Stop your silly game with me and come out clean," the commissioner warned, trying to sound tough.

A light chuckle from the caller, a slight pause and finally, a whisper.

"I can be anything you want me to be to you."

"Listen here and listen well. I don't have time for your silly games. Don't you ever call this number again or else I'll track you down and deal with you severely."

"I can be your greatest friend or your worst enemy of all time," the husky voice continued, unperturbed by his threat.

The commissioner swore loudly and prepared to cut the call in annoyance.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Please, sir, I don't like it when people cuss even though I myself do a lot of that."

To say the commissioner was beginning to get irritated would be putting it mildly.

"I don't care to know who you are or what you like and don't like. Tell me how you got my number and your reason for calling me."

"You see, this is why I like you so much, Mr. Commissioner. And I believe I'm going to have a long-term relationship with you."

The commissioner scoffed loudly. "I don't broker with the devil, my friend."

Savior cackled. "Unless you are friends with the devil, sir, if not, how do you use your English?"

"I know you called me for a reason, so why don't you say it out as I'm sure neither of us have time to make social calls right now."

"Yes, yes, yes. Once again, this is why I like you so much, sir, and I know we shall be good friends and best business partners in years to come."

Savior cleared his throat and the commissioner thought that with any sliver of chance, he might be able to capture and recognize the voice of the mysterious caller, but when the husky voice resumed talking, Abubakar knew that at that moment, any strategy he wanted to use to identify the voice of the other caller would be futile.

"I want to make a proposal to the Nigerian Police Force."

"What proposal is that?" The commissioner asked, sitting straight.

"I know how you've been struggling yet largely unable to destroy Alpha Shadows. I know that they are like a cancerous tumor that must be removed, a menace to society and the Nigerian Police Force.

"Mr. Commissioner, I know how desperate you are to clamp down hard on these people especially because Rivers State is their basic place of operation."

Abubakar didn't reply audibly but he nodded his head in agreement with what the mysterious caller was saying.

"The reason I'm calling you is because I want to work with the Nigerian police."

Seriously? The commissioner was livid.

"Mr Man, do I look like a recruitment officer to you? When the recruitment form comes out, go and get it from the nearest office to your location or get it on our website and let's see if you would be considered after going through all the necessary procedures."

"I'm not interested in being recruited by the police. I said I want to work 'with' not work 'for' you and the Nigerian police. I didn't say I want to do it as a police officer. Not in your life, sir. It is the furthest thing from my mind. I must compel you to listen to me now."

"Are you threatening me or what?" The commissioner's eyes narrowed.

"Why do the rich, famous and public figures like you easily feel threatened by ordinary people like me who are in society?"

"Not in my opinion. You can hardly pass for an ordinary person in society."

Savior guffawed. "You see, this is why I like you sir, and if I wasn't sure before, I now know this with so much conviction in my heart that you are my kind of person and we shall have a long-term relationship."

Here he was again with those words. "What's with you and liking people a lot?"

"This is to show you that I'm just a human being like you, sir."

"This conversation has lasted for over five minutes and all this while, you and I have yet to establish the reason you called. So why don't we stop beating about the bush?"

"I think you are wrong, sir." Savior corrected.

Abubakar was puzzled. "Ehn-ehn? How so?"

"Thank you so much, sir, for asking this brilliant question. I like it a lot when people ask questions when they don't understand instead of pretending that they do. I hate pretenders and evil doers."

"Is that the objective you've established?" The commissioner smirked, despite knowing that the anonymous caller couldn't see him.

"Even though I just did that now, it wasn't my first established objective. I think I've been able to establish the fact that I like you a lot, sir, and you and I are going to have a long-term relationship, as good friends and colleagues."

Okay. It was either this guy was a psychopath, Abubakar thought, or he was messing with his brain. If it was the latter, then Abubakar knew that the caller was definitely good at mentally and emotionally manipulating people. No one had ever kept him on a long call like this without establishing any meaningful thing. He was beginning to fall prey to the mysterious caller and he'd better take control of the situation before the caller finally got into his head.

"You have sixty seconds to tell me why you called," the commissioner growled into the phone.

"I know you admire the Kano State Police Commissioner a lot for her good works, and you also want so much to carry out the same good performance in Rivers State."

"Fifty seconds remaining."

"I can help you discover the hideout of Alpha Shadows and even go as far as helping you capture its leader."

The commissioner's curiosity was honestly piqued but he'd continue to act tough. If this guy was really who he was claiming to be, sixty seconds should definitely be enough to unravel him.

"Forty-two seconds remaining."

"An armed robbery attack will be taking place in a week's time at Destiny Estate and I want you to send your most trusted and capable men to lay an ambush for them on the west side of the estate from 2:00 a.m."

The commissioner was beginning to get perturbed but he'd try more to keep up with his strong bravado and extract more information.

"Thirty-one seconds remaining."

"Your men will see six hooded figures coming out from that west side of the estate. Tell your men that when they do, they should pursue after them and start shooting and telling them to surrender."

"Twenty seconds remaining."

"As you already know, just as it is with every armed robber, these guys will hightail it. Even though the police won't be able to capture all of them, two of them will be dead that day."

"Fifteen seconds remaining."

"Sir, you and your men must do as I have told you. Let me tell you that if you try to outsmart this intelligence I've given to you by sending your men to the estate before the said time or leak out this information to the estate management, it will backfire and your men are not going to return alive."

"Three seconds remaining."

"I'm going to call you back after the operation."

With all the strength he could muster, the commissioner forced his finger down to end the call. The line went dead.

Abubakar Abdulrahman sat down in his office, visibly shaken by the information he'd just received from a mysterious caller.

When the sixty seconds elapsed, he knew he didn't want to disconnect the call. He wanted to ask questions to verify if this person was saying the truth, but he knew that if the anonymous caller was who he said he truly was, then there was no doubt in the commissioner's mind that he had done the right thing by disconnecting

the call. The game was now being played on his terms, and with these developments, he knew he had been able to seize control of everything.

Savior was surprised.

He had known that the commissioner was smart, but it had come as a surprise to him the way the commissioner quickly figured out his game and began doing a sixty-second countdown for him to spill out his guts. He wasn't expecting the commissioner to catch up with his game as quickly as he did.

Even when he'd given him some important information, Abubakar went on to disconnect the call just as he said he'd do after sixty seconds. A lot of people in the man's shoes might have done it differently for the sake of extracting more information. But they didn't know that it would never work like that.

Savior liked games, and he was ecstatic to find a competitor. He hated it when it was one-way.

He hated people who would easily bow in the face of challenges. He hated people who would not put up a fight before accepting defeat. He hated people who wouldn't go down with a struggle. And he even hated girls who would accept him the first time he asked them out on a date.

So, when he noticed that things were different with Abubakar, he was so thrilled that he had gotten a new partner.

"You see, this is why I like you, sir, and I know we shall both have a long-term relationship as friends and competitors." He snickered.

Since this game had shifted a little to the side of Abubakar and the weight was now balanced on both sides, just as he had told Abubakar, Savior would not also call the commissioner again until after the operation had been carried out.

Savior knew that breaking his word by calling Abubakar prior to the said time would discredit his words, his personality and the impression he wanted to make in the commissioner's mind. If he and Abubakar would be long-term friends as he had predicted, then he would have to keep his cool and he must not mess this up. Besides, anything contrary could produce ruinous and pernicious results and Savior would certainly not like that.

If the commissioner called his bluff, it might ruin a lot for Savior.

But Savior couldn't allow that. As the chess master that he was, he would play the game with dexterity. Play he did.

He took a quick glance around his environment. Everything was in place as he wanted it. "All is well," he said. "All is well indeed."

With a smile of satisfaction, he leaned back into his chair.

Commissioner Abubakar AbdulRahman, remained seated in his office as he pondered for the umpteenth time that day about the mysterious caller and what he had said.

Who was the caller? If he was indeed correct, how did he manage to get such information? The information he gave was succinct and the caller spoke so confidently like a prophet who had in fact seen the future.

Could it be that the incognito caller was one of his enemies who were waiting for him to make a mistake so that they could use it to bury him in the media? Could it be a fellow police officer, a senior, junior colleague or his fellow counterparts? Could it be a prank? No, it couldn't be, because a prank couldn't go as far as calling his private line.

It meant that this anonymous personality knew something. Abubakar wished he could capture the mysterious person and make him prattle like a parrot.

Whoever the man was, he really struck a nerve with Abubakar. The commissioner had disconnected the call as he told the caller that he'd do after sixty seconds, but he did so, hoping against hope that the mysterious caller would not keep to his word and call him back, but it had been over nine hours and there has been no other mysterious call to his private phone number. Abubakar knew for certain that he wouldn't be getting any call from the informant anytime soon.

These were not just common words of an unfortunate madman, but of someone who had vital information that was very important to Rivers State police.

Exhausted and worn out from the depressing thoughts, Abubakar finally concluded that he might be left with no choice than to carry out his own side of this crazy action no matter how illogical it sounded.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd give the anonymous caller the benefit of doubt and send his most trusted agents to carry out the operation.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DESTINY ESTATE, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

The state of being a blind young adult was something people hardly considered.

People generally assumed blind people were either really young children or middle-agers. Did people think blindness was like a psychiatric disease with lucid intervals from ages twelve or so to forty and thereabout? Ayanate pondered on this as she prepared breakfast for herself and her mother.

She had just placed a warm mug of chocolate drink beside a plate containing four slices of bread and another ceramic bowl with perfectly-made scrambled eggs on the dining table when she heard her mother's regal heels clapping on the tiles as she approached the dining room.

Ayanate had always considered the dining room unreasonably large for their small family. It had an elliptical, glazed mahogany table covered with a cream and brown lace tablecloth that had an intricate embroidery design. There was a low flower vase placed strategically at the center. Beautifully designed table mats lay on the table. Eight upholstered high-back chairs surrounded the table.

It wasn't like they entertained guests often, so what was the waste for?

Her mother always felt she had an unorthodox thought pattern. Ayanate decided not to add this thought to the list of evidence that corroborated that fact. There would be no mention from her of the wastage of space and money that this dinning represented.

Her reverie was cut short when she heard a sound proceeding from her mother's mouth who had already taken a seat at the table.

Now, moans of satisfaction might be normal in other homes, but it was strange to Ayanate because her mom was the queen of ice, not in a Wicked-Witch-of-the-West way, but in a high-power-shark-lawyer sort of way. Ayanate was wise enough not to admit this to anyone but her hyperactive inner self.

Going by this, a moan of pleasure at food is normally a sign that her mother was super excited about something. Ayanate's guess didn't miss a beat coming. She could bet all her savings on the fact that this excitement was work-related.

Before she could ride her train of thought further, her mother spoke through her bread-filled mouth. Another absurdity.

"How is school, Ayanate?"

"As fine as it can be," Ayanate replied with a shrug, standing opposite her mother.

Righteous continued speaking without looking up from her phone. She was scrolling through the news feed for the day. It had become her habit to multitask—eat and read—every morning before heading for work.

"I'll probably graduate as the best student if they take those law-related courses off our mandatory list in this academic session." Ayanate intentionally made that remark to spite her mother. Somehow, her mother had been sending signals that she wanted her daughter to take up her career baton and continue the legislative legacy she had already established. Ayanate, having a mind of her own, had other plans.

Righteous raised her head to roll her eyes at Ayanate, although she knew her daughter would not see her. She was, however, stopped in her tracks by what she saw.

"Have you been invited to a festival I am not aware of?" Righteous asked, her brows scrunched in alarm.

Her daughter was dressed in the most unimaginable and incompatible off-color skirt and blouse ever known to mankind. Even her flip-flops were also a mismatch.

Ayanate, in her mother's bewildered eyes, looked like an old village witch that hadn't slept all night. The only difference was that there were no bags under her eyes, no sign of fatigue that could prove that she had been flying at night in a witches' coven instead of sleeping in her bed.

"No," Ayanate sheepishly replied with a smirk forming slightly. She had been waiting to see how her mother would deal with this.

"Did you forget the color class of your wardrobe?" Turns out high-power-shark-lawyer type of moms were ultra organized, and that extended to their children's wardrobe.

"No."

"Then, what in the love of all things holy is going on with your attire?" Despite herself, Righteous was bemused and confused all at once. What had come over her daughter?

"Mom, I'm a big girl and big girls love to explore and try things out."

"Well, it's funny because you look anything but grown up wearing that orange top and lime skirt, young lady. You look like a masquerade," her mother gushed without a hint of sarcasm.

"Plus, those tees look really old. We are going to get you something else. Get ready. When I get back, we are going shopping," Righteous said. She stood and walked around the table to give Ayanate a quick peck on her forehead before heading for the door.

"I have a hearing in thirty minutes and I am going to be driving like a maniac," Righteous said over her shoulders.

"Bye, Mom. Please take care," Ayanate called after her.

"Goodbye, sweetheart." The clak clak of her mother's shoes punctuated her words as she exited the house through the front door.

"Hmm, sweetheart? She just called me sweetheart. Well, thank God she didn't call me 'baby' today. Maybe she has finally started accepting the fact that I'm a grown up now," Ayanate whispered to herself. "As long as she doesn't call me baby, anything else is fine by me."

Ayanate breathed a sigh of relief. The conversation went way better than she expected. She knew she had nothing to fear about her mother's driving and the thirty minutes she mentioned. Most likely, her mother referred to her personal alarm rather than the time fixed by the court for the hearing.

She probably should change now. She'd proved her point, and now that she thought of it, orange and lime was a weird combo.

MOSCOW ROAD, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

Being a computer geek was lucrative. Munachimso Onuoha was a proof of that fact, having built his own firm to the height it currently boasted. His computer firm, Charlie's Hub, was named after Charles Babbage, the polymath regarded as the father of computers.

Munachimso fancied himself to be a polymath too when it came to computers, as he could do virtually anything computer related aside from actually making the computers.

He was grateful he ventured into business while he was in school. Although his grades suffered because of the amount of time he had to invest into the infant firm, he was doing better than the best graduating student of his set, financial-wise.

His black 2014 model Honda Civic pulled into the parking lot reserved for him at the Golden Plaza where his firm occupied the entire third floor.

No one had ever accused him of having a fine taste in cars.

He was okay with his preferences, and that was what mattered.

The story was not the same for a lot of his clients, like the ones he knew were currently waiting in his lobby.

As he parked his car, he saw a flashy-looking Range Rovers model that he could not name even if he had a gun to his head just by his left. The said Range Rovers had armed police officers conspicuously guarding it, and he could not shake off the feeling of awe he felt. Who would have thought that he could keep men of such stature waiting when a few years back he would have run himself ragged to have such as these in his contact list even if they never spoke. Time had a way of handing out rewards.

As he walked into The Golden Plaza, his thoughts roamed the presentations he had just made on 'webinars' being the new way. That was the modern truth. Live presentations, lectures or workshops happened in real time with participants from all over the world. Never mind that he had to appear in person to teach this truth.

He was deep in his technological wander lust when the elevator bell chimed, informing him of his successful arrival on the third floor. From here, he would take the stairs to ensure that his arrival was not announced and he would have settled in before anyone was let into his office.

Once again, he was grateful for the wisdom employed by the building contractors in placing a stairwell away from the sight of those sitting in the reception area.

He watched, standing up, smiling and with an extended hand, as his clients made his way to the plush seat opposite his table.

Munachimso was not given to the grandiose way of life but when he saw the founder of Ibu Wahid University take in the interior of his office, he felt proud of the millions he invested into his firm as he knew that the respect the older man had for him must have risen a notch.

"Thank you for accommodating the fact I moved up the appointment. I have to be at an impromptu series of meetings outside the country and I had to be here myself," the man said in a deep voice.

"It is all good, sir," Munachimso replied, rewarding his clients with one of his professional smiles. "We are always at your service."

"Have you gone through the report prepared by my people?" asked Mr. Abdulazzi Usman, driving to the point after a brief handshake.

"Yes, sir, and I would like to inform you that the problem is one that is fixable. We could strengthen the firewall of your current website and not necessarily make a new one from scratch."

"I want a new one."

"And I do not object to that, but I had to tell you this in the interest of full disclosure. As you might have already guessed, I stand to gain more if we go this way, although every penny would be worth the job."

"This kind of conduct would not be condoned in my institution. It goes without saying that I want the best of the best."

Munachimso had been briefed by the report of the breach in the website by some student who managed to penetrate the firewall and manipulate their results.

"You can rest assured that we will deliver the programming language..."

"Not to cut you off, but you do not have to bore me with the details. I am a man who believes in actions more than promises."

"Then, you wait and see, sir!"

"What are you charging?"

"Due to..."

"I did not ask all that."

"Seventeen million naira."

"My P.A. will see you. Thank you for your time." They both arose and shook hands before the client made a hasty exit out of his office.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ELEVEN HOURS TO THE OPERATION.

POLICE STATE COMMAND, RIVERS STATE.

The D-day had finally arrived. Still, the Rivers State Police Commissioner was yet to make up his mind as regards the call he received a week ago.

Sitting alone in his office, he had been pondering over the matter that dominated his heart and faltered his concentration. He knew that any decision he made could affect him in a profound way, and this was why he hesitated more than usual.

Over time, he'd contemplated his options. Should he disregard the information given to him by the unknown caller? A little voice of reasoning admonished him otherwise.

But there was nothing substantial about the information Abubakar received from the anonymous caller and that was why he had tried to wave it off as the ravings of a madman, but that place of reasoning in his heart advised him, or better still, admonished him, to take credence to the information he'd been given.

Unable to decide yet on what to do, he immediately distracted himself from the conundrum at hand by calling two of his sons who were currently studying outside the country.

After his call with his sons, he tried to engage into other activities to distract him more, but the imbroglio never tapered. If anything, it escalated.

Thus, for the sake of his own peace of mind, he decided not to put off the matter at hand any longer.

Alone with his thoughts, he analyzed several facts which eventually helped him draw up a conclusion.

One was how the caller had managed to contact him. The unknown caller had contacted him via a means that no outsider had ever been able to get access to. Abubakar reasoned that for someone to go through such extreme measures to pass information to him was worth giving a thought. Two was how detailed the information and instruction had been. No cooked up tale could be that flawless logic-wise.

He decided that he would do as the unknown caller had instructed, watch how everything would pan out and then wait for the next call from the incognito caller.

He'd make this an undercover operation. Everyone outside the concerned party, he surmised, would be none the wiser.

Everything would be sharp, fast and clean. He knew the right prodigies for the job. These young officers always came through for him, and tonight would be no different.

The unknown caller had told him like a soothsayer that two of the armed robbers would die, but Abubakar determined that all the armed robbers would be captured alive. And he'd achieve this by leaving specific instructions to the best officers that he had personally handpicked.

"The game is on, my friend, or whoever you are," Abubakar whispered.

NINE HOURS TO THE OPERATION.

Savior, aka Tiger, sat down in his favorite hideout with a beaming smile on his face. Try as he might, he couldn't stop the euphoria he felt. Like a river, he let it flow freely.

The time had finally come. So far, everything has been working perfectly according to his blueprint.

It was time to mete out proper vengeance and justice. Evil must pay, and good must prevail.

Evil must pay, good must prevail. Evil must pay, good must prevail. Tiger chanted the mantra over and over in his heart.

After a brief appraisal of himself and the mission he was going to carry out that night, he nodded to himself, satisfied that all was in order, and then headed for his wine bar.

Taking out a bottle of Jack Daniels, he poured himself a tall glass of the liquid and casually gulped down its content.

He resisted the temptation of imbibing multiple glasses. He needed to be clear-headed for tonight's mission.

Putting away the wine glass and bottle of Jack Daniels, he moved over to his study room, took out his diary and went through his meticulous plans for the umpteenth time. Satisfied that every 't' had been crossed and every 'I' had been dotted, he closed the diary and held it close to his heart as though it was a treasure trove.

Beaming a smile, he repeated the commissioner's words like a challenge.

"Let the game begin."

SIX HOURS TO THE OPERATION.

The day wasn't going well for Ayanate.

Today was one of those days when the reality of her condition crash-landed upon her with a heaviness that could rival the weight of a loaded cargo ship.

She was battling a heavy dose of depression today. Yes, life had not always been a bed of roses or a smooth ride for her.

Even with her sightless condition, she still battled with life situations like every normal human being, be it emotional, psychological or physical issues. A lot of people in the society who didn't know better thought that when someone became physically challenged in any part of the body, such a person would turn oblivious to every other life issue. They assumed, erroneously, that there'd be no more difficulties for such an individual apart from the blindness, crippled legs, deaf ears or any other bodily challenge.

If only they knew that bodily impairment was just a compound exponent on already existing problems. Especially in places like Africa where being physically challenged was a stigma. Isolation in the midst of a crowd would become the order of the day. People would avoid such individuals because they felt the physical challenge was a curse or a payment for sins, and they wouldn't want to be contaminated with the disadvantaged person's 'disease'.

What others could go a mile to achieve, the physically challenged would have to go double miles to prove their capability of achieving. And even after proving their capability, not everyone would be thrilled to have a physically challenged person on their bandwagon, because as far as the society is concerned, the physically challenged were done for and life would never be the same for them.

Some even went as far as believing that once a person became physically challenged, he or she would be as harmless as a dove. The handicapped couldn't even hurt a fly. They couldn't carry out evil activities or think negative thoughts.

The memory of a statement from the speaker from one of the visiting groups they'd entertained back in her special school always made Ayanate chuckle.

"These people cannot sin or have negative imaginations because they don't have eyes to see the evil that we see everyday in our society," the speaker, who was a middle-aged woman, had remarked innocently. It took every willpower and respect they had for their visitors for the blind students and staff not to burst out laughing.

The heart of man is desperately wicked, the Holy Book says. And it didn't exclude the physically challenged. At least, they were also humans.

So, no doubt, Ayanate struggled with her own problems.

The absence of a father, her blindness, the everyday struggles with life, education and other activities, living the life she didn't want to live as a physically challenged person. All these boomed their presence in her heart today, and it was almost driving her to the point of mental and emotional breakdown.

There are times you tell yourself that you are alright regardless of the problems that are surrounding you. In spite of everything, you still push yourself up from your bed every morning, pushing it one day at a time because you are hopeful that there is light at the end of the tunnel. But one day, maybe you let your guard down or something, and you finally hit rock bottom and you are in a daze. Nothing makes sense anymore. Confusion flies everywhere and you feel like you're tired of fighting. At that point you just want two things to happen: You either want the temporal relief or a total end. But you soon realize that there is a big difference when you are not alone, when you're sure that someone greater than you is solidly with you. You see the spark of light at the end of the tunnel. Then, you begin to frantically reach for it.

That was what Ayanate felt.

And as a child of God, Ayanate began to conquer her foe with the weapon that the Greater One who lives inside of her had given her by quoting the Word of God.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

"Greater is he who is in me than the devil who is in the world."

"No weapon formed against me shall ever prosper and every tongue that rises against me in judgment, I shall condemn."

"If God is for me, who can be against me?"

As she kept fighting with her weapon, defeating and disarming the enemy, she became energized. She felt as though a greater entity suddenly appeared before her and tossed her more weapons.

"My life is hidden in Christ and Christ in God."

"I am seated with Christ in heavenly places, far above principalities and powers."

"Let no man trouble me because I bear the mark of Christ on my body."

"He that dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

"God has taken me from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his dear son Jesus Christ."

"I am a partaker of Christ's inheritance."

More weapons, more victories.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SIX HOURS TO THE OPERATION.

Munachimso Onuoha had an eventful day in the office. Returning from work by this time, he was eager to rest his tired body.

He attended to over one and a half dozen new clients and delivered five completed products to eleven of his old clients. And even though it was past his closing hours, he knew that the day was far from over for him.

There was a lot of work for him to do in so little time, and Munachimso was well known for delivering his product and services prior to the deadline no matter how inconvenient the due date was. And he would rather decline the offer for the business if he knew he couldn't beat the deadline than to disappoint.

Over the years, he'd built himself a reputation of punctuality and five-star excellence. This had earned him the trust and respect of his clients. Because of this, fully satisfied clients told their business partners and associates about him. When these referees tried him and got satisfactory results, they also told others, who told others, who continued to spread the news and became unsolicited marketers for him. Word of mouth was really a helpful tool that promoted his business far beyond his reach.

That was why, he surmised, his clients were increasing instead of dwindling. Thus regardless of the low economic situation, Munachimso was one of those whose business thrived in the country.

At the rate his enterprise was progressing, he was grateful that he had employed a handful of computer geeks who had been doing the major chunk of the work. On his own, he would have collapsed under the strain of the workload. Even though all the products went through a final check by him, most of the groundwork was done by his employees.

These days, there were more clients to attend to and both he and his employees were fast becoming overwhelmed. Next Monday, he will put out a notice for job vacancies.

He entered his three bedroom apartment and made straight for the master bedroom. He immediately stripped down to only his boxer shorts, grabbed his towel and entered the bathroom. He turned on the shower after taking off his boxer. He made himself comfortable in his bathtub as the cool shower relaxed his muscles and freshened him up from the stress of the day.

When he finished with his bathroom duties, he dried off the globs of water on his skin and made for his closet where he dressed up in a green t-shirt and white shorts.

After a brief contemplation of what to do next, he decided against napping in his bedroom and went instead to his living room where he relaxed on one of his couches and ordered food from a nearby restaurant.

Munachimso was one of the few African men who enjoyed cooking and took it as one of their hobbies, but he wasn't feeling up to cooking today. He would give himself a special treat whenever he felt like it.

As he waited for the arrival of the food he ordered, he gazed blankly at his 48 inches plasma TV that hung on the wall directly opposite him. He used his remote control to channel-surf but there was nothing of interest that caught his attention. He hated watching movies. He would rather play games on his computer, learn how to do something new, or go out for sporting activities rather than to sit down, watching a boring movie for over two hours.

It was a little too late to go out and play football, and he wasn't in the mood to learn something new, so he powered up his laptop and began playing one of his favorite online games with some of his internet friends who were also computer geeks.

FOUR HOURS TO THE OPERATION.

Ayanate, having successfully battled the depressing feeling that clouded her, was feeling much better. She decided not to leave it at that, though. She thought it best to take her time to offer thanksgiving to God the best way she knew how to. And she would do it with the worship and praises that would flow freely from her heart to her lips.

As she set out to do just that, she remembered the conversation she had with her elder brother two weeks ago. He'd promised to return home in a fortnight, and even though she knew it might be a little too late, she still held out her expectation of seeing him that night.

After expecting his arrival and not seeing him, thirty minutes later, she decided to call him to know why he had yet to arrive and if he was okay.

Her brother picked up after the third ring. "Hello, ba—"

Before he could finish his cheerful greeting, she interrupted him with a barrage of questions.

"Where are you? Why are you not home by this time? Haven't you closed from work? Is there traffic on-the-road?"

THREE AND A HALF HOURS TO THE OPERATION.

Savior was the first to arrive at the hideout location where all the gang members for tonight's operation were supposed to converge before dispersing to their specific operation places.

As usual, he carefully approached the hideout and unholstered his Glock 9 mm, and carefully inspected the place to be sure that they were not being ambushed by the police or any agency. In this line of work, trust was a high commodity, one ought to be meticulously wary because one could be betrayed by a Judas in John's clothing.

Satisfied that the place was free of men in police uniforms or any videoing or tracking device, he relaxed and holstered his Glock-9 pistol before concealing it with his jacket.

The concealed weapon was for his own personal use. No one had ever seen him with it and no one knew that he had it. Alpha Shadows was mostly known for using an AR-15 to carry out any operation or attack. Thus, no

one had ever suspected what Savior was up to. Whenever the police released a report about the death of an Alpha Shadows member, the report would always turn out to be that the gunshot wound they died from was from a Glock 9 mm.

The Glock-9 was his favorite and personal baby, it was what he used in meting out justice and vengeance on the bad guys. And that was what he was going to use tonight.

Smirking slowly, he took a seat near the entrance and watched as the rest of the gang members started arriving at the designated location with their AR-15s casually slung on their shoulders.

THREE AND A HALF HOURS TO THE OPERATION.

"Is that how to greet your elder brother?" Preye asked after his sister finished asking her torrent of questions.

"Don't change the topic."

"What are you saying?"

"I asked where are you, big brother?"

"Ha ha... Is that why you want to bite my head off? I want to flex. I wanna chill with the big boys."

"That's not funny." But she laughed anyway.

"You scam! You were supposed to be at home by this time, but mum and I haven't even seen your brake light."

"Oh, tell me more," he quipped.

Her brother was such a douche bag. Ayanate, now annoyed, said, "You specifically told me, promised me, two weeks ago, that you would return. And now, you're pretending you don't know what I'm talking about?"

Preye cackled in that irritating tone of his. "I think you misunderstood me."

"I misunderstood nothing. Unless you are using a different calendar."

"I can assure you that my calendar is accurate, my dear."

"So why are you not here by this time?" she asked in triumph.

"Umm, I actually meant to say that I will be returning home this weekend. I'm so sorry you misunderstood me, baby."

"Don't call me that!"

"Don't call you what?"

"Don't call me baby. It's annoying."

"I love you too, baby. And yes, I'll buy your favorite pizza when I'm returning home."

"And a box of chocolates."

"A box of chocolates?"

"Yes, of course. Don't you dare forget the box of chocolates."

11:00 P.M.

THIRTY MINUTES BEFORE THE OPERATION.

The armed robbers loaded their AR-15s and each of them holstered three extra mags just in case of any unexpected firefight with the police.

Before they hooded their faces, Savior looked each of the six designated gang members straight in the eyes and admonished them.

"You all know the drill?" They all nodded their heads slowly before he continued.

"I don't have to remind you all that you must not mess this up." Savior used foul language.

"But let me just remind you that I will personally mess up anyone who messes this up," he warned fiercely.

Satisfied that his message had been received, he gave them the go-ahead to continue with their preparations.

Ready and all dressed in black, it was time to move out. And so, Savior and the rest of the gang members began filing into the car. When everyone was comfortably seated, the driver, who was a twenty-two-year-old undergraduate by the name Ibrahim, revved the engine and drove to their designated location. Just as expected, the armed robbers didn't encounter any traffic at that time of the night.

And so, they arrived at the location right on time.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DESTINY ESTATE, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

D-DAY

11:30 P.M.

The armed robbers parked their car a few miles away from the estate, to facilitate a noiseless intrusion, and made the rest of the journey on foot. They successfully entered the estate from one of the vulnerable areas that Savior had discovered when he was studying the estate a couple of weeks ago.

Even though it was night, the estate was illuminated with solar-powered street lights. Dogs barked from several houses. With the little knowledge he had about domestic animals, Savior concluded that half of the dogs might be German Shepherds.

