

Chapter one

In Lagos, the silence of the room was broken by a sudden clap of thunder outside. Slowly, gray clouds in the sky spread their skirts open, wider and wider, and soft rain began to fall. It started quietly and caressing the warm air erotically, licking at the sides of buildings, sucking at the soft grass, kissing all the bright corners of the morning. It was a hot rain, wanton and sensuous, sliding down slowly, slowly until the tempo began to increase and it charged to a driving, pounding storm, fierce and demanding, an orgiastic beat in a steady, savage rhythm, plunging down harder and harder, moving faster and faster until, it exploded in a burst of thunder. Suddenly, as quickly as it had started, it was over.

Obinna had been staying with a friend whose distinguishing features were a large head, which everyone believed carried a giant-sized brain for outstanding scholarship and a diminutive nose which seemed to have been stuck to his face as an afterthought. Ikenna's head swung from side to side on a torso that was so thin proportionately, he sometimes reminded you of a tadpole. However, his legs had gradually "straightened" as he grew older, that a football or a fruited pumpkin could still pass between them when he stood to attention. There was nothing superfluous about his average height and his body that was slender without being thin. Ten rows of tattoo marks ran parallel to each other from his chest to his navel and sideways from each corner of the mouth, terminating just short of a crater-sized dimple.

Although, Obinna had promised his younger sister Adaobi when they had a chat on facebook the previous day that he would visit home this morning; the vulture-eyed thief had another business in mind.

“Big boys are never dead broke, so money must be raised for fun for the weekend; thank God it’s Friday!” the nineteen year old guy thought superciliously as he got out of bed naked, except for baggy trousers. A look of complete beatitude spreads all over his face as he reached for his shirt on the floor. He left the exiguous room like a seasoned depredator with a crescendo of fast steps.

Chidi was having his bath while his laptop computer was being charged with the plan to work on it later. He was happy that, there was ‘light’. He was a bachelor and still looking forward to a bright future ahead after being unemployed for many years after graduation. However, it seemed mother luck smiled on him recently as he got a job as a computer operator and his employers gave him a laptop computer so as to enhance his skills and efficiency. He had suffered too much for survival, and this job came as a welcome relief.

Just as he was bathing, he heard a sound that came from his parlour. It sounded like something dropping on the floor.

“Who is that?” he asked, really worried and perturbed. But he got no answer.

“I said who is that?” he asked for the umpteenth time but he got no answer again. Instantly, he became suspicious that it could be a thief or a burglar because he wasn’t expecting anyone around that time and he thought he locked the door leading to the parlour. In the twinkling of an eye he remembered he was charging his laptop computer before he entered the bathroom. Then surprisingly he heard the loud bang of his door and the rushing sound of footsteps.

It immediately dawned on him that it must be a thief. At that very moment he was covered with soap from head to toe. He quickly used water to clean his eyes and grabbed the towel, then rushed out of the bathroom. In a

flash, he saw that his laptop computer was missing from where he placed it. He ran towards the door leading to his parlour and saw the thief running away with the laptop cleverly tucked under his armpits. He followed him with all his might, running the great race of his life. He was a tall and lanky young man but he had all the energy to pursue this good- for-nothing, lazy thief.

As he pursued him, chasing him with all his vigour, he was shouting: '*Ole! Ole!*' But the computer thief continued running without looking back as if his life depended completely on the laptop he was holding. The two people were panting heavily as the great race continued. As Chidi continued the chase, he didn't realize that his towel had dropped from his waist for the past few minutes on the road, and he was also covered with soap from head to toe. People wondered at the strange drama taking place. A naked, young man running after a thief holding a laptop computer on a Friday morning! They thought it must be a movie or some kind of reality drama taking place across the road. Passers-by and residents of the streets concluded that they must be shooting a great movie or great film.

All this while Chidi was still chanting, '*Thief! Thief! Onye Ori ! Onye Ori! Help me grab him!*' The hot chase continued unabated. His thought was focused on retrieving his computer by all means, because his survival depended on this precious machine. The thief was now running like a cheetah, the fastest animal in the world but he was never tired and remained relentless. Obinna was the name of the fair-skinned, tall, young and muscular thief. He was a smart thief. As a young boy, Obinna alias 'complete submission' was spoilt beyond redemption by his loving Parents, particularly his mother-Mama Adaobi. He was so overfed and over-pampered that at a stage it seemed he had become so rotten in manners that maggots were dropping from his body. Could it be because he was the only male child? His degeneration into the abyss of waywardness and rot started at a very young age in the primary school.

In those days, he would only go to school if he so wished and would come home with stolen pencils and biros, sometimes with pilfered money, and his parents would never question or scold him for such acts. Somehow, he managed to scale through the hurdle in primary school and was promoted to the final class through the help of his Mum who bribed his class teachers and the headmaster so that he could go to the next level, which was secondary school. To be precise, he was an absolute dullard in school. However, while he could be dull in school work; he was an expert in thieving and lies. If he tells you good morning, make sure you take a proper look at your wrist-watch; it could be late in the night, or a blazing afternoon.

When he entered secondary school, all societal ills rolled into him. By the time he managed to get to the final class, he was a perfect reincarnation of a *'Naija bad guy'*. He would not go to school, but loaf around with his friends and peers of the same character and mindset. While he was much younger in primary school, he indulged in smoking cigarettes secretly, but now in the secondary school, he had the wild and weird habit of smoking marijuana with frenzied passion. Some of his friends used to prepare tea with the illegal weed and he and others would sip it with relish. He was once caught with his awkward friends smoking marijuana at a *'joint'* very near the school premises. The proprietor threatened to expel him. He called his Mum to intervene. Mama Adaobi was on hand to bail him out of the problem. She had a very soft and tender passion for him and would always cover him up when he did wrong or committed punishable atrocities. He gradually started drinking *shepe, ogogoro* and *paraga*-locally concocted hot drinks that would make one go wild and high.

That is Obinna for you. It got to a point that the school authorities could not tolerate or stomach his wayward and utterly debased way of life. He was instantly expelled from school. This in particular was the genesis of his descent into the dark, unwholesome abyss of crime. His first attempt into full time crime was as a pickpocket. He would go to bus stops and position himself at

strategic places. Whenever a bus came to a standstill, he would struggle with other passengers and in the process dip his hands into their pockets and filch out money. At times, he made thousands from such unholy ventures. On such days, he would spend lavishly on his girlfriends. He would even buy things for his parents but Papa Adaobi wouldn't lay a finger on such gifts however they didn't bother to investigate the true source of this income.

'Thank you, my lovely son,' his mother would say. 'I know one day, I'll depend on you for survival. You make me proud and I am bold to say that there's also life and success other than through solely educational pursuits. I'm proud of you my son; you're now a big boy.' She would pat him on the head like a local hunter would pat the head of a loyal and dutiful dog.

"Oh, Mummy," he would reply, 'you can always count on me. Don't mind whatever our neighbours or anybody says. Money will never be our problem, but how to spend it.' At about sixteen, he had started dating young ladies. He began to soar in the world of crime. The money he could filch as a pickpocket was not enough to meet his extravagant lifestyle. He turned into a burglar at seventeen. Life as a burglar was equally exciting to him and very eventful. On any particular day, if he went on a burglary mission and was successful, he would earn hundreds of thousands of naira. He had four young men who teamed up with him in the evil business. Back from burgling, he would bring plenty of money home and his mother would share in his loot, not asking where he got the money he was spending so lavishly. Now, he is on the run!

Somehow, as Obinna was about crossing the road after twenty minutes of a hot chase to the other side, a speeding motorist (*Okada*) knocked the bloody thief down. He fell down instantly in pains, but the laptop was still under his armpit, despite the crash. He was lucky not to have suffered a broken leg. In a

jiffy, Chidi was around to claim his laptop back and dealt him eight powerful punches in quick succession.

“Got you at last, you nitwit and numskull!” screamed Chidi, “may God punish you with all his vengeance, you mother fucker!”

He instantly collected his laptop and grabbed the thief from his trouser, around his belt. He continued hitting him with annoyance.

“You’ll rot in hell, you son-of -a-bitch!” he charged madly at him. When Obinna saw a huge crowd coming, he got his feet to work as rapidly as lightning. He didn’t want to be burnt to death. A huge crowd had gathered at the scene of the incident. It was at this moment that people realized it wasn’t a movie but a case of plain larceny. The next minute, two policemen appeared on the scene.

“Why are you naked, *Mister Man?*” One of the officers asked Chidi after a long pause. It was then he realized that he had been naked all this while. He was so surprised. He took a long breath before narrating all that had happened. Instantly a young man with a tear-tugging imagery of a starving *Lagosian* with blown-out belly, skull with almost no subcutaneous fat harbouring pale, sunken eyes in sockets that betrayed his suffering offered a jacket to Chidi. Oscillating amid impassioned outrage and constrained love, Chidi provided a toothy smile and reached out his hand to the *good Samaritan*, the touch was as light as a feather. He however thanked him as he muttered:

‘Although, I ran naked on the road to retrieve it, it was an embarrassment that paid off at the end of the day because my employer would have sacked me for negligence of duty and as for that young thief, he will breathe his last soon, if he doesn’t change.’

Chapter two

Five years later after attempting to steal the laptop. The sky was milky and the uneven ground was brighter but the harmattan season was particularly harsh. Everything seemed bleak. The dry sandy air seemed to be an additional torment, delighting in covering the body with layers of the Sahara Desert's fine dust, blown in from hundreds of miles away. Obinna paced up and down in front of his parked Toyota Avensis. He looked at his golden wrist watch. It was 8 O'clock in the morning. He stood staring at his magnificent house with satisfaction. With the air so clean and crisp, the earth so fragrant, he felt like the only man on earth. His countenance now was that of joy, which his brilliant modesties had not craft enough to colour. It was his twenty-fourth birthday celebration. A day he had vowed to burn the candle at both ends. He was already hallucinating aggressively to see the evening in order to appease his corneous appetite.

The evening is here. Boldly inscribed on the black gate is: *'Aids is real, play safe'* and this is undersigned: **"THE YOUTH OF HONOUR"**. What an irony! This gate leads to one of the dingy neighborhoods of Lagos where men, fat rats, roaches and bed bugs cohabit. It is a place where black, smelly water spills into the streets from brimming gutters when it rains and where naked children romp in the day, oblivious of the filth around them.

The place is an enclave of sort for some alcoholic loafers who wake everyday to eat, drink, play Lagos Lotto and make merry. In the night, it is also a hangout where nubile young girls stand half nude by the road sides to hawk sex at low costs; where men of unruly libido meet women of inordinate sexual

cravings. It is reminiscent of biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. A centre of sin where no pure person passes through undefiled.

Welcome to “Empire,” one of the numerous sex markets in the city of Lagos. Here, life is lived at its most worthless. But it is more about survival than choice. It is also about the failure of various institutions in Nigeria. This lovely evening, Empire looks like a small shanty town. Small sheds for food, cheap liquor, cigarettes and “weeds” dot the roadsides. Young men with burnt finger tips crowd at the sheds smoking hemp and downing spirits recklessly. The revolutionary renditions of legends like Bob Marley and Fela oozing from a C.D player nearby help set the mood or so it appears. Far from the black gate entrance comes also the music of Don Moen and a collage of other gospel music. But no one pays attention to the religious melody here. The boys play Lotto even as the revel continues, and occasionally sing along with the music box. Often, they launch into hot arguments on trivia. Topics like: who is a better football player, Messi or C. Ronaldo? Who sings better between Fela and Bob Marley? There were some young men in a corner who were playing football with improvised goal-posts. They were reed-thin, with skulls capped with wiry rust-coloured tufts of hairs and bodies centered on protuberant stomachs.

There is much sound and fury now, signifying nothing. But no one seems disturbed by the regular nuisance of the boisterous youths. At one corner of a stall, a few elderly fellows are sipping *paraga*, local cheap whisky. They all bear the same features: yolk-yellow eyeballs, puffy checks, decaying teeth; the relics of their old selves, a result of several years of indulgence. Yet they appear cheery even in their degenerate state. Past their prime, these men can no longer give lustful pleasure to women, not even the fallen angels of Empire. Now, a lurid joke is the pastime of this old gang. Sitting there on a broken bench they do not mind the noisome bunch of youths around them, they are mere reminders of their own heydays.

At Empire, girls are bat-like. They don't walk the streets in daylight, except to buy food and cigarettes. Then you could see a bare-bottom bimbo stroll towards 'Mama-put' shop, get her order and go back to her shack. Her prancing might not even win a leer from the boys in the hood. They have seen it all. Generally, it is a quiet community during the day. But the mood of the place changes at nightfall into something of a street party with music blaring from every corner, each side of the roads lined by girls of various shapes and sizes. Young attractive girls, dressed up with the intention to lure buyers. In this business, looking sexy is it. They all look ravishing and smell like mobile perfume shops. But some are more aggressive than others in their marketing. The more daring ones would hold your hands and throw some endearments at you even as you walk past.

"Sweetheart, come here," "Honey pie, look here;" "Hi handsome." Some would even invite you to touch their breasts to feel the firmness. Those with sagging breasts try hard to do a push-up with iron-cast bra. Some succeed. But experienced eyes can identify the firm from the fallen.

It is tucked in between *Yaba-Ojuelegba* and *Surulere-Mushin*. It is the same place where the late *Abami Eda, Fela Anikulapo* reigned and ruled before he relocated to the new shrine in *Ikeja*. Here, whoever tarries long enough to listen to the sales talk of these Empire girls could forget all moral lessons in the Holy books and follow Adam to gobble the apple.

Obinna drove into the Empire in his Lexus Jeep. He is a rich lover boy who has an unusual skill and knack for making money and for 'hooking' ladies. He is tall, chubby and with a cool and charming disposition. No girl could escape his sugar-coated tongue. He knew what ladies want and would give them without mincing words. He is also a damn good liar. No woman could escape from his lecherous and amorous moves. No woman could beat his wits

in matters of love and romance. His Achilles heel is women. He could kill or betray his blood sister or closest friend because of them. There was no denying the fact that he was once a philanderer of the highest order. He simply loves anything in skirt. He was so wayward and debauched that he confessed to his close pal Tony, one day: *'I can die because of Lagos girls! Take it or Leave it guy, I came through that 'route' and wouldn't mind if I join my Maker through the same route'*.

As Obinna was about to alight from his Jeep, he saw a light-skinned young beauty and was overwhelmed by her celestial beauty. The girl was heading for the eatery in Empire. She had a figure and gait that could tempt even Monks to do the unthinkable. She wore a skimpy dress that made her look irresistible and enchanting and her steps were calculated and mesmerizing. Truly the girl was charming from head to toe. He was consumed by admiration; he had never seen such a raving beauty in his entire life. To further accentuate her sexual allure, the girl had tiny blue beads around her waists.

"Oh my...my goodness...!" he exclaimed smacking his lips. Hello, angel, just give me your love and I will make you happy with millions! What's your name Angel?"

"I'm Angela!!" she said softly, smiling and showing her white set of teeth.

"Angela! Angela!!" he repeated excitedly. I thought as much. You know, I called you Angel. Remove the last 'A' and your name becomes Angel. If I were a prophet, my predictions would always come true.

Obinna: *I like to catch some fun with you tonight, how much will it cost me?*

Angela: *How much you wan give me?*

Obinna: *How much you wan take, you no get a regular price?*

Angela: *No regular price o, any amount wey you and the person talk.*

Obinna: *You go do night?*

Angela: *Where?*

Obinna: *Ikeja.*

Angela: *Ah! That's far o. E far please pay twenty thousand.*

Obinna: *Twenty K...Just like that?*

Angela: *Yes now o, you know where you wan take me to naw?*

Obinna: *But I go carry you in my car.*

Angela: *I know.*

Obinna: *So talk, how much be your last price?*

Angela: *Ok, give me fifteen thousand.*

Obinna: *No, I de think of ten.*

Angela: *You know within go happen, I no want make we talk too much, give me twelve.*

Obinna: *I go give ten.*

Angela: *Na twelve*

Obinna: *Ok, make you wait for me where the car dey. I dey come.*

He left her in search of more daughters of fun and accosted Sandra who looked elderly and friendlier and so was her price. She was willing to take five thousand naira to “do night”, but she would not follow any man to spend the night outside Empire. “Lagos is risky” she says. She promised a rewarding night any day if he is willing to “do it around”. While the conversation was going on, no curious eyes strayed towards their direction. No querying stare. Everyone appeared to be minding his or her own business. Some men were enjoying some *suya* with beer at a bar nearby. Some clustered around a TV set, feasting eyes on the ongoing UEFA Champions league final match between *Barcelona* and *Juventus*. A number of Empire girls were swaying to *D-banj* music on the roadside. Some could be seen negotiating prices, after which they would disappear into a small room to eat the forbidden fruit.

As he was speaking with Sandra, he noticed a particular beautiful girl walk into a bar nearby. As the girl settled down, an old man engaged her. They chatted about five minutes and the old man left in anger. It looked as if she only came to unwind but there was something unusual about her. She was not dancing, only busy taking pictures, staring at others and pressing her *BB touch phone*. And again, she was laughing and talking with a bar lady in a way that showed that it was not her first time at the club. Obinna met with the bar lady and asked about her. It was a straight reply: “Her name is Emilia; do you want her for the night?” He agreed with the bar lady to pay the sum of seven thousand naira. The bar lady had initially refused, insisting that it is *ten K*, but he said all he got is seven thousand naira. She asked for a minute, moved aside and returned with the good news. Emilia was finally here. When Obinna asked what she came to do because she looked very refined. She explained that she came to see the owner of the hotel who was her friend but after the bar lady mounted pressure on her; she was willing to *do a short time*. She gave a smirk and continued, “You know, I’m a kind of nymphomaniac. I’m only interested in the pleasure. I don’t care how little the money is that you can provide, inasmuch as I am satisfied.” “But...How do you take care of yourself? I know you understand what I’m talking about?” Obinna asked hiding his surprise.

“The real money comes from the offices of top government’s officials. But the problem is that, they only ask one to do all sort of things to satisfy them. They hardly do the *“real thing”*! But you can’t trust those dogs. Honestly, those guys really taught us a lesson last week. Imagine...I went for boat cruising with two female friends to have some fun with some married government officials last week. I mean the top guys in power! Unknown to us, the drinks were drugged and we completely lost consciousness. These guys slept with us and even took photographs of the goings-on. Although none of us died, I’m sure it was a bitter experience”. Emilia concluded almost in tears.