As they continued navigating stealthily into the estate, more dogs began barking frantically. But to the utter amazement of the armed robbers, the residents did not turn on their porch light, peek through their windows or even step out to see what had gotten their dogs rattled.

Then it dawned on Savior and his gang that it was either the residence had gotten used to their dogs barking whenever they detected motion, or they had become lackadaisical and totally left anything that had to do with their security exclusively to the estate security personnels. How pathetic. Either way, it was obviously playing to the advantage of the armed robbers and they hoped it would remain that way. Although, after this night, nothing would remain the same.

Oblivious to the imminent danger prowling the streets of her estate, Ayanate was enjoying her time in the presence of God.

At the moment, she was doing what the Bible instructed in Ephesians 5:19 and she was loving every minute of it .

Ephesians 5:19

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;

She was having a great, intoxicating koinonia with Jesus Christ, and she just wanted to keep basking in the euphoria of the moment forever.

After singing 'What a mighty God I serve', another song came to mind. She opened her mouth and began singing.

In Christ alone my hope is found

He is my light, my strength, my song

This Cornerstone, this solid Ground

Firm through the fiercest drought and storm...

The armed robbers quietly made their way behind rows of houses, occasionally crouching behind lush and freshly-manicured flowers, blending into the shadows.

They got to the end of one road and quickly navigated another route.

The security guys were actively making their rounds, but having prepared for scenarios like this, the armed robbers were careful not to appear on the radar screen of the security personnel.

Still moving, they almost collided with one of the security men who was rounding the corner, but they expeditiously ducked just in time as the security personnel pointed his flashlight towards the spot they were standing a few seconds ago.

Not noticing anything suspicious, the security personnel walked on, oblivious to what had just taken place, or better still, what he had just missed.

Savior and his boys came out of hiding, releasing a torrent of expletives from their lips as they did. After mumbling a few more choice words at the security personnel who had almost seen them, they continued with their mission.

For now, nothing would interrupt them. The operation was still very much on.

What heights of love, what depths of peace

When fears are stilled, when strivings cease

My Comforter, my All in All

Here in the love of Christ I stand...

The armed robbers continued in silence for a while until one of the gang members, who was also one of the guys Savior had plans for that night, spoke up.

"Oh boy, we get Luck o, na 'im make we come quick quick. All these yamayama security people don't wake up o. Assuming say we delay this operation peren, we for don peme," the young man said in the Nigerian pidgin English.

Savior scoffed. The fool wasn't even out of the woods yet and he counted himself lucky. The poor guy wasn't lucky at all, at least, not where Savior was concerned.

The guy's statement was followed with silence. Clueless, he opened his mouth to speak again, and Savior shot him a glare that could kill.

"See, bros, if I hear any word from you again, I swear, you no go like me o. You dey hear?" Savior asked in a bone-chilling tone.

Both men held their gaze for a while before the younger one finally wavered.

"I say, you hear me? before I go match you now to the ground," Savior drawled, bringing his face a few inches closer to the guy's.

His voice quivered as he replied. "I hear you, boss. No vex."

Satisfied with the reply, Savior began to retreat slowly, but not before he noted, with satisfaction, the fear in the eyes of the other gang members.

Very good, he thought. Let them continue to be afraid of me.

Fear was one of the most effective tools. And right now, that was the leverage he had over them.

In Christ alone who took on flesh

Fullness of God in helpless babe

This gift of love and righteousness

Scorned by the ones He came to save...

The armed robbers walked for a few minutes more before Savior pointed behind a row of houses that were dark. "Comrades, make we go conclude our final preparations for that safe corner."

"Boss, we dey your back," they replied as they trailed behind him.

Savior led the group to an inky dark spot where he was sure even a cat would have to do a double take to be able to see them.

"You have less than sixty seconds," he told them. They began wearing their gloves and dressing in their camouflaged dark uniform. The gloves were a precaution to mask their fingerprints so that the police wouldn't track them down with it. The camouflage was meant to disguise the outline of their figure so that anyone who saw them would not be able to give accurate descriptions of what they looked like to the police.

Till on that cross as Jesus died

*The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live...*

Time seemed to abruptly move in slow motion as Savior began hearing a melodious song from one of the nearby houses. The voice sounded hauntingly sonorous. It was too good to be real that he began wondering if the melody was coming from his heart. He looked at his fellow gang members and from the way they were reacting, he knew that it was for real.

At first, the voice sounded faint, but soon after, they could distinctly hear it. Not long after, they could also make out the words.

*There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again...*

Savior was momentarily distracted. The other gang members were also getting distracted, and Savior didn't like it.

This wasn't good, not good at all, but there was no denying the fact that some people had wonderful voices that could make a man lose concentration. And losing focus was not allowed in this line of work. No, no, no, the stakes were too high for it. Every lost second had grave consequences.

And as He stands in victory

Sin's curse has lost its grip on me

For I am His and He is mine

Bought with the precious blood of Christ...

What a sweet voice! And what a bad timing! If he didn't know better, he would have thought that the voice was a booby trap meant specifically for them. Surely, he was in trouble now because the voice could just be the death of his plan.

Clearly taken by the melodious voice, the other gang members began whistling slowly, making a few catcalls and dropping side comments.

One of the boys said something that jerked back his concentration.

"What did you say?" Savior asked him.

"I was saying that we should start our operation with that house so that we can see the face behind that beautiful voice," the boy replied, smiling with a lustful glint in his eyes.

But Savior didn't smile. "Rapist!" he snarled. Then, wagging his fingers at all the gang members, he said, "I'll warn you all very clearly for the last time. Tonight is no night for silly games. We have a mission and don't you dare mess it up."

Grudgingly, they all murmured, "Yes, boss," and began shuffling to get the last bit of their gears ready.

Satisfied, Savior forced himself to tune out the still-singing voice that was like that of an angel's and focused on his mission.

As the gang began filing out stealthily, Savior made two decisions. In situ additions to his original plan. First, they wouldn't be carrying out their operation in that house; second, he would personally return for the mystery singer, whoever she was.

No guilt in life, no fear in death

This is the power of Christ in me

From life's first cry to final breath

Jesus commands my destiny

No power of hell, no scheme of man

Can ever pluck me from His hand

Till He returns or calls me home

Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The armed robbers started their operation in nearby buildings, and by the time they were done, it was almost

1:00 a.m.

An hour and a half later they had succeeded in invading and ravaging over twenty buildings.

The armed robbers counted themselves lucky because none of the houses they entered had an alarm system. Although none of the houses were left unlocked, this wasn't a problem for them as Savior was able to easily pick the entrance locks.

It wasn't part of their plans to shoot their victims, but they shot six family men in the foot that night who weren't complying with their demands and watched as their trembling wives and kids shrieked and begged for their lives to be spared. Still, they didn't let go until the desperate wives complied on behalf of their injured husbands.

As the women scurried around quickly with tears streaming down their faces to gather up what they demanded for, one of the boys was designated to follow the women to get the loot, brandishing their AR-15s to put more fear into the already traumatized women just to make them to hurry up and do their bidding, while the rest of the team monitored the whole family to avoid things going sour.

Occasionally, one or two of the armed robbers would drop comments like, "You see, it wasn't our fault that your husband was shot. He was proving stubborn."

The women would either remain mute or reply with something along the lines of, "We are very sorry, sir. Don't mind my husband o. That is how he is, sir. He won't do that again, sir. Please, let me hurry up and give you everything you want, sir," their voices shrill and quivering and tears falling down their cheeks.

And at the end, out of fear and trauma, the women would give them more than they asked for. The armed robbers dutifully collected everything, and left the family husk dry.

That was part of what Savior desperately hated about Alpha Shadows and other crime syndicates in the country. And that was why he vowed to meet out justice and vengeance on behalf of these innocent victims.

By the time the armed robbers were done with their operation, they had stolen a lot of valuable things: bundles of cash, Androids and iPhones, laptops, tablets, several boxes of jewelry and other gold, silver and diamond accessories. The gang members would later calculate everything and discover that they had stolen properties that were worth millions of Naira.

Two hours later and the armed robbers were done. They had gotten more than what they came for. It was time to leave.

Just as he had decided, The Rivers State Commissioner of Police had complied with the instruction given to him by the unknown caller and sent his men to not just lay an ambush at the eastern gate, but also at the western gate of Destiny Estate. To the best of their knowledge, they had effectively surrounded the estate and backed the armed robbers to a corner.

Dressed in their black uniforms, black boots and armed with submachine guns, and batons, the policeman crouched in strategic positions and maintained perfect silence in order not to alert the armed robbers of their presence.

Just as instructed by The Rivers State commissioner of police, radio silence was maintained. No one spoke apart from the occasional instructions and updates that was passed to and fro the phone by the leader of the covert squad, one Inspector Joseph Alabi.

However, after almost an hour of waiting in silence, the policemen began to relax and mumble among themselves.

They began wondering aloud if they had replied to a prank call or if they were being set up. This whole mission was starting to seem like a wild goose's chase.

Inspector Joseph announced that they would wait for ten more minutes, and if nothing happened, they'd go inside the estate for a round of inspection before heading back.

Nine minutes later, just as the team was about to give up and leave, out of the corner of his eyes, Inspector Joseph saw six boys, the exact number they had been anticipating thanks to the intel from the anonymous caller, all armed with assault rifles, running away with stolen property. Instantly alert and filled with adrenaline, he stood up and commanded the other officers to do the same and give chase as he led the way.

The officers complied, firing at the running armed robbers as they did while asking them to stop and surrender.

Savior nodded his head in satisfaction as the policemen were unknowingly playing things out the way he wanted it. Good, everything was working out just fine, and this meant that it would all go as planned.

Also, as expected, his gang members began firing back at their pursuers as they noticed that they were getting too close for comfort.

Just like that, a gun battle ensued. The hour had come. Savior seized the opportunity and sprung into action.

One of the armed robber's eyes widened into saucers as he saw Savior reach beneath his jacket and swiftly pull out a Glock 9 mm equipped with a silencer.

He was unfortunately one of those Savior planned to kill that night.

Smirking at the expression on the boy's face, before he could get the chance to compose himself and react, Savior immediately clicked off the safety on his handgun, pulled the trigger and double tapped him on his forehead. The boy died with that shocked expression on his face.

The other gang members saw one of their comrades going down and thought that the police had just killed one of their own. He was obviously dead but this was not time to mourn.

The police were fast gaining on the armed robbers. Savior chambered around his Glock 9 mm pistol as he continued running. It was time to finish his job and escape for good.

All around him, bullets ricocheted and whizzed past. One of the bullets from the police AK-47 brushed his left shoulder, leaving him with a bloody graze. Savior bit his lip hard from crying out in pain

One of the armed robbers wasn't as lucky as him, though. Savior watched as the bullet that brushed his shoulder hit one of the boys that was to be his second victim for the night. Unfortunately for the boy, his knees buckled, crying out in pain, he landed with a thud to the ground.

Savior couldn't believe his fortune as he ran in front of his injured colleague/to-be victim. Immediately the boy saw his leader, he cried out for help.

"Help me," the boy pleaded, his eyes ridden with pain.

"Of course I'll help you. I'll help you and you can thank me when we meet each other on the other side. I will help you by saving you from the police interrogation. I will help you by relieving you from your pain and making your death a quick one," Tiger replied without emotion.

"What are you sayin-?"

But the boy never finished his question. Savior unleashed several bursts, instantly eliminating him. The boy took the knowledge of his killer to his early grave.

As soon as his second victim for the night gave up the ghost, he looked ahead and saw that the other gang members had not seen what happened behind them. They were too busy cynically trying to save their own skin.

Angry that they had not even bothered to check on each other, he wanted to kill all of them but decided against it. Even though it was what they deserved, he wouldn't do it but would find another way to mercilessly deal with them. He mustn't allow his emotions to control him because it would go contrary to the word he had given to the police commissioner.

Savior had done his job, and it was time to step out for good. With the rush of adrenaline, he and the remaining survivors took flight for all they were worth.

On getting to where they parked their vehicle, Savior took over from the previous driver as he fired the car engine to life and drove off wildly.

The police, having left their squad car back at the estate Gate while pursuing the robbers on foot, and clearly not prepared for this turn of event, pursued the car on foot for a while and finally gave up when the armed robbers drove out of sight.

Because of the commissioner's instruction, they couldn't call for backup... and even if they did, none was close. They couldn't put out an all-points bulletin, thus the four wanted armed robbers successfully escaped that night.

The night was a huge success for Savior. To the police, it was a total disaster that exposed a level of incompetence on their part.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Commissioner Abubakar Abdulrahman didn't close his eyes that night. He had been too on-edge to go home after his closing hours.

He sat down in his office, anxiously waiting for the report his men were about to bring to him in the early hours of the morning.

It was almost 2:30 a.m. and his men had yet to report back to him about the outcome of their operation.

Indeed, he would have gotten the information he wanted by simply listening to the police walkie talkie but he had categorically told his men that this was not an official operation and they must maintain radio silence all through the duration of their assignment. Not implicitly trusting his source, he had earlier decided not to follow formal procedures to avoid making a fool of himself if everything had turned out to be a joke after all.

Now, feeling quite edgy, he was beginning to second-guess himself.

Conflicting emotions tugged furiously on both sides of his heart, one trying to condemn and the other to applaud his course of action, and, quite frankly, he was at a loss of which to believe.

He'd followed instructions of the unknown caller to the letter. Well, almost to the letter. There was one instruction the commissioner had left out when he was briefing his men about the operation.

He had asked them to capture the six armed robbers alive but there was one instruction that he had left out and now, that would be between him and the unknown caller. He would hold it like that secret ace card that could be a game changer.

Really, there was no reason feeling anxious or second-guess himself. What was done was already done.

The commissioner remained seated in his office waiting for the much anticipated call. His phone suddenly rang, startling him. He looked at his caller ID. Private number. Something told him that it was the unknown caller that had succeeded in turning his world upside down in this past week, but he quickly dismissed the notion. But, on a second thought, who would have the effrontery to call him at this ungodly hour but the very person who was the reason he was awake.

Tapping the answer button on his phone screen, he placed the phone on his left ear. "Rivers State commissioner of police speaking."

The commissioner wasn't surprised upon hearing the voice that replied to him. If anything, he was relieved that he hadn't simply made a fool of himself. But, it also meant that something serious was brewing and the commissioner had the premonition that he was going to have a big part to play in it.

"Hello, Mr Commissioner! I told you that I would call after the operation."

Abubakar was seriously itching to know the outcome of the operation and he wanted to ask the unknown caller, but he knew that it would give away the fact that his men had not reported back to him, so he decided that he would be calm and cool.

"You said so indeed," the police commissioner replied coolly.

The airway was silent on both sides of the call until the unknown caller spoke up again.

"I just thought I should let you know that your men did very well tonight and the operation was successful beyond my expectation. Don't worry that they have not yet returned to give you the reports; they are just doing some routine work, albeit quietly."

Saying that Abubakar was surprised that the unknown caller knew so much would be putting it mildly.

"But how did you...?"

"I will call you again soon."

The line went dead.

Abubakar stared at his phone in shock. He couldn't believe that the unknown caller had so much knowledge about him and his designated officers.

In his line of work, he had seen a lot of strange things. But this was the creepiest thing he had experienced so far.

How did he know? How was he getting his information? Did he have a mole? Or was the unknown caller somehow monitoring and recording his movements? Was it possible that there was a hidden camera in his office that was giving a live video feed to the anonymous caller? Was his office bugged?

First thing he would do as soon as the day broke would be to invite professionals to sweep his office for any hidden cameras or listening devices.

If Abubakar wasn't a logical man, he'd have been close to believing that this stranger had psychic powers.

It was obvious this unknown caller was miles ahead of him in the intellectual area, and Abubakar didn't like getting outsmarted.

Events were rapidly spinning out of control and some drastic measures had to be taken.

The commissioner's phone rang for the second time that early morning and he hesitated to answer the call. If it was the unknown caller, he sure wasn't ready for more shocker.

Physically and emotionally spent, he picked up his phone from his table and looked at the caller ID. Lo and behold, it was Inspector Joseph.

Anticipating a sliver of positive news, he pressed the answer button.

"Hello, Joseph, please tell me that the operation was successful," the commissioner dived in straight without any greeting or preamble.

"I'm afraid not, sir. It was a total disaster."

The commissioner let out a burst of every profanity he knew. Only when he paused for breath did Inspector Joseph gingerly continue with his report.

"Yes, sir, I'm so sorry it took a while for us to call. We have been taking our time to carry out verification before we call you. We didn't want to bother you until we've concluded."

Of course the commissioner already knew that the operation wasn't successful as he wanted. He was just in denial. But now, the leader of the team has opened his eyes to reality.

"Tell me about it."

And so, Inspector Joseph explained everything down to the details, occasionally pausing to answer one or two questions from the commissioner.

"So, you are certain that two of those armed robbers are dead? "

"I'm afraid so, sir."

After a moment of hesitation, the commissioner asked. "Has the bullet with which the deceased criminals received the gunshot wound been verified?"

"Yes, sir, that is what we've been trying to verify. And, sir, there is a problem."

Abubakar huffed in exasperation. "Of course there should be a problem. We will deposit them to the morgue later in the day, after identification and putting out an official statement to the media about the operation, because this is not what we can keep under wraps since there was a real armed robbery attack."

"Uhh, that's not actually what I'm talking about, sir."

The commissioner was shouting at the top of his voice now. "Say what you want to say. I don't have time for this nonsense!"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Abubakar smacked his table hard. The poor thing rattled. "Sorry for yourself. Say whatever you want to say or forever hold your peace."

The inspector wanted to apologize again but thought better of it.

"We've been able to verify beyond every shadow of doubt that the fatal bullet wound was not from our submachine guns and neither was it from the AR-15 the armed robbers used. The bullets were from a 9 mm pistol."

It took a while for Joseph's words to register in the commissioner's brain. But his blood immediately ran cold when the implications of his words hit him.

"Hello, hello, sir. Are you still there? Is everything alright?" Inspector Joseph asked after an uncanny silence.

But no, Abubakr wasn't alright, thank you very much. He suddenly realized that a suspected killer had just contacted and played him. He might have had a heart attack.

He didn't feel like himself at all, and he felt two hundred pounds heavier. He immediately started feeling nauseated. He stood up and immediately entered his restroom just in time as his stomach gave way with the food he ate the previous evening.

Something drastic had just happened. Something had just changed, a big piece of the puzzle had just clicked. Abubakar was terrified by the implications.

Whatever it was, the commissioner knew that his life would not remain the same.

Successfully within the confines of his house, Savior took out the first aid kit that he had kept for occasions like this and began treating the bullet scratch on his left shoulder.

Thank goodness that there was no serious damage. If not, he'd have been thinking of how he'd lay low for a while to avoid explaining how he got a bullet wound to his friends who didn't know what he did.

Satisfied, and with his mind riveted on his success, he barely winced at the otherwise painful treatment that he was administering on himself.

He had carried out plan A which had panned out without a hitch. Now, it was time to accelerate to plan B.

His gaze moved to his wall clock. It was almost 3 a.m.

Grimacing, he placed the band-aid over the sterilized wound with his other hand.

It was time to go to bed. He had a lot of work to do today.

Tired and exhausted, he clicked off his light and bounced on his bed. He slept off immediately his head touched his pillow.

A sweet voice was the last thing he thought of before he drifted off to La-la land.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

At 7 a.m. that day, news about the armed robbery attack the previous night had spread around the estate like wildfire.

The police had been called in to secure the estate and investigate the attack.

Everywhere was tight. No one moved in or out of the estate without a lot of questioning, and a proper stop and search by the police.

All the security men were sacked on the spot by the estate management with a lawsuit threat hanging over their agency, attributing the fault of the attack to their complacency.

The media had already received the news of the armed robbery. Reporters and the media camera crew were among the early birds that cramped at the gate of the estate to have firsthand access to the crime scene. However, the police didn't grant them access for security reasons.

The reporters raked and gleaned snips and bits of exclusive information that they could scavenge. They made a prompt public announcement on the state of affairs and the eye-witness accounts just in time for their morning headlines.

They also reported about the two dead criminals, but left out the mystery about their gunshot wound. Actually, they left it out because the police didn't tell them.

The police had intentionally kept the information about the killer from the media and the public with the justification of not instilling fear or panic to the masses. People already had enough headaches with Alpha Shadows. There was no need to add one more, at least not yet. This was a dirty linen they'd better keep away from the public eye.

The families that resided in the houses that were attacked received visitors from the houses that were not attacked.

Before Righteous left for work that morning, she and her daughter also visited their neighbors who were victims, to console them for their losses.

Three of the victims' were some of Righteous' close friends. Righteous and her daughter visited one of them whose name was Helen. The other two were part of the six women that had rushed their husbands to the hospital to be treated for the gunshot injuries they'd sustained.

Helen collapsed into tears upon seeing her friend and her daughter. She had explained to them how the hooded criminals stole her box of gold jewelry which was a gift from her husband. It was worth three million naira.

"And that was not all they took," Helen resumed after her visitors finished consoling her for the loss of her jewelry. "They also took the money I made from yesterday's business, which was over 4.5 million."

Helen was a business woman who owned a big boutique store that sold varieties of Brazilian hair, expensive foreign clothes, shoes and handbags.

"My workers and I closed at the normal time and as usual, I brought the money home, you know, to be deposited to the bank first thing this morning." Helen was the old school business type. These days, a lot of banks, including the one that Helen was partnering with had upgraded their services to make transactions much easier, and these included allowing for the bank designated workers to go to big enterprises with a bullion van and collect their money to save them the trip of coming to deposit it themselves in the bank. But for reasons that were best known to her, Helen loved going to the bank by herself to deposit her money.

"You see, that was my plan before those evil doers, children of the South, came and turned it upside down. And I was planning to travel to Dubai and Italy to restock in two weeks' time, but with this recent development, I don't know what to do now."

The woman kept whining like that for over fifteen minutes, while her two visitors occasionally interrupted her with their consoling words. Righteous abruptly stood up, when she glanced at her wristwatch and discovered that they'd spent overtime here, and announced, with a brief apology, that it was time for her and her daughter to leave.

All Helen could think of offering them was, "So soon? I was actually beginning to enjoy your company."

Righteous knew that if she allowed her, the woman would talk for a whole day without getting tired. And she couldn't, in all good conscience, allow that. "Yes, so soon, but don't worry because me and my daughter will check up on you when I return from work in the evening."

"Okay, but, let your daughter stay with me, small na?"

In her optical imagination, Ayanate could see the hopeful look of anticipation in the woman's eyes, but everything inside of Ayanate was protesting against the woman's request. She definitely didn't want to sit down and listen to a woman who was twice her age whining all day. Never! No, no, no! Her mother must have somehow picked up on her inner protests because she apologized and told Helen that Ayanate had a lot of work to attend to and she would be attending online lectures in a couple hours.

Seriously not wanting them to go just yet, with the look of resignation, Helen saw them off to her front door, talking in the Nigerian broken English as she did. "Oya na, we go see for evening be that, shebi?"

"Ehnn, we go try come," Righteous replied in kind over her shoulders, now taking her daughter by the hand and leading her out the door.

Helen received a kind hug from both mother and daughter before they waved each other goodbye.

"Even though my friend was oblivious, I noticed that look of protest in your facial expression, and that was why I made up all those bunch of excuses for you. Even though it wasn't all true, they weren't all lies either," Righteous remarked on their way home when they were well out of anyone's earshot.

Smiling in gratitude, Ayanate opened her mouth to speak but her mother beat her to the punch.

"You can thank me later. Let's hurry up. I'm almost running late for work."

Both mother and daughter got back home, silently thanking God that their house was preserved from the armed robbery attack.

Before leaving for work that morning, Righteous and the other occupants of the estate had called for the services of the workers that would come and fix their fire and security alarms and fire escape outlet.

Righteous suddenly didn't want to go to work as she was shaken up with the recent events and overcome with negative thoughts of what could happen to her daughter if she left her alone. Yes, their house had been exempted, but what if it hadn't? What if, what if, what if?

But Ayanate wouldn't have any of it as she immediately sent her mother out the door, assuring her for the umpteenth time that she was fine and she would be alright.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE NEXT DAY, SATURDAY.

After working for a half day as was required of him and all the staff workers every Saturday, Preye made his way to Destiny Estate immediately after the close of work, stopping only to purchase a few necessary items.

He was currently working for the company that employed him shortly after his one year national youth service. Having proven to be a resourceful worker who was dedicated to his work at the time of his youth service, Preye came highly recommended to a couple of the companies that had their eyes set on the youth corpsers.

Preye had a quality that was a rare commodity in the lives of a lot of human beings. He was one of the best at the technical department, and he was always punctual to work everyday. It was a habit he inherited from his mother who was always pursuing excellence in anything she did.

Being the type of person who prayed before making decisions, when the offer of employment from those companies came for him, Preye had prayerfully sought the face of God. He chose the right company as he was led by the Holy Spirit.

And here he was, almost four years later, enjoying every bit of his work, no regrets.

But, he complained occasionally when his job became too demanding that he could hardly make out the time for the two most important women in his life. With the absence of a father in his life at a very tender age, making him the only male figure in the family, he'd subconsciously taken the enormous weight of responsibility for his mother and sister.

It wasn't designed to be that way but he had become not just a brother but also a father to his sister as well. And he was a son to his mother. While he wasn't seeing any scorecard, he hoped to God that he was dutifully playing his role.

From a very young age, he'd never wanted to disappoint or let down his only family, and that was how he decided to be the best in all that he set out to do and take advantage of his God-given potential no matter the odds that were against him.

It was that determination that kept him on his feet ever since.

The thought of his estranged father appeared out of the blues and it made him scowl. He had stopped fantasizing a long time ago of his father's dramatic return.

When he was still quite young and naive, he always occupied his mind with the thought of how his father would return, begging on his knees, and after a little drama from his mother, sister and him, they would finally forgive and tearfully reunite and become one big happy family.

His father would become responsible, pay his school fees and give him daily allowance. His father would ask about his studies, occasionally help him with assignments and attend all his graduations. He would be a good son in return and always make his father proud.

So it would continue until Preye would make a lot of money, settle down, get married and bless his parents with grandchildren and his sister with nephews and nieces. But now, all those dreams and desires were only a distant memory.

He didn't even know how he would react should his father make a sudden appearance in their lives. Heck, he didn't even know if his father was already dead or if he was still alive. And even if he was alive, he didn't know if the man was regretting his actions or if he had remarried and was comfortably happy with his new family.

Feeling too sad and uncomfortable at that last thought, Preye pushed the grim thought of his estranged father to the back of his mind and focused on his driving.

Preye immediately noticed the changes with the security details as he got to the estate gate. He was seeing new faces and they wouldn't allow him to enter the estate until they verified that he was who he said he was.

Surprised at the solemn mood of the operation that led to his detention and interrogation at the gate, he sat down quietly in his driver's seat as the gatekeeper called his mother to verify his true identity. His mother came to the gate and verified that he was indeed her son; only then did they apologize briefly for any inconveniences, saying that they were just doing their job. They cleared the roadblock and allowed him passage into the estate.

He opened his mouth and was about to spill his mind about the rather rude treatment that was given to him even though he was one of the occupants of the estate when his mother patted him gently on his arm--a sign for him to keep calm. Confused as to why his mother was preventing him, he looked at her face and she seemed to pass him a knowing signal with her soft brown eyes. He closed his mouth in peace and moved on.

Now, driving inside to his family home with his mother comfortably seated on the passenger seat, Preye couldn't hold back the question on his mind.

"What the hell is going on here, Mum?" he asked after successfully getting past two checkpoints apart from the initial one at the gate.

"Good to see you too, Son," Righteous quipped, playfully reaching out her hand and pinching her son on his right cheek. "I must confess that you are really looking good."

"Please, don't change the topic, Mum. Tell me what happened."

Righteous slowly withdrew her hand to her laps as she replied, "There was an armed robbery attack in the estate last night but thank God that our house was exempted."

Righteous watched as the look of shock and something else she couldn't decipher at that moment descended over her son's face.

"There was an armed robbery attack, and you didn't tell me?" he asked incredulously.

"Relax! Ayanate and I decided not to bother you with it. We didn't want you to worry because we were alright. Since the media carried the news, we thought you would hear about it and also know that we are safe."

"My job hardly allows me the pleasure of listening to the news and you know that, Mum."

"Yeah, I do. I guess I just didn't want you to worry," she replied, suddenly interested in something that was outside the car window.

Obviously not satisfied with his mother's answer, he was about to give a rebuttal but thought better of it and remained silent. He got to the front of their house, and turned into the driveway that led to the garage. He saw his sister standing in front of the entrance with a big smile on her face, awkwardly waving at him.

Momentarily forgetting the banter with his mother, he smiled back at his sister even though she couldn't see him.

He drove into the house garage and immediately switched off his car engine. Stepping down from the car with some of his items, he met his sister halfway to the entrance and embraced her.

Righteous left her children to go and continue watching the news that she was following before she was interrupted by the call from the estate gate.

"Oh, have I missed you, gal," Preye said, after breaking the one-sided hug with his sister.

"Of course you have missed me. You know it's not everyday you see ladies with pretty faces like mine."

He laughed out loud as he placed his arm around his sister's shoulders and they walked inside the house. "See this small gal o. For your mind abi?"

"Enhen na," his sister gushed proudly.

They entered inside the living room and saw their mother seated on the couch with her eyes glued to the television as it displayed news that was broadcasting live from Channels TV. The children were definitely not interested in the news.

Preye handed over the items in his hands to his sister. "Here's my peace offering for misunderstanding me the other day."

Ayanate squealed happily when her hands felt the items her brother gave her. She had just been given a box of chocolate and three packets of her favorite pizza.

"I'm glad you like it," he said when he saw the look of satisfaction on her face.

"I like it a lot. This is too much. I can't even finish all of them today."

"You don't have to. You can always microwave it."

"Oh yeah, you don't have to say it twice." She laughed.

"So, are we good?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"I mean with our misunderstanding."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Of course, as long as you don't..."

Their mother who had been sitting quietly suddenly interrupted by scuffing loudly. "I don't know what the fuss is all about."

Her children turned to face her. "It is pizza," they replied almost in unison.

"Children nowadays. I don't understand the obsession with pizza," Righteous shot back with a roll of her eyes.

"Well, Mum, I'm sorry but it is not our fault that Domino's Pizza had not yet come to Nigeria in the days of your youth," Preye replied with a wink. His sister supported him with a laugh.

"You jerk." Righteous picked up one of the couch pillows and stoned her son.