“It’s Okay. I’m sorry about that. Fun is sometimes produced by pain.” Obinna admonished with obvious empathy and continued, “Why didn’t the old guy with you some minutes ago take you home?”

She replied; “Don’t mind him; he was just telling me how he would snatch me from my boyfriend. *He no get power for bed.* I am doing this mainly for the pleasure. I’m not a prostitute. Prostitutes are cheap roadside hawkers!”

As Obinna and Emilia were cutting steps towards his car, Obinna was busy pouring some beer into his insatiable stomach. He could drink urine if cocked in a bottle. He was always soused in whisky and rum daily. Sometimes after bouts of drinking and getting high, he would beat the living daylights out of his girlfriends. Just almost where his car was parked he sighted Pamela; a twenty year-old student of the University of Lagos. Pamela is a novice in the job. She just wants to be like her colleagues, use I-phones, latest Black Berry phones and what have you. These are luxuries her poor parents cannot afford for her.

“Hi...small baby girl! Can you come with me? I like it small sometimes...you know,” he snapped.

“Okay, it depends on your pocket. How much do you have?” Pamela asked displaying her plump side.

“Money is not the problem if you make me happy,” he responded.

Only one, neck-deep into the playboy culture could have made three beautiful catches in less than thirty minutes. He had flung the doors of the jeep open and they were hopping in. The sweet fragrance of their perfume had filled the car and Obinna had the urge to push his nose in their cleavage and sniff some more. Even the playboys around were mesmerized as they wondered where he will get the raw energy to satisfy the appetites of such a number of

ladies. But with women, you can't beat him. He was already driving to a friend's sprawling duplex at *Ikeja*.

Obinna was now right inside the living room- with his three new '*catch*', not minding the fact that they were total strangers. When it came to romance, he had no moral scruples and would take the plunge without hesitation. He was about to begin the romance maze. He quickly took off his designer shirt and trousers, leaving only his shorts. The girls were all sitting on a long Italian leather couch. He laid his head on the soft thigh of Angela and stretched out his legs on the thighs of another. The third girl was busy massaging his bare chest. The three girls in a row were giving him a regal treatment meant only for kings and princes. He was also sipping champagne and munching the laps of chicken. The young man was in heavenly bliss. What more could life offer? The split-unit air conditioner was on and music was blaring from a hi-tech CD player. He continued his wayward maze of romance till five o'clock in the morning. He was now like a dehydrated horse. He reached for his brief-case and rewarded the girls.

Despite the fact that she was debased, lewd and a girl of easy virtue, he had developed a strong affection for Angela beyond the gloat of sex appeal. Will Angela fall for him and stop "*hooking up*" with her Indian boyfriend? He later gave Angela a *sweet ride* back to her family's house at Agege, after exchanging all necessary contact addresses with her.

Chapter three

Obinna placed a call and while waiting for it to connect, he heard a voice welcoming him to the season of “love”. He thought it was an error. He cut the call in order to re-dial again but alas! The error was not that of the network but his. He did not know that the world had moved on to another level in its pursuit of the transient, the ephemeral. He tried to connect again, he heard the voice which sounded like that of the female among the genies and the message it sought to pass across was meant to remind him of the fact that valentine’s day was around the corner; that he was now in the season of “love”. Immediately the voice on the phone network invited him to partake of its offers to mark the day, he realized he needed to write a letter and buy some “*valentines*” for his girl.

Tony was invited over to write a letter. “Please give me the best of all letters; it is meant for Angela, the only one I love, the most beautiful girl on earth”.

“There’s too much love in your eyes these days my guy, this new girl in your life is getting you crazy. You got to take it easy! Lagos girls are no good. They are vampires of sort, you got to *shine* your eyes before you fall *mugo*.”

“Just don’t disturb me... Please...Please...” pleaded Obinna. “I need it very badly; just put down all the ideas I have given you! There is no time for the preaching, if I need it, I will simply go to your church.”

Tony, sensing the inconvenience he was causing him started writing while Obinna kept coming back to peep at the long letter as he was busy “*facebooking*”.

Tony wrote with an overflowing smile:

Dearest Angela,

Since I met you at Empire, my life has changed! It astounds me! I've never seen a lady so beautiful. Your love for me is working like alcohol in my senses. Ever since I saw you, I haven't slept. I thought I must have gone mad with love. I am full of admiration for you. My parents and friends thought I must be sick or something. But I knew I wasn't sick. I knew it's your love that overwhelmed me. I've heard about love at first sight. Yes! I've heard it. I never knew such could happen to me. But now I know it's real! The day you will confess your love for me will be the happiest day of my life. Whenever, I think of your beauty and the joy of being my wife, sweet tears of joy rolls down my face.

Your being an angel and trustworthy is rare among the ladies I've met. The general notion is that beauty comes with bad character. But Angela, you're different. Angela, the light of my life, the fire of my loins, my sin, my soul; Angela, a name sweeter than honey, softer than butter, lovelier than Juliet. No man will see you Angela and pass by without stopping to turn his head thrice or four times or more.

I shall feel your warmth and tender lips forever, even up to heaven. Just remain by my side Angela. With your presence I'm "belly-full", with your presence I'm my true self. Angela! Your name itself is soft; it's musical and soothing to the ears...its honey, I confess. Let's love and love till we exhaust the large portion of love Romeo and Juliet forgot to give. Angela, my heart! Without you I'm dead. I shall come to your place tomorrow as I told you on phone. I give you one thousand deep kisses through this letter; Angela, the living Angel.

Yours sincerely,

Obinna.

“Ah!” This is too much! You’re mad with love; don’t give yourself a heart attack because of “*common Lagos love*”! Tony exclaimed, while reading out the letter.

“Just help me deliver the letter and that’s all, no comments. That’s how I feel about Angela,” Obinna replied and collected it.

He folded the letter, tucked it in a brown envelope and handed it to Tony. Tony took it and left immediately. He had a first semester examination to catch up with. Tony was a slender young man, easy-going and understanding by nature. He was an undergraduate at the Lagos state university. It happened that Angela, his newfound love, lived beside Tony’s house. That afternoon after the examination, he made it his first duty to deliver the letter.

On reaching the house, he was fortunate to see her. He gave her the letter. She was extremely glad to see the letter. Truly, she was a beauty, a rare gem. She had all it takes to make a man wag his tongue and go up in flames of desire. Words alone are not enough to describe her seraphic beauty. She was fairly tall. Her skin was dazzlingly light. Her eyeballs were seductive and sparkling white. Her breasts were full and round. Her glittering white teeth were something no man could resist.

Everything about her was graceful and enchanting. Angela opened the letter delicately with smiles. She unfolded it and began to read. Every now and then she smiled. Then she laughed softly. She had never seen someone so full of desire for her and who could express it confidently on paper. She thought she must not disappoint him. Yes! She vowed to be loyal but must make things a bit difficult so that she doesn’t appear cheap.

She read it with rapt attention and her spirit was instantly elated. After finishing the last lines, she stood up with a rather sensuous smile. She was indeed very happy and she took her siesta thinking of him.

Ever since he sent the highly emotional letter, he had been thinking that she will gladly accept his love proposal. He never imagined that there will be any hitch. So, he called her on phone to know whether she had received it. Instead of a positive reply, she gave the impression that she was irritated and infuriated by the letter. She replied that she wasn't interested, with a capital 'No'. Her reply was a great shock as he became frustrated and vowed to commit suicide by plunging himself into the bar beach to end his life!

That rainy and thundery Saturday, Obinna could visualize the Angel of God telling him not to take the wrong step; the Angel was advising him not to kill himself by drowning in a beach. He refused to listen and vehemently fought back the tears as he sobbed quietly on his way to the Ocean; the Lagos Bar Beach to drown himself and end it all. "Don't beg me please..." he soliloquized, I'll kill myself and die because of love. What more do I want in life other than the love of my darling Angela? I love her. I adore her. But sadly enough, she doesn't love me...Please don't beg me. I'm on my way to the Ocean to get drowned and kill myself. My flesh and bones will become food for sharks and other wild and hungry predators in the Ocean. I beg you in God's name, let me kill myself. O my...Love. I love you Angela with every fiber of my being."

The rain was getting heavier by the minute and fearful thunderclap could be heard throughout the length and breadth of Lagos metropolis but despite this inclement weather, he chose this very odd time to commit suicide at the Lagos Bar Beach. Wonders shall never end!

He was now heading towards the Ocean to drown himself. He was really drenched and wet in the heavy downpour but he had made up his mind to die a violent death in the Ocean. It was even more tragic because he wasn't actually a good swimmer. The rain increased in intensity as the young man walked the streets of Lagos Island like a Zombie. The frightful peals of thunderclap

continued unabated and lightning flashed through the sky at a heart-rending pace.

About twenty minutes later, he was at the Ocean in tears as he saw the tidal waves of the Ocean. He knew he was doing this for love's sake. He just couldn't help it. He cried like a baby. Picnickers and other people around didn't know his intention as he approached the great waters with slow, steady and sad steps. In a minute, his short lifespan flashed across his mind. He could recall nothing in his memory now but suicide and death.

He begged God to forgive his sin because he knew that his action was totally ungodly. He continued to weep gently as he moved towards the giant waves of the Ocean. He had now made up his mind to plunge into the Ocean and was about jumping inside when he heard a soft voice behind him calling: "Obinna, don't do this please...I beg you in God's name. I sincerely love you...I sincerely love you..." Instantly, he turned, but lo and behold, Angela was behind him in affectionate tears. She touched him tenderly and hugged him.

"I can't believe my eyes...is this real?" Obinna asked for the umpteenth time.

"Yes, it's real my darling. You are my sweetheart and everything," Angela replied softly. I just wanted to give you a test. I love you sincerely from the bottom of my heart. I followed you carefully immediately you left the house for this beach. You're my heart and soul..."

It's hard to believe this but now I know it's real. My Angel is back and willing to love me..." he said with unmistakable joy vibrating and hovering over the love duo. Then he continued, "When you are beside me, my Angel, it's like I'm in paradise. It feels so heavenly that I don't want to let go off your arms. I love you so much."

“I love you too; no one can take your place in my heart. I’ve found a true love. Let’s go darling. From the depth of my heart and soul, I want to say I love you, I can’t live without you.” she replied with adoration between a blissful and passionate kiss.

“We are inseparable like the fishes and the Ocean and the sky and the birds;” he replied and drew her tender hand as they left the beach.

Chapter four

As the love affair between Obinna and Angela continued to grow, he suddenly realized the flaw of his gazelle-like and charming lover. The deportment of the starry eyed and celestial beauty's love of money is breathtaking. His financial standing was not so encouraging at the moment and this often caused petty quarrels between them. All the same the relationship continued as she had to make do with managing his meager resources at the moment.

Angela was always on the social media mapping out plans and strategies that would banish poverty from her life as she realized that time was nobody's friend and she was fast aging. She was always posting her nude pictures to entice and generate "*likes*". It was an advertisement of the "*sale*" of her body of sorts! Well, her numerous friends were always generous with lofty comments on her enchanting and disarming body. They were skilled in fashioning words that could shut down any lady's precocious mind of love. She was always full of smiles whenever she logged into her facebook account and saw the ingenious compliments of some sex-hungry men most of whom were her white friends.

Angela knew definitely that Mother Luck would answer her one day and she would hit it big on *facebook* or *twitter* and that would put an end to the incessant nagging of her mean boyfriend.

It seemed Angela's expectation was coming to reality the day she met Ronald Silverworth on facebook. She was happy and delighted at the new development and exuded confidence and the hope of breaking the yoke of poverty. Fortune smiled on her when on a particular chat she typed:

"You really mean you're a divorcee?"

To which the multimillionaire South African mulatto replied: "Yes"

“Sure?” she asked with a satanic and sly smile radiating over her face.

“Angela, just give me your love and I will take you to paradise with millions of money!” Silverworth typed and sent gleefully with all sincerity.

“I’m all yours. My love and heart are yours forever!” she replied with assurance.

And that was it! Angela had finally ensnared an innocent multi-millionaire South African businessman in her love bait. Her efforts on facebook had finally paid off. She was now acting on instructions from Obinna. This was actually one connivance, too many. It was a planned work. She was happy to be in partnership with a boyfriend, who had always boasted of being the *‘doctor of love’*. He had really been benevolent with the necessary masterful guidelines. His sketch of the grand plan was the height of class.

“Angela, you have got a very good job now! If we play the game skillfully, we will soon be in millions. I assure you! Hope, you got my drift. This is an opportunity; please don’t let it slip through our fingers.” Obinna admonished his girl as they were in a bath one evening.

“Sweetie, I understand every word you’ve spoken, I assure you that I’ll deliver very well! No kidding! We are on the right path,” she replied.

Silverworth fell for the ruse, hook, line, and sinker. Just two weeks into the ungodly relationship, Angela and Obinna had become very rich, courtesy of his benevolence. In three months, the white man had spent thousands of dollars on her. He had changed her fortune by making her a millionaire. He even bought a mansion for her in Lagos.

Angela drove around the city of Lagos in sophisticated wonder-on-wheels with Silverworth whenever he was in the country. At the request of the South African guy, they drove to the village to see her home. Touched by the

level of poverty of his supposed in-laws, he promised to build a beautiful duplex for them.

It was the highest point of deceit as Angela still met with Obinna, her real lover at the time. Somehow, the unexpected happened. She became pregnant for Silverworth. At that very time, the tall and handsome White man was in his forties and it gave him so much joy. Obinna was mad with her because the pregnancy wasn't part of the plan. He now felt the presence of an adversary and everything became sour.

Angela being fed up with the ingratitude of her overbearing boyfriend convinced *Romeo* for a two-week holiday to Miami in Florida, United States. It was a great time as he was "*schooled*" on what it really means to be in the hands of a Benin girl behind closed doors. The white guy was simply roasted like yam and was eaten like a fried chicken. For her, it was a pay-back time for all the '*blessings*' she had received. However, he had never been the parsimonious type of guy all his life. In fact, he had never known poverty or ever been in lack. The puzzle was that he was now ready to spend and go into an impecunious state for the sake of her ineffable beauty.

When they came back from the trip, Silverworth started getting threatening telephone calls from an unknown man. He wondered who could be after his life for he couldn't imagine hurting anybody or stepping on anybody's toes.

One day, he flew in from his base in Cape Town, South Africa to finalize some business deals in Nigeria. He was chauffeur-driven to Pearl Avenue in Highbrow Victoria Island later in the afternoon in company with Angela. About thirty minutes later they were in the comfort of his sprawling mansion in Pearl Avenue. As usual, the lovebirds were enjoying the bliss of life in the all-purpose mansion.

At about 11p.m, they started hearing sounds of gunshots in the main compound. The security men on guard were instantly killed by some daredevil robbers who had gained entrance into the living room in a Commando Fashion. Silverworth was gripped by fear when they suddenly broke into his room.

“Where’s the money now? Dollars! Dollars! Bring them out now!” threatened the masked robbers, numbering about seven and clutching AK-47 rifles and other submachine guns.

“Please, I’ll give it to you; just don’t hurt me or my darling...” Silverworth begged. He stood up and opened his wardrobe. He gave the robbers a briefcase containing 950,000 USA Dollars.

“Thanks a Million,” the kingpin of the robbers said in a guttural voice and cocked his rifle. “This is your parting shot!”

He fired a volley of shots into Silverworth’s chest. The man collapsed and died. Then the kingpin turned and faced Angela, who all these while wasn’t perturbed. He took off his mask and stretched his hand towards her. Angela grabbed the hand of the kingpin and they burst into raucous laughter. Behold, it was Obinna, her boyfriend.

“Come closer dear,” he called softly, mission is accomplished! We can now go home and live our dreams...!”

The following day, Angela aborted the pregnancy. Meanwhile, the Nigerian Police Force, in collaboration with Interpol had been probing the death seriously. Angela advised her boyfriend and his gang to leave Lagos at the moment because of the serious investigation of the security officers. He never suspected that his lover had concluded plans to reap the loot alone as he obeyed the seemingly good suggestion.

After a week, he returned to Lagos and went to see his lover. He was shocked and dumbfounded and couldn't imagine the sad turn of events. That early morning, he had driven to her duplex to discuss the challenges of beating down the hot investigations when, he realized that the house was occupied by another person. The new owner even showed him the documents indicating that he now owned the house. He was told, after much questioning that Angela had sold the choice property and relocated to the United States of America with a young man. He almost died on the spot from cardiac arrest. He felt betrayed by the only girl he had ever loved.

"Are you sure these documents are real and not forged *Mister Man*?" he asked, sweating and coughing at the same time.

"Are you crazy?" the elderly man replied with annoyance. "You must be out of your mind! This house belongs to me and nobody else" he added.

Obinna turned in tears and left the house sweating profusely at the same time. He almost had a fatal accident while driving home that eventful day. It was a mystery and miracle how he got home, because he wasn't concentrating at all. He was just whispering, "Angela! Angela! Angela!"

He decided to take his own life by drinking an overdose of a sleep-inducing Capsule-Valium 10. It was exactly mid-night when he got a cup of water and swallowed ten Capsules of the drug.

He sat down, expecting death to take to its abyss, but he was shocked. Instead of dying or plunging into coma, he was awake. It was amazing to him that till daybreak, he didn't sleep or even faint for a minute. He was speechless and lost in gloomy thoughts of death.

When it was exactly 1pm that day, he started sweating like never before. At the same time, he began to gnash his teeth and breathe heavily. He suddenly

put his hands on his head and screamed, “Oh God! Why did Angela do this to me? Why?”

Then he began to cry like a baby as he prostrated on the floor! Suddenly he remembered the last discussion he had with her in the bathroom before leaving Lagos.

“Angela, my love”, he cooed into her ears that night, I’ve never loved a lady the way I love you...you are my heart and soul...your beauty is out of this world...I’ll do all I can to have you as my wife.”

And she replied: *“Honey, I’ll show you what sweet love is all about...”* smacking her lips with delight, *“I’m just starting with you in this exciting love drama...by the time I settle down as your wife, I’ll take you to cloud nine and beyond and you won’t remember the name of your mother again...I swear by the gods...”* She concluded and planted a passionate kiss on him.

Chapter five

Obinna woke up a week after attempting suicide rather very excited; it was a special day for his only sister's 21th birthday ceremony, who was a sociology graduate of Lagos State University. Adaobi is possessed with very charming and alluring features; dazzling white eye balls, glittering set of teeth, coupled with deeply brown pupils that looked exactly like stars. She was light-skinned and of moderate height.