"I'm not that old, you little boy. I was just calling you, 'children of nowadays' for emphasis. Even if Domino's Pizza had been in Nigeria when I was young like you and your sister, I'd still not go crazy looking for it. No wonder they call you children 'Indomie generation'."

Preye and his sister laughed hard.

"Well, pizza is the new deal so I guess you can change the name to 'Pizza generation'," Preye replied over his shoulders as he and his sister began to move to the staircase that led to their rooms upstairs.

Now it was their mother's turn to laugh out loud as her children disappeared from sight.

But the image of her jovial son remained with her in her mind's eye and she shuddered involuntarily at the old memories it tried to bring back.

At the age of twenty-four, Preye looked exactly like the younger version of his father, Henry Green.

The way they walked, talked, and even the uncanny expression they displayed on their faces whenever they were confused about something. The similarities were pretty much compelling and anyone who knew Henry over two decades ago could definitely tell that Preye was his son. his carbon copy.

However, there was one aspect of their lives that both father and son couldn't be more different in, and for that, Righteous was grateful. While her son possessed qualities, characters and a lifestyle that was worth emulating, her husband was the direct opposite.

Righteous knew that she didn't do it on her own. She strongly acknowledged that it was with the help of God that she had raised beautiful and God-fearing children.

Upstairs, both brother and sister were having an animated conversation.

When they were done, Preye stood up and asked. "Is there anything you would want me to help you with before I retire to my room?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'm all ears." He sat back down.

"I want you to leave my room so that I can eat my pizza in peace."

"Ingrate! You know where to find me when you need me." He stood up again and with his sister's laughter trailing behind him, he crossed the threshold and closed the door with a bang.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TEKENA GREEN'S HOUSE,
RIVERS STATE

Savior alighted from his car after he had parked it in the garage and walked towards the main building.

The staggering house before him belonged to none other than his malevolent boss, Mr. Tekena Green, the mastermind and leader of the Alpha Shadows.

This wasn't the first time Savior would be coming to this man's mansion-like abode, but still he could not shake off the uneasy feeling that he was walking into a lion's den from off him.

Maybe it was the bleak and harsh facade that oozed that vibe.

The one-storeyed building would have been a brutalist structure if not for the marble tiles that were used to cover a larger part of the walls and pillar.

Getting closer to the main entrance, Savior could hear sounds of loud, throaty laughter rising above the ear-splitting noise they called hip-hop music coming from the building.

When he got close to the door, he nodded his head in a grunt of greeting to the two burly bouncers that were stationed on both sides of the huge, Made-in-Israel bulletproof door.

These ones were new guys and they'd almost stopped him, but the ID he showed them got him a respectful access into the main lobby. Savior couldn't help but wonder what the former ones had done to piss off the boss and have themselves replaced.

Almost all the gang members were present, slouched on couches.

Tekena, with his bloodshot eyes and bloated tummy, was seated leg-spread on a chaise-lounge.

There were bottles of all kinds of assorted and local wines, most of them emptied, on the glass center table.

Some girls who sometimes went on undercover missions with them, were there as well, barely covered by the threadbare, leaving-no-place-for-the-imagination clothes they called fashion.

These girls clung unashamedly at some of the guys. They sent sexy signals to Savior but he didn't even give them a second glance.

Smoke, pot, alcohol and weapons reigned unhindered here.

The place was poorly lit with the eye-turning disco lights, and was poorly ventilated too. The music was an off-tune rap song that caused Savior's head to pound.

Everything about this place ticked Savior off. He always hated it when the boss insisted they celebrate together as a team and share the loot of any successful operation in his house. As the second-in-command of the crime syndicate, Savior was officially entitled to not less than thirty percent of the loot. Fifty percent went to the boss, while the remaining scraps went to the other team members who went for that operation.

He preferred a professional, all-business setting to this chaos. But what could he do?

When one of them noticed his entrance, he alerted the others; they all hailed him with hoots and cheers.

Tekena quieted them with a raise of his palm and raised his glass, a sly grin on his face.

"To our tech brainiac and my second in command, I give a toast!"

They all raised their glasses, clinked and the uproar continued.

"Come here, Tiger," Tekena said, putting down his leg and patting the space beside him on the chaise-lounge, "Come sit with me."

Savior was disgusted by the man, but hey, when you're in the gang, you don't object to the boss' command or slight his favor.

Savior sat perched on the edge of the sofa. Tekena slung an arm about Savior's shoulder. Savior resisted the urge to shrug him off.

"You make me proud, my boy," Tekena said and Savior almost gagged at the stench of alcohol that wafted from his mouth.

"You've got a smart brain in that skull of yours and that's why I like you. It's too bad we lost two members of the team, but it's no pain, no gain in this work we do. At least you were wise enough to flee the scene before those police scoundrels caught anyone alive. Here, loosen up for once. You should celebrate your success," Tekena said as he filled a beer mug with scotch and gave it to Savior.

Saviour took it and dragged a sip. Tekena downed his whole glass.

"I see a lot of potential in you, Tiger," he said, his voice slightly slurred. "You remind me of myself when I was younger."

Savior watched his boss. The man was getting drunk.

"Back in the days, I was a nobody. Everyone thought nothing good would come out of me. But look now, look around you boy, what do you see? Money and power more than anyone could wish for! I did this by my wits." He tapped his temple.

"I was so miserable and poor then, that my first wife would always taunt me." He tsked and shook his head.

"Her constant nagging was something else. It got to a point when her nagging didn't reduce even after the many warnings and beatings I gave her, I shut her up permanently."

He gave a wicked laugh and coughed.

He leaned towards Savior, his dark eyes glinting as if he wanted to share a major secret accomplishment with Savior.

"I remember that day as clearly as today. I was in the house and then she just barged in from her work and started ranting about what a mess I had made in the kitchen. Was that woman really expecting me to wash the dishes when she's there? Me?" He pointed his finger at his chest as if the notion was unthinkable.

"When she started screaming insults at my face, saying I was jobless, lazy, drunk, I couldn't take it anymore. Something snapped in me. I stormed into the kitchen in anger, to the sink. Maybe she thought her talking was finally hitting a spot in me and I wanted to clear up the mess. But no, how wrong she was." He chuckled evilly and rubbed his palms together.

"I brought out a dirty kitchen knife and with a brutality fueled by my rage, I ran it into her stomach several times."

The man was proudly demonstrating the stab with his clenched fist. Savior just stared at the drunk man. This man must have definitely had demons that haunted him from his childhood.

"I still remember the haunting look of shock and pain in her eyes as she crumbled to the floor in a pool of blood. Guess what I did with that annoying hag? I butchered her up and put her pieces in our deep freezer to enjoy hell for three days." The man roared in another hacking laughter like a maniac.

Savior was appalled but he didn't let it show. He kept a straight face, while he tried to imagine why anyone would conveniently kill his spouse and even go on to brag about it. His boss was a soulless creature with the potential to turn on anyone. Savior made a mental note to find out his weakness before the man turned on him too. Also, he had to be very careful around this man.

Turning serious all of a sudden, Tekena said, "Alpha Shadows has just begun, my boy. I want us to cut through those weaklings to our gain until they come begging us. I'm trusting you have the same aim." He gripped Savior's shoulder and looked at him straight in the eye.

Grimacing, Savior managed a nod in response.

Tekena closed his eyes and dropped his head to the headrest of the chaise lounge, an effect of the drowsiness the alcohol in his bloodstream brought. The wheels in Savior's head kept turning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE NEXT DAY, SUNDAY.

"I don't see what is still keeping you children upstairs in your rooms. We are almost late for church. Do I need to drag you both down here so that we can be on our way?" Righteous called out to her children from the bottom of the stairs.

Just like always, Righteous Green, a no-nonsense woman, a woman who was constantly time-conscious, had finished dressing up for Sunday service and was the first to go downstairs to the living room as she waited for her children to join her.

Having inculcated the same time consciousness in her children, they shouldn't have taken this long to join their mother who had been waiting for almost ten minutes, but today was one of the occasion they did the contrary for a change.

Righteous loved arriving at the church premises twenty to twenty-five minutes prior to the start of the program. Today, her spotless punctuality record was about to be soiled, thanks to her children who were dragging their feet this morning. It was beginning to irk her. Her taut patience was rapidly wearing thin as she glanced multiple times both at the wall clock and her wristwatch.

Like a typical African mother, she yelled and yelled at the top of her lungs for the children to get downstairs.

Unable to endure their mother's shouts, Ayanate and Preye burst out from their rooms into the hallway that led downstairs almost at the same time.

"Mum, it is barely 5:30 a.m. Keep your voice down, or else you are gonna wake up the entire estate," Preye said as he raced down the stairs to greet his mother with a kiss on her cheek.

"Don't touch me!" Righteous replied with a slap which he dodged just in time. Preye thanked his stars as he stylishly turned it into a joke. He would have been sporting a swollen purple face to church today.

Behind him, Righteous could see Ayanate hurriedly moving towards them with her makeup kit on one hand, her handbag and shoes on the other.

"I wasn't going to touch you. I was only going to give you a kiss on your cheek, but your behavior has made you miss my buenas tardes," Preye said to his fuming mother, chuckling.

"Hey, 'buenas tardes' is the Spanish word for saying good afternoon. You can't fool Mum while I'm here," Ayanate shouted a few inches away.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Busy body," Preye mumbled in response with a sheepish grin.

"Whatever," his sister replied, unaffected by his words.

"And what was keeping you children so long. I thought you would never come down," Righteous said, staring hard and somewhat suspiciously at both children.

"Well, we are here, Mum. Shall we?" asked Preye

"Where do you think you are going with that makeup bag?" Righteous asked, pointing towards her blind daughter even though she couldn't see her.

"Is that how you want to comment on how stunning I look?" asked Ayanate, twirling around flirtatiously, oblivious to her mother's glare.

But Preye was seeing the expression on their mother's face. He willed himself not to burst into spontaneous laughter. To him, that look of annoyance was priceless for his entertainment and amusement, so he decided to pull his mother's legs more.

"Also look at me, Mum. Don't I look like the perfect gentleman?" He asked, wiggling his eyebrows, licking his lips, adjusting his tie and stylishly displaying his Rolex.

Beside him, Ayanate was still twirling as she waited for a word of approval from Righteous.

Righteous gave them one last deadly look through her squinted eyes that could pierce through a rock-solid surface, then she huffed and stormed out of the living room.

Apparently giving up on wearing makeup, Ayanate tossed her makeup kit to one side, quickly putting on her shoes as she and her brother scrambled to catch up with their mother, giggling as they did.

Outside, Righteous sat down, with her arms angrily folded around her chest, in the driver's seat of her car and waited for her children to get into the backseat. But she watched, not surprisingly, as Preye held his sister's hand and gently guided her to his car with a smug smile on his face.

"I thought you children were coming with me?" she asked her children when they were a few inches away from the car.

"Of course we're coming with you," they replied almost in unison.

"So, why are you not entering the car?"

Ayanate took that one. "That's what we are about to do? Do you need a pair of good glasses too, Mum?"

Her brother laughed. What a contrast! His blind sister was asking his perfectly sighted mother if she needed a pair of glasses.

Righteous just watched her children in amazement for a while.

"Of course we are coming with you, Mum. We just didn't say we would drive in the same car," Preye continued. "Now, mum, if you don't mind, please be on your way. We would be happy to become your escort or make up your motorcade."

Righteous wanted to give a retort, but she just shook her head instead and hissed as she inserted her key into the ignition.

"Indomie generation." Righteous finally said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"No, mum, it's pizza. Pizza generation," Preye, who had heard his mother, corrected, laughing.

Breaking away from her brother, Ayanate successfully made it to the passenger's side of her brother's car, opened the passenger door, climbed in and secured her seat belt.

But before her brother could get the chance to do the same, Righteous fired up her car engine and zoomed off, not giving them the chance to be her escort or one small motorcade.

The man wakes in a daze.

He is expecting to wake up to another mundane day, in the monotonous environment that he has gotten so used to in the past few years, but to his utter bewilderment, something is different.

Instead of waking up on the hard, rough floor in Kirikiri maximum prison with a bruised and battered body filled with mosquito bite marks, he wakes up on a big, soft, feathered bed. His head is on a fluffy pillow. An electric blanket has even been draped over him to keep him warm throughout the night.

The whole thing isn't making sense. One minute he is sleeping and waking up in the prison and the next, he is waking up in a bedroom that he was also familiar with.

The man is obviously dumbfounded but he wouldn't do anything irrational about it. The unexpected but much-needed change brings warmth to his bruised and battered body and soul, and it makes him smile happily for the first time in a long while.

Wow! Wonders shall never cease. Did he just actually smile? He can't even remember the last time he did so.

How long has it been? A century? A millennium? Well, it doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that at the moment, he is smiling and he will savor each moment of it as though it would be his last.

Slowly, ever so slowly, as if he is handling a delicate moment that he doesn't want to break out from, he sweeps his gaze around the room to take in the environment.

That's when all the sweet and pleasant memories come rushing like a waterfall.

To his pleasant surprise, he is really not in the biggest prison in West Africa serving a life sentence.

His eyes recognize the bed sheets, the electric blankets that kept him warm, the wardrobe, lamp stand, antiques and the exquisite decor that is Alexandria's brainchild.

Yes, this is Alex's and his bedroom. This is their house.

No, this is not their house; it's Alex's property, solely under her name. But it doesn't matter, as long as they live together, under one roof. It doesn't matter because anything that belongs to Alex also belongs to him. That's it. Full stop.

The man is not related to Alex by blood. They are just boyfriend and girlfriend who are currently cohabiting. But it hardly makes any difference, because in their minds, he technically has joint ownership with Alex.

This is why he freely uses her car, resides in her four room bungalow apartment, eats her food and extravagantly spends her cash.

To all who are busy bodies, Alexandria is not complaining because she has made him the next of kin to all her estates. This includes her money in the bank and all her investments.

All this she has done and continues to do, all in a bit to impress him and make him pop that question a lot of women desire to hear.

In The Man's opinion, he rightfully owns everything, including her body because he is a man and Alex is simply a woman.

Also in his own opinion, in this side of the world, for a woman to own a property is a bad omen. And he can also put up a strong argument centering around the feminist controversy. Should women be independent and own properties or should that be strictly a right exclusively reserved for the male species? He supports the latter motion.

Because as far as he is concerned, the woman is, and will always belong to her father or to her husband. As it was in the beginning, so shall it be till the end, thank you very much.

Not too surprising, a majority of African men agree with his concept, deferring to some ancient, archaic tradition that ought to have been wiped off the face of God's green earth.

Talking about marriage, he is not Alex's husband. At least, not in the sense that he has paid her bride price, but with the way they are living together, he and Alex are practically husband and wife. That's the way he sees it.

Not just him, for even outsiders who do not know that they are cohabiting calls them Mr. and Mrs.

And Alex is comfortable to be seen and known as his wife even though he has yet to legally and officially give her his name.

Well, the time for all that will come. That's what he keeps telling Alex each time she begins to pressure him to go meet her parents and do the necessary things.

"I'm not asking for too much. We could just start with introduction and all the necessary rights, organize a little bride price ceremony for our families and a few friends to officially inform people that we are legally married.

"I'm not asking for a traditional marriage and a white wedding, we will let go of those ones. They might be too expensive for you and I understand. It's not like I don't have enough money to organize a traditional and white wedding if you give me the go-ahead. But forget it, the most important thing is that we get officially married.

"You know I love you so much, and you have also said it several times that you love me. So what still separates us from being together the way we should be?"

But after all these carefully planned and well-rehearsed speeches, he will still tell her to cool off, that there is still enough time and he is not running away. And indeed, he isn't running. After all, where will he go and leave behind all that he has been enjoying.

He isn't making ends meet. In fact, all he does is to make ends part. Alex gives him everything he wants, including her body. This is a rare opportunity that he never wants to pass.

There's only one thing she has not given him though. Something very important to him. Something he believes is one of the most important things for every man on earth.

She has not given him a child. This is the major reason he is holding back from going to her parents to inform them of his interest to marry their daughter.

The Man is sure that nothing is medically wrong with him, and even though Alex is also claiming the same thing, he isn't sure she is telling him the truth. As a matter of fact, he thinks she is lying to him. After all, she is not getting any younger and she is desperate to get married. The Man will not be coerced into marriage.

The Man has not always been honest over the years, dating from the start of their relationship, which is to say that it is not the same for Alex. She doesn't have the kind of character that could be attributed to a good and virtuous woman, so...

He has been planning to sneak up on her medical files one of these days to discover the truth for himself. But until then, he will continue to drag his foot and slow things down. Once again, he reminds himself that he is the man and Alex is simply the woman. All the cards are in his hands, this is reason enough for her to dutifully bow down to his every whim.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

EN ROUTE TO CHURCH.

Righteous was driving with a heavy heart, and it was because of her children.

Indeed, she knew what her children were trying to do this morning. She understood what they had been trying to do in recent times.

This morning, her children had been smiling and playfully teasing her.

To make her forget the pains, the struggles, the tears, heart breaks, disappointment... Name it.

But how could they? After everything that had happened in the past twenty-four years, why were they trying so hard to make her forget? As if it was that easy.

It was crazy. To her, it was very crazy.

How old were her children? Her daughter was twenty-one years old, and her son, twenty-four years old. But sometimes, he and his younger sister behaved like some bunch of spoiled kindergarten kids.

The children seemed to be enjoying what they were doing and sometimes she wanted to tell them to enjoy it while it lasted.

Life had a shrewd way of wiping off the smiles from one's innocent face and replacing it with many sorrows. Unfortunately, when it came, it came unannounced.

And this was why she was furious at them. Sometimes she wanted to slap some sense into their heads and ask them to wake up to reality.

To tell the truth, sometimes she was also jealous of their carefree lifestyle. Sometimes she wished, even for a minute, to be like them. To know what it felt like not to cry over the negative decisions and regrets from the past, feeling depressed about present situations, and not worrying or feeling anxious about the uncertainty of the future.

But the other times, she wanted to tell them not to be deceived, that whatever happiness they thought they were experiencing now was just a scam. She wanted to tell them that it was a big sham and they should wake up to the reality before the unexpected happened to them the way it did to her.

Experience was, indeed, a teacher, and a brutal one for that matter.

If only she could turn back the hands of time and become nineteen again, prior to the time she met Henry, prior to when the world went bananas on her.

Regrets, regrets, regrets. She had a buttload of them.

The only regret she did not have was her two lovely children. Many people were not able to bear children of their own.

Okay, and her gift of salvation. A lot of people did not have this free but priceless treasure.

And a successful career. Not everyone, including her counterparts could boast of this.

A conducive home and a welcoming environment. Billions all over the world were sleeping under the bridges, dangerous places and run-down, dingy apartments, exposed to cold and mosquitoes and all manner of hazards.

Food. Many were currently starving and suffering from lack of balanced diet and malnutrition.

What about the clothes on her body and her children's? Sound health. A fancy ride.

Alright, there were a lot of things to be happy and grateful for.

So why was she feeling overwhelmed with so much anguish instead of gratitude? Why did she worry so much, and feel anxious about everything?

Did Christ not warn his followers against this very thing she was doing? Did he not say to be anxious for nothing?

Did the Holy Spirit not admonish the early church through the mouth of the apostles? In Apostle Paul's epistles to the Philippian Christians, specifically chapter four verse six and seven, where it stated: *'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'*

In Matthew 6:25-27, Jesus Christ told his followers that they should... *“Not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Isn't life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”*

Jesus also says in Matthew 6:34, *“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”*

Did Christ not make provisions for every worry and anxiousness?

Wasn't that why he said in the book of John 14:27, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”*

So, why then, was she rejecting that peace?

She wasn't the only one who had suffered. Her children, too, had been in this all the way. Even her parents.

But now, it seemed like everyone had moved on and left her behind.

Why? Why? Because it's not easy.

It's not easy to just forget and move on, and her children were supposed to know better. In short, they knew better.

And why shouldn't they? Her son, who had managed to grow up without his biological father and who was also the only man in the family, had not only become a son and a big brother, but had become like a father as well to his sister.

Oh, and what of her only daughter who got blind at the age of sixteen, on the day of her final WASSCE papers?

Anyone who saw her laughing and smiling today would not know that she'd gone through hell, especially for the past five years. She too, just like her only brother, had grown up without her father.

As a daughter, Righteous loved and adored her doting father. Till date, she still had a lot of sweet, fun memories of her father.

She remembered those moments when her mother would want to punish her when she did something wrong and her father would step in and plead for mercy on her behalf. Sometimes, he would even cajole her mother with the promise of giving her that money she asked him for the previous week.

No matter how strong her mother's bravado was, her father would always melt it with a little reasoning.

She could also remember that her father played with her a lot and she teased him several times.

The only times she got punished severely was when her father wasn't around. And that was mostly because her brothers who were jealous that she was getting preferential treatment wouldn't fail to immediately report her and instigate her against their mother.

The father-daughter relationship had always been the most envious relationship in the family, and she had always wished that her daughter had the privilege of experiencing and enjoying it like she had.

Although, no matter the relationship between father and daughter, her mother will always be her confidant. You don't just walk up to your father now and tell him of your first boyfriend, first kiss, first love, or anything like that in Africa. Your father would chase the innocent young boy around the town with a loaded shotgun.

Nevertheless, this was the kind of relationship Righteous had been privileged to enjoy with her father, but her daughter never did.

Whenever these bitter and depressing thoughts crossed her mind, she mentally chided and berated herself, feeling guilty, believing that it was all her fault because of the bad decision she made.

But just as equally, the word of God would speak to her heart, letting her know and understand that her sins were forgiven. Letting her know that there was no condemnation to them who were in Christ Jesus.

So, this morning, on her way to church, she accepted the truth of God's word and love over her life and began giving thanks.

The devil, after suffering another round of utter defeat over this soul that he wanted so badly to waste, he packed all his baggage and left her for a season.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Man hears a muffled creak at the door and looks towards the direction.

He can see his girlfriend, Alex, walk in with a beautifully designed ceramic tray that contains four slices of coconut bread, scrambled eggs, fried plantain and a mug of piping hot cocoa, with a gracious smile on her face to give him breakfast in bed.

His stomach rumbles upon seeing the delicious breakfast, and his taste buds come alive, leaking saliva.

The Man smiles satisfactorily at Alex. The faithful queen has come to serve the king his breakfast in bed.

Alex is walking towards him seductively, in slow motion. She is taking her precious time. He can see the twinkle in her eyes that shows him that she is enjoying making him wait. No problems. This is part of their romance. He isn't complaining, no, not at all. In fact, he relishes it.

But, the scene changes abruptly. Halfway to his bed where he is waiting for her to bring the breakfast, her smile begins to fade and her face morphs into a deep, hideous scowl.

The man is shocked with the abrupt change of attitude. He immediately looks around and behind him to see what she is scowling at. Nothing seems to be out of place. When his gaze returns to her, he sees that she is staring directly at him.

If eyes could kill, then he would have died six seconds ago. Her raging eyes are shooting daggers and lasers at him. She is quaking with a violent fury against him.

Cold chills run down his spine, his body trembles, and his face breaks out in sweat. The Man is very scared. He has never seen such an unguarded display of anger from Alex before. It terrifies him.

Her lips barely move but he distinctly hears the words that stop him cold.

"You killed me."

Without warning, the food tray violently crashes to the ground. Its contents splatters all over the floor.

His mind begins to protest but his lips will not form the words, so he keeps staring wide-eyed at the furious Alex.

He has seen her angry before, but it's nothing compared to what he is seeing now.

He hears the words again, and it almost sucks the breath out of him.

"You killed me, and you will pay for it!"

The man is shocked at this unexpected turn around. What should he do?

He should run away immediately. Yes, that was the right thing to do at this moment. The house is no longer his safe haven but it is now haunted by a ghost. It is now haunted by Alex.

Before he could bolt from the bed, Alex surprisingly appeared in front of him with the same food tray with all its contents in it, effectively blocking his path. He gasps at the abruptness of her appearance. She looks even more menacing up close.

Without a word, she empties the slices of bread, hot fried plantain and scrambled eggs on his body. She also empties the mug of hot chocolate on his flesh and smashes his head with the ceramic food tray. The man screeches out in pain but there is no iota of mercy in her eyes.

It doesn't end there. As a matter of fact, it is just the beginning.

He cries out in pain, begging Alex to stop.

He keeps begging and telling her that he did not intentionally kill her. She doesn't listen.

After breaking the food tray on his head, she begins kicking and clawing at him.

Suddenly her voice turns into a million voices and continues shouting, each one straining to be heard above the other.

"You killed me and you must pay!" "You killed me and you must pay!" "You killed me and you must pay!"
"You killed me and you must pay!"

The voices become louder and louder as they multiply in boomeranging echoes. At this point, the man has lost count of the voices.

And now, he no longer feels only a pair of hands and legs kicking him. He can see and feel a lot of them beating and clobbering at him.

No amount of begging will pacify them.

"You will pay. You who kill, you will pay."

The voices continue like a mantra as they deliver their own form of vengeance.

As the Green siblings drove to church in a separate car from their mother's, they were chatting and laughing as the car stereo played a Christian song from a radio station.

But after some time, Ayanate stopped her own side of the conversation, eventually forcing her brother to do the same as well, and sharply turned to him.

"See eh, Preye, I've told you before that you should stop calling me baby."

"What now?"

"You almost did it this morning at home." Her voice was accusatory.

"Nearly is not a crime."

"I don't want you to attempt it."

"En-hen? Tell me something," Preye replied nonchalantly with his eyes fixed on the road as he drove speedily to catch up with their mother now well ahead of them.

"I've told you, next time you call me baby again..."

Her brother cranked up the car stereo, drowning out her voice. He bobbed his head comically in rhythm with the song and let out a whoop.

Ayanate's serious face melted as she collapsed in a heap of laughter.

They finally got to the church and secured a space for themselves in the parking lot.

Stepping out of the vehicle, they joined the throng of human beings who were going inside the church auditorium. They were seven minutes early, instead of the usual twenty.

The church was already buzzing with a lot of activities.

The hundred-thousand capacity auditorium, popularly known as Glory Dome, was currently the biggest church auditorium in the world. There were also other surrounding buildings which were a few thousand capacities that were used by the church in all their services for overflows.

The church's major emphasis was on evangelism and soul winning, thus, they had other satellite churches in other parts of the country and around the globe.

Preye and his sister were fortunate to get a seat for themselves inside the church auditorium. It was almost filled up to the needed capacity.

A few more church members entered before the ushers closed the doors and directed the rest to the overflows.

Unfortunately for Righteous, even though she made it to the auditorium, she was unable to sit on her favorite spot which was close to the front roll.

Yes, even in a big and crowded church like that, there were people like Righteous who often came early to stake out a claim for themselves just behind the pastors and other ministers.

Preye peered into the crowd, his eyes searching for his mother.

As soon as he spotted her, he gave a little wave and told his sister her location. With his oral direction, Ayanate wheeled towards her mother and sent her a wave.

Righteous was sitting in the same row as her children, but she was a few seats away, the ones between them having been occupied by other church members.

A man was seated to Righteous' right side and he tried to make small conversation with her.

"He looks handsome and clean shaven," Preye described the man to his sister.

"Okay, what is he wearing?"

He trailed off with some designer this and designer that.

"Age range?"

"What? I didn't catch that." He said, tilting his head and bringing his ear closer to her mouth.

"I asked what his age range was."

"Mid to late forties."

"So, this makes him how many years older than mum?"

He displayed two and five fingers separately but quickly drew them back when he remembered what he was doing.

"Between two to five years," he finally said.

"Okay, that's cool. Now we just have to see if he's wearing a wedding band."

"But you know it's not all married people that wear a wedding band."

"Just check first," she said with a tone of voice that told him that she was up to something.

"Okay, okay, I'm doing that now."

He strained his eyes as he checked. The man's ring finger was bare.

The children began to get excited. This might be the much-needed break their mother deserved.

Preye could see the man putting on his best smile as he kept trying to make some conversation with her.

Around them, some of the church members were seated, praying for the service that was about to start. A few members sat still while the rest discussed with families and friends.

The man that was chatting with Righteous was oblivious to her silent message but her son could see clearly that she wasn't interested in the conversation.

Preye relayed his mother's disinterest in the man to his sister.

"Forget it, she is just playing hard to get," Ayanate told him.

"How sure are you?"

"Just watch, sooner or later she will start cracking like biscuits."

"Are you willing to bet on that?"

"Cross my heart," she replied with a smile.

Righteous swiveled her gaze towards her children's direction and saw them smiling knowingly at her. She reciprocated their gesture with a scowl.

She gave them the look that read, "Una don enter my soup today."

That was a pidgin way of saying, "You guys are in trouble with me today."

But her children, clearly not bothered, grinned and waved at her.

Finally figuring that it would be better to listen to this pestering man than to keep looking at her children, she turned towards him and wrapped her attention around the conversation.

Immediately the hour struck six, the church's first service began with an opening prayer of thanksgiving.

Four more services would follow.

If only Ayanate knew how utterly wrong her prediction was, she wouldn't have made that ridiculous bet with her brother.

As soon as the church service started, Righteous was greatly relieved that the boring conversation had come to an abrupt halt.

Her children could think all they wanted but she would never have anything to do with the man who introduced himself with the name she didn't desire to hear that morning. He had introduced himself as Henry. Henry something. She had forgotten his surname because it was his first name that mattered to her.

At first she thought the man was playing a creepy prank on her, but she later realized that he didn't know her prior to this time. Why did he have to bear the same name as her lost-but-never-found husband.

"Lift up your hands and worship the King of kings and the Lord of lords," the lead chorister began after the opening prayers had been said by the coordinator.

Righteous relaxed her mind and concentrated on the service.

She needed a lot of healing, and the presence of God was her only hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

KIRIKIRI MAXIMUM PRISON, LAGOS, NIGERIA.

The Man woke up for the second time, disoriented. This was a different place from the last, a place that he had been waking up for the past decade.

As usual, he woke up with his mind and body dishevelled. He could feel the rough and hard prison floor beneath his skin as he laid on his back.

Now this was where he knew all too well that he should wake up, but had never been able to get used to, regardless of the fact that he'd spent a decade in that correctional center.

As usual, he'd just woken up from another series of nightmares again, and each one was becoming worse than the previous.

Could there be no end to a man's suffering? Was there no end to his suffering? How long? How long could he take before he called it quit?

He had already made up his mind to spend eternity in hell to pay for his sins. So, why then, could the devil not wait for him to die first before tormenting him with the fires and brimstone of hell?

No, the devil was also a sinner like him. Not just any sinner, but a condemned one whose fate was permanently sealed.

So he was sure that his problem was not with the devil. His problem was with God.

God must be so furious at him that he couldn't even wait for him to die first before tormenting him.