Nobody had an inkling that something bad and disastrous would happen that Monday morning when Mama Adaobi and Papa Adaobi bade their only daughter farewell and left for their different destinations; they had no premonition that nature would show them its ugly side.

Papa Adaobi was a beverage marketer with Peterson foods while his wife was a trader selling kitchenware in the heart of Lagos. They lived in a mini-flat in Surulere, the outskirts of Lagos. About an hour after the couple left home in search of their daily bread, the firmament started gathering for a torrential downpour. Veronica, Mama Adaobi's cousin had gone out early in the morning to welcome her Lebanese boyfriend from the airport, while Obinna was being expected to visit home. Adaobi was alone in the house cooking which is unarguably her best hobby.

The sky became cloudy and a powerful breeze kept blowing over the entire area. The breeze started whistling eerily. People ran helter-skelter for dear life. She became frightened when the breeze blew away a portion of their ceiling. The next minute, a tempestuous rain began, coupled with intermittent roars of thunder. The peals of thunder continued unabated for the next thirty minutes and the breeze blew away everything in its path.

She was aghast with fear. A large portion of their fence caved in and a monstrous whirlpool of rainwater rolled into their compound.

“Help! Help! Help! Somebody help me!” She screamed. The violent gush of rainwater was so fierce and gigantic that it broke down the door leading to their living room and occupied the entire space. She had run inside the kitchen for safety. The violent rainwater pursued her inside the kitchen; then pulled down the window of the kitchen.

All the while she was weeping and shedding sorrowful tears as the water submerged her instantly. The tide then swept her away into the other street. She had never experienced such turbulence in her entire life. She was rolling along a wide path created by the tidal wave and was still screaming for help as she rolled with the violent waves of water.

The rainstorm was calamitous and devastating. It brought down several houses, planks and trees; carried with it personal belongings of people. It destroyed cars and household properties worth millions of naira. For two agonizing hours, the downpour continued ceaselessly. It looked like the world had come to an end; something akin to Armageddon or apocalypse.

There was no doubt that she was on the verge of dying. She had swallowed large amounts of water and was gasping for breath. She had no strength to scream for help again. Suddenly, as the violent waves of water submerged and carried her along, she felt herself entwined and clustered among the strong branches of a tree.

She held tightly on to the tree and heaved a sigh of relief. “Even if death comes”, she thought, “it would meet me here...” She clung tenaciously to it. About two hours later, the rain stopped abruptly. The terrific tide had disappeared, leaving behind tales of woe. Some painful tears dropped from the

corner of her eyes. She hiccupped four consecutive times and vomited the next minute.

The weather was now serene and calm when her parents, Obinna and Veronica arrived. The time was 5pm. They were all shocked to see the ruins caused by the rainstorm to their house. Mama Adaobi became anxious to see her daughter. She moved towards the bungalow and screamed: “*Ada m! Ada m! Ada m!* Where are you?”

Her husband hurriedly joined her in search of their precious only daughter. There was palpable and horrifying silence. Mama Adaobi’s heartbeat increased at an alarming rate when she couldn’t get an answer. They could only see the ruins and devastation of their house. In a split second, the thought of tragedy and death flashed through their minds. Now, they were not so mindful about the loss of their properties to the rainstorm. “Somebody help me! Where’s my daughter?!” She screamed while shedding painful tears. Instantly, a search party was set up by Obinna, comprising of about seven friends who had come to celebrate the birthday. Mama Adaobi had vowed that she would commit suicide if her beautiful daughter wasn’t seen; she was greatly disturbed and deeply agitated. Papa Adaobi begged her not to kill herself as it would not solve the present problem, but further worsen it.

For five hours, the search party combed every nook and cranny of the locality but she wasn’t found. It was even reported in the 6pm news that a young girl by name Adaobi Obika was missing after a terrific rainstorm ravaged the home of the Obikas, sweeping away the only girl of the family.

When it was around 10pm and she was yet to be found, her Mum collapsed. She was rushed to the nearby St. Mary’s Hospital. Her husband was confused and heartbroken. The man simply broke down and wept bitterly.

“This will be double tragedy!” Papa Adaobi said thoughtfully. “My daughter is missing; I don’t know if she’s dead or alive, and my wife is in coma...O God, I’ll kill myself if the worst happens.” He was soliloquizing as he left the hospital premises, wandering aimlessly to an unknown destination.

Papa Adaobi, a tall, dark-skinned and lanky man had trekked for about thirty minutes and he became very weak and tired. He was so hopeless and worn out; he then sat down beside the road, not knowing where to go and what to do. His eyes were heavy with grief. He lowered his head in sorrowful meditation and wiped the dripping tears off with the tip of his shirt.

Time was 10.45pm. He shook his head in melancholy and obvious gloom. Just then, he raised his head up and lo and behold, he saw his lost daughter lying dangerously on a nearby tree across the road, he was elated and ran to her.

“Oh daddy, I’m happy you are here to save me! Adaobi exclaimed joyfully. “You’re a great dad! Where is Mum?” she asked.

“She is in the hospital, let’s go”, he replied. Hand in hand, both father and daughter headed for St. Mary’s Hospital. When they got there, she was still in stupor. The doctors scurried here and there to revive her. Adaobi was really afraid for the life of her mother. She moved closer to her and touched her forehead softly, then said; “Mummy, wake up, your daughter is her...”

It was like magic! The words had a miraculous effect. Instantly, she opened her eyes to behold her lovely daughter. An indescribable joy enveloped them. Minutes later, Obinna and his team arrived to share in the immeasurable joy. They were all smiling and giggling. He drew his sister aside.

“I’m happy you are hale and hearty after having a good swimming!” he snapped.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha, you can say that again! With that...you should be nominated for an award or included in the Guinness book of records for the best swimmer of the year.” Veronica added to the joke.

While the invited friends had left because of the level of the insecurity in Lagos, Obinna and Veronica were determined to make the day a memorable one. As they were in the sitting room having a good chat while enjoying some fruit drinks and the cake. Obinna reached under the pillow, brought out a magazine; drowned himself totally in the contemplation and flourished the magazine, open in the middle.

“Eh...Veronica...How is that your good-for-nothing boyfriend? I keep wondering what you are doing with that ugly guy, with your beauty and youthfulness,” he spoke with a blissful smile as boisterous as a stormy sea wind. He was always ruthless nowadays when it came to relationships. Angela had taught him a lesson on *“Lagos love.”*

Veronica suddenly realized that she was strapped, as one on the top of a tree about to break. She was afraid to look back into the worthless sight of the past as she began to sob at the question. She looked like one ferried to a village farm by the torrents of a rainstorm. The love bug had bit her conscience again. However, she had all the seductive and alluring qualities a lady should have. Everything was in the right proportion-white set of teeth, well-curved shape, a lovely nose and sparkling starry eyes that could tempt any man. A young girl in her early 20s; possessed by the triple grip of money, lust and greed, and had a boyfriend who was handsome, tall and dark-skinned. She was very cunning and could tell lies to her numerous boyfriends without the slightest suspicion as her lips were more vibrant, smooth and ever rosy when she fabricated lies to convince them to do her wish or to extort money. Her lies could move mountains. Truly, she would pretend to be faithful. Some men believed her

completely. In fact, majority of her catch never doubted her sincerity in matters relating to love.

Ikedi, no doubt, was a very cunning man too and even a greater liar. His lies and wiles were superb and sweeter than the cunning of the fabled tortoise, for when he told lies, he would be so extremely serious that the most sensible and tricky of girls wouldn't doubt his honesty. Then the memorable love saga started without much ado. She would tell him to be faithful to her, that he was the only one in her life. That she thought of him every second while alone. She even confessed dreaming of him in her sleep every day. She said if he should marry another lady she would commit suicide. She said she was a virgin and that her love was more than Juliet's love for Romeo. But all these were lies. Utter lies! She would flirt about with other men at the slightest opportunity. At that very moment she had about seven regular boyfriends in town.

Ikedi was very clever too. He would claim to believe her and claimed that his very existence depended on her love. He fabricated lies that his father had mansions, duplexes, and company's everywhere and that he was a millionaire. He told her that if she would marry him, she would reap all the bounties of his family. Whenever he borrowed his friend's cars he would claim it was his. He normally borrowed expensive clothes from his friends. He told her that he had been to many places in the world, and mixed with many rich and great men of the world. He even told her that she was the only girl in his life and would flatter her about the extra-ordinary and superb marriage they would have in the near future. He claimed to be a saint and assured her that she had met the right man.

All that he claimed and pledged to do were the direct opposite, for at time, he had about five girl friends scattered all over the town. He was not even from a rich family. He was from a very poor family and his father, whom he said lived in a posh duplex at Victoria Island in fact, lived in a ramshackle house in

the ghetto of the “notorious jungle city” called Ajejunle. The man, he claimed had a Rolls Royce, a Hummer Jeep and other Cars did not even own a bicycle not to talk of a car. He was a retired policeman.

The storm started gathering one day when he declared that he was checking out of this god-damn country for the USA, God’s own country. She shed crocodile tears and said if he should go away and come back with another lady, her corpse would be waiting for him.

He begged her not to commit suicide because he would be back to marry her. Then, she asked when he was leaving for the airport so that she could see him off but Ikedi sensing the danger dodged the proposal, saying he may still go to Abuja to partake in the opening of one of his father’s companies. He claimed that, he might be leaving for the USA through Abuja after the celebration. After shedding many crocodile tears, Veronica said she too would start a nun’s life until he would come back. She swore that lightning should strike her dead if she ever spoke to another man in his absence. He too confessed that he would live a monk’s life in the USA, that if any lady, no matter the beauty, talked to him, he would just snub her for trying to pollute him and make him unfaithful to his love. You see, his lips were so sugar-coated that when he said anything, no lady, no matter how intelligent, would doubt his sincerity, but then, he was not travelling anywhere. He was just going to Mgbidi to loaf and stay with one of his friends. Coincidentally, it happened that Veronica too had a boyfriend in that same building. The tenth day after he left was the day of great surprises! On that very day, Veronica decided to see her boyfriend without knowing that he was somewhere in the same building enjoying himself. You know, it is a saying common among Igbo people that “every day is for the thief and one day for the owner of the property”. Now we have two thieves trying to steal from each other.

He had been in one of the flats in that building for ten consecutive days now, frolicking with his girlfriend called Tessy. He didn't know that Veronica was in the same building and she had planned to go out with her other boyfriend. And he had planned to go out too, about the same time. Coincidentally, as the lovebirds came out, a great drama unfolded.

Unbelievably traumatic! Veronica was shocked to see Ikedi whom she thought should be in the United States of America with a girl in Nigeria. Terribly amazing! He was shocked to see her who was supposed to be living a nun's life in a man's arms. Next, the wiggle waggle of tongues, then eruption of anger, leading to some tongue-lashing, but first from Vero:

"You shameless dog" she thundered, "you are not even ashamed of yourself! Is this your USA? You liar! You should have been named Judas! Who is that girl with you?"

"*Sharrap*, you dirty harlot," he retorted. You bastard daughter of the devil, you should have been named Delilah or Jezebel. You are bearing the wrong name. Who is that guy with you?"

At that moment her eyes were very sore and red. She tried to fight a suppressed anger and she was powerless. "And you too," she thundered, you wolf in sheep's clothing, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, you Judas, snake, leopard, alligator, chameleon, you cunning tortoise..."

In a jiffy, a terrible fight began. They were now stark naked as they had torn each other's clothes in the scuffle. The fight attracted many people including the eagle-eyed news men. In the confusion and brawl that erupted, Tessy and Henry left together leaving them alone in the shameless squabble. After several hours that looked like eternity, the fight was finally settled at the police station.

The birthday girl and her brother were still lost in thought at the sudden reaction of Veronica. She had no history of mental disorder or dementia. Events had taken a bizarre turn as she began to cry bitterly which attracted Mama Adaobi who was sleeping after a rough bite with the hospital some hours ago. All were taken aback to see the exquisitely beautiful and delectable eyes in a torrent of tears.

Just at the wrong time, Okunade entered. Adaobi left the sofa and flew like an eagle and embraced him. All were caught in the dilemma.

Chapter six

“I say where did you keep your salary, you crazy man?” Mama Adaobi roared at her husband another eventful evening, giving him a thunderous slap. This daily show of shame is one of the reasons Obinna and Adaobi find it difficult to visit home.

“Er...er...I told you it’s under the pillow...please, don’t beat me anymore, I’m saying the truth...” Papa Adaobi begged his hot-tempered wife. That was how things went everyday in the Obika’s family. She was the Lord of the house and a woman of valour. Almost five feet tall, fat, strong and stoutly-built, she towered over her husband like a giant does over a lilliputian fellow.

At home, she was always in command and her husband feared her so much and treated her like a demigod. Don’t blame him as no one would dare a lion in a jungle or do battle with a ferocious shark in the Ocean without ending up in their bellies. Mama Adaobi was not only feared by her thin, short, frail-looking and skinny husband who obviously had no strength to hurt a fly. She was also feared in the neighborhood.

For many, Papa Adaobi had chewed more than he could swallow, and whoever advised him to take Mama Adaobi as a wife did not wish him well. Whenever he collected his salary at month end, his wife would take it from him forcefully and if he dared show a little reluctance in the process, he would get the beating of his life.

On occasions like these fifteen years ago, Adaobi, their only daughter would cry and beg their mum: “Mama...Mama... Mama...please don’t beat Papa again...please don’t beat him again...You’ll kill him...” Even though she was usually in tears during these periods, her mother was usually never in the

mood to have mercy on her weak spouse or care a hoot about the feelings of the sobbing little girl. Obinna would always watch in agony.

Expectedly, neighbours would always gather and plead on behalf of the unfortunate man. These interventions never yielded positive results as the insults and assault always continued unabated. Of course the poor man would cry like a child.

Once, the couple and children were invited to a naming ceremony. At the occasion, a bizarre drama unfolded when Mama Adaobi caught her husband admiring a pretty young lady. She gave him a dirty slap.

“What the hell are you doing? Why are you looking at that young lady that way?” she yelled.

“Er...er...I’m just trying to...” He stammered. Before he could complete his sentence the boorish and boisterous woman dealt him six thunderous slaps in quick succession. Thereafter, she dragged him up from the seat and declared it was time to go home.

“Nonsense! That’s how adultery and fornication start! Useless man!” she sputtered.

A thoroughly confused and embarrassed Papa Adaobi knew that it was only God’s intervention that could free him from the enslavement he had found himself in. His wife was also in charge of picking the friends her husband hung out with in order that peer influence does not come to his rescue.

As time went by, he meditated on a way out of the snare, “who would bail me out of this prison”? He asked no one in particular one morning. “God, please help me! Mama Adaobi is a terrorist! She is worse than *Boko Haram and Niger Delta Avengers!* In fact, only a masochist with an exuberant taste for violence will pick her for a wife. She is absolutely beyond redemption. Every single day

of continued neglect brings me ever closer to the brink of the abyss. It calls for greatness!" He said to himself as he laundered her clothes. He had been washing her clothes ever since they got married. He suddenly got angry with himself for being too weak and lazy to defend himself against his troublesome wife.

Most times, he did the cooking and washed plates while the ungodly wife would just sit, relax and enjoy the food. That is why he kept on praying to God to free him from the shackle of slavery, as there was nothing he could personally do. On so many occasions, and at the height of his frustrations and perplexities, he would burst into tears and weep silently over the helpless and unlucky situation he found himself in. In some of those instances, the little Adaobi, would come to him; wrap her little arm around him while urging him to take heart, as he would overcome his travails some day. A once blissful marriage, now characterized by sorrow, hardship, and oppression and akin to hell. Sadly, she was getting more wicked and heartless.

"Is there God at all?" he questioned no one in particular one day, adding "truly if there's God, he wouldn't leave me at the mercy of this evil woman I married?" It was at that point that he concluded that he would run away and kill himself if the situation persisted.

Just this evening when he had closed from work, an old friend invited him out, for a beer-drinking spree. He objected at first, telling him that his wife must not see him taking alcoholic beverages.

"Hah, Chief Pius, that's suicidal!" he exclaimed, "If my wife *"catches"* any alcohol stench in my breath, she'll kill me!" "Why?" Chief Pius queried, "She's your wife isn't she? Why are you afraid of enjoying some bottles of beer simply because she would get angry or mad at you? Are you not a man? You are too soft for my liking. You got to be a man." he further protested.

“Er...you don’t know her. But she must not see me drinking alcohol.” He begged. However, after much persuasion, Papa Adaobi agreed to spoil himself a little with some bottles of beer at the joint. After six hours, he was completely soused after taking eleven bottles of beer that eventful evening. By 6p.m, he was so drunk that Bacchus the god of wine would be green with envy on sighting him. As he staggered and tried in vain to control himself without success, something told him it was time to go home.

He stood up staggered and turned to his friend and said, “Chief...Chief...am...am...a family man...I have to...go home...”

“See you tomorrow, my...good...friend!” his equally inebriated friend replied. And continued with a great effort, “I will come to pick you up...tomorrow”.

While Papa Adaobi was on his way home, He saw a young female hawker selling sweets. He dipped his hand into his breast pocket and brought out his last money and bought “*Tom Tom*” sweets as he still had the ingenuity to come to terms with the fact that he would be in for some trouble with his wife for consuming beer. The confectionaries he bought were to help quench the stench of beer oozing from his mouth as he continued to stagger home. Although he was very weak and fell severally on the street, he continued to trudge home hurriedly. He was very happy indeed. Such was his mood and feeling whenever he was drunk. He had forgotten his sorrows and tribulations. Joy had taken over even if for a short while. He started humming an old song as he changed his steps to that of a seasoned dancer:

“I will love you from everlasting, from everlasting to everlasting; I will love you from everlasting, from everlasting to everlasting. I will love you from everlasting, from everlasting to everlasting; I will love you form everlasting, from everlasting to everlasting. I will love you from everlasting, from everlasting to everlasting; I will love you from

everlasting, from everlasting to everlasting. I will love you from everlasting, from everlasting; I will love you from everlasting, from everlasting..."

His voice was as tuneless as a bag of wool. Forty minutes after leaving the joint, he was back home. He knocked and staggered in. He was disappointed that only his wife was at home. Instantly his wife knew he was drunk. She was not only boiling with rage but was as hot as volcanic Lava.

"And where are you coming from?" She asked visibly annoyed.

"Why are you...you...asking me...stupid question?" he boldly answered. Now he had come to the bridge, he knew it must be crossed. There is no need to be on the horns of a dilemma today.

"Me!!! Ask you stupid question?" Mama Adaobi said furiously with her eyes dilating with annoyance.