So far, he had been doing the right thing. At least what he believed was the right thing by accepting the guilty verdict on him.

He had not even begged nor had he protested. Like a sheep taken to the slaughter, he had willingly accepted his fate or what he thought was his faith.

Why did God hate him to such an extent that he couldn't even bear to see him with his holy eyes on this green earth?

The man began mumbling and asking God to give him time. Just a little more time.

He would soon die and God could be free to do whatever he wanted to do. But please, a little moment of peace was all he was asking for.

He looked around him and noticed that no one was close to him at the moment. He was grateful that no one could see his struggle.

He looked a little bit farther and noticed that the usually crowded cell was half emptied of human beings.

The handful of people who were milling around didn't even notice him. If they did, they didn't act like it.

Where was everyone?

He did a quick memory check. Today was Sunday. Then he remembered that the reason most of the prisoners were not around was because they had gone to church.

Once again he was grateful for that as well. If anyone was seeing his current disheveled state, he knew the outcome would be unpleasant throughout the new week and weeks to come.

His actions would be perceived as weakness, and he didn't want to become a topic of discussion, nor did he want to become the reason his fellow prisoners would jest.

The man got up from his sleeping position and went out into the bright morning. The sun was just beginning to rise.

People passed by him but no one stopped to greet or for a little conversation and he was okay with that. He wasn't in the mood to talk to anybody and he didn't want anyone talking to him either.

He moved to his favorite spot which was beneath a mango tree and sat down.

He must have imagined how horrible he smelt right now for he was yet to bathe, wash his face or brush his teeth. But at the moment, he didn't care about any of those things.

He heard the familiar baritone voice of the prison chaplain resonating from the church speakers, and he knew that the sermon had begun.

As always, the man would hear but he would not care to listen. All those religious mumbo jumbo weren't helping him.

"I'm telling you not to let the lies of the devil overcome and defeat you."

The chaplain was preaching to his congregation but the man felt as though the preacher was replying to his last thoughts.

"I want you to know that no matter what you have done, Jesus loves you. Jesus will always love you."

The chaplain's voice kept resonating through the speakers and firing their way into the man's heart. But he simply did not believe it. He would not believe it.

"I'm telling you today that Jesus loves you. Can somebody shout Hallelujah?"

"Hallelujah!" the congregation shouted excitedly.

The good chaplain continued.

"It doesn't matter how long you have stayed in this prison or the guilty verdict that brought you here, I just want to let you know that Jesus loves you."

"I want you to repeat after me. I want you to say, ``Jesus loves me."

"Jesus loves me!" the prisoners reverberated those words with a loud and deafening roar.

"I want you to shout it louder so that the heavens, the earth, the devil and his demons will hear you."

"Jesus loves me!"

"I can't hear you. I said you should repeat these words after me. I want you to say Jesus loves me."

"Jesus loves me."

"Louder."

"Jesus loves me!"

"Louder."

"Jesus loves me!"

"I want you to say it louder."

"Jesus loves me!"

As the crescendo from the congregation died down, the chaplain continued.

For a while, The Man actually wanted to believe what the chaplain was saying. But how could it be that Jesus truly loved him?

How could Jesus love him? How could Jesus love a piece of rotten garbage like him?

Maybe God loved some human beings. That was a reasonable way of putting it. But how could he be part of them?

No, Jesus certainly didn't love him. At least, if he wasn't sure of it, the situation around him was enough fact.

"It doesn't matter what you have done, it doesn't matter if you are the worst sinner that ever lived. Jesus still loves you and there is hope for you."

Unable to take it anymore, The Man stood up and walked off.

The prison chaplain went on to give some Bible references about sinners God saved, but The Man was no longer within an earshot.

CHAPTER THIRTY

What a beautiful place.

That place that was known for its beauty and splendor. That place that defied all mortal description.

A place filled with joyous laughter, indescribable beauty and spunky colors.

This holy celestial body was known for its numerous names like Paradise, The Third Heaven, The Kingdom of God, a place of rest for the Saints of God, etc.

That was where a caring father was as he stared down into the earth, watching how his son's life was playing out in the cosmos.

On earth, it was a Sunday morning and the saints were worshiping.

But that was not the case for this man's son, who before the hour of his and his wife's death, had been brought up to know the Lord.

The spirit of the deceased Nigerian police sergeant was watching his only son and only child utterly turning away from his first love and going after worldly lust and unrequited vengeance.

"What are you doing?" he asked worriedly even though his son could not hear him, much less give him an answer.

His son, Savior, was visiting with some of his friends who were drinking and having vain conversations. He could hear how they made plans about some party, girls and clubbing later in the day.

The spirit of his mother joined the police sergeant and she also watched her son.

It broke their hearts to see their son deviating from what they taught him.

Before they went home to be with their maker, the spiritual life of their son had always bothered them.

As a child, Savior had loved the Lord and was dedicated to him.

He always came first in the children's bible class. His parents were so happy for him. They loved him and encouraged him to go deeper in his faith.

His parents knew that he was a great child and they believed in him.

But as the years went by, his parents watched, in horror, as Savior's love and devotion to God waxed cold and eventually fizzled out. Not long after their deaths, which was the last straw that broke the camel's back, he turned into an agnostic.

While they were alive, he still went with his parents to church, but it was no more out of devotion and love for God. After the unexpected death of his parents, he completely stopped.

He had only been going to church to please them; there was no need for him to continue after they left him.

With their spiritual eyes still on him, they could see what his physical eyes could not see. He was spiritually blind.

They could see the constant battle between demons and the warrior angels of God for his soul.

The prayers they'd prayed for his salvation before their deaths were working in his life. This was why the warrior angels were fighting, and this was why heaven had not given up on him yet.

Both parents wished that they could go and shake him hard, and remind him of God's unconditional love, but they knew that their prayers were doing more than anything they could physically do.

Still, they wanted to start seeing the results. Both parents badly wanted their son to join them here for eternity when his days on earth were over.

They both felt a gentle tap on their shoulders. Without having to turn around, they already knew who it was. No one else had that kind of gentle, worry-diffusing touch.

Still, they simultaneously spun around and beheld the smiling face of Jesus Christ.

There he was, standing in all his glory and splendor.

His smile was like the glimmer of a rainbow around a waterfall, but a million times more. For the purpose of his personal visit to comfort them, he'd stepped down the glare of the light that accompanied him everywhere he went. Still, the sergeant and his wife felt as if they could never get used to his brilliance.

Both parents immediately relaxed under his touch.

Smiling peacefully, the police sergeant saluted. "Oh, hi, Jesus."

"And how are you two doing today?"

Both parents replied to him with a hint of concern for their son. Jesus looked down at what they were watching and a flitting expression of grief and pain passed across his face.

"I understand how you feel."

Jesus spoke with a voice that showed that even though he wasn't happy with the current situation, it wasn't impossible for him to sort out.

"We know that whatever we feel is a speck of dust compared to what you feel. Not just for our son alone, but for your creation that has rejected you," Savior's mother said with emotion, her eyes brimming with tears.

As a confirmation to their statement, Jesus smiled grimly. He turned his attention back to the slowly-spinning blue-green globe. "Many people have turned away from my love and embraced the wicked one. It hurts me to see them going astray as sheep to the slaughter." He paused for a while and sighed.

"But, don't worry, the prayers you prayed for your son are still working, and I'm not giving up on him."

Savior's mother exclaimed happily and embraced Jesus in glee. "I know you'd never give up on him. Thank you, thank you so much!"

"What a fortunate child he is for having parents who didn't give up on him. A lot of children are not as fortunate as him, not even children from some Christian homes. I'm glad that exceptional parents like you understood the importance of prayers. If only a lot of parents would have the same understanding.

"It is my desire that more of my people who are called by my name would stop sleeping and slumbering. If only they would rise up in prayers. I will hear them, because my ears are not deaf that I cannot hear neither are my eyes blind that I can not see.

"If only they would stop claiming that evil is all my will, even when it is the enemy's doing. If only they would rise up in faith and take up their place in prayers and change unwanted situations around them.

"For the fact that I love them so much to not want any harm to happen to them, I have also given them the full rights and freedom to make their own choices. Even at that, I try to make them understand that even though they are in the world they are not of the world.

"My people are my ambassadors, and I've given them the power to operate thus. But the enemy has and is still trying hard to make them forget their rights and privileges. This is why a lot of people try to hold me responsible by claiming that every evil that happens in their lives is my will.

"But it is not and can never be. I make it clear to them that Satan is the god of the world. He is the one afflicting them with sickness, poverty, earthquakes, wars, sin and all kinds of afflictions. They say I am a loving God and yet they contradict themselves by saying that I am in control of all the evil going on in the world. But how can I be a loving God and afflict my children with so much suffering?

"No, a loving God is supposed to protect and deliver his people. And that's why I taught them how to pray during my days on earth. My people must take their authority in the place of prayers and enforce the will of the Father on earth.

"I have done everything, and the devil is a defeated foe. He is powerless in the place where my people are concerned. The victory I have is theirs for the taking. I just want them to exercise the authority I have given them in my name by faith.

"But many are still asking me to do what I have given them power and authority to do. This scenario is like when you wake up in the morning and you want to brush your teeth. You already have your toothbrush, toothpaste and even the ability to do that, but you are calling on another to provide all those things and brush your teeth. You see how ludicrous it sounds?

"Or you have legs but you are telling another person to walk for you. Do you tell someone to eat for you when you have a mouth and can eat?"

Even though Jesus was asking a rhetorical question, the parents slowly shook their heads.

"But I can understand the struggles they are going through day by day and my Grace is always sufficient. No matter what, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail over it."

When Jesus finished talking, both parents bowed down and worshiped him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Another Monday had arrived. A start of another week to go through the motions of work, work and more work.

Having arrived at his office by six o'clock, an hour before the official resumption, Munachimso worked his head off, but still, his work was far from finished.

A lot of deadlines were rapidly approaching and he needed to catch up.

There were lots of pending apps to work on and new ones he had to code and design.

And right there in his company, there were several new and old clients waiting for him at the reception area. He didn't like keeping them waiting, but at the moment, this is what it had resulted to.

The door to his office creaked and opened, Munachimso was slightly offended by the unwanted distraction. He glanced up from his monitor in time to see his receptionist poking her head into his office. That was her way of telling him that she was inviting herself in.

Unlike the other staff workers, the female receptionist was the only one who didn't have the decency of knocking before entering his office and he knew why.

The receptionist, whose name was Queen West, was a chubby lady of an average height.

She was four years older than him, but this wasn't the major reason for her disregard towards him as her boss.

At the moment, she was professionally dressed in the kind of attire that was meant to be a sight for sore eyes, and meant to make the rich guys with a fat pocket not mind waiting for hours on end.

It had been the plan all along. Queen was supposed to be an enigma, the one that would make the rich clients interested enough to want to wait to unravel her like a new package.

But there was nothing new about her to Munachimso. At least, not since she started working for him.

Four months after she began working for him as his receptionist, the both of them had been infatuated with each other.

To him, it was nothing more than the fling to pacify his testosterone. A quickie. That's all.

But this was not the case for his receptionist who, obviously, was expecting something more. She succeeded in coaxing him into a relationship.

It ended as quickly as it started.

She always complained about not getting as much of his attention as she deserved and how he was giving more attention to only his work and himself. Never the type that could be held down with one woman for long, he dissolved the relationship.

During their relationship—if that is what you'd even call constant sex and nothing relevant on which to build anything fruitful—he watched and observed how the girl who was supposed to be his receptionist upgraded herself to boss lady.

She still remained dedicated to her job, and that's one thing that he would give her credit for. But she spoke to her fellow employees, even those who were higher than her, anyway she wanted, fearing no reprisal.

She paraded herself in the company as though she had joint ownership with him and made it clear to everyone that something was going on between her and their boss.

He did try to put up with her atrocious attitude. He often overlooked it when she spoke to some of his employees rudely and shouted at them unnecessarily.

Disgusted and unable to take more, he spoke to her about it in one of their private moments. Instead of getting a satisfactory answer, she ended up smothering his face with kisses, telling him that she was just trying to handle the employees to bring out the best in them.

As if he didn't know how to handle his own employees.

Even so, what had she offered the company?

Because of the way she had been strict towards her subordinates, making sure everything was perfectly in order and to the schedule, he'd thought she might have a crucial contribution to make for the growth of the company, but she had only proven herself to be a beauty without brains.

He still retained her as his receptionist after the relationship was over, not after admonishing her that it would be strictly business henceforth.

But she didn't listen.

Being a specialist in using her body to get what she wanted, she constantly displayed her 'assets' just to remind him of what he was missing.

If only she knew that the breakup was a relief to him, that he wasn't interested in romance.

There was one lady he secretly wished he was in a relationship with, though, if he had the chance to.

"Some of our clients from last week are here. They said they urgently need to see you," Queen West said, distracting him from his reverie.

"Which of them?" he asked.

"The ones from the bank."

He looked at her in silence for a while before he asked, "What did you tell them?"

"What did you expect me to say? I told them the usual blah blah blahs about formally booking an appointment and all that stuff."

He ignored her rude tone. That was what she resorted to when she realized that she could not get to him again.

"And what did they say?"

The receptionist pushed back free strands of her wig, shifted her weight on one side of her hip seductively and resumed answering.

She was making her moves on him again and he knew it. She didn't just come to his office to talk about the clients because it was something she would have done by calling him from her receptionist desk. Apparently, she wouldn't take no for an answer. He'd soon find a way to get rid of her for good.

"They told me that it was too urgent and they couldn't go through all the protocols. So upon their insistence, I told them that I'd come and check if you'd be too occupied to attend to them."

"Let them in. I'll see them now," he told Queen as his gaze returned to his monitor. He was evidently dismissing her.

The receptionist stood for a while in silence, disappointed that she didn't get the kind of response that she wanted.

She started to exit his office with a haughty catwalk. She got to the door and was about to open when his voice called out to her.

"Queen?"

She partially spun around, smiling in hope that her charms had eventually taken their effect. "Yes?"

Munachimso looked at her with a face devoid of expression.

That was all she could reply to him. No more, "Yes, sir." That was how it had been since the accursed relationship started. Maybe he should fire her now for insubordination. After all, he was still her boss and the executive owner of this enterprise.

"Inform everybody that we will be having a brief meeting after the close of work today."

"Is that all?" she asked with an annoyed frown, one hand on the doorknob. She pushed it open, and without waiting for a reply, she began to step out.

He ignored her attitude. "Just remind them that nobody should go home until after the meeting."

"Okay," she said, stifling a hiss, and slammed his door.

He shook his head and returned to his work. She was a piece of cake to him, and he knew how he could deal with her when he wanted.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

POLICE STATE COMMAND, MOSCOW ROAD, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

Wednesday came too quickly for the Rivers State commissioner.

Today made it exactly two weeks since he received the mysterious call on his personal mobile number and the armed robbery attack that followed a week later at the estate.

The events were moving too rapidly for him. His mind was reeling and he'd barely had time to process anything before being plunged into another call with the mysterious person against his own will.

The Rivers State police commissioner was currently in his office, and just as promised, the mysterious caller was on the phone with him.

"You still haven't told me anything reasonable about the people, or should I say your colleagues? That's right, your colleagues that died. You categorically told me that two armed robbers would die and the rest would escape." The commissioner was pacing back and forth in his spacious office, speaking at the top of his husky voice, but he didn't care.

"Everything went as you predicted. The only thing I can figure out here is that you definitely have a hand in all this and I'm no more playing hide and seek with you."

Abubakar was finally having it out with the unknown caller, and he wasn't planning to let go. Just like the first time, the commissioner had been on call with this unknown person for over four minutes, yet, the person wasn't saying anything reasonable. When Abubakar discovered that his brain was being manipulated, he became furious.

Savior had been calmly listening as the commissioner made his case. Even though the man was yelling at the top of his lungs, Savior wasn't the least bit afraid.

This ongoing call was long-awaited. As a bride faithfully awaited her bridegroom, he knew that it was how the commissioner had been anticipating his call. Heck, by now, the commissioner probably has his best tech guys on this call, trying to track it.

Now that he was finally on the phone with the commissioner, they'd been going back and forth for over the last four minutes about the operation that took place last week.

"The bullets that were discovered from the gunshot wounds were not from our own machine guns. I've also seen the bodies of the dead men. They were obviously shot and killed from the front and at close range while my men were pursuing from the back. That was the mistake you made, killing them the way you did, and it has no doubt exposed you."

But, that was where he got it wrong. It was no mistake. Savior had intentionally made it so. Before carrying out the operation, he'd meticulously laid out his plans. There was no way something as little as that could have slipped off his attention.

"Apart from the bullets and the gunshot wounds that you claim is from my gun, which other evidence do you have to prove that I was responsible for the deaths of the two armed robbers?" the boy asked calmly.

Abubakar was taken aback by the calmness in the caller's voice, but he would not be perturbed. He would not be shaken from his resolve.

"Oh, come on, your fingerprint is obviously all over this thing. Stop denying it! What I'm yet to understand is why you turned on your own people. There must definitely be something in it for you."

"Oga commissioner, you still haven't answered my question. Instead, what you've been trying to do for the past two minutes is to coerce me into admitting something you have no proof of. I should think you are more brilliant than that."

"You need what? My answer? Oh, that is quite simple. You called me prior to the operation and gave me a carefully laid out plan. You asked me to follow it. You told me that if I did anything contrary to my given instruction, my men would suffer for it. You specifically told me on record that they would return in body bags. So, the game is over, my friend, it's time for you to give up."

"Actually, sir, the game is far from over. It is just the beginning."

"What? What did you say?"

"I'm sure you heard me correctly the first time, sir, but since this is way above your shock absorber, I'm going to repeat myself. Actually, sir, the game is far from over. It is just the beginning."

Those words chimed like bells in Abubakar's head.

Actually, sir, the game is far from over, it is just beginning. Actually, sir, the game is far from over, it is just beginning. Actually, sir, the game is far from over, it is just beginning...

Beginning, beginning, beginning...

Abubakar rubbed his temples. A full blasted migraine was coming up. He went to his table drawer and took out a bottle of aspirin, took out the last two tablets, and guzzled it down into his stomach with a glass of water.

"Are you still there, sir?" Abubakar could hear the caller's voice asking him but the voice sounded distant. He let out a string of curses as his befitting reply.

"I told you before, sir, that I don't like it when people cuss, even though I do that a lot. Apparently, the first time is never enough for you."

"Don't even start with me again. I am not cut out for your mind games this time around," the commissioner snapped harshly.

Savior laughed. "Of course, of course, sir, I wasn't going to play any games with you. Now that you have your own theory, will you allow me to give you my own theory so that you can compare notes?"

The commissioner didn't answer. Instead, he mentally berated himself for what he was doing right now. What was he doing? Oh, what was he doing? He wasn't supposed to be on the phone with this incognito killer. He should be giving out the word to his men to hunt him down.

But strangely, he found himself hesitating slightly to take action, that was because he was actually curious to know what the caller had to say.

He was yet to give a reply, so the unknown caller waited him out.

"What could you possibly tell me that could clear you?" the police commissioner finally asked.

"Why don't you give me the benefit of doubt until you finish hearing me?"

"I'm giving you the benefit of doubt, but I should let you know that you have a limited amount of time. As I speak to you, my men are bearing down on you."

The caller called his bluff. "I'd love to see them try." He gave a slight chuckle.

"All the best to you and your men."

The commissioner berated himself all the more. He'd just made a fool of himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

What could he possibly do now to salvage the situation? Aha! The previous technique should do.

To the caller, he said, "This call will be disconnected after this countdown."

"No, that's not fair. I didn't time you."

"You have just wasted ten seconds of your precious time."

"Okay, okay, so, how much time do I have this time around?"

"When the line goes dead, just know that your time is over."

"Alright, I guess I'll just have to make do with what I have. You've left me with no choice, you know. So you are really a time conscious human being? What's with you and all this—"

"You've wasted almost twenty-five seconds of your..."

"Okay, I'll talk now like I am being timed even though you and I know that you are not actually timing me. You see, Mr. Commissioner, I am beginning to like this cat-and-mouse game you and I are playing."

Once again, the police commissioner was cornered, probably by a small boy that could be young enough to be his son. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Just end this call now and stop making a fool of yourself.

Just when he was about to press the end call button on his phone screen, the caller began talking and his tone was all business, the police commissioner couldn't help but listen.

"I'm going to try to be as succinct as possible.

"I have a very long credential but since I promised to be short and precise, the short version of it is that I have the kind of qualification that could earn me a place with the American CIA or FBI, even the Israeli Mossad and Shin Bet. Am I exaggerating? I'll leave you to be the judge of that."

Unaware of the call his second-in-command was currently making, Tekena Green's entourage was just about to enter one of his largest warehouses. The one with a secret link to his house.

If only he knew what was about to happen in the next few minutes, he would have turned around and possibly tried to cart off his most valuable treasures from that place.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

"These facts exponentially heightened my abilities to find out about the operation," Savior continued.

The commissioner was now giving the caller his undivided attention. Even though the caller had been merry-go-rounding at first, he turned out to be very informative.

"You probably don't know this but Alpha Shadows have a highly encrypted database, state-of-the art, where they store up most information about them."

What was unknown to the commissioner was that the same person speaking was the one who developed the database with a strong encryption when he was trying to gain the favor, trust, confidence of the leader of Alpha Shadows and climb up the food chain.

"After a painstaking effort into their highly encrypted database, I finally succeeded in hacking into their archive and pulled out a lot of files containing clandestine details about the operations that would be carried out that week.

"You should note that I didn't take only that of Rivers State. I also took out a lot of files that contained details of operations in major states like Lagos, Kano, Kaduna, Enugu, Anambra, Ogun, Akwa-Ibom, Delta and Abuja.

"The commissioners of the states I mentioned and the Federal Capital Territory are my allies. You can call them to verify if they received an anonymous tip about some clandestine operations.

"And since you are a newspaper person, I believe you read the news last weekend about how some of the gunmen who were suspected to be members of Alpha Shadows in those States were killed on site. Those who escaped did so with a bullet wound; the rest were apprehended. That was the result of the Intel I gave your police buddies."

The commissioner was both surprised and momentarily confused on what to say. This was never what he expected. He expected that the unknown caller would give him a cock and bull story. Never did he imagine something as brilliant as this.

He was sure that he had covered all the bases. He was even making plans on the best way to get this person behind bars. Instead, he was thrilled with what he was hearing. It was either this person was a harmful and dangerous liar, or he could be telling the truth. If it was the former, then the Nigerian Police Force had just landed themselves a big fish to fry. But if the latter was the case, how would he know?

What should he do? Has his job just gotten more complicated?

After a brief contemplation and still not coming to a decisive moment or giving an accurate verdict about the integrity of the unknown caller, he decided to probe further.

"So, why did you insist prior to the operation that my men should follow your information and instruction to the letter if you are still claiming not to have a hand in this?" asked the commissioner.

"I did so because it was the safest way your men could engage these guys without getting victimized from a firefight with them."

"Did I just hear you correctly?" Abubakar asked, the incredulity evident in his voice.

"Yes, sir. Crystal clear."

"Victimize?"

"Yes, victimize."

"Did you- wait, did you actually use that word?" Try as he might, the commissioner could not just shake off his amusement.

"I'm not accustomed to repeating clear answers."

Abubakar's laugh was filled with derision. "What are you? Guardian angel man, I think, sent to protect the same people who put their lives on the line every day to protect other lives and properties. Protector of the protectors. Jehovah God, Allah... Which should I call you? Are we supposed to be worshiping you or what?" the commissioner said sarcastically.

"I did what was best for your men by alerting them to the threat they faced."

"And how did you know this?"

"If your men hadn't showed up at the right time, if they had not done exactly as I instructed, they wouldn't have returned to you alive."

"And you know this because?"

"It is all contained in the files which I just sent to your personal email address."

Abubakar was taken aback with this latest development. First, it was his private phone number, and now, it was his email address that wasn't publicly listed. What else did this guy know about him that is not for public consumption?

"Don't worry. I actually don't like invading people's privacy unless it is necessary," as though reading his thoughts, the caller said.

"Surely you understand that this was necessary. And I can assure you that for now, only your personal phone number and your personal email address are the only private details I have of you, for now.

"I'm sure you do understand that it would be necessary for me to dig up something private about you when the need arises."

Mind reeling, Abubakar kept mute. Oblivious to what was happening to the commissioner, the unknown caller continued.

"So, as I was saying, you should really go through those files I sent you. There's a section in the file where you would see how these people sent some of their sharpshooters to keep an eye on the estate one week before the day of the operation. They were under strict instruction to kill anything and anyone in a police uniform.

"I know you'd want to argue that your men should have gone undercover, but you would see in that file that these people had planned for every contingencies and your men would have been eliminated, pounced upon like preys by a predator, all for nothing."

"Still, my men would have done something," replied the commissioner.

"And what, pray tell, do you think you would have done?" the caller asked.

It didn't end there.

"So tell me. Tell me! How many times have you done anything significant to capture this extremely wicked, nefarious, and barbaric crime syndicate called Alpha Shadows, or any other crime syndicate for that matter, in this country?" The caller's voice was rising.

"Tell me what you have ever done if not to unnecessarily destroy the lives of your innocent officers because of some stupid and unintelligible actions!"

Savior was fast losing his composure, but he couldn't help it. He was furious and literally screaming at the commissioner. This wasn't part of the plan, but the unjust death of his father and subsequently his mother had once more spun him out of control.

"Sure, you have made some gains," he continued, "but how many losses? Is the loss not greater than the gain? How many more destruction of lives, both military and civilians do you want?"

The commissioner drew the phone a few inches away from his ear to protect his eardrum.

"Do you even know why I'm doing all this? Do you even know why I'm risking my neck to be talking to you?"

"I've gone through so much effort to contact and talk to you yet not once have you ever asked why I did it. Instead you've been trying to get me to indict myself.

"My father..." His voice trailed off.

The commissioner remained speechless.

Saviour regained his strength, cleared his throat and continued.

"My father was unfortunately killed during one of the firefights between the police and the crime syndicate. He was one of your dedicated officers, but the brutal hands of death took him away in such a rude and unwarranted way.

"So, I ask you, sir, how many children have you turned fatherless because of this accursed job?"

The commissioner swore out of discomfort. Sorrow filled his heart for this kid who had unfortunately become fatherless. Not just him, but for every other child out there who had lost a military parent or two because of an operation that went haywire.

But he quickly collected and composed himself and spoke professionally.

"My sincere apologies for your loss."

The boy didn't answer so he took it as a cue to continue.

"I hear you, and quite honestly, I understand you. But what of the two armed robbers who were killed? How did you pull that one off? Did you kill them for the sake of revenge over your father's death?"

"What makes you think that I was the one who shot them? I believe in justice, Mr. Commissioner, not revenge. And it is justice that makes me want to join the Nigerian police and help in any way I can."

"I don't believe you. I can understand that you might still feel the pain of losing your father, and I understand that need for revenge but..."

An idea came to his mind so he quickly changed tactics. This might be the tiebreaker in uncovering this person's identity.

"You said your father was a policeman who was killed in action?"

"Yes," Savior answered, already anticipating where this was going.

"What was his name?"

"How smart. You've got to do way better than that, Mr Commissioner."

"Young man, you don't expect me to take what you have just told me at face value. How am I supposed to verify the accuracy of what you've just told me about your late father?"

"I guess you'll just have to take my word for it."

The commissioner tried another one that was his last for now, and which hopefully would be for a long time.

"If you are really telling me the truth about your father who was a policeman who died during his service, then tell me, in what year did he die?"

"Don't try using my beloved father, God rest his soul, to blackmail me."

"But, I was only trying to verify..."

"You would have to try harder than that to uncover my full identity, but for now, you can call me Omotola."

"You speak nothing like a Yoruba indigene."

Savior laughed. "Yeah, I just love that name."

What an enigmatic personality, the commissioner wondered. He says one thing and tells you the contrary in the same breath.

"You still haven't told me anything about the killing of the two men. If all you've been saying is true, then how do you want to defend the fact that your prediction about two of them dying came through?"

When Savior finished telling him how and why it happened, the commissioner almost dropped dead right there in his office.

He'd barely recovered from his shock when Saviour spoke up again.

"Now that you no longer have any reason to doubt me, I have vital information to pass on to you. It is an info I believe you will love very much."

"I'm all ears."

Savior began giving the commissioner detailed information about one of Tekena's biggest warehouses in order to prove a point and tear down any remaining barrier between him, the commissioner and the Nigerian police.

Thanking him profusely after recovering from his shock, the commissioner immediately snapped back to his job mode.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The afternoon sun cast shadows at the corners of the large compound of the Alpha Shadows biggest warehouse base.

Savior crouched at the farthest eastward edge of the metal-frame warehouse, in a spot that made it possible for him to have a panoramic view of all that was transpiring in the compound without being quickly spotted.

He wiped off sweat from his brows as he discreetly watched a motorcade of three jeeps and two cars enter through the remote-controlled gates and enter into the underground car park.

Tekena came out of his Hilux jeep wearing a dark shade and a scarf around his neck while the sun gave off glints of light that reflected from the jewelry—a long, golden chain and Rolex watch—he wore.

Together with his personal sentinels and the rest of the team that came with him, he moved towards the large entrance.

He inputted the secret combination with his fingerprint and the large garage door rolled open. They all marched in. Two of the guards stationed themselves outside, their guns concealed in their holsters.

Savior watched the whole transaction silently through squinted eyes.

Pulling the phone closer to his ear, Savior lowered his voice and continued his talk with the commissioner.

"Now, listen carefully to me Mr Commissioner. As I speak to you, the gang leader of Alpha Shadows has just arrived at their secret warehouse to ascertain the delivery of new ammunition. A total of thirteen armed men are with him. I'll send the details of the address to your email in a minute.

"What you will do for me is to send in the very best of your team. You'll ensure they surround the perimeter of the warehouse and then strike while the element of surprise is still there. If you are fast and lucky, you just might collect the accolade of being the commissioner to nail the lead criminal of the country. I will contact you once more after this mission is successful." Then Savior cut the line.

Fast as a robot, he typed the address and forwarded it to the commissioner. Then he shut down the phone, just in case, to cancel even the slightest chance that the police could pick up his phone's signal in close range and trace it to him.

He shoved the phone into his light backpack and hoisted it on his shoulder.

Then pulling the best alarmed panic face, he mentally and physically took on his role play.

He sprung up from the corner and ran towards the warehouse door.

The guards there recognized him at first glance so they made no attempt to stop him. In fact, when they saw his alarmed face, they hastily parted and granted him access into the warehouse.

Savior burst in ceremoniously just as Tekena was examining the stacks of AK-47s in the ammunition section of the warehouse. Everyone spun and faced him, startled by the abrupt interruption.