"Hee! Hee!! Heee!!! Almighty God! They have taught you bad things. You are drunk. That is why you have the confidence to speak back to me in that manner. You are dead drunk! They have been teaching you how to fight and rebel against me. You will see hell today, just wait for me." Like a rampaging bull, she turned and rushed inside the kitchen.

"You can do nothing....nothing...nothing...you can do just nothing. Look...look.... you are like a dead rat". He replied with all his strength.

Within the twinkle of an eye, she returned with a big pestle in her right hand. She waved it wildly, aiming at her husband, but he dodged it and ran towards the balcony. She followed behind trying to hit him with all her might.

"I'll kill you today" she roared like a wounded lion, "you've been taught very bad things recently, you stupid, nasty and rebellious man." Holy Moses! Help him! She had now got him cornered at the balcony. She raised the pestle

up angrily and was about bringing it down on her husband's head when he moved swiftly. Thanks to alcohol. She accidentally lost her balance and crashed like a felled iroko tree. On the floor, she screamed heavily as she was in pains and agony. She had sustained a broken arm, as it had twisted in the great fall. She bled profusely. She was now occupied with how to walk with the aid of crutches and the plaster of paris. Obinna came back just in good time to behold the gory sight and rushed her to a nearby hospital.

Papa Adaobi was lost in thought as he watched his son drive out, "Will she become a totally changed woman upon being discharged from the hospital? Will the erstwhile cantankerous, boisterous, and quarrelsome woman turn a new leaf? Will she be very quiet, calm and no longer quarrel with me or anybody in the neighbourhood? Will she be gentle and peace-loving?"

Chapter seven

Papa Adaobi walked leisurely into the bar around 8pm with Chief Pius feeling rather excited for coming to spend some time again. He told him over a bottle of beer and bush meat about the fight yesterday. The Chief was happy because he was now receptive to change and promised to help him secure a good advantage over his wife's madness, over-weaning pride, thoughtlessness, and crude showiness of power. They had a good beer-drinking spree again, which Papa Adaobi won again effortlessly after emptying twelve bottles. The chief took him home because he could hardly stand up. However, despite the new found happiness he had become more thin and gaunt. He looked so dehydrated and emaciated, like someone who had been sick for years with no remedy in sight for his ailment. His phallus too had swollen so big like a full blown balloon about to burst.

Papa Adaobi just fell onto the bed and slept because he was very weak. When the pain of hunger became so much that night and he couldn't bear it anymore he screamed: "Help! Help!! Help!!! I'm dying here! Please, *Adam* help!"

Adaobi who was watching a movie with her brother and Veronica hurried out of bed but Obinna wouldn't have any of that rubbish. Come on Ada. You care too much. Don't spoil the *good time*...he will be fine. Mama, whose job it is to take of him is still in the hospital after their routine fight, please...leave him...He is a man for crying out loud! He can take care of himself!" He aggressively pointed out.

Adaobi gave him an angry look, took a wrapper on the head of the bed, clothed her flamboyant beautiful body and left the room. She hurried to her

father's room only to find him in a pitiable condition. She was so afraid that her blood pressure rose up instantly at an astronomical level. It was like Armageddon had finally come!

"God Almighty!" She uttered, sighing uncontrollably, "Papa, what is the matter? Tell me what happened to you? You are completely filled with trepidation and sweats."

"Oh...this is death! I cannot control this hunger any longer. Yeeeh! I'm dying... The pain is getting...too much...please help me" he spoke in spasmodic pains.

"Is food all you need? Is that all...Papa?" Adaobi insisted but her father still fuming with rage and ferocious anger roared like a wounded lion almost in tears "If I don't set my eyes on food in the next five minutes, be sure I'll meet my maker!"

"I'll be back in a minute" she said as she walked away hastily. She was filled with sweating as she searched for food in the entire cupboards in the kitchen and fridge. Thank goodness. She found a loaf of bread and a cup of butter. When Papa Adaobi had his fill, his mood at the moment could be compared to that of a man about to leave the shores of Nigeria to Europe for greener pastures. He nearly slapped his daughter some moments ago when she asked him to chew the bread more gently. After the bizarre response, Adaobi promised herself never to give such a piece of advice to him again. He is done with eating now. "When is that stupid, wayward and promiscuous brother of yours coming back Ada?" He charged. "He is in his room now" She replied and left the room.

He fell onto memory lane as he began to reflect on his past life. The fifteen years he spent in London looked just like yesterday. He was not accustomed to the white man's way of life. He spoke English through his nose,

just like the white man. The only difference was that he was black and that couldn't be wished away. No matter how hard he tried to ape, mimic or copy the white man, the fact still remained that Papa Adaobi was a complete African man. But wait a minute. His main problem was his romantic wife. He was now forty-eight and his family felt that time was definitely not on his side as he was fast aging.

He had been the serious type since stepping on the white man's soil. He had a good job in an insurance company in the heart of central London. He earned good money and lived a comfortable life. He was a tall, dark-skinned and handsome man.

All the "solid babes" wanted to marry him at all costs. But he had been careful not to impregnate any of these beautiful ladies because his family back home had warned him severally that he shouldn't marry any lady in the UK but come home to "hook" a typical country "pumpkin" so that he could enjoy his wealth and live long.

There was immense pressure on him to come home and marry a good indigenous wife. So, all he did since landing in the UK regarding romance was taste the "forbidden apple" of London "babes" and dump them like a plague. It is like eating the banana and throwing the peel away! What more could he do since he wasn't a Monk living in a Monastery, a celibate or eunuch, he reasoned. He was a strong and virile young man. According to his mother in Nigeria, most ladies in the western world weren't good enough as housewives and could plot the downfall of a successful man.

Pronto, he was called home that eventful year to marry a village girl that would put a lasting smile on his face, support him, build a happy home and also help the family. They told him, they had seen a very beautiful, homely, dutiful and respectable young country girl that would actualize his dreams and that of the family. They told him a lot about this raw, local, untainted and sexually

unmolested young country girl that was as perfect as an angel they'd found for him. Without wasting time, he bought an air ticket and flew back home. On landing at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos, his parents were eagerly waiting for him and before the mention of "Tommy" he was driven to his home town, in Imo State.

Preparation was in top gear for the wedding. The lucky young country girl was by name Adamma. She was fair-skinned, really beautiful and enchanting. She wasn't fluent in English Language and barely literate but she understood the local language of her people-Umuchukwu, which is Igbo language.

Without much ado, the marriage ceremony between Papa Adaobi and Adamma took place amid pomp and pageantry. All the money bags and other influential personalities graced the wedding ceremony. Even many Londoners attended the grand marriage. It was the talk-of-the town in Mgbidi for several months. It was a very expensive wedding which was even relayed on the national television.

He was so happy to have married Adamma. He travelled to London with her two weeks after the wedding and tried as much as possible to make her adjust to the white man's lifestyle, but she was a slow learner. However, it was a blissful relationship, or so he thought. And he felt he had finally found the perfect woman. His parents must be right in their recommendation!

But after three years, there was no child. She could no longer bear with the medical report that stated categorically that medically they had no reason to be barren. She had reached the limit of her endurance. She became very insulting, unnecessarily saucy and nasty to her darling husband. Nothing ever satisfied her. She would make a series of complaints and turned life into hell for her husband. All the words of pleading of her husband fell on deaf ears. It got to a stage that she reported him to the British police authorities that he beat and

assaulted her on a daily basis. The British police intervened and her husband was arrested instantly. He was warned never to lay a finger on her again. The authorities didn't know that she was lying and had heinous plans up her sleeve. That night Papa Adaobi was barred from sleeping inside his home for one week and he slept outside in the freezing London cold. On the fifth day, while still sleeping outside, his recommended eye glasses got lost and he was hit by a fast moving motorcycle. He sustained some injuries and was in severe pains for the next few days. A sympathetic white friend lent him some money to get himself another pair of eye glasses.

“What the hell have I gotten myself into, Almighty God?!” He screamed in tears one chilly wintry night. “I've definitely chewed more than I can swallow...how am I going to escape from the snares I now find myself?”

The British authorities later served him a warning letter that if his wife should report him again he would forfeit all his properties in the UK and be repatriated back to Nigeria. They warned him that he was living on borrowed time in the UK and that if another accusation should come again, he would definitely regret it. They never knew that her accusations were all false and utterly lies.

Papa Adaobi bore his problems and travails stoically when he was allowed back to his house. He tried as much as possible not to offend his wife. She became the lord of the house and would reel out orders to him at the slightest opportunity. He tried all he could to avoid clashing with her and fanning the embers of discord. No matter how hard he tried to be good, she showed herself as the real devil in his life.

One Sunday morning, she reported to the British authorities that she was beaten by her husband again. She showed them some self-inflicted injuries. He was arrested, but this time around the innocent man was handcuffed out of his house. She instantly filed for a divorce. Papa Adaobi forfeited all his properties

and life's savings to his wife. She became very happy that she had now become a rich woman. He had to leave London for Nigeria unwillingly in a crescendo tears.

Chapter eight

It was an afternoon as bitter as hemlock. One of those few moments, the presence of Obinna or Veronica could have made a difference. “Adaobi,” Papa Adaobi called, “If you ever get Pregnant for that “*Ngbati Ngati*” man, I’ll disown you as my daughter! How can you fall in love with a Yoruba man? Are you out of your mind?” he questioned.