Savior bent over, doing his best acting of panting for breath.

"Boss," he cried, choking on air. "The police. They're on their way here as we speak!"

Tekena's face squeezed into a deep frown.

"That's impossible!" the boss spat in disbelief.

"I'm not kidding, Boss. I hacked into their computer system a while back and I discovered the commissioner had ordered a team to come rout us here. They've found us out, sir. Someone must have tipped them off."

A murmur of unrest and suspicion spread through the gang.

"Silence!" Tekena barked. The warehouse was filled with terse silence as he paced frantically.

"What do we do? Tiger, what is their strength of force? Can we fight them off?"

"Boss, we're terribly outnumbered. And the classified info was very specific. The best of their top intelligence team have been sent. We have no choice but to retreat immediately. We have no choice..."

"No, no, no! What about all these?" He swept his hand across the spacious cubic warehouse.

There were segments for ammunition. Another for drugs of all kinds—loads of white powder, coke, marijuana and other rare experimental drugs. Then, there was a safe chest at another corner where there was a stack of high currency cash—Pounds Sterling, Euros, US Dollars.

"We can't lose all this!" Tekena shoved his hand into his thinning hair.

"I swear, I'll find out the person behind all this and rip him apart limb by limb," he growled as he wagged his forefinger at the entire gang who cowered at his threat.

"Boss, we'll deal with that later. We don't have time on our side," Savior said in the most persuasive voice he could muster.

A very faint and distant wail was heard by all.

Tekena's eyes rounded in sheer shock. This was impossible! Alpha Shadows could never be found out.

'Good job, Mr Commissioner, That was very quick of you,' Savior thought and suppressed the rueful smirk that was ghosting on his lips as he took in the Boss' mortified expression.

"Boss, we have to go right now!" Savior called, firmly.

With a final groan of resignation, Tekena issued the order, "Guys, retreat! Emergency exit at once."

They all rushed out of the warehouse, through a secret door that led to the underground garage.

Savior, being the last to leave, paused after they all had trooped out through the door, turned and with a smug smirk whispered, "Good luck, Mr Commissioner."

Then he followed them through the escape portal.

They all bounded up into their vehicles and drove straight through a tunnel that continued forward, slowly rising. It would lead them to an enclave of Tekena Green's house garage which was miles away. He had paid heavily for engineers to design and construct this link and secret escape route. It played a dual escape function from both sides. Who knew that such a rare time as this would come when they'd actually use it?

The police came a few minutes after the gang had made their escape. They surrounded the main gate, innocent-looking as it was.

The commissioner, eager out of his wits at the info delivered to him by the anonymous guy, had decided to go on this mission with his boys.

He had a strong hunch that today would be his lucky day and he didn't want to miss the chance for anything in the world.

After the police had cut off all obvious escape routes, and had stationed their guns, the commissioner took the PA speaker and barked out commands while the loud, police siren wailed in the background.

"ATTENTION! ATTENTION! THIS BUILDING HAS BEEN SURROUNDED BY THE POLICE. ALL OCCUPANTS IN THIS BUILDING SHOULD SURRENDER WITH THEIR HANDS IN THE AIR, ELSE WE WILL BE FORCED TO SWITCH TO FORCEFUL MEASURES!"

Five minutes and no response later, the commissioner sent part of the squad in. They stealthily crept in like mice.

It was surprising that the gate was left open.

The compound was larger than was expected, the main warehouse imposing.

As soon as he saw the building, the commissioner could tell that Alpha Shadows had retreated and deserted the place in a hurry.

Somehow he was thankful for that. It granted them an easy, without-struggle entry into this hell arsenal.

There was no way they would have been able to unlock the door of the warehouse otherwise, because Abubakar noted that its lock operated on fingerprint sensor technology. And he was partially relieved that there would be no open fire fight, that was the vibe his disheveled emotions was giving him. At least, for today.

But he was disappointed that they would not place those criminals in cuffs and behind bars today like he dreamed for a long time. Especially their maniacal leader.

And just look at this place. All sorts of weapons and tech gadgets, both those that were familiar and strange to him, were displayed like artwork in a gallery.

Soon, the forensic team would arrive and begin their quest for clues and evidence.

Oh look, here they were, as swift as lightning.

And behind them, the news hounds and vultures. Those reporters were like hyenas. It was a wonder if they ever slept.

Almost an hour later, the commissioner started to leave, but was promptly intercepted by the throng of reporters trying to be the first to get a statement from him.

The commissioner, knowing this was his moment to shine, decided to pause and give them to the audience all at once. Cameras flashed and different sizes of microphones and phone recorders were thrust forward in the direction of his mouth.

"Today, the Rivers State Police force were only a hair's breadth away from capturing the infamous Alpha Shadows gang. Unfortunately, they escaped. Investigation is in high gear. The forensic team has gotten DNA samples and we'll be working with that. Also, all the loot in this warehouse has been confiscated and is now under government custody. We want the public to rest assured that we are working tirelessly to bring these criminals to the book. Thank you."

But the reporters wanted more juice and details. So their curious and prodding questions pressed on as they trailed the commissioner while he entered his official police jeep.

"How was the police able to find out this location?"

"Was the escape of the gang preventable?"

"Can you give an estimate of the value of the loot and spoils Alpha Shadows had stored in this warehouse?"

But the commissioner was done delivering his info. They could all go enjoy and expand what he had told them for all he cared, or they could go to sleep.

The police entourage drove out. The commissioner felt a strange mix of triumph and a sense of dread that he was playing in favor of the cards of that anonymous caller that called himself Omotola in this game.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The following day, by nine on the dot, Savior was preparing to join a virtual meeting with not just the police commissioner of Rivers State, but also the commissioners of Kano, Lagos, Abuja and the Inspector-General of the Nigerian Police Force.

Everything was apparently working according to plan and he was ecstatic about it. Indeed, he was born for this moment.

He'd been waiting for a long time. The opportunity had finally presented itself. Now, it was left for him to maximize and make good use of the advantage that destiny had presented to him. And Savior, a guy who never failed to use even the most sparsely distributed opportunities, would jump on this one.

He dressed casually in his leather jacket—it wasn't like any of the commissioners or the Inspector-General could see him through the disguises—and sat down on his chair in his private study and switched on his touch-screen, detachable, Apple laptop.

The monochromatic color scheme and lighting in the air-conditioned room blended well to produce a calming effect. Simple and harmonious. A mirror of his bland yet ambitious life.

There were two chairs straddling a table coated in fine leather—the first was an ergonomic, swivel chair, the second a regular armless chair.

On the table was an organized array of gadgets and books and countless files. On adjacent sides of this rather spacious room were two parallel horizontal bookshelves that ran from top to bottom. All sorts of books, ranging from mystery and crime novels to high-class info studies and research on politics, business and whatnot, were nicely tucked in. Not as though he was much of a reader, but when the need arises in lieu of a particular operation, he had something to fall back on.

He connected to the internet with just a tap. He accessed the pre-scheduled virtual meeting, but not before activating a software that would make him look like a silhouette. Even his voice had been electronically altered.

Not even a video conference meeting would unveil his real identity to the people he was about to talk to.

He waited for the few seconds it took for the live video feed to connect, drumming his finger rhythmically on his table. Like a brief flicker of a flame in an icy terrain, a memory came to his mind. The night of the operation/game where he shot two unfortunate ganglings. That melodious voice of unusual clarity that pierced his dark soul.

Amazingly, this was not the first time. These days, apart from his work which he was even still trying to keep up with, all he mostly thought of was the girl. The girl. The singer...

He itched to go and do a little spying. If he was lucky and smart about it, he'd not just see her face, but also try to get acquainted with her.

He smiled. What beautiful face would be behind that voice?

Well, there would be enough time to visit her. For now, he would just concentrate on this job with the four commissioners and the Inspector-General of police.

At the moment, he surmised, the meeting with these law enforcement officers was of utmost importance.

When he was done with them, only then would he be free to go on another little, personal escapade.

The virtual call finally connected. He could see the faces of all the commissioners and the Inspector-General staring at him, their trained eyes squinting very hard, trying in vain to make him out from the silhouette that was currently showing on their monitors.

He smirked victoriously, also staring back at them, trying to read their eyes and body language to see if he could detect anything unsavory with the police officers.

So far, all he could detect from their energy and attitude was wonder. Pure wonder and a large dose of curiosity. The admiration he created and planted in them by pulling off what he did.

All the commissioners that were present in the virtual meeting and the Inspector-General of police looked at their monitors, specifically at the only civilian in the meeting. The civilian who had done so much under a week for them, the civilian who had done enough to capture the attention of the top commissioners and the Inspector-General of the Nigerian Police Force.

Being able to disguise his appearance and the outline of his figure on a live video feed, the enigmatic civilian was definitely proving to them that he was indeed a genius. They could only watch him in awe.

"I never knew we still have such great minds and people with high intelligence quotient like you," the IG said with a practiced smile, breaking the propitious silence.

Savior just shrugged as though he felt embarrassed at such kind of recognition and praise, especially coming from a high-society person like the Inspector-General.

"And to think we have people like you in Africa, especially here in Nigeria. I thought we only had the great Philip Emeagwali. You know he has the record of being one of the human beings with a high intelligence quotient, right? Time will not give us the luxury of mentioning his multiple world breaking records.

"Apparently, we still have more of him here in Nigeria. Are you also from the East, son? And could it be that you also coincidentally hail from Anambra state like the great Philip?"

"My name is Omotola," Savior said.

The IG squinted, having the hunch that he was faking that name. "You mean like the namesake of the popular Nigerian actress?"

"Yes, sir."

The Rivers State commissioner wasn't surprised. None of the commissioners were surprised.

The civilian wasn't carried away by the praises of being compared to one of the personalities with a great IQ in the world. The Inspector-General had also failed to unravel this enigmatic civilian.

The IG leaned back on his seat, recognizing that his subtle intention had just been busted.

"I know, I know," he said, waving his hand as if to say this was old news. "You've said that before. At least, that's what you've told all my commissioners."

Abubakar was a bit taken aback that he wasn't the only one who had tried to uncover the identity of the civilian and failed.

"That's my name, sir."

"That is what you claim. We haven't done our own background check."

The police officers and the civilian stared at each other for a while, their gazes unwavering, before the Inspector-General broke the eye contest and continued the meeting in earnest.

"My commissioners have briefed me on how you became their informant last week, blowing the whistle on Alpha Shadows, helping my officers to uncover clandestine operations, exposing several hideouts and even the warehouse of the leader of Alpha Shadows."

The Commissioner of Rivers State Police was quiet as the conversation progressed. He even maintained a poker face, but he shuddered inwardly. And it wasn't as a result of the ongoing conversation. No, it was because of the personal conversation he had yesterday with Omotola or whatever his real name was.

He remembered vividly the first statement he made when the commissioner asked him about the killing of the two men.

"I killed them." Those were Omotola's words and it had dropped like a bomb.

Abubakar had asked the reason for his actions and when Omotola replied, the commissioner was certain beyond all unreasonable doubt that his heart stopped beating for a while.

"I want to be a spy for the Nigerian police against Alpha Shadows," Omotola said, his words jarring the River State police commissioner back to the ongoing conversation.

"You mean like an undercover cop that would penetrate deep inside the inner sanctum of the crime syndicate?"

"Undercover, yes. But not as a cop."

"Then, in what capacity do you want to achieve this?"

"I have my resources and skills that would perfectly help me to blend in. I don't have to be a police officer to do it. What I'm saying in essence is that I would like to partner with you and not work under you."

"What makes you think that we would be interested to 'partner' with you?"

"The answer is quite simple, you desperately want to bring down Alpha Shadows, and you need my expertise."

Omotola spoke self-assuredly, the IG observed.

"Why do you want to work with us?" asked the IG.

"I want to do this because I hate evil. My second reason for doing this is that I want to honor my late father and every other policeman that had died at the hands of these people."

"Let's talk a little about the last part of your statement. Do you want to take revenge against the people who killed your father? Is that the point you're trying to make?"

"No, that's not it at all."

"Okay, tell me why. I'm all ears. We are all ears."

"My father, God rest his soul, always told me that he was a believer in justice each time I asked him why he joined the Nigerian Police Force. He would always end it with vehement advice, encouraging me to strongly believe in it as well. The concept and perception he inculcated in me is the driving force behind this whole thing."

As he spoke of his father, Savior almost choked on emotion but applied a strong restraint.

He spoke of his father with a genuine calm that both surprised and touched the police officers. By the time he was done with his emotional tale, no one doubted him.

"I'm sorry we keep bringing up this topic about your father," the Inspector-General apologized.

"It's alright, sir. I definitely understand. I'd do more if I were in your shoes."

"I will definitely understand if you are too emotional to continue this meeting. We can continue later, whenever you're ready of course," the IG offered.

But Savior waved his hands. "I'm very much okay. Let's continue."

The virtual meeting finished after fifty-two minutes.

Savior had succeeded in getting the police to adopt him as their secret informant. After a few moments of attempted persuasion from the Inspector-General and the other commissioners, Savior still didn't reveal his real identity to them, his reasons being that he didn't want to attract any form of attention to himself. He concluded by telling them that whenever he carried out any successful operation with them, the Nigerian Police Force should take the credit in the public.

He only asked that his monthly salary should be paid on time.

Savior had asked for a specific amount to be paid him as his salary. In his own opinion, it wasn't much but the Inspector-General and the commissioners thought it was outrageous.

At the end of the day, he had won the argument and the police personnels had all capitulated to his demands. If they wanted the kind of quality job that he was ready to offer, then they should also be ready to bankroll him. Not everything was free in Freetown.

Truth be told, he didn't need the money from the Nigerian police to do his job—he could have done this conveniently for free—but he didn't want to do a volunteer job for the Nigerian government lest he'd be taken for granted.

And away from the public eyes, they signed a contract with him and almost a dozen non-disclosure forms. Savior was finally in. And it was where he always wanted to be since his adulthood.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Righteous drove with the kind of speed that only an insane or intoxicated person would attempt.

And truly, she was intoxicated, but not under the influence of drugs or alcohol. She was rather intoxicated with joy. A joy that she could not explain or appropriately put to words right now.

Nearly colliding with her garage wall, she pivoted just in time and successfully steered the car into the garage.

Barely turning off her car engine, she immediately opened her driver's side door, came out, slammed it shut and bounced into her house.

Rushing towards her daughter who was seated on a couch, listening to a television program in the living room, Righteous pulled her up and gave her a crushing hug.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch! Ease off, Mum. You are almost crushing my windpipe!" Ayanate croaked out, eyes wide, barely breathing.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Forgive me." Righteous immediately released her daughter.

"It's just that I'm so happy, baby. I'm just so happy right now, I feel like I've just been given the world on a platter of gold," Righteous cried excitedly and subconsciously gave her daughter another crushing embrace which Ayanate reciprocated with equal fervor.

Ayanate was both surprised and ecstatic at her mother's display of joy. She rarely saw her mother show off such a high level of positive emotions. Without knowing the cause of it, she was happy for her mother. When was the last time her mother expressed such joy?

Indeed, if she could guess correctly, she would say that the last time her mother had been so happy like this was her wedding day and the day she gave birth to her and her brother.

Righteous broke loose from the embrace, sat down on a two-seater couch and patted the space beside her.

"Come and sit down here with me, honey. I've got great news to share with you."

Ayanate did as instructed, curious but smiling.

"I have good news to share."

"Really?" Ayanate chirped animatedly.

"Awww, yes o, and I know you'll also be excited about it when I finish telling you."

"Okay, you are killing me with the suspense."

"Please, my dear, don't use such a word again."

Ayanate's eyebrows cocked up. "Which word exactly?"

"Don't say, 'kill' again, please."

"Mum," Ayanate chuckled in relief, "I didn't mean it literally. I was only using it as a figure of speech."

"Yes, I know, but it's still the word of your mouth."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I hear you. I'll not use it again."

"That's better, my dear."

"Thanks, Mum. So, can you go ahead, please? The suspense is- uh... Let me just hear it."

Righteous reached for the television remote control and pressed the power button, effectively turning off the television and shutting off the program.

"I'm also going to tell your brother about it. God is definitely answering our prayers," Mrs Righteous gushed.

Ayanate had not seen this kind of extreme happiness from her mother in a long while. This was what she and her brother had been praying for, that their mother would accept the joy of the Lord and make it her strength instead of always being antsy and irritable. It was finally happening as they prayed and believed. Ayanate could only observe in awe.

Instead of spilling the anticipated good news, her mother was stalling for time, but Ayanate didn't care. This happy side of her mother was really something amusing and entertaining to watch.

"So, before I tell you the good news, baby,"—Ayanate almost protested at the 'baby' her mother called her but she knew that her mother's elation would make any protest fall on deaf ears—"I have a sweet proposal to make."

"Anything for you, Mum. Just say it already! The suspense is starting to get excruciating."

"You shouldn't say such gloomy words, baby. After all, the good news is about you."

Ayanate didn't bother protesting again about the 'baby' as she concentrated on the last statement her mother made. The good news was about her?

She scrunched her eyebrows trying to recall anything she'd done that could warrant such joy from her mother. "Wait. I don't understand. How is the good news related to me?"

Her mother patted her shoulders. "Don't worry, you will see, my dear. You'll see. But let's talk about my proposal first."

With an affirmative nod from Ayanate, Righteous began to lay out her proposal. "I want to propose that instead of calling your brother and giving him the good news over the phone, I think we should pay him a

surprise visit. Let's go out for a little celebration—just the three of us—and have a nice time. It's been a long time since we did that, don't you agree?"

"Yeah!" Ayanate clapped her hands excitedly. "That would be nice and it would also be a pleasant surprise for Preye."

"Yes, yes, you can imagine a surprise visit to his condo and giving him the surprising news!"

Righteous gave her daughter another quick, warm hug, squealing into Ayanate's hair.

"I love you children so much I don't know what I would do without you two in my life. You children are one of God's greatest gifts to me, you know?"

"I know, Mum. My brother and I are also grateful to have a wonderful mother like you."

Righteous began telling her daughter the good news she brought home.

"You remember the fixed deposit account I opened, specifically to save enough money for your treatment in the United States of America?"

"Yeah, yeah... I remember."

"Well, after six long months, the bank emailed my statement of account and finally permitted me to withdraw the money if I wanted to."

She remembered clearly the bank account her mother was talking about. It was a fixed deposit account where she could frequently deposit money but could only be allowed to withdraw from it every six months.

It was more or less like a go-fund-me account that was set up in her name, only that her mother and brother were the ones funding it.

Shortly after she became blind, as she and her mother and brother prayed for the recovery of her sight, they had also gone to a lot of hospitals in Nigeria.

When the hospitals in Nigeria didn't work out because of obvious reasons, her mother spent millions of Naira flying her to a few other African countries like Ghana, South Africa and Egypt. That was how far she went before her mother almost became bankrupt. Still, none of them could provide a solution to her 'peculiar' case.

At that time, Righteous was an emotional wreck because of the state of her daughter. Desperate to do everything in her power to eradicate the problem once and for all, she never considered her dwindling finances. When it could no longer suffice for the treatment of her daughter, unknown to Ayanate, Righteous began mortgaging her properties and used them to apply for loans in different banks, determined and certain that they would stumble upon the solution.

Her mother's behavior at the time was like someone who needed a fix. Ayanate finally heard of the bank loan from her brother when he confided in her and voiced out his growing concern about their mother. That was when she finally walked up to her mother and told her that enough was enough.

An argument, fueled by frustration due to the pressing and unexpected problem, sparked. The family had never been so disunited.

Righteous was angry at her son and didn't talk to him for over a month. Ayanate was angry at her mother and did not also talk to her. Preye was left feeling terrible and confused because of the misunderstanding that was going on at that time thinking that it would have been better if he had kept his mouth shut and allowed peace to reign.

Righteous begged her daughter to understand the reason for her actions but it all fell on deaf ears. It was like an unending cycle of sorrow and heartbreak.

Ayanate felt miserable that her united family was falling apart because of her condition.

Filled with anger and resentment for her son, Righteous didn't want to see him, much less hear his voice, and Preye took the bait. He stopped returning home from school every weekend as he usually did.

After a tremendous effort from Ayanate, she succeeded in getting her mother and brother under one roof.

Prior to the small family meeting, she had prayed, asking God for forgiveness for her actions and that of her brother and mother.

She also prayed that God should restore peace and unity in the family. She asked the Holy Spirit to give her words that only he could say that would comfort and bring healing to their emotional wounds. And the Holy Spirit did.

They broke down in tears and apologized to each other. They embraced each other like long lost friends and the family was once again a united and happy family.

Knowing that their little reunion might not be enough to stop her mother from worrying about her, she gave them an idea she thought might keep her mother busy from being anxious about her for a while.

She suggested that her mother should cancel all the applications for the bank loan, rebuild her finances and her law firm. As soon as she was stable enough, she should start depositing money monthly into a fixed deposit account until it would be enough to travel to a recommended hospital in America.

Righteous readily agreed to the idea, but not after Ayanate made her promise that she would never borrow from anyone or the bank.

Now their sacrifice had paid off. Her mother, who was currently giddy with joy, had returned home to share good news about the money.

"I was so excited when I saw that we've been able to deposit 85% of the money," said Righteous.

"Wow, Mum, are you serious?" Ayanate asked, pleasantly surprised.

"I would never joke with this."

"This is indeed exciting news."

Ayanate got up from her seat, dancing around and making a joyful noise. Unable to sit still, Righteous joined her and they happily danced around for a while.

They both sat down to rest and resumed talking. The way her mother's voice was subdued as she started talking immediately set something off in Ayanate. She braced herself.

"Ayanate, baby, I know you made me promise never to borrow again, but this money is just remaining only 15% to be complete for your treatment, and that's just four million naira. I can take a soft loan that I can pay up in a year or two, no collateral. If only we could ease up a little and borrow this money so that we could get going."

Ayanate frowned and began to shake her head.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

OSHODI, LAGOS STATE

Flourish Bambi, the Lagos Police Commissioner, was out of sorts this particular evening. Her mind was calculating the risks, the pros and cons of what was at stake.

It was way past working hours especially for her, being a top official, but the passion she had for her work kept her late into the night most of the time. Especially with the recent case of kidnapping that had rocked the state, threatening to tip her, as well as the worried-sick families of the victims, off balance.

Kidnappers had intercepted an unsuspecting coaster bus on its way to a tourist attraction, and had captured a total of fourteen young children and teenagers, a man and woman who were their tour guide, as well as the elderly bus driver.

After three days of their disappearance, the leader of the Alpha Shadows branch that operated in Lagos State sent a video message to the families, claiming they were the ones who rounded up those victims.

The cries of fear and torture of the captured victims that those hooligans had intentionally allowed to waft into the video—which had its background blurred so as to protect their identities and the location where the abducted victims were kept—was the only proof that this was not a hoax.

If each of these tiny pups weren't ransomed in a week's time with nothing less than ten million naira each, the gang leader had threatened, then they shouldn't be surprised if all they met were the empty shells of their loved ones on dumping sites. The gang leader left the hanging threat that organ transplant and the demand from ritualists and slave traders was still very high; it was a rather profitable business.

That mysterious information snooper who called himself Omotola had contacted the Police Commissioner of Lagos State again, shortly after the incident.

Again, this time, he made outrageous claims.

He gave her specific details of the Alpha Shadows hideout in Lagos, telling her that that was the only covert place they could stow those kidnapped victims to.

She couldn't help but wonder if this Omotola was an ally or just another strategy of their foe to rope the Nigerian Police Force.

She was skeptical, but didn't have much of a choice. It was either she followed his lead, or she drifted aimlessly like a feather in a whirlwind.

The families had been pressing hard on her to hasten up with capturing the perpetrators as she had assured or else they would cave in to their demands and give them the money they had asked for.

Flourish didn't want that at all. She wanted to capture those scoundrels with her bare hands and make them face the full wrath of the law.

She couldn't be a weakling. No, she had to surpass the achievement that she had seen the Rivers State Commissioner attain. She had to be the latest hero of the country, no matter what it took.

"Let's hope this isn't a con," she muttered as she sat back, donning her imaginary boss lady garment, and began to place necessary calls to get her team ready.

This time around, it would be an all-out free-for-all, if that was what it took to bring the pain-in-the-butt called Alpha Shadows down.

"Alright everyone, we know what we're facing. This is no child's play. It might get really bloody. But remember we are going to save lives and serve our country just as we swore when we were inducted into the service," Flourish said, addressing her team of roughly thirty armed police officers through a walkie-talkie.

They had not had enough time to go into details. She'd just sent an emergency memo and asked them to follow her when they gathered.

So, as they drove right from the police station where they had converged, she'd been briefing them about this mission.

They followed her lead in a motorcade. She was the only one who knew the destination. Nobody thought to question her judgment. If the boss lady says go, you don't hesitate.

She, trying to be discreet about this operation, had ordered that they all ride, not in wailing siren police vans, but in normal civilian-worthy cars. Neither should they wear their police uniforms; only they should wear bulletproof vests underneath their casual clothing.

As she drove mindfully into the slum area that Omotola had sent her as the Alpha Shadows' hideout, their chain of cars brought curious stares from dirty, bedraggled, hungry-looking clusters of people and children who lived there.

Her heart clenched. She desperately hoped there would be a way to evacuate these innocent citizens to prevent the shedding of innocent blood. She had a strong feeling that this time around, there'd be a face-off between the police and the Alpha Shadows gang. She was ready. But, she couldn't bear to see innocent lives wasted on her watch.

As they rode further in, she realized that the location was a gigantic factory which had what looked like a warehouse beside it. And thankfully, it was farther away from the area of the slum designated for residence.

Their target location was on the outskirts, the deeper fringes of the ghetto.

She shut the engine, eyed the structures, coming up with a quick infiltration plan, and whispered into her Walkie-talkie, "Lay low. I go first, then on my count, you'll come after."

Responses of agreement filtered in back to her, disrupted at intervals by static.

She signaled to the two companions that rode with her in her vehicle. A man with the stamina of an eagle, who was her second-in-command, and one of the best female detectives on the team.

They got out and walked to the gate as if they were regular customers of this place.

Flourish quickly refreshed her memory as she took powerful, yet casual strides towards the gate.

Omotola had given her a secret code word that would grant her unrestrained access in case they were met by resistance.

"Who are you people?" The gate man who looked as if he had carried too many weights in his lifetime questioned them with a deep frown when they knocked.

"We're here on business," Flourish replied in her toughest voice.

"Well, I say vamoose. No customers are expected today. Leave now before I lose my temper."

The man's scowl was intimidating, much more his baritone voice.

"We've come to see the power that obstructs the light!" Flourish hid her disgust as she said it. That was the code. Omotola said it meant Alpha Shadows.

The man smiled ruefully and nodded.

"Na wetin you suppose talk from beginning be that. Alright na," he said in pidgin as he opened the gate wider, "You sabi your pikin, mama. No forget drop small tin for am."

But Flourish had other plans. As she stepped over the threshold, she caught the man by his throat and gave him a quick powerful shove, thrusting his back to a wall on the left corner close to the small entrance they'd walked in through.

He reeked of smoke and alcohol, and it showed in his bloodshot eyes too.

His face, stunned and shocked, turned purple as she cut off his blood and air flow.

She brought out her pistol and waved it before his face. She loved the terror that flashed through his face.

"Now, you're going to tell me exactly where those victims are, or I will blast your brain," she said calmly, methodologically, her angry face inches away from his.

Though the man was choking, she frowned as she saw the quick smirk of defiance that came across his face.

In a flash, she saw as he struggled to bring out a gun from his holster. As she turned her attention to the place his hand was reaching for, in a bid to stop him, she realized she wasn't fast enough.

The shot came out, loud and faster than she expected.

She winced, through gritted teeth, as she felt the bullet tear through her flesh and muscle and was embedded in her femur. Her grip on him weakened. Blood poured out of her thigh, dampening the jeans she wore.

Her second-in-command, the eagle-like man who came with her, immediately swung into action.

He hit the gate man's jugular with the butt of his handgun and dragged him to the nook of the gate to tie him there.

Oh, dear!

Those inside the factory warehouse were definitely already alerted.

Flourish shook off the maddening pain that caused her to haunch over as she grasped the spot right above the gunshot wound. She brought the walkie-talkie to her mouth and rasped the command, "Division 11.5, take position immediately! Squad 12.1, make your immediate infiltration! Now!"

Immediately, the team of thirty weapon-wielders marched in and took their positions.

Flourish was led back into her vehicle by the female detective who did her best to stop the blood flow before getting back into the action.

"Make sure you don't back off before rescuing the victims," Flourish said emphatically to the detective, her teeth clenched from the pain that shot through her system with each movement.

Once the police team burst down the warehouse door and came upon the gang, they realized—not too surprised, but apparently a second too late—that the Alpha Shadows boys were ready for them.

Bullets sprayed from AK-47s, sub-machine guns and pistols as the gang, which currently comprised about twelve apparently inebriated men, tried to salvage their territory. The rounds pinged off obstacles and the metal wall that the warehouse was made of. The sound ricocheted through the hollow space.

The police men took cover behind doors and stacks of whatever-it-was-that-these-goons-had-piled, but two of them were already precariously hit by bullets. One on the shoulder. The other was saved from having a shredded torso by the bullet proof vest he wore.

The second-in-command issued the order for the intelligence snipers of the police team to take them down.

Piuuu!

Piuuu!

Two of the Alpha Shadows gang members were hit by a bull's eye, and they fell on the hard floor, dead.

The others, seeing that they were outnumbered and couldn't stand a chance, tried to run off.

"This is the police! We have you surrounded. Put down your weapons now!" the second-in-command shouted in an authoritative voice.

But they wouldn't give in so easily; their boss would kill them.

The sporadic gun shots continued as they shouted amid themselves, obviously confused because their only point of escape had been cut off.

The female detective realized that they had to figure out who was in charge here and then get him to surrender. It was only then that the others would follow suit.

From her corner she signaled to the second-in-command and pointed to the one she suspected as the leader. That supposed one was tattooed on his neck and had a running scar from his shoulder to the back of his palm. He was the one shouting commands and handling the most menacing gun.

The second-in-command got the message and passed a silent order with hand signals. Two police men threw tear gas into the warehouse. In no time the place was filled with the eye-watering and stinging gas.

The police squad all put on their mask, plodded in and started to round up the gang boys who were now splayed on the floor, gasping and choking. They put them all on cuffs and began to shove them roughly in a pile outside.

The detective and the second-in-command went straight for the leader, and after a few seconds of struggling with him—he was a strong and stubborn one—they finally held him in cuffs.

Shoving his frame with much effort to stand upright, they commanded him to take them to the place where they kept the victims.

His intention was to stubbornly deny anything of such, but a few punches to his gut had him changing his mind in no time.

Defeated, he grudgingly led them there. It was an underground store at the back of the warehouse.

"It's okay. We're the police and we've come to rescue you," the detective said softly to the bundle of whimpering and shaking abductees in the well-like basement.

While the second-in-command personally saw to the deployment of the gang leader, the detective and other police officers carefully raised the abductees up from the hole one by one.

The victims, who looked starved and unkempt, were crying with relief.

She handed them over to the First Aid medic team that had followed the police officers.

Flourish Bambi was more than relieved that the mission was successful. At least her injury would not be a waste.

When the news hounds swarmed the area some minute later, she was happy, despite her pain, to report to them that all the victims had been rescued.

She was one step further than the Rivers State Police Commissioner. Even better and much more fulfilling, she would definitely soon catch up with that self-righteous Kaduna State Police Commissioner, Aisha, or whatever her name was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Ayanate scratched her head in confusion and frustration. "I thought we'd settled this, Mum?"

"Yes, dear, we have, but..."

"Then, why are we still going down the same road?"

"It's not what you think. I swear, it's not what you think."

"Mum," Ayanate said, hands on her hips, "you remember that swearing is not good?"

"Yes, yes, dear, I'm so sorry about that. It was a mistake and I won't do it again I sw— uh, promise. But won't you just allow me to borrow the small money for your own good? Remember it is nothing compared to your eyesight being restored."

"No way, Mum! You promised not to do it again, and I won't let you compromise."

"But I strongly believe that now is the best time to rally around and get this money. You know how inconsistent our currency is to the US dollars. What if the value depreciates in the future? That would mean that we will have to save more money, and it will take longer."

"Who says that you must save up the complete money anyway? Don't you have trust in God?"

"I do, but..."

"Did God not say in his scripture that we should trust in him and lean not on our own understanding?"

"Please, baby, listen to me..."

"He doesn't even need this money to heal me and you know it. But since we are going down the medical route, we still have to rely on him to direct our paths. Don't you know that, Mum?"

Righteous sat down, shell-shocked as though she had just been struck by thunder.

Her daughter wasn't done.

"Besides, as much as I don't like this physical blindness, this is just all that there is to it and honestly, Mum, you have to stop seeing it like it is worse than the internal destruction of a man's soul.

"You see, I'm not denying that I'm blind. I can't see even a shadow not to talk of the real thing. But my situation is not the worst. This physical blindness is way better than spiritual blindness.

"Let's stop giving the devil the credit that he doesn't deserve because of the temporal things that we can see. The word of God, which is eternal life, is ultimately superior to all this."

Seeing her hope crumble in front of her eyes as a result of her daughter's unwavering stand, Righteous buried her face in her hands and began sobbing.

Ayanate shifted closer to her mother and wrapped her arms around her.

"As the good and loving mother that you are, I know you are very concerned about me. I know you love and care for me and my brother and I know you don't like this situation that I was tossed into, and I know that if you could give your life for me to have my vision back, you won't even think twice. I know that if it were possible for us to switch positions, you would gladly give me both of your eyes."

"But, don't we serve a God that is able to do all things? If you, who is filled with so many imperfections, know how to give good gifts, how much more our father who is in heaven.

"Do we not have a God that could take this blindness away in a twinkle of an eye without any help? Do we not serve a God that tells us in his word that he did not only take our sins away on the cross of Calvary but he also took our diseases?

"We see these words coming to pass everyday. Souls are getting saved, people are getting healed from all manner of curable and incurable diseases."

At that, Righteous sharply raised up her head and looked at her daughter through a blur of tears.

"Then, tell me something, Ayanate. Why does God heal all those people we've seen but hasn't healed you?" Righteous' voice cracked at the last part.

"You trust him, you believe in him. I don't even have the kind of strong faith you have in God, I confess, but you have that kind of faith that is greater than a mustard seed. So why do we go to church and attend all those miracle services, and yet, nothing has happened?"

"No, Mum. I believe that's where you're actually getting it wrong. Something has been done. I believe that Christ has healed me because his word tells me that he took all my infirmities and diseases. There are no two ways about it. Either Jesus was telling the truth or he was a big fat liar. And yes, I believe the former.

"Why should I still think that I have what he said he took? Why should I call Jesus a liar to his face because of the physical things that I can see. You remember that I told you earlier that these are just temporal? Paul in the Bible calls them a mirage, and that is what it is."

"I don't know, Ayanate, I don't know!" Righteous cried, shaking her head, her emotions a mess.

Ayanate breathed in and stroked her mother's shoulder.

With a soft voice she said, "Have faith in God, Mum. Don't you remember that faith is evidence of things hoped for and the substance of things not seen?"

"The justified can only please God by faith. People get saved through faith. Even though there is no physical change in their body or facial appearance, they still believe that they have been saved by the blood of Christ

and have become new creatures. This can also be applied in other areas of our lives and that includes healing for our body."

"So, I'm not giving up on myself until God's word concerning my healing comes to pass, and I expect you to join me and do the same. Whether we get this thing done the medical way or God's supernatural and miraculous way, God's faith will keep me."

When Ayanate finished talking, Righteous embraced her, weeping. "I believe, I believe you, Ayanate. Oh, I believe in God. Oh, God, help my unbelief! Forgive my double-mindedness!"

Although she couldn't see her mother, Ayanate could sense her state of fragility and vulnerability.

"It's alright, Mum. We will be fine," she said, gently patting her mother's back.

After a while, she led her mother, who was unable to stop the tears from trickling down her cheeks no matter how much she tried to hold them at bay, upstairs

Righteous emotional dam had finally broken, and she cried unashamedly like never before. Feeling like a scared baby, she longed to be in the reassuring arms of her parents. Thankfully, her daughter had substituted for her parents.

As Righteous lay on her bed, her daughter, who had seen her emotional state, decided against sleeping in her room for the night. She gently climbed onto the queen size bed, lay beside her mother and wrapped her arms around her, singing and speaking words of comfort to her.

A few minutes later, with the arms of her daughter wrapped around her as though she were the mother and not the other way around, Righteous continued to listen to the song her daughter sang as though it was a lullaby and finally slept off.

Ayanate relaxed when she heard the rhythmic and gentle snoring of her mother. With her arms still wrapped protectively around Righteous, she closed her eyes and drifted off to a peaceful sleep, after offering a prayer of thanksgiving and protection to the One who had always loved her and her family.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The following morning, Savior rose up earlier than usual and prepared to go to Destiny Estate.

The past three weeks had been all business for him. Now was the time for a little play to unwind.

All work and no play makes Savior a dull boy.

Today was bright, though a bit cloudy. It was time to finally go on his much-anticipated escapade.

As he dressed up in a simple Levi's top and navy blue jeans, there was only one mission on his mind.

To unveil the face behind the voice he heard singing a week ago.

He couldn't deny the fact that she had incessantly invaded his curious mind.

And even as he finished dressing up, picked up his car keys and moved out of his apartment to where his car was parked, he kept telling himself that he was just curious, that it was just the usual need to know. Nothing, absolutely nothing more than that.

Somewhere in the distant black hole of his mind, a tiny voice called him 'liar'. He almost jumped in fright, but Savior wasn't the type who easily gave in to fear.

He spun around to look for that person who was able to read his jumbled thoughts but didn't see anyone. It was probably a figment of his overactive mind.

"Hope you are up for a joy ride this morning?" Savior said to his car as he approached it and unlocked it with his car remote control.

He opened the driver's side door and got in. Without bothering to strap his seat belt since it was too early for the police to stop him for that kind of thing anyway, he slid his car key into the ignition and zoomed off after the engine roared to life.

A few miles from the estate, he picked a preferred spot and parked his car inconspicuously.

Before getting out of his car, he argued with his highly calculative mind for the umpteenth time that he was only being curious and nothing more.

The argument formed a mini-courtroom atmosphere in his mind.

Of course, he wasn't putting everything on the line for an unknown small girl.

No, he wasn't risking all that he'd built with the police. Of course not. That'd be a ridiculous and dangerous venture.

He just wanted to satisfy his restless curiosity. What was so wrong with that?

No, he was never going to get into any trouble or get himself killed. He was a cat with nine lives. Yes of course, it wouldn't hurt to see a harmless damsel. When did it become a crime?

The rational part of his mind kept hammering that this was a stupid mistake, but the knowledge didn't taper his desire.

After several pitiful attempts, he finally tuned out the persistent argument and proceeded to do as planned. Climbing out of his car, he picked up all the equipment that would be necessary for this escapade, and he holstered his Beretta that he decided to bring along in case of any unforeseen situation.

He looked at his car which was one of his best friends and began whispering to it. "I'm going alone for an adventure. Are you sure you'll be alright by yourself?"

He even went as far as quoting some of the words of Jesus Christ to his disciples. "Where I am going you cannot come now."

Funny how he could remember some passages of the Bible after several years of turning his back on God.

Locking his car with one of the buttons on his remote control, he made a beeline for the estate.

Going through his mental map of the estate in his mind, he took the most favorable spot that would help him navigate into the estate with little or no interruption.

Although it was more arduous than the first time, Savior successfully got inside the estate and subsequently the targeted house.

Much to his shock, Savior was not alone.

As he looked for a place to hunker down before making his next move, he saw it. Or rather, him.

He saw a dark figure moving slowly, inconspicuously around the building presumably towards the direction of the girl's window.

Uh-oh! Looks like someone has beaten him to the punch.

Instantly alert and cautious as there could be more than one person, he immediately whipped out his Beretta which was equipped with a silencer and put on his high optical night goggles. Walking on tiptoes so as to not make a sound that would give away his presence, he began closing the gap on the moving figure.

As soon as he got close enough where he could clearly see the figure, he crouched behind a brick wall that was high enough to conceal the glowing light from his goggles and also prevent this intruder from seeing him.

A quiet gasp escaped his lips as soon as he was able to get a good look at the person's face. He knew this guy.

This was Chika—Stone, was what he was called in the gang—a twenty-year-old School dropout who was given his nickname because of his constant stony expression. He was a member of Alpha Shadows. Even worse was that he was one of those who came with Savior at the last operation that was done in this estate.

Apparently, the guy had nursed the same idea as Savior.

Who knew how many more had the same idea, he wondered to himself. And how many had executed it like he and Stone were doing right now?

He'd take care of all of them in his own way ASAP.

For now, all he wanted to do was to squeeze the trigger of his Beretta and blow this stupid boy's head off.

None of these jobless imps would lay their filthy hands on her, or set their corrupt eyes on her, he vowed. He would cut out their hands and gorge out their eyes first.

"Control, Savior, control..." he whispered soundlessly to himself.

What to do now?

An idea came to his mind and he didn't hesitate to execute it. Killing the guy today won't be good for his current mission, so he proceeded to do the next best thing in his mind.

Standing up slowly, he stretched out his gun hand, aimed at the boy's right shoulder—a nice spot—and squeezed off two rounds, making sure that the boy would not use that arm for a long time. That is if he had not permanently disabled it.

Stone screamed out in pain and shock, and three terrier guard dogs in the vicinity began barking.

But just like Stone who immediately muffled his shrieking sound of pain so as to not give up his exposed location, all three dogs stopped barking.

But, there was a new problem. An angry-looking German Shepherd, looking like it was itching for a serious excitement, suddenly came into view.

They both could see the trained German Shepherd, and Savior was sure that it could see them both at the same time.

The dog gave a low growl and looked like it was going to enjoy having one of them as breakfast.

Stone was shaking now, partly from pain, partly from fear.

Savior almost pitied the guy who looked like he was going to wet his pants any moment but quickly decided against it.

The stupid guy deserved it and even more.

Savior looked at the German dog that he had inadvertently named Gibraltar, after a rock in the Bible, and silently implored him to not carry out his intent for his own good and if it wanted to continue living. He even waved his Beretta threateningly at the dog.

All the while, Stone, oblivious to the ongoing transaction, was quaking like a dry leaf in autumn.

The dog seemed to take the bait because he shot them both a long, menacing glare, snarled and let out another I'm-not-scared-of-you growl before reluctantly walking off to his next target.

Stone heaved a shuddering sigh of relief, but he knew he wasn't completely out of the woods yet.

Since he didn't get killed by a menacing-looking dog, he might die from a bullet this morning if he did not immediately do the prudent thing that he ought to do in order to save his life, or what was left of it. Somehow, he was sure that after this morning's event, his life will never be the same again.

The boy, who was shocked and now believed one hundred percent that someone was on to him after the bullets from a silencer penetrated his shoulder and ruptured the muscles and tendons in his right arm, immediately took off, leaving a thin trail of blood in his wake.

The first threat has been cleared off, Savior thought as he watched Stone stumble away. Time to continue. Before that, he had to finish what he started with Stone.

Savior stealthily moved around the apartment with his Beretta on his right hand, scanning for any sign of trouble that might be lurking in the morning shadows.

He took several quick breaths to regulate his pulsating heart. Steady, steady.

Satisfied that he was the only one, apart from the owners, who was currently on this property, he loosened his grip on his handgun and breathed easier.

Trying not to waste any more precious time, he began looking for a place to hunker down.

The garage appealed to him and he went for it. The garage's door was halfway open and the lights in it were turned off. Indeed, it was a good place to hide out of sight.

He slid inside and hid behind several working tools that were arranged at the left corner of the garage.

The cuboidal parking space was almost empty. Built to contain a maximum of four cars, it currently housed one black Camry.

This made him wonder if a family that was buoyant enough to live in an elite environment had only one car.

Maybe the other cars were being serviced at the mechanic's. Maybe someone traveled with the other cars. Or maybe the family simply wasn't buoyant enough to afford more than one car.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. A gazillion possibilities flipped through his mind.

'It's not your blasted business, Savior,' a voice in his head taunted.

'I know, I know. You don't have to talk to me like you're the Wild Witch of the West,' he shot back to the voice in his mind.

He fished out the GPS tracker that he had brought with him and planted it under the front tyre of the Camry. When it was safely installed, he returned to his hiding place.

He crouched low, straining for any sound of movement inside the house. A few silent seconds later, he knew the absurdity of what he was doing. Most times, houses located in sophisticated areas like this were sound-proofed. This one was apparently no exception.

After deciding not to do anything absurd or fertile anymore, he waited patiently for his time.

The right time.

CHAPTER FORTY

Oblivious to what was happening just outside their house, mother and daughter slept on soundly.

After a little while, Ayanate stirred awake and noticed that her mother was still sleeping.

Knowing her mother too well, she perceived that after last night's emotional exhaustion, her mom wouldn't be waking up early today.

"That's alright," she mused, "let her have her beauty sleep."

The world would not abruptly transcend into oblivion if Barrister Righteous Adiaha Green didn't wake up early.

Careful not to make any sound that would interrupt her mother's peaceful sleep, Ayanate quietly slipped out of the bed, walked soundlessly to the door and closed it behind her as she stepped out into the hallway.

She went into the bathroom just down the hallway and responded to nature's call.

After that, she slugged downstairs to the living room and did her routine one-hour morning devotion. She was done by 5 a.m.

Not wanting to kill time idling around, she immediately made her way into the kitchen to start preparing breakfast for her and her mother. She contemplated a while before finally deciding on what the breakfast

would be. Her mother loved cake a lot. Not just her mother, but it was one of the favorites of both mother and daughter. Baking was one of her hobbies, and thus, Ayanate settled for chocolate cake and tea for breakfast.

She confidently went to one of the kitchen cabinets and groped for a packet of butter and sugar. She took them and set them side-by-side on one of the kitchen counters.

After that, she reached back for the remaining items and also dropped them besides the previous ones on the kitchen counter.

Before she started mixing together the ingredients for the cake, she picked up an electric kettle, placed it directly under the mouth of the water faucet and turned it on. She turned off the water faucet as soon as she perceived that the water was enough.

Just as she was about to plug in the electric kettle, she remembered that the functioning water dispenser in the dining room still dispensed both cold and hot water, according to the user's choice. She changed plans and dumped the electric kettle in the sink as she went to the counter where the other items were waiting.

Ayanate emptied the packets of butter and sugar inside a round bowl and began mixing them. When she was sure that it had perfectly blended, thanks to touch and taste, she measured her baking powder, flour and a few other dried ingredients and began mixing them too in a separate bowl.

Next, she took out four eggs, broke them one after the other and poured their gelatinous contents into a separate bowl. She poured just enough quantity from the bottle of squadron inside the bowl that contained the eggs. Before mixing it like she did the previous ones, she added chocolate and vanilla flavors to it.

The funny thing was that Ayanate didn't measure the contents for the cake as was professionally required. As an African, this was not peculiar to her alone. Except you were some sort of chef or you just liked keeping meticulous details, many Africans didn't care for such things.

There was even a joke attributed to it. In Africa you don't measure salt; you just keep pouring until the ancestors say it's enough.

After mixing the eggs and the last ingredients to her satisfaction, she began pouring the contents of the last two bowls into the first one which contained the butter and sugar and carefully mixed them one-sided until everything was perfectly blended.

She took out three small baking pans and poured out the contents in each of them and then carried them towards the oven.

As she approached the oven, Ayanate remembered that she had wanted to bake some cookies and meat-pie yesterday, but she had taken a break after mixing the dough, to go and watch her favorite television program. After the program, she couldn't return to the kitchen again because of what happened between her and her mother last night.

The pie dough was still good. There was nothing she could do about the cookie dough, since it had stayed open overnight and was most likely contaminated by bacteria, so she regretfully discarded it and started mixing another fresh dough for chewy chocolate chip cookies. She would indulge her sweet tooth on them later in the day. She could pack some of it for her mother's lunch.

She finished with the cake, baked enough cookies and meat-pie that her mother would take to work that day and set them on a cooling rack. She'd bake her own later.

Meanwhile, she took out a food tray and placed two plates that contained cakes and two cups of hot cocoa, and carried the breakfast upstairs to her mother's room.

Still feeling groggy, with her eyes closed, Righteous reached out her right hand and felt for the spot where her daughter slept last night. It was empty.

Sharply turning away, she turned on her bedside lamp, looked at the clock and gasped. It was six-thirty in the morning. One hour thirty minutes later than her usual waking time.

Righteous groaned, mentally chiding herself for sleeping for so long. Before she could get up from her bed, her daughter quietly waltzed in with a food tray.

She smiled, her eyes dancing with satisfaction at what she was seeing. Ayanate occasionally gave her special treats with her top-notch cooking skill. She was excited that today was another one of her lucky days. Breakfast in bed. Room service. All from her sweet, blind daughter. Just imagine what her precious little angel would do if she could see.

"You have done it again, sweetheart."

Ayanate jerked, almost spilling the content of the food tray.

"Mum!" she cried. "You almost scared ten years out of my life! I thought you were still sleeping."

"I'm sorry I startled you so much. It was not intentional." Righteous let out a little laugh.

"Well, I said I should serve you breakfast in bed," her daughter added with a smile as she walked towards her mother.

"I'm sorry I became such a child last night."

"And I'm happy I got to play mum, and you were such a cute little child." Ayanate pouted.

"Well, you were a terrible mum," Righteous deadpanned, "See how late your child woke up!"

With a shrug Ayanate said, "It's not easy to babysit a middle-aged woman."

Both mother and daughter laughed.

"I can see you're still playing your mum role. And as an obedient daughter, let me go and brush my teeth," Righteous said with mock seriousness.

"Please go ahead before your breakfast gets cold," Ayanate gushed.

Righteous finished her bedroom duties and sat down at the edge of her bed with her daughter, the breakfast situated between them. There was no missing the glee in her voice as she thanked her daughter and munched on her food in delight.

"I'm so happy you made this, sweetheart," Righteous cried, a mouthful of spongy cake goodness swirling in her mouth.

"I'm glad you like it," Ayanate said with a small smile.

"Oh, I love it!"

"I baked cookies and meat pies that you would take to work today."

"You know I can't resist that. You will make me fat with all this junk food."

"At least, one good thing that will come out of it is that we'll keep the gym owners in business."

"And we shall do that with your school fees and allowances," Righteous quipped, taking another bite of the cake.

Before Ayanate could give another comeback, Righteous joyfully thanked her in advance for the lunch and the two women continued the rest of the breakfast, occasionally chatting and discussing random topics.

Both mother and daughter got so engrossed in their discussion that it continued long after the breakfast. Their gist was so interesting to the extent that Ayanate had to shove her mother out of the house and into her car.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Savior waited and waited, and began to get tired of waiting.

There were fifteen minutes left before the clock struck eight, but he was yet to find an opening.

Maybe no one was at home. Maybe everyone traveled and left one car behind as he earlier predicted. Should he go and pick the entrance lock?

The idea felt nice to him for a while but he quickly thought better of it, citing other reasons.

The day was bright and the sun was already shining. Anyone who saw him walking up to the entrance door would surely raise an alarm.

And what if there were people inside?

However, as he decided that it was time to go home, he heard the creak of the entrance door as it swung open. Soon, he could hear the approaching sound of their footsteps. One was the clink-clank sound of a pair of high heels, while the other was the muffled swish-swish of rubber flats.

He could hear two distinct voices talking. Both with a feminine timbre.

Savior guessed that the older voice was probably the one on high heels, and the younger, familiar one was on the flat rubber slippers. Mother and daughter.

The two voices finally made their way into the garage and stood at the driver's side, still chatting.

Savior was careful to peek at the faces that owned the voices as soon as they got into his line of sight, careful not to uncover his hideout. He could see the face of the older woman and the foggy outline of the younger lady's figure.

Wait. There was something familiar about the older woman.

He did a memory search and that was when it began coming to him bit by bit.

The car. The pretty face that had looked terribly stressed out of its bones then, but was smiling now. The large body figure. Although she was dressed differently, it was definitely the same woman he trailed behind three weeks ago from the Oil Mill market.

What a small world, he thought.

There was something else that was familiar about this woman, but try as he might, he could not place his hands on it.

The women were finally wrapping up their conversation.

"Mum, won't you give me a hug again before you go?" He heard the younger one ask.

"I'm not even sure I should go to work again. There's no court hearing for me today. I'm thinking I should just stay with you for the rest of the day."

"No way. You are going to work. You must go."

He could see the older woman make a gesture of surrender. "Alright, my baby. I believe you will be okay by yourself."

"I'll be fine. I'm no longer a baby."

"You will always be my baby," the older woman said, squeezing her daughter's cheek.

Saviour felt like he was intruding on a sacred ground as he listened to the conversation between the two. Their friendly conversation reminded him of his father, and he winced inwardly. Trying hard not to get distracted or lose concentration again by that thought, he kept listening.

"Urgh. That sounds so cliché, Mum."

The mother laughed and said, "I don't care."

"Before I forget, I made new friends on Monday when I went to school, and they will be coming over today to visit."

"Why didn't you tell me about it earlier? Hope you'll be able to take care of yourself with them?"

"Don't worry about anything. They are just good people who don't think it's a big deal having a blind person as their friend. I'll make some more of those cookies and meat pies for them."

"Do I have your word that you will be fine?"

"Yes, Mum. You worry too much. Just go."

Savior watched as the younger one pushed her mother towards the driver's door. And that was when he saw half of her face and the full length and height of her body.

Another wave of déjà vu hit him. He squinted his eyes to take a good look and once again, his photographic memory was almost up to the party.

He was cork sure that he must have seen the woman's daughter before, but where exactly?

"Okay, okay, I'm going. You don't have to become all dramatic about it. One would think you don't like my company," the older woman mumbled.

The mother entered her car, fired up the engine and began to drive out of the parking garage to the road. The daughter spun towards the retreating car and waved. That was when Savior could see the full face, height, and body stature of the daughter.

It finally clicked.

Savior almost fainted, but struggled at the last minute to get a grip.

He couldn't believe his eyes. He couldn't accept what he was seeing.

Because this was the person he had seen only in his dreams for the past five years.

Someone, anyone, please tell me that this is not a dream! Please tell me that I've not slept off in someone's garage?

No, maybe his mind was playing tricks on him. It wasn't her. It was definitely not possible.

But then, again, why not?

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

It was definitely the same height, the same petite body, the same complexion, although she was glowing more than the way she had five years ago.

And, just look at that beautiful baby face. That adorable, pimple-free sleepy kind of cute baby face. The high cheekbones, the full lips, and that familiar smile that, thankfully, had not been wiped off her face because of her condition.

Those soft eyes. Those soft brown eyes that later glazed over, unseeing, and abruptly changed the trajectory of her life.

No wonder he was drawn to the voice when he heard it a fortnight ago. No one else had that kind of entrancing voice, at least in his opinion. Call him biased, but he didn't care.

The voice he had been hearing in his dreams and imagination for the past five years was certainly outdated because this current one was more beautiful and more melodious.

That was why he couldn't recognize that it was her when he first heard the voice.

When he had heard the voice two weeks ago, the first thing that came to his mind was to know whose voice it was that wanted to surpass the one in his dreams. And it was that curiosity that led him here, back to the girl of his dreams. The voice of the mysterious singer and that of the girl in his dream was one, belonging to the same person.

This was Ayanate Righteous Green. Yes, she was the one, and yes, he still remembered her name and everything about her.

She should be how old now? About to turn twenty-two in the next two months, on the twenty-second of August to be precise.

Only daughter. Had an elder brother, who had been a friend and mentor to him. Her mother was a barrister and a single mother of two. Her father was a jerk who left them almost two decades ago. Savior would like to put a bullet into his skull.

He tried to stop going down that train of thought but he just couldn't help himself.

He also remembered the secret crush he had on her back in senior secondary school. He had always been a secret admirer, although he was careful to conceal this from everyone but himself.

Before she disappeared from his life without warning, he knew he wanted her to be his and he wanted to be hers alone, but he could never walk up to her and say the things that were in his heart because of their social and religious differences.

She was one of the people the school tagged "reclusive" and "holy rollers". It would have made serious news for someone of his social standing in the school to be seen with her kind. But when it finally dawned on him that she had permanently gone out of his life for good, he had repeatedly cursed his hesitation and regretted every bit of the five years without her.

At first, he couldn't bear the thought of permanently losing her, thus he'd tried all he could to get in touch. He'd started by calling her phone number which he had secretly collected from a friend's phone, and going to her house address. But, she had changed her mobile number, and her family had changed location. There was no other way to reach her.

Everything he did the past five years to get in touch with her had proved abortive.

Now, she had returned into his life without warning, in this estate. Their former address was located in a more elite estate.

He should have known that the family would need some privacy and therefore move to a less standard estate. He would have scoured every nook and cranny of all the estates in Rivers State and other states if he must until he found her.

He'd finally found her, by a stroke of luck. He couldn't believe his fortune.

Munachimso Savior Onuoha, alias Tiger, the former Head boy and senior prefect of New Life Secondary School, the current CEO of Charlie's Hub, the wanted killer and second-in-command of the largest crime syndicate in the country—Alpha Shadows, was seeing his former secondary school classmate, Ayanate Righteous Green, after five years of her disappearance without a trace.

"Ayanate Righteous Green," he whispered the name just to be sure that he wasn't hallucinating.

He looked at her in awe. It was truly her, and so little had changed about her physical appearance.

While he had totally changed and increased in height, body stature and weight, apart from a few changes that showed signs of maturity, anyone who knew Ayanate five years ago would immediately recognize her. She still looked very young.

He continued watching her intently, determined not to let her out of his sight.

Her mother drove off, and it was finally just the two of them. She stood for a minute, and then started for the entrance of the house.

It was time to go home too, he knew. But Munachimso Savior didn't want to go home just yet.

He wanted to see these friends that she talked about. He felt a pang of jealousy when he imagined them being male friends. Knowing that his curious mind would never rest until he was certain of their identity, he abandoned the thought of going home and also made his way towards the entrance.

As he got in front of the entrance and turned the door handle, it didn't budge because Ayanate had already locked the door from inside. That was not a problem; he easily picked the lock.

Before going inside, he carefully looked up and down the street to see if anyone was watching and was about to report him. When there was no sign of that, he looked at nearby houses. To the best of his knowledge, they were clear of observant eyes.

He cautiously entered the apartment, careful to make minimal sound just in case there was a janitor or a house help around. He locked the door with a little sound. He stood still with his back to the door, watching out for

any unexpected twist. When no one jumped out at him, he concluded that it was just the two of them in the apartment at the moment. But he wouldn't relax until he had checked out the apartment for himself.

After making sure that no one else was around, he found his way into her room, straight to her vanity where her makeup kit was, and with his gloved hands, picked up a body spray which smelled the same with the one he perceived from her at the garage. He sprayed a little on himself.

Although he didn't use his own body spray and body cream that morning, still, he wasn't taking any chances. The reason for wearing her own was to eliminate any other fragrance that would give him away.

When he finished applying the body spray, he carefully returned it to the original position.

During his initial search, he noticed that Ayanate was in the kitchen. And so, with nothing else to look out for, he went there.

His stomach rumbled like a cannon being fired, and he remembered that he hadn't eaten or drank even a glass of water that morning.

He was thankful that it happened while he was still on his way to the kitchen. If not, she would have noticed his presence regardless of his meticulous work to stay as unobtrusive as possible. She would have done what he didn't want her to do—raised an alarm.

Determined to silence his stomach, he went to the water dispenser and drank directly from the spigot. Satisfied, he raised his head and straightened his shirt. His stomach would not expose him for some time.

The first thing that hit him as he tiptoed into the kitchen was the sweet aroma that wafted in the air.

He involuntarily salivated but tried to put up a good show of self-control.

He noticed Ayanate working. She was baking exactly what she told her mother that she would make. Meat pie and chewy chocolate cookies.

He could see some of the meat pies and cookies that she had finished baking on a cooling rack. It baffled him to see her doing the things she did with so much clarity as though she could see.

Now, he couldn't wait to get his hands on one of those meat pies and cookies. First, because he was seriously famished, and second, he wanted to know how her baking tasted.

He waited for the right time. His patience paid off.

Ayanate stepped out of the kitchen, presumably to get or do something else. Seeing a great opportunity, he seized it as he moved towards the meat pies and cookies. Hopefully, she hadn't counted them. He decided to fetch just a handful that she wouldn't notice that anything was missing.

Thus, he fetched them, like the thief that he was, from different angles, such that the stolen pieces would not be noticeable even to a sighted person.

He ate them fast, careful not to drop any crumbs. He was almost done when she stepped back into the kitchen.

He kept watching her, but remained far away from her in the large kitchen so that she wouldn't detect his presence.

Then she did something that he never expected.

She did one of those things that people do when they were alone. Those things people did when no one was watching them. Those things that people were embarrassed of doing even in the presence of family members.

She farted.

At first, he was taken aback. Then realizing that he was also guilty of such a thing, he began to laugh soundlessly.

But his amusement ended almost as quickly. He watched as her body stiffened. There was some kind of awareness in her expression as though she noticed that someone was with her.

She remained like that for a while, then she suddenly turned around and began moving towards him.

What? How did she discover that he was there? He had been meticulous in everything he did so far. He froze, mentally chiding himself for letting his guard down. Now, he was at risk of being exposed.

Ayanate was almost upon him when his mind snapped alert. No, she couldn't meet him. Not yet. Not like this.

He slipped away from the spot where he had frozen.

However, she felt his body breeze as he moved.

Her blind eyes sharply swiveled towards his area.

"Is anyone here?" she asked in a tiny voice, confusion and a hint of trepidation written all over her.

He hated seeing her discomfort at that moment. He wanted to say something that would put her at ease, but he knew he would be doing the opposite if he tried anything.

After circling the kitchen and coming up empty, he watched as she stepped out of the kitchen and reached for the entrance door to confirm if she locked it as usual. It was locked indeed, and her body seemed to relax at that knowledge. She spun around and exhaled in relief.

She'd probably concluded that it was just her imagination, and decided to leave it at that because she confidently walked back to the kitchen and continued what she was doing.

Savior reassured himself that he would be more careful, not just to avoid detection, but for her own peace of mind.

There were no more problems, until her friends arrived two hours later after going through a security check from the estate's gate.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Ayanate was relieved that her friends had finally arrived. It was always good to be around people who could see because it kept one from being scared of the unknown.

Earlier, she had no worries about her mother going to work today, but she began second-guessing herself when she started having the feeling that someone was in the house with her.

It was just this kind of creepy feeling you get, like unseen eyes were watching you or a strange spirit or ghost was standing with you.

It was ridiculous, she knew, but it felt so real that at some point she wondered if someone unwelcome was inside the house.

That was why she rushed up to the front doors and checked if she had locked them even though she never left them unlocked.

Each time she felt someone's presence silently coming behind her, she was always right about it, because when she voiced out, she would discover it was her mother or brother who secretly came behind her to see if she could be able to detect their presence.

And each time she did, it never ceased to amaze them.

They would laugh in amazement and ask how she sensed their presence even as she couldn't see them.

She always answered truthfully. It was no special gift or vision.

Sometimes, the fragrance of their body spray, body cream and cologne gave them away. Sometimes, they were not silent enough—the sound of their breath or tiptoes gave them away. The rest of the time it was the other four senses at work when it detected the body heat of the person close.

And that was what happened today. She didn't perceive any fragrance except her own and the aroma of what she was baking, but there was no mistaking that feeling she got that someone was with her in the kitchen.

To make matters worse and even creepier, as she got close to the presence, thinking that maybe her mother or brother who had the house keys must have secretly slipped up on her, she felt the figure immediately move away. No matter what and how she tried, she couldn't capture it.

She started getting afraid but she tried hard not to show it. Fear could be a big leverage and weapon your enemy might have over you, and so, she decided not to give into fear.

That was how she resolved to remain strong and bold until her friends arrived. She heaved a sigh of relief, from the depths of her heart.

No one could harm her now that more people would be staying with her in the apartment.

It didn't occur to her that the presence could have harmed her and fled away if that was its intention.

As she went to the entrance to welcome her friends, Savior immediately scrambled to a hiding place in a little corner that was between the stairs and hallway. It was far away from the seeing eyes of her friends, but it was also a strategic position that could allow him to see and monitor them.

The three visitors entered the living room, sat down on the couches, and made themselves at home, chatting and laughing.

Savior then observed the visitors. Two girls and a boy.

He recognized one of the girls and the boy. His eyes widened, for these people were members of Alpha Shadows. Apparently, Stone wasn't the only one who had funny ideas about this same innocent girl called Ayanate.

This wasn't looking good at all. These types weren't the kind to just make friends. There would always be strings attached and they would be the only beneficiaries.

Although it didn't appear like that to Ayanate, Savior knew that these friends were here to take advantage of her blindness and family's financial buoyancy to extort from her. Ayanate's life could be in danger!

He also had no doubt that they were the one who initiated the meeting in her house. And the clueless Ayanate, who was eager to make new friends, readily accepted, not knowing what she was getting herself into.

To confirm his suspicion, Savior noted how they were looking around with so much lust, their eyes full of evil intentions as though they couldn't wait to start stealing things.

The other girl who was not a member of Alpha Shadows kept talking on and on like a fast moving train that could not stop due to a failed brake. Ayanate, who couldn't keep up with her, just kept quiet and let her rant.

To think that it was just this morning that she was bragging about her friends to her mother.

"Don't worry about anything, Mum. They are just good people who don't think it's a big deal having a blind person as their friend..."

Savior remembered what she said verbatim.

Now that he thought about it carefully, he wondered about the point she was trying to make with that last part of her statement.

Was she facing some form of discrimination in school because of her condition? Why did she say those words with so much conviction?

There was no time to start going into all that. He would go home and carefully analyze the things she had said later. It was time to concentrate on the now.

He listened to their conversation. They were currently chatting and laughing about their names.

"So, I think I'm the only one who has the nicest name among all of us. Joy is such a beautiful name, don't you agree?"

"Never!" said Ayanate. "That name is too popular. Many girls these days bear that name and I don't like popular names. It takes away the vibe and juice."

"I agree with you," the boy said. "Especially as there are some ethnic groups that don't know how to pronounce that name accurately because of their accents."

Everyone laughed as the guy continued. "Especially your mother's tribe that pronounces 'Joy' as 'Yoy'. They literally pronounce every word that starts with 'j' as 'y'."

That statement was comically directed to Ayanate who flushed in embarrassment. Everyone, including Savior, doubled up in laughter.

Ayanate picked up one of the pillows on the couch and, aiming for the direction of the guy's voice, she stoned him with it. "That is stereotyping. My mother and a lot of indigenes of Akwa-Ibom do not pronounce words like that."

"Ouch! Of course, of course, I was just trying to support the fact that Yoy, uh, Joy is a popular and an archaic name. I mean that's why you're not pronouncing vibe as fibe, juice as yuice. That's my good girl!"

"That's not funny, and no one said the name is archaic. I was just saying that the name is too popular."

"Yes nau, it's still the same thing that you and I are saying. Na English language dey confuse us," he finished off in the Nigerian pidgin English.

Ayanate returned with a rebuttal.

"Talking about names, what about your own? The first time you told me that your name was Maro, I thought you meant marrow as in bone marrow."

Joy and the other girl, who was Maro's girlfriend and also a member of Alpha Shadows, giggled.

"Not until you finally explained that it was your dialect name, 'Oghenemaro' which translates to, 'God is mighty' in English."

Savior knew Maro and his girlfriend. They were from the same tribe, Urhobo to be precise, in Warri local government, Delta state.

Ayanate turned to the other girl. Savior closed his eyes and continued listening, but he knew what was coming next.

"And when you told me that your name was Karo, I thought it was the Caro of Caroline. I never knew it was another dialect name, Oghenekaro, which means..."

"So, Maro and I have unique names, right?" Karo interrupted excitedly, smiling.

"Warri no dey carry last," Maro quipped, obviously proud of his roots.

"On the contrary, I think they are the weirdest names I've ever heard."

The argument became heated again for several minutes before Ayanate abruptly brought the banter to a halt by inviting everyone to the dining table.

She led the way as others got up and walked behind her.

Savior watched as Maro and his girlfriend who were bringing up the rear discreetly leaned into each other and whispered a few words to each other.

Joy, the talkative of the group, was about turning around but noticed and began kissing each other fully on the lips to confuse her of their true intentions just in case she had seen them from her side eye, whispering to each other.

"Hey, you love birds should stop kissing each other in public," said Joy. Savior had secretly nicknamed her Basket-mouth because she could not seem to keep her mouth shut for more than a minute and she was the loudest among all of them.

Since their arrival, she had commented on everything her eyes were set upon. She had even bragged about how her parents could afford a lot of things she saw inside and around the apartment building. She also spoke of how her parents frequently traveled outside the country and how their three houses which were located in Nigeria, America and France were a lot more bigger and sophisticated than the apartment buildings in this estate.

She also tried to start talking about the prices of the things she saw but the already uncomfortable Ayanate would not let her carry on.

Savior didn't know Joy personally, but he knew her kind and he knew that she was lying. A quick background check would expose her true personality and would show that she was from a poor family that was hardly getting by each day.

It was her kind that came to the university and started claiming what they were not just because they wanted to belong.

It was unfortunate because these people were the same people that their parents worked night and day, selling any little thing of value they had to train them. That after graduating with a good result, they'd get a white-collar job, train nine or eleven more younger siblings and ultimately alleviate the family from poverty.

The popular saying, 'Show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are', just didn't apply in any way to Ayanate and the trio. Sooner or later, Savior hoped, she would realize this and do something about it.

What Savior didn't know is that she was already having regrets.

"This is not the public. This is our friend's house," Maro said, unlocking his lips from his girlfriend's.

"Then stop kissing in someone's house," Joy retorted.

"I'm so sorry, ladies. I love Maro so much. You girls wouldn't understand yet. Just wait until you have your own boyfriends. I'm sure you will do even worse," Karo said.

Joy giggled like a fool while Ayanate looked uncomfortable.

Everyone settled at the dining table and enjoyed their snacks with a bottle of soda. They praised Ayanate for her handiwork. Joy commented with the flair of a spoiled brat that she could never enter the kitchen to do anything because her family had several chefs and house helps that did all those things.

When they finished eating, Joy apologized to everyone and lied about going home to prepare for a party that she would later be attending that evening with other rich kids in a five-star hotel.

Savior guessed that she was probably one of those people that was popularly known in Nigeria as 'runs girl'.

If so, then she was definitely going to prepare for a party alright, just not the one she spoke about.

They were all relieved to let her go.

A few minutes after her departure, Karo suggested that Ayanate take them upstairs to her room and show them her collections.

Her request sounded innocent enough but every molecule in Savior's body screamed their disapproval. Ayanate, who didn't know what was afoot, accepted and led the way as everyone went upstairs.

Now seething with rage at Karo and Maro, Savior retreated deeper into the corner as they passed by without noticing him.

It pained him that they were out of his line of sight and he couldn't monitor them anymore, but there was nothing he could do about it.

However, there was one other thing that he could do and it made him smile that he had prepared ahead for this contingency as well.

He had planted a small device at the hem of Ayanate's dress during the time he and she were alone in the kitchen, a bug that would enable him to listen to all their conversations crystal clear. At least, if he couldn't see them, he would listen to them.

And God help anyone who tried to harm Ayanate. Savior swore to shred the person limb by limb.

After talking for a while, Karo took permission with some flimsy excuses, telling Ayanate that she and her boyfriend needed to step out a little to take a private phone call.

From the hesitation in her voice, Savior knew that she was uncomfortable to let them leave her side. She obviously didn't trust them. She was just answering them politely so as to not give away her distrust, and risk hurting her new 'friends'.

Don't worry, baby. I'm here and I will help you monitor those fools.

He called them all sorts of unmentionable foul names in his mind.

Maro and Karo thanked her and promised that they would be back in five minutes or less, depending on the outcome of the call.

He watched how the two criminals stepped out of the room, and immediately began their hideous operation.

They started by opening the doors of the other rooms. They tried to open the door to the room that he suspected belonged to her brother but it was locked.

They tried another door which was the guest room, but there was nothing for them to take.

However, they opened the third and last room and struck oil. It was the Master's bedroom and they couldn't believe their luck.

Smiling, eyes bright with greed, they tiptoed inside the room and quietly locked the door behind them.

They stepped out a few minutes later, different from the way they were when they entered the master bedroom. Savior could notice the difference. Karo's handbag looked heavier and Maro's bulging pockets dangled with the sound of all sorts of jewelry.

This ongoing operation was not authorized by Alpha Shadows, he knew. The only explanation to this whole thing was that these people were going against the syndicate rules by doing their own freelancing. There would definitely be hell to pay.

But he was even more angry that these people had penetrated their way into her life in the disguise of a friend just to take advantage of her condition in the most gruesome manner.

Such heartless creatures did not deserve to be alive, he told himself.

And he would personally see to ridding the world of their kind.

The criminals returned to Ayanate and dutifully apologized for any inconveniences. After a few more awkward conversations, they stood up and told her that it was time to leave. They thanked her for her time, generosity and hospitality as she saw them off to the balcony.

Savior also made his way out of the house and out of the estate after giving Ayanate a long look of concern.

Maro was in his one-room apartment that was off campus with his girlfriend, celebrating their new wealth.

They had stolen a lot of cash and jewelry from the master bedroom of Ayanate's house.

As they celebrated, they were too distracted to hear the sound of someone unlocking the door and casually but purposefully stepping inside.

Savior listened as they talked about their fortune and how they would extort more from their blind friend.

They shamelessly prayed to come across more blind people from financially buoyant families to extort from them as well.

Unable to endure and listen to more atrocities coming from their mouths in the form of prayers, Savior, who had been leaning against the door with his arms and legs crossed, straightened and spoke up.

"Well, that prayer will never be answered because this is the last time that you would ever steal from a blind person or any other person for that matter."

The two criminals sharply looked up, shocked almost to the point of heart attack. When they saw and recognized who it was that had just happened upon their secret celebration, their shock and fear increased and doubled up like leavened dough. They realized that they had just been nabbed red-handed, especially by their own boss.

They started to plead for mercy, promising that they would stay away from the girl and never do it again.

"Of course, you will never do it again, after I've sent you two to hell where you belong."

They continued begging and crying, but their crocodile tears irritated him the most.

"Give me your gun!" Savior demanded forcefully.

Maro's eyes widened, so did his girlfriend's, for they knew what he wanted to do.

With the look of resignation, Maro got up from the kneeling position that he and his girlfriend had earlier dropped into while begging for their lives, and went towards his gun cabinet that contained just one illegal firearm.

However, instead of handing over the pistol to Savior, Maro carried out one last desperate attempt to save his life.

In one swift move, he clicked on the safety, spun around and pulled the trigger towards Savior's direction. Savior had expected this response and ducked just in time as a bullet slammed the wall where his head had been.

Because the .83 pistol was equipped with silencer, no one heard the gunshot being fired, and so, no one would come for the rescue of the students. Realizing this, Maro began firing wildly like a crazed man as he chased after Savior around the small confinement.

Karo scrambled to safety to avoid being hit by a stray bullet.

Saviour released a string of expletives from his lips as he ducked several times in different directions.

All of a sudden, Savior could no longer hear the sounds of the bullets as they slammed against the wall, all he could hear was the click click click sound that was coming from Maro's gun.

Finally, he had run out of ammo. Saviour smirked, seeing an opening that he had been hoping for.

Maro realized in stark horror that his rounds had just finished without accomplishing his motive. Not knowing what he planned to achieve with an attempt that would be futile, he rushed back towards his gun cabinet to reload.

Savior got up from his crouched position and smirked wider at the sheer foolishness of what the boy was trying to do. Did he think that Savior would sit down quietly like an obedient toddler and watch him while he reloaded?

"Go to hell, you son of a..." He unholstered his .83 which was similar to the illegal one in Maro's possession and double tapped him on his forehead. Maro's brain exploded. Blood and tissue scattered everywhere.

Savior pivoted, dragged a wailing and struggling Karo out and shot her at the side of her head.

Sweet. Now, the crime scene looked like the girl killed her boyfriend and committed suicide.

Other students would speculate that she had done it after having a heated lovers quarrel.

The police, after carrying out a grilling investigation, would eventually come to such a conclusion as well. And so would the media, the society, and ultimately, Ayanate.

Straightening, he packed up all the stolen accessories and made his way back to Destiny estate twice in one day.

He worked his way into the house and returned all the accessories to their previous positions.

Now it was time to go home and rest for the day. Time to make proper plans to return into Ayanate's life. Hopefully, this time around, he will make things better and do what he couldn't do five years ago.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Before evening, the news about the murdered students had reached the media. The police were currently at the crime scene.

From what the media reported, a female student who was the victim's neighbor in the same compound, had stormed into the room as usual without knocking, to beg them for salt and small onions, when her eyes witnessed the kind of thing that she had only watched in movies or read in a crime book.

The 200 level mechanical engineering student named Kosisochi Samantha Obiano had run out of the room, screaming hysterically and thereby alerting the other tenants who came out to see what happened. Stopped cold by the gruesome sight before them, they had called the police.

The police arrived at the crime scene just as Kosi, who finally stopped screaming hysterically and fainted out of shock, was rushed to the nearest government hospital to be taken care of. The doctors would keep her under observation for the next twenty-four hours.

The Rivers State Police Commissioner was watching the news coverage about the dead students in his office. The Rivers State police public relations officer was currently having a press conference close to the crime scene with correspondence from several media outlets.

"Yes, we have been able to interrogate all the students in that compound apart from the first eyewitness that has been admitted to the hospital as we speak because of shock," the public relations officer answered the

correspondent from Wazobia FM. "We are monitoring her progress, and we will interrogate her when she becomes coherent."

The next answer was in reply to the question asked by another correspondent from Silverbird TV.

"We are still investigating. However, from what we have gathered so far from people who know the couple, the two of them have been known for quarreling frequently over trust issues. The male victim had threatened several times to break up with his girlfriend who was the second victim."

A reporter from NTA asked the next question. "What have been the observations of the police so far from the crime scene?"

"As we entered the victim's room, we found both the young man and his girlfriend lying in a pool of their own blood that flowed from gunshot wounds. The gun we saw in the female victim's hand and the residue of gunpowder matches the bullets that killed them," the PRO replied and took another question from one of the Today FM reporters.

"Has the exact cause of the death of the victims been determined?"

"For now, the investigation is still ongoing and thus, inconclusive. I would ask for your cooperation and for you not to make any speculations. When we are done, an official statement will be released to the public."

Reporters from Channels TV, African independent television, Vanguard Newspaper, the Sun Newspaper, the Daily Newspaper and several more kept throwing questions at him like hail. The PRO dutifully answered all of them as best as he could; but the Rivers State Police Commissioner was no longer listening.

Instead, his mind drifted off to the event that had been taking place for the past three weeks and the last private conversation he had with the person now parading himself as Omotola.

He still remembered that conversation as though it just happened a few minutes ago. He remembered that bone-chilling answer Omotola had given him when he asked about the death of the armed robbers.

"I killed them," he had replied flatly like he had no other choice than to do it.

"Why did you do it?" Abubakar asked.

"I did it for your sake," Omotola replied after a brief hesitation as if he was trying to shield the commissioner from a trouble bigger than him.

"What do you mean you did it for my sake?"

"Please, Mr Commissioner, do we have to go over this?" His tone of voice was almost pleading with the commissioner not to take this far for his own sake.

But instead of yielding the desired results, it exacerbated Abubakar's curiosity.

"Go ahead and tell me. I want to hear it."

After several protests and persuasions from both sides, the Omotola, finally gave in.

"There is no simple way of softening this heavy blow, and since you don't want the easy way out, I'll just go ahead and tell you; but don't say I didn't warn you."

There was static for a while before Omotola spoke again. But when he did, Abubakar wished that he had not persuaded him.

"They wanted to kill one of your sons. Your fourth son to be precise; the first son from your third wife. Ibrahim Ali AbdulRahman."

The commissioner was shocked at first, but regaining his composure, he asked, "Why? How so?"

"Ibrahim was going to be killed that night by the armed robbers. The two thugs I killed that night were the ones saddled with the task of assassinating your son."

"Surely you can do better to convince me by mentioning my son's name. It wouldn't be difficult for someone who was able to get my private phone number and my private email to also know the names of each member of my family."

"Of course not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I was just saying that you are correct and that is why I've sent you more proof from a nearby surveillance camera.

"The footage is from an adjacent supermarket, boldly displaying the face of your son, who is secretly a member of Alpha Shadows, and the other criminals as they were running away with their stolen possessions.

"You don't have to worry that the footage would eventually get into the hands of the police because I hacked into their system and deleted that particular footage."

Abubakar logged into his email address, downloaded the video, and watched it. Staring at him was all the proof he needed.

"The reason they wanted to kill your son was because he is the son of a law enforcement officer," Omotola continued.

"Your son is not the only child of a law enforcement officer in the gang. There are other children from police families and other military sectors in the country, and there is an ongoing plan to kill all of them. This is because, although your son and his counterparts joined out of their own free will, Alpha Shadows fears that they are being infiltrated, and thus, they are not taking any chances.

"That is why they are discreetly killing them under so many guises, including the guises of an operation.

"I got the knowledge of this clandestine operation when I hacked into their database and I've sent the plan to you in a separate file where I wrote down everything verbatim."

Abubakar remembered opening the file sent to his email and reading it in shock.

He finished reading and looked up from the documents with tears in his eyes. He didn't even know when they started trickling down his cheeks, because he had been too grief-stricken to notice.

After managing to put on a strong bravado, he nailed one of the warehouses of Tekena Green who is the current leader of Alpha Shadows, smiled to the cameras as he answered questions from the media, and had returned to his office, numb and distraught.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Abubakar didn't remember the last time he ever cried, but he buried his face in his pillow and wept almost all through the night.

His tears were as a result of believing that he had failed as a father.

All his professional and married life, he had done his very best to be the best father, husband and police officer that he could be.

Apparently, his best wasn't good enough.

Yes, he was a revered police commissioner in the country. His four wives were not complaining. But out of his nine children, three had gone haywire.

He had known of some of his children's capricious and wayward life but never did he think that one of them was part of the same crime syndicate that was giving him sleepless night and instilling fear and terror into the hearts of many of the Nigerian citizens.

He wondered what it would look like if the news about Ibrahim inadvertently leaked out to the media. That would definitely be the end of his career as a law enforcement officer.

Of course, they wouldn't fire him—there is no place where it was written in the Nigerian constitution that a person would bear the consequences of the negative actions of a family member. But Abubakar knew he would simply resign because he would be unable to bear the shame.

This was why Abubakar would forever be indebted to Omotola.

And no matter what anyone said or did, no matter whether anyone forgot or not, Abubakar would always remember what Omotola did for him and his family.

His attention returned to the ongoing news coverage and he could see that the public relations officer had just wrapped up his press conference. He pulled out his phone and called the PRO for his own personal report.

"Are you certain that this is not an act of cultism?" The commissioner asked after the public relations officer had finished briefing him.

"Sure, these people are indeed cult members, we could see the marks on their bodies indicating as much but there has been no cult activities that would warrant what we saw this evening."

"So, you think it is a lovers quarrel just as the students are speculating?"

"It's too soon to say, sir. The report that we are getting is that the boy cheated on his girlfriend a lot. They quarreled over it several times, but the boy was always threatening her with a breakup."

"Some of our analysts are saying that maybe he carried on with his threat and since the girl was unable to bear the heartbreak, she decided to kill the boy and commit suicide. Things like this happen between couples when one of them is obsessed," the PRO said.

"Okay, carry on with your investigation, but keep me posted if anything changes."

"Will do that, sir. Thank you so much."

The commissioner disconnected the call and clumsily dropped the phone on his table as his mind wondered if he should contact Omotola to come and carry out his own investigation on this crime, but he quickly decided against it because he didn't want to be too dependent on him.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Munachimso Savior Onuoha lived an ambivalent lifestyle, unknown to the people that surrounded him on each side.

As the CEO of a successful tech enterprise, his workers, employees and friends could never imagine that he was one of the most wanted men in the country.

Also, as the second in command in the ranking of Alpha Shadows, the founder and current leader of this crime syndicate, Tekena Green, never knew or suspected that his second-in-command was a successful CEO of an enterprise. His prodigies didn't know. In fact, none of the members of Alpha Shadows knew anything about him apart from his English name and his alias.

The question was, how possible was it that the CEO of a well-known enterprise in the country was a cold-blooded killer and one of the most wanted men in the country and no one was the wiser? How did he carry out his ambivalent activities unabated?

The simple answer was that Munachimso Savior Onuoha was not just a criminal, a killer and a CEO, he was also the master of disguises. He was a pro in his game.

Apart from his identity which was meticulously concealed, he had taken an elaborate measure to disguise his physical appearance as well.

But even that one did not suffice. So, apart from the camouflage and disguises that changed his physical appearance and identity, he also did most things differently and lived in different locations for each of his partitioned lifestyle.

Different houses, different phone numbers, cars, clothes, shoes. Even different patterns of thoughts, behavior and movement. The only similarities was the fact that he was dedicated and professional at what he did, regardless of which role he was playing.

Tonight, he was dressed as Savior and was currently sitting on one of the couches in the living room of one of his hideouts. Besides him was a small sized stool. On top of it was a bottle of Budweiser and an empty glass.

The television was on and tuned to one of the news stations. He was watching the news coverage of his handiwork just like everyone who was currently tuned to the station.

He liked what he was seeing and hearing from the news. He had killed Maro and his girlfriend at the right time, at the time they were having their lovers quarrel. So far, from the report given by the police PRO at the press conference, and from the ongoing speculation by the media, nothing was linking the deaths of the two victims back to him and that was how he wanted it to be.

That was why he'd set up the crime scene the way he wanted the police and any other eye witness to see it.

Snatching the advantage of their acrimony towards each other that he learned of a few minutes prior to their deaths, he had made it look like the girl killed her boyfriend and committed suicide.

Everyone who knew the couple when they were alive was apparently presuming the same thing. Savior believed that no matter what, the Nigerian police force would still come to the same conclusion, it was just a matter of time.

The success of his impromptu mission gave him that familiar feeling of exhilaration of victory but Savior could not celebrate. Instead, he found his thoughts wandering to Ayanate.

What was she doing right now? He suspected that she must have heard the news about her dead friends, probably from that basket-mouth, Joy. Maybe not her, but surely, someone must have told Ayanate.

He wondered how she was taking the news of their death. She would never know, and Savior would never tell her what he did for her. She would never know that the students died because of what they did to her. That was a necessary and selfless sacrifice that he had to make for the woman that he had always wanted so much to impress but he would never bother regaling her with the details.

Savior had no regrets for killing them. The only thing he regretted right now was not being with Ayanate to console her as she mourned the deaths of her so-called friends.

His train of thought was interrupted by another concern. The River State police commissioner.

Who knew if the man was also watching the news? He was probably still thinking of the last conversation they had.

He was impressed at the way he managed to pull everything off.

It has taken a lot of arduous planning and investigation, but in the end, everything paid off.

Yes, it was true that the commissioner's son was a member of Alpha shadows. Ibrahim Ali AbdulRahman had tried to conceal that fact, probably because of his father's public image, but Savior had eventually discovered it on his own. It was also true that there was a plan that was being set in motion to kill all the children of law enforcement officers that had joined Alpha Shadows.

In the midst of that, Savior saw an opportunity to turn things around to his advantage, and he used it to the maximum.

That was why he had personally handpicked Ibrahim and everyone who joined him on his last operation. And everything worked according to plan.

He knew beyond any shadow of doubt that he had gained the trust of the four commissioners and the Inspector-General of police.

He hoped it would remain like that. Everything was almost in his control now, and there would be no going back.

He was a fighter and this was a fight that he would see to the end.

Well, enough of all that. Time to change course and start planning for his next move.

He got up from the couch that he had been sitting on, straightened the wrinkles on his shirt, turned off the television and all the lights, and began moving into his bedroom for the night.

Ayanate was crying over the loss of her new friends. Her mother, who had been by her side consoling her, stepped out to call her brother.

Preye, upon getting the information from his mother, immediately put a call across to his weeping sister, consoled her and promised to return home that weekend and go to church with her on Sunday though it hadn't been in his initial plan.

She thanked him and disconnected the call even as her thoughts drifted again to the three friends who had visited her earlier today, two of whom were already dead.

It was true that she didn't know much about them, but she never suspected that Karo was capable of doing the things they said she did.

That was what she told Joy.

"I knew these people longer than you did and the truth is that she was obsessed about him. Don't you remember what she said when I caught them kissing each other at your house today?" Joy argued back.

"She obviously lacked self-control and it was this same lack of self control that pushed her over the edge. I strongly believe that she truly did what she was suspected of doing."

Ayanate didn't like the way Joy spoke of them with so much indifference, especially now that they were gone. At least she should show an iota of respect for the dead. A level of disdain for the girl stirred in her, but it wasn't the right time to point that out.

As it turned out, Savior eventually didn't have to go after Chika, aka Stone, as he planned.

Stone gave up the ghost in the arms of his grandmother in the early hours of Sunday, 1:15 a.m. to be precise. He died from an infection that he got from the gunshot wound that wasn't treated.

It happened that he finally managed to return home in intense pain from Destiny Estate to the dingy, rundown apartment that he and his grandmother resided in.

When his grandmother, who was the only surviving member of his family saw him, she had raised an alarm, calling people to help her take her grandson to the hospital.

Her daughter and her son-in-law had died violently from a car accident, leaving her to take sole custody of their son who was her grandson.

Chika was finally rushed to the hospital, but the doctors had refused to administer even first aid without a police report.

There was no way that the doctors would treat him without the police report—that was highly unprofessional and risky in the light of the type of injury he had gotten—regardless of his grandmother's persuasion. Chika refused to give a statement that would implicate him to the police.

The police refused to write a report for what they didn't know about, and the doctors refused to treat him without it.

Then his grandmother took him home and began to administer local treatment, but it was too late by then because the damage had already been done.

Chika apologized remorsefully to his grandmother for the wrong he had done to her.

Granny forgave him and asked him to also apologize to Jesus for all the heartbreak that he had caused him. Chika hastily but sincerely did so before passing on to the other side.

Granny held the corpse of her grandson and cried for his untimely death, but her consolation was that her grandson was currently in the gracious arms of Jesus and reuniting with his parents and grandfather.

She gave a prayer of thanksgiving for all the time and opportunities that she had spent with her grandson, and concluded her prayers by asking God to take her home if her assignment here was over.

Little did she know how her prayers were being answered at that moment.

In a fortnight, granny would peacefully pass on to glory in her sleep.

Then, she would finally see the face of her Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and her family reunion will be complete.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

It might look like another mundane night on earth but it wasn't so in Heaven.

Today was the day of remembrance. The day of reckoning. All the sons of God had been summoned, both living and dead.

This was a spiritual gathering, yes. However, some privileged sons and daughters of God who operated in a high dimension of intimacy with the Righteous Judge were present in this gathering.

Today was the day that a lot of prayers that had been offered for several years and were put on hold would be answered.

A lot of people would receive several miracles like healings to deadly and even terminal diseases and sicknesses, deliverances from demonic oppressions, conception for the barren, favor, breakthrough, blessings, God's help, and ultimately, salvation.

This was also the day that a lot of nations in Africa, Asia, and other countries on the green planet would receive God's intervention because of the prayers of the people who spent all their lives interceding.

Today was the day that obscure villages that were very difficult to pinpoint on the atlas would be remembered by God to reach out the gospel of Christ to them.

This would be an answer to the prayers of those who sacrificed and poured out their lives as drink offerings in prayers that the Gospel of Christ should reach every nook and cranny of the earth.

The sons of God were currently gathered in a vast hall known as the Hall of Remembrance.

It was a huge hall, with the capacity to accommodate millions times millions of attendees at once. It was so wide that it almost seemed to have no boundary.

Gold and other precious stones were lavishly used to render the flooring and installations.

This Hall of Remembrance was the very place where Cornelius' prayers and alms-giving stood as a memorial before the Righteous Judge. This was where the accuser of the brethren spoke against Joshua, the high priest, and Job, the wealthiest and holiest man in the far east during his time.

And currently, this was the place where the case of none other but Savior Munachimso Onuoha was tabled for consideration.

On his regal and highly exalted throne, bathed in a light so bright that no mortal could gaze upon, sat the Righteous Judge.

The golden throne was at the epicenter of the hall, on a very high plinth that made it seem as if it was floating.

Surrounding his throne were four mighty cherubs with fierce appearances.

They each had four faces and four pairs of wings. With two wings they covered their feet, with two others they covered their faces, and with two they flew.

The flying wings fluttered so fast it looked like the buzzing of a super-speed hummingbird.

A brilliant, rainbow-like glow, with a million colors flashing as lightning bolts erupted, cocooned the throne.

The four cherubs cried, "All hail the one true God who was, and is, and is to come. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the Righteous Judge!"

With that cry, every creature in the hall bowed low and made obeisance.

"Bring forth the accused," the majestic voice of the One who sat on the throne boomed.

A hologram image of Savior appeared. Not only was his physical body revealed but also the state of his spirit.

His spirit looked black, rock-hard and wounded at the same time.

The Righteous Judge looked closely at this son of man who he had created for his purpose in his current state, behaving as though God didn't exist.

"Who is here to plead his cause?" the Righteous Judge said with a sigh.

"I am," a soft voice called.

He was the one called the Lamb. Jesus, the advocate.

First, he appeared as a spotless lamb who had deep red blood gushing out from a slit in his neck, but as he drew nearer to the throne, he took on his humanoid form.

His white robe mirrored the glory that proceeded from the throne. He stood at the right side of the throne, beside the hologram of Savior.

After a quick glance with eyes of compassion on the holographic image of Savior, he bowed to the One who sat on the throne and said, "Your majesty, if it pleases you, I will advocate for the candidate being addressed here, your son, Savior."

"Alright then, the proceedings may begin."

"Woah, woah, woah," a sleek voice echoed, interrupting the sacred gathering. "Don't tell me you want to begin this party without me!"

At the appearance of a huge black reptilian form on the golden floor of the hall, groans could be heard from the crew of angels in the hall.

He was here again. That old serpent. The devil, the accuser of brethren.

He slithered up close to the throne, doing his best to mask the pain and regret he felt at having lost his place of glory forever.

Oh well, if he couldn't reign as God, neither will those weaklings called men. How dare they take his place? He'd definitely make them suffer along with him in hell for the rest of eternity.

Mustering all the hate he could manage and making sure not to look too close at the throne, he took his place at the left side of the hologram of Savior.

He completed his transformation into a human form too. His raven black hair glistened and his robe of doom flowed past his feet.

He sneered at the image of Savior. Piece of cake. This one was a goner. He was an easy prey. Let them just get all these formalities over with.

Then with a smirk, he turned and mocked the Christ, "Oh, I see you showed up punctual again. I wonder why you even bother with these ungrateful imps. They don't deserve everything you do for them. They don't even know it."

"SILENCE!" the majestic voice of thunder from the throne commanded.

The accuser willed himself not to tremble too visibly. "My apologies, your majesty," he said, bowing low. "I didn't mean to disrespect your presence. I was only stating the fact to my opponent here."

One of the mighty angels in the front row flew to them and bowed low to God.

He brought out a large golden-inked scroll. He was a record-keeping scribe angel.

"I will now read the briefings of this man's life."

"Savior Munachimso was born to Mr and Mrs Onuoha who are now resting in the bosom of the Lord and are in fact standing in this court this very day. He was brought up in the way of the Lord, however, he didn't follow this path. His heart grew more hardened when, after his parents' death, he began a blood-thirsty pursuit of revenge, going as far as joining a crime syndicate known as Alpha Shadows. Currently, he is responsible for the murder of over a hundred persons both directly and indirectly."

Terse silence hung in the air. Mr and Mrs Onuoha in the congregation standing among the resurrected saints, with heads bowed, wept silently.

The accuser clapped and laughed maniacally.

"Why do you all stand stiff?" he asked, turning around and addressing the congregation.

"This is great news! Why, I'll say the boy has really impressed me. Need I go on and go into full details of his sins from childhood till date? It seems our dear secretary here has intentionally left some things out."

The accuser's face morphed into one of triumphant evil.

"His fate is sealed. It is written in your word that the soul that sinneth, it shall die. 'This man,' he pointed at the holographic image of Savior, "is worthy of condemnation. He has rejected your only son and hardened his heart. I say, he be judged accordingly."

The Righteous Judge didn't speak, so the accuser continued, pressing home his point.

"Can't you see? He is not even the least bit repentant. He curses you, your majesty, daily, not only in his words but also in his acts. He nails over and over again the one who died for him. He has rejected your love. Didn't your word also say that your eyes are too righteous to behold iniquity?"

The Righteous Judge finally spoke up in a voice filled with pain.

"Does the advocate have anything to say?"

Jesus slowly stepped forward. He knelt down with heads bowed.

"Oh please, can all this drama stop and the verdict be issued already?" the accuser said in an irritated, impatient voice, rolling his eyes.

However, the entire congregation paid no heed to his rants. Their eyes and attention was riveted on Jesus.

"Abba," Jesus said in a sweet voice, barely above a whisper.

Then he lifted his hands and the blood began to flow from his pierced hands. When he raised up his head, the tears fell like a waterfall, unrestrained.

The accuser scowled so deeply, his eyes were almost buried.

"No!" he growled deeply, low and slow. "That's cheating! He is going against all practical orders of the universe."

Everyone ignored him. He'd had his say. Now was time for the Lamb to speak.

Some of the angel guards ached for the Righteous Judge to command them so they could toss this talkative back to where he belonged, the pit.

"Remember my sacrifice on the cross, Abba. The blood I shed for Savior's sake," Jesus said, "Remember the prayers offered for him by his parents."

At his words, an angel came as if on cue and dropped a golden vial into Jesus' hands.

He uncorked the lid and out flowed a wisp of incense that ascended to the throne. The prayers and tears of his parents had been kept here all these years. Now was the set time for remembrance.

"Remember who you are. Gracious in mercy and slow to anger. Remember your love for his soul. Show mercy, Abba. Give Him one more chance," Jesus said, crying.

The One who sat on the throne stood up, and thunder clapped.

All knees bowed.

"I am the Lord. I have mercy on whom I will have mercy and compassion on whom I will have compassion. I give Savior a second chance. I dispatch his guardian angel this moment to begin reminding him of me, of the faith he has lost."

"Urgh, what is all this? I bet you, I will make sure he never turns to you. You'll see!" the accuser spat.

"SILENCE! Your time here is up! Guards, escort him out of my presence!"

Two burly, gladiator-like angels flew and grabbed the accuser by his arms with joy. Oh, how they had been itching for this!

"Stay back! I'll leave!" the accuser barked at them.

He shrugged them off and slithered away by himself, his head down in defeat.

Yet, the glint in his eyes showed the cunning determination not to give up on that soul. Tiger.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

5:30 A.M.

SUNDAY, 29TH OF JUNE.

He was currently dressed like Munachimso Onuoha but he was feeling like Tiger.

It was necessary to blend both personalities today because it increased his uniqueness.

She needed to see him as Munachimso Onuoha, that former classmate of five years ago. But there was just one problem about that.

Munachimso was a good guy. He was clean. He had never carried out any dirty job. He was a quiet, smooth talking businessman, a professional and the drop-dead handsome CEO of a successful enterprise, Charlie's Hub; definitely not a spy.

Thus, if Munachimso tried any behavior or activity that was contrary to his personality, he would not last even for one second before he would be caught or killed.

But Savior, alias Tiger, was the direct opposite of Munachimso Onuoha.

He was the bad guy—a fact that he was all too eager to admit—and he was the master of dirty jobs. Indeed, his hands were soiled with it.

The only similarities of these personalities was that they were both handsome and smoking hot.

And today, Savior was practically itching to do another dirty job. That was why he was happy to tag along. After all, he was the one who had set in motion the plan Munachimso was executing right now.

Thus, his job was to tag along side Munachimso to protect him from doing anything stupid that would land his backside into trouble.

Munachimso Savior was back on the road again. This time around, he was following the direction of a GPS tracker. And it was the GPS that he had planted in the tyre of Barrister Righteous Green's car to monitor her movements.

After planning different kinds of scenarios to get back into the life of Ayanate Righteous Green, the best scenario had finally come down to the one he was executing right now.

After carefully thinking of how to do his reintroduction back into her life, he decided that the best place that he could meet her and it would look like a pure coincidence would be in her church.

There was no way he could walk up to her front porch, ring the doorbell, and after he was asked to be welcomed in, he would just walk up to her and, bam, drop the information of how he relocated her after five years on her laps.

No, the reunion was supposed to be better, more dramatic, more natural than something as ridiculous as that.

Although several scenarios came up, after several and deep contemplation, he finally concluded that this was the best case scenario.

The Ayanate he knew five years ago was a very religious person. Where better to meet her than the place that would be like a second, if not the first, home to her?

The words of David in the Bible came rushing into his heart. "I was glad when they said to me let us go to the house of the Lord."

Munachimso Savior didn't know why he remembered that Bible passage. Indeed, he didn't know why he was remembering a lot of Bible passages lately but he convinced himself that it was because of the person he was going to meet.

Maybe her spirituality was rubbing off on him, he smiled, but after a while, the thought and knowledge of her spiritual convictions posed a new question and challenge to him.

Munachimso used to be a dedicated, born again Christian that turned into an agnostic, and finally abandoned God and anything that had to do with church after the death of his parents.

As an atheist who had a great level of knowledge of the Bible, he knew what could stand as a challenge should he desire to forge a relationship with Ayanate.

Even now, he remembered some of those Bible passages that frowned against having a relationship with the kind of person with his spiritual standing.

He remembered what David said in the Bible, specifically in Psalms 84:10.

"For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

He also remembered what Paul wrote in his second epistle to the Corinthians in the sixth chapter verbatim.

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?

And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

More Bible passages came rushing and he was surprised at how even after all these years of burying his mother's Bible in the bowels of his library, he could suddenly remember a lot of them.

A frown creased his forehead as he looked straight ahead.

What was happening?

This wasn't the right time to get cornered or distracted by that thought. The question now should be how he was going to make things work between him and Ayanate.

Would she accept him regardless of his spiritual standing? It was highly unlikely.

So what should he do? Pretend to be a Christian or tell her the plain fact?

Don't worry or get distracted, Munachimso. Savior's here to do those dirty jobs for you, okay? Just focus on executing your ongoing task. You will cross that bridge when you get to it.

Munachimso nodded almost imperceptibly as his eyes focused on his GPS reader and the road in front of him.

The moving GPS finally stopped moving. Munachimso read the location from the GPS screen.

"Jackpot!" he exclaimed as he floored his accelerator and drove like one who was possessed to his destination.

He arrived at the church location in a couple of minutes and was directed by one of the members of the crowd control unit to park his car in the parking lot.

He did so, and when he checked his GPS screen, he realized that his car was parked a few rows behind that of the barrister.

Still sitting at his driver's side, he switched off his car and checked the time on his wristwatch. It was 5:43 a.m.

He quickly browsed the time for the church service on the church website. Good. He was seventeen minutes early.

A lot of people were parking behind him and entering the church, so he told himself that he better get going if he wanted to get a seat in the main church auditorium. He had no doubt that Ayanate had made it with her mother into the church auditorium, and he wanted to be in the same place where he could keep his eyes on her. Making it to the main church auditorium was also very vital for their so-called coincidental reunion.

Just before he stepped out of his car, his eyes inadvertently went to the Beretta on his passenger side. An urge to take the handgun along welled up in him but that was a foolish suggestion, so he quelled it.

He had no doubt that a church as big as this would be tight on security. If he walked past the church magnetometer with a concealed pistol, he knew it would immediately set off and expose him to the security personnels.

That wasn't how he planned to introduce himself to Ayanate. Thus, it was time to put Savior in his rightful place.

Munachimso chided Savior for his unnecessary and foolish interference. Slightly ashamed and subdued, Savior apologized, and agreed that he would remain quiet in the background.

"That's better," Munachimso whispered as he began making his way inside the main church auditorium, being conscious all the while that Savior's presence was with him. And he could also sense the presence of another that he could not quite identify.

What he did not know was that it was that unidentified entity that was pouring those Bible scriptures in his heart.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Munachimso was very close to one of the entrance doors of the church auditorium when he spotted Ayanate also about to enter the church through a different entrance door.

He squinted his eyes and observed her carefully. He could see that she was wearing a long red gown that snugly fit her petite body and she was carrying a big handbag on her left arm. He could see the gleaming bracelets on her wrist that matched her necklace and gold chandelier earrings. Her long wig was bundled in a ponytail with a white ribbon. It was obvious that she was wearing a high heel but he couldn't see the color and design. Her makeup was moderate and almost went unnoticed on her smooth and spotless face.

"Stunning!" That was the only word he could manage to exclaim before his heart began furiously slamming against his rib cage at something else that he just began to notice.

Ayanate was not with her mother as he presumed; she was with a man.

His eyes squinted even more and took a careful look again, and he could see a man affectionately holding her by the hand as they walked into the church. He could also see that she and the man were smiling and having some sort of conversation.

A heavy jealousy that he never knew that he was capable of having sprouted wings in his heart. Savior was now protesting in the background of Munachimso's mind despite his earlier vow of maintaining silence.

After several attempts, Munachimso finally succeeded in silencing Savior as he continued inside the church auditorium, trailing Ayanate and her, uh, her... He couldn't bring himself to complete that sentence.

Apparently, he had a rival, and Savior was already planning his next move to defeat and take out this rivalry.

He observed as she and the male figure took their seats, seemingly at their preferred spot. Then he hurried and sat down on the other side of the church aisle. Luckily for him, the place he chose to sit in afforded him the luxury of observing Ayanate from a safe distance.

Unable to resist the temptation of looking at her, his gaze moved towards her direction and that was when he recognized the man that was with her.

He began to breathe easier, for if his memory served him right, the man who was seated beside Ayanate was her only and older brother. This was no rival. Oh, piece of cake!

This was Preye Green, one of his former friends.

Preye was also an alumni from the same school that his sister and Munachimso graduated from, although he was two years ahead of them. Despite the disparity in class, Preye and Munachimso discovered that they had a lot of similarities, and it drew them together back in their secondary school days. Indeed, their relationship was more or less like that between a master and his prodigy.

Preye Green, who was in SS2 at the time and computer savvy, had not just been given the position of the head boy and senior prefect, but also allocated the task of taking charge of the school's computer lab and all its equipment.

Being the only student with access to the computer lab, he was also in the position to grant a temporary permission to any student who also wanted access at a period of time.

It was in the process that he had met a young and bright student who was also his sister's classmate. His sister was in JSS3 at the time, which was equivalent to grade nine in the European educational setting.

Munachimso didn't just approach him everyday, before school hours, during school breaks, and after school hours to request access to the computer lab, but also for Preye to teach him what he knew about computers. Unable to resist such a passionate request, Preye readily agreed.

It was during one of their classes that Munachimso asked his revered teacher and senior student what he would like to study in the University. When he replied that he would very much like to study computer science, Munachimso called him his mentor.

"How so?" Preye had asked, smiling.

"That's because I also want to study computer science," he had replied, reciprocating his mentor's smile.

There were also other similarities with the duo. They were both science students and part of the most brilliant the school ever produced. They also belonged to the class of hot guys. This was why, regardless of his mentor's religious affiliation, the students, unlike his sister, didn't tag him as one of the holy rollers.

His sister was also one of the brilliant students of the school, but she was just an ordinary art student. Plain and simple. And her strict ways of turning down boys landed her in the category of touch-not-my-anointed.

As the years went by, Munachimso and Preye grew closer like brothers. Munachimso would someday occupy the position of the senior student, and his mentor at the time told him as much prior to his graduation as though he had seen it coming.

Munachimso remembered how he and his friend began slowly drifting away from each other.

Soon after Preye graduated from secondary school, both of them started becoming too busy to see one-on-one. When Preye gained admission into the University of Port Harcourt, he became too swamped with lectures, assignments and projects in order to keep up with a high GPA, so much so that they hardly spoke even through phone calls. Then finally, Preye and his family had dropped off the radar after what happened to his sister.

Looking back now, he could hardly blame Preye for what happened. Communication was supposed to be both ways, and he had done a terrible job.

Munachimso's attention was drawn back to the present and the church as one of the pastors went up to the podium and began the church service with an opening prayer.

He gave the siblings one last look before turning to concentrate on the opening prayers.

"This reunion will be really fun," he muttered to himself.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Try as he might, Munachimso could not bring himself to fully concentrate on the ongoing church service.

His eyes kept drifting back in different intervals to Ayanate, his mind to the conversation that he was about to have with her after the service.

He didn't look at the large screens which were placed at strategic locations for easy visibility to a wide range of the congregation. While others were looking at it to read the projected hymn and song lyrics, Bible passages, prayer points or announcement, his mind was far away.

He didn't look straight at the podium when the pastor was preaching or when the choir was singing. Instead, his eye traveled back and forth to Ayanate. After all, she was the reason he was here. She was the reason he came to church after several years.

Much to his relief, the church's first service finally drew to an anticipated end.

There was going to be a five-minutes break for people who came for the first service to step out of the auditorium before the second service would start. Some of the incoming and outgoing church members clustered around in small groups, chatting and exchanging greetings.

Munachimso, in a brief moment of distraction, lost sight of Ayanate and her brother.

He mentally berated himself as his eyes carefully scanned the massive crowd, looking for his charge.

He couldn't mess this up now. He had come too far.

After a brief moment of searching harder and more urgently, almost knocking people over as he breezed past them, he still didn't find the siblings. He covered as much ground as he could inside the massive church auditorium, doing an almost 360 degree search, but he still didn't find the siblings, and there was no sign of their mother either.

Dang it! He couldn't believe that in a moment of carelessness, he had let them slip away from his sight. There was nothing he could do now than to go home and sulk for the rest of the day.

He had failed.

He sighed, hung his head and turned towards one of the exits.

He took a few steps when his eyes lit up at something he saw that almost went unnoticed.

Ahead of him, Preye and his sister had just broken up from a group and were also heading towards the same exit. His face broke out in a wide grin. Bingo!

The siblings were almost to the exit door when Munachimso made his move.

He put up his game face and began running towards them, calling out to Preye as he did.

Preye heard a male voice calling out to him. Ayanate did too, but she quickly discarded the thought that it was who she thought. Maybe she'd also developed a hearing problem, or it could be that the person who was calling just had a similar voice to who her mind was telling her it was.

They stopped in their tracks as Preye turned around to see the face that belonged to the voice that was calling him by his name.

The figure approached them, and Preye couldn't believe his eyes.

"Please tell me that my eyes are not playing pranks on me!"

"It took me a while but I knew it was you when I saw you during the church service!" Munachimso replied excitedly as Preye broke out from his sister and gave him a giant bear hug.

Munachimso was happy to see his friend after several years, but sincerely, he wished that it was Ayanate that was embracing him right now. Indeed, it took an ounce of willpower not to shove his friend to one side and take Ayanate into his arms. He knew he had to be patient and play according to script. Prim and proper. Cool and collected.

Preye seemed to have forgotten his sister as he broke away from the embrace, calling the name of his long-lost prodigy over and over again in happy amazement, talking and laughing excitedly as his sister stood at one corner, utterly astonished and not quite believing her ears.

Standing a few inches away from her brother, Ayanate was visibly astonished. She was surprised when Preye mentioned the name she never expected to hear again in her life. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. It sounded like a mistake, but when Preye repeated the name over and over again in a tone of pleasant surprise, she knew it was really Munachimso Savior Onuoha. She almost fainted.

Although she couldn't see him, her hearing compensated for it. His voice, as expected, was now more mature, but it was still the same baritone voice that she loved listening to five years ago. She had no doubt that this was indeed Munachimso, her formal secondary school classmate and secret crush.

She felt dizzy, she was sure going to faint now, she just had to position herself well.

But there was no time to faint as Munachimso suddenly called out her name, and reached out to greet her.

Munachimso darted closer to his blind former classmate to greet her with a handshake but unable to help himself, he decided to change course and embraced her at the last minute, however briefly.

After a few more exchanges of pleasantries and awkward conversations, Munachimso turned towards Preye and asked with a smile. "So, how have you been, senior?"

Preye laughed. "We are no longer in secondary school, bro, so you can quit with the 'senior' thing."

Munachimso grinned. "Alright, if you say so. But tell me, what have I missed?"

"Not so much. Let me not bore you with all of it. What's up with you? I believe life has been nothing short of amazing to you?"

"I won't exactly put it that way, but generally, I'm fine."

"Of course. So, are you done with your studies?"

"I haven't gone for masters yet, but I've graduated from first degree and recently finished my youth service."

"Wow! Congrats! It has really been a while, wouldn't you say?" Preye said, playfully slapping Munachimso on his back.

"Honestly, it has, and I still can't believe I met you guys today," Munachimso replied, discreetly stealing another glance at Ayanate for the umpteenth time.

"So, how long have you been in this town?"

"I was always in Port Harcourt during holidays, but after graduating from the University of Lagos, I permanently moved back to this town."

"Is this your first time attending church service here, because I've never seen you here before?"

"Yes, it's my first time here," Munachimso wanted to lie and say more for his solid cover story, but he decided to leave his answer at that, fearing that what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in the Bible might happen to him.

Where did that notion come from?

"It's really nice to have you here. I hope you enjoyed the service and you will keep coming?"

"Of course, I'll come again." And he meant it.

Preye kept peppering his friend and prodigy with a lot of questions.

He and his sister were excited when Munachimso regaled them with the list of his successes and the fact that he was now the CEO of his own enterprise, even though it wasn't his intention to do so, when Preye asked him about it.

"Wow! I've heard of your firm. Almost every tech savvy person in this country knows of it, but I never imagined that you were the CEO, and I never took out the time to really check up on it."

"Thanks to you, I finally studied computer science," Munachimso quipped.

The second service was about to start and another pastor was moving up to the podium to begin the service with opening prayers.

"You know what," Preye said as they began to join the throng of people heading towards the exit.

"Why don't you join us? My sister lost two of her friends this week unfortunately, and I promised her I'll take her out today to cheer her up."

Was that a look of expectancy on the face of Ayanate that she was trying so hard to conceal?

"Oh, I wouldn't want to be a third wheel," he laughed.

"Oh, come on, I'm sure my sister doesn't mind, and it would be fun to do some catching up."

Munachimso couldn't believe what he was being offered. And what he was rejecting.

He would like nothing more than to sit with Ayanate and listen to her all day, but he didn't want to appear so eager. Thus, he politely declined the invitation despite her brother's persuasions.

That look of expectancy on her face morphed into disappointment.

He quickly decided to make up for it, hoping he had not shattered her hopes.

"But tell you what," he said, fishing out his phone from his pocket, "Why don't we exchange contacts so that we can continue communicating on the phone before fixing a suitable date for a little get-together?"

"That's a nice idea."

The siblings exchanged contact numbers with him, Munachimso was inwardly jumping in ecstasy that he now safely had the number of Ayanate among his phone's contacts, although he knew he would have easily gotten it via another way if you wanted to.

When they were done, they all said their goodbyes and Munachimso broke away from the group, turned and began to calmly walk towards the direction where his car was parked.

As he approached his car and unlocked it with the remote control, he told himself that enough was enough.

It was high time he did what he couldn't do five years ago. It was high time indeed.

EPILOGUE

Three spiritual entities beaming with radiant light watched, with interest, what was unfolding in the cosmos.

The parents of Munachimso Savior Onuoha, standing on both sides of Jesus Christ, had seen the whole event of how their son went to church just for the charade of relocating a girl he wanted back in his life.

They could see Munachimso talking and laughing with Ayanate and Preye, but Jesus wasn't smiling. Consequently, both father and mother weren't smiling either as they kept watching the scene below.

There was something solemn about this moment that Jesus and the parents were observing with an unreadable expression.

On the dark side of the spiritual realm, one of the demons of destruction that was assigned to Africa also stood, with smaller demons that had been designated to help him carry out his evil and destructive works, observing the reunion.

These demons were the ones who tried as much as they could to corrupt and influence human beings that would allow them with sins of corruption, hatred, malice, anger, fornication, bestiality, rituals, witchcraft, kidnapping, idolatry, blasphemy and all manner of evils. Their sole purpose was destroying and wasting the souls of mankind and ultimately making them spend eternity in hellfire.

Unlike the spiritual entities of light, the demons watched with the look of confusion and contempt for the reunion of these human beings.

"This is no stupid coincidence. This was the orchestration of the enemy!" The lead demon fumed with clenched fists.

As the grotesque-looking creature verbally poured out its rage, its mouth odor was even more putrid than its body odor. Black plumes of smoke poured out from its wicked belly through its oral orifice. Its fellow hideous creatures didn't mind the bad breath and the wicked fume that radiated from their leader because their case wasn't different.

The demons could see the angels of light that shielded the three human beings with their white wings. Just like Jesus and the parents, the angels that built a protective hedge over the trio did so with solemn expressions on their faces, not giving the demons any hint of what was afoot. And it ended up confusing and enraging the demons the more.

Unable to contain its disdain for the enemy and his shining angels, the demon of destruction walked towards the angels, speaking vile and hateful words and wagging its hideous, gnarled fingers at the angels.

"Tell your master that whatever he is up to, he shall not succeed. You hear me?"

The angel closest to him did not reply. He just stared at the demon intently with a silent warning for him not to come any closer than he already had.

But just like the defeated fool that he was, the demon kept blabbering, spittle flying here and there.

"Tell your master that he didn't conquer, especially not my own Africa, regardless of what he thinks he has done. This is my territory. I'm the king of the jungle, and I shall do as I please. I shall not relinquish my hold on this territory."

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," the angel replied.

"I shall continue to cause more destruction and waste more lives, and I will use him to carry out my missions," the demon said, pointing towards Munachimso. "He is my instrument. I shall use him to waste and destroy human souls, including hers."

It pointed towards Ayanate.

"Just watch what I will do. You just watch!"

The demon finally stopped threatening when it ran out of breath. It expected a confrontation from any of the angels but was disappointed when none was forthcoming.

A completely sane person did not exchange words with a madman.

"Curse be upon your master. I curse him with all my breath and vehemence!"

The demon went closer than was required to one of the angels and tried to spit on him as one last act of defiance but halfway through, it collided with the light that was coming out of the angel and the saliva returned and splashed on the demon. The putrid saliva burned like a deadly, concentrated acid on that demon's skin. A searing pain akin to the torture of hell's flames cut through his nerves.

The evil creature fell on the ground, screeching in pain and whimpering like a scared baby rat. The other small demons saw how their leader was utterly defeated with his own weapon and were more than terrified. They couldn't wait to get out of that environment. But to avoid being severely punished, the small demons couldn't leave their boss all by himself. They were saddled with the responsibility of leaving that environment with him.

At this, they were filled with disgust and disdain at their general for stupidly making them have the responsibility of dragging his sorry butt out of that place. They called him all sorts of foul and unholy names that could make even the devil cringe, but the head demon couldn't hear them because its loud screeching and whimpering drowned out their curses.

They almost spat on his face if not that they were afraid of the repercussions of such action.

They quickly surrounded him but no matter how they tried, they couldn't lift him because of his size. He was enormous—an enormous empty shell. Just one touch and he was deflating like a balloon, this elicited more expletives and diatribe from the small demons.

They finally resolved to drag him.

And so it happened that the small demons roughly dragged their leader by the tail and retreated out of the line of sight of the angels to their dark corners.

Jesus and both parents watched the exchange between the angels of light and the pathetic demons. They could see how the small demons dragged their master by the tail, out of the sight of the angels but not out of the sight of the Master of Light. After all, who could hide from him? Who could do anything in secret that he wouldn't have knowledge of?

The parents watched as their son broke away from the siblings and began moving towards his car with some of the angels following him.

Then, they turned their eyes away from their son to look at Jesus and asked him the important question on their minds.

"So, what will happen now?" Savior's mother, Mrs Osinachi Onuoha, asked hopefully.

"They met each other right on time."

"This means that their reunion is good news, right?" his father asked, smiling.

But Jesus wasn't smiling, and for this, the parents looked at him with concern written all over their faces.

"Yes, it's good news," Jesus replied in a tone that told the parents that there was more.

"But?" the father asked.

"Saviour's reunion with Ayanate is good. Very good, in fact. But, events will not quite go as you expect."

"Oh, no!" the father exclaimed as both parents dropped their gazes, their faces stretched taut with concern for the soul of their son.

Jesus placed his hands on their shoulders as he spoke the next words.

"From here on, everything would be quite dramatic. I will tell you how the enemy has planned this. She will make a mistake that would lead to his own, so that at the end, they will both be destroyed.

"But do not be afraid because I have conquered, my strength shall be made known in their weaknesses.

"Like I prayed for Peter when the devil was after his soul, I have likewise advocated for them. And when they are strong, they will strengthen others," Jesus concluded with a smile for the first time since the conversation started.

His parents returned their gazes to Jesus, reciprocating his triumphant smile.

No matter what happened in the future, they knew with certainty that with God, nothing would be impossible. Absolutely nothing.

Jesus is never too late. The advocate is always right on time. Let the drama unfold.

A NOTE TO THE READER

Dear reader,

Thanks for reading Right On Time.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While my name is written as the author of this book, the true fact is that it is the result of combined efforts.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Faith Ijiga is a Nigerian who currently resides in Port Harcourt which is located in the Southern part of the country. She is a bachelor's degree holder of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution from the National Open University of Nigeria. She is a daughter to a retired police officer and a sister to a police officer.

When she is not writing or googling new authors to obsess over, Faith enjoys learning new things, spending time with her family and friends, and ultimately, her quiet time with the Holy Spirit who is her best friend and helper.