“But Dad” she pleaded; I’m truly in love with him...I can’t do without Okunade. He is my man. He is the love of my love. He has all the qualities I want in a man, dad. He is a very nice person. He is...”

“Shut up, Adaobi,” her mother intervened, “If you ever say that again I’ll slap you! You know me very well. You know what I can do. Listen to me very well. Do you want to tell me that among all the Igbo men in this Lagos seeking your hand in marriage you can’t find any right suitor but that useless, good-for-nothing, irresponsible and worthless Yoruba man! He must have charmed you with *juju*! I really can’t understand all this! *Tufiakwa*! A Yoruba man! An abomination!” She got up in anger.

“But Mum, Dad, you can’t do this to me...you know Okunade loves me.” She broke down in tears and wept. “You know he makes me happy...you know he has all I cherish in a man...you know how much I love him...why Mum? Why Dad? Oh, God! I’m already pregnant for him!” She gave some penitent sobs.

“You are what? Repeat what you’ve just said Adaobi! Her dad interjected, standing up in fiery anger, “pack your bag and baggage, everything you have in this house and leave immediately! I disown you as my daughter as from today! You won’t bring shame and disgrace to my family! This is disgusting and irritating! Love! Love... my foot! To hell with you and the so-called Okunade! If

you're not marrying an Igbo man, then you're not my daughter! Before the count of three I want you out of my house! Your so-called pregnancy is nothing but a maggot in a septic tank! You will regret your actions Adaobi! You'll regret it I swear!" He concluded with a voice livid with rage.

Adaobi went inside her room in tears amid painful sobs. She loved Okunade with all her heart. Their love affair transcended tribal and cultural barriers. She had vowed to marry him despite the fact that he was a Yoruba man. They had been dating for the past four years. Her parents had never been in support of the relationship ditto Okunade's parents, who had warned him of impending doom if he ever put her in the family way. Okunade was lucky to get a good job after his graduation at the Lagos State University. He studied International Relations while Adaobi studied Sociology. Their relationship started back in their third year at the university. Okunade was a six-footer, handsome and light-skinned.

She packed out of her parents' house that fateful hot Wednesday afternoon. "Where would I go? What more can I do?" she thought questioningly. She shook her head sorrowfully. Truly, she was two months pregnant. Now that her parents had disowned her, she knew she had only to see Okunade and tell him the mind-boggling and worrisome development. The scorching heat of the tropical sun perched on her smooth and velvety skin. She walked hurriedly to the park; the pain and grief in her heart was too much to bear.

An hour after the grandiloquent departure of Adaobi, Mama Adaobi had an august visitor. "Sister, do you know that after my eventful wedding, days kept rolling into weeks and weeks to months yet Chima never *touched* me. At first I thought it was a joke and nothing serious. I thought he would change his heart. I did all the tricks in romance encyclopaedia, thinking that he would change his attitude, mellow down and come back to me but he wouldn't budge. He was as adamant and unmoved as a wounded horse with a bleeding hoof", said Linda

sorrowfully. Linda who is Mama Adaobi's younger sister just visited her elder sister. They were having a conversation on the porch over chilled palm wine and dried *nchi* (grass cutter).

Mama Adaobi snapped "Is he out of his mind? Damn it, your marriage was an outright mistake. Nonsense! It was a big mistake. I never liked that honey-tongued boy. I warned you Linda but you wouldn't listen to me". She brought out two glass cups which she placed on a small table and also brought a can of fruit juice and filled the two cups and served. "Go on!" She commanded as she took a sip of the juice. "Another dimension to the morbid drama was that he wouldn't even speak to me. This hurt me so much that I would cry and cry. I always remember that the last word I heard from him was the "I do" he said on the day of the marriage ceremony when the officiating pastor asked him if he really wanted me as his wife. The first year rolled by, the second, the third and the fourth; still he wouldn't *touch* me or even speak to me. We were like two opposite people in wedlock. When the fifth year came and he didn't change his behaviour, I started sending people, family and friends to plead on my behalf but this didn't make him change his attitude. You are a good witness to this. And you know what my sister? He never told anybody the plain truth and reason behind his wicked aloofness."

Linda stopped as Mama Adaobi interfered "I remember asking him severally why you hadn't taken in since all these years but he had a ready-made answer that you people are waiting for God's time to manifest. But I keep thinking, how did you cope with the *heat*? Linda gulped down the remaining juice in the glass cup, cleared her voice and continued, "It wasn't easy. It was like a rehearsal to hell. There was a particular day; I actually got crazy and frustrated over his behaviour. I think, it was a very chilly night. He was deep in sleep and I sneaked towards him and grabbed his phallus. He screamed in annoyance: "What are you trying to do to me? You Jezebel, what? You want to

rape me?" I cried and wailed. I begged him to stop his *madness*. I made him see reasons why we cannot go on like that. But he never gave in.

The following morning, I thought very hard on what to do. I was determined to do anything to have back my husband. I thought of another way of winning the love and soul of my husband. With the help of a bosom friend, I made up my feeble mind to see Mazi Ogwugburugburu, the great medicine man. I hoped that he will prepare me a love potion that will capture the heart and soul of my husband either by hook or crook for me.

I reached his shrine in Ibiasoegbe around 12pm and I narrated my problem to the old herbalist. After pondering over the whole thing, he told me confidently that it would cost me the sum of one hundred thousand naira. He assured me that if he sets his eyes on me when I had rubbed the love powder on my face that he would come after me the way he had never done before. I thanked him and gave him the money." Linda stopped as she struggled with the painful emotions.

"I am really taken aback by your story"! Mama Adaobi who had been listening with rapt attention with a face as sour as lime snapped, "You mean, you went all through this and you never told your elder sister...But most of this was superfluous. He isn't worth it!"

"That evening when I got home" Linda continued as she ignored her. "I took my bath. After that, I rubbed the love powder on my face and put on my night gown. Then I walked seductively towards him as he was busy watching a movie in the living room. I smiled alluringly and sat beside him. I walked closer to him and threw my arm around his neck. To my surprise, he turned his face away irritably. But I persisted and cooed as I begged him with eyes wet with tears. But that demon never had mercy rather he screamed at me to get out from his presence. When I refused, he roared in anger and gave me a thunderous slap on the cheek and left the living room. He left me to sulk in

disbelief. I was shocked. I got up in tears and vowed to collect my money from Mazi Ogwugburugburu. That was the moment I made up my mind that I was fed up and tired of the marriage. The following day, I filed for a divorce. I told the judge that day that I couldn't continue because I wasn't getting any joy from it. I can't go on married to a man who doesn't speak with me or *touch* me. I want to go on my way. If Chima is God, he won't let human beings reap the bounties of rainfall”.

Mama Adaobi drove in again: “But what was his reason or reasons for such a strange behaviour?” Linda continued “Yes...I was about to come to that before you interrupted. When the elderly judge asked him to give his reason for such abnormal behavior...he simply said, it was because he caught me cheating on him a month to our wedding day! Can you imagine? What a joke!”

Mama Adaobi bowed her head in shame as she was lost for words. She had always felt that her younger sister had a blood worse than Delilah's. Now she knew better! Just as a movie, that fateful day just played out in Linda's memory: Chima, who was supposed to visit Obinna for their weekly Saturday exercise in the gym returned much earlier due to a heavy traffic. At first he was reluctant to return home since he just left but he couldn't think of a better place to go so he headed home. On getting to his house, he couldn't find the gateman at his post and he got angry because of the security risk of him leaving the gate open like that. But something got him worried when he saw the gateman's sandals right inside his sitting room; he just told himself that something wrong was going on. He was right. When he moved close to the window of his bedroom, he started hearing screams of pleasure. He tried to peep into the room but it was difficult because of the protector. So he summoned courage and walked to the door as if he wanted to tell her that he was back. He opened the door and caught the adulterous daughter of eve red handed under the dirty Hausa gateman. Sad! He couldn't get up immediately. It took him seconds to jump off and grab his clothes.

“Ha...hah...haaaa...!” Linda started weeping. Her face and body looked worn out, burnt, wrinkled and black like that of a gorilla. Tears streamed freely down her face. The tears were disturbed by the presence of a seraph. Truly, she is beautiful. Possibly, she got heady and out-of-control because of her beauty; light in complexion and tall, gazelle-like and charming. Actually, it would take the resistance of a monk or a castrated gentleman to ignore her enchanting backsides. She had well-arranged sparkling white teeth, well-curved and alluring shape and was gap-toothed too.

“Veronica...how many times will I warn you to stop coming back late? And where are you coming from? If you lie to me...I will beat you silly today!” Mama Adaobi roared.

“But...I’m just coming from a red carpet and champagne party. You keep warning me as if I’m a baby. I’m twenty three. I know what I want.” She replied.

“Vero...don’t talk to your aunty like that, she is saying the truth. There’s more to life than being wayward. If you are not careful, your insatiable thirst for a turgid phallus will get you into trouble. You look worse than an Italian prostitute returning from a disco party. Look at your dressing... short...skimpy brown shirt...and a top that reveals your lower abdomen, almost showing the hairs of your navel...” Linda added.

“Are you sure she is listening to you?” Mama Adaobi who was seething with rage asked. The other day, I caught her smoking cigarette like chimney. She is getting bad through and through as the days go by. I pray she will find a job soonest and leave my house before the worst will happen. It is not even up to two months since she’s stayed with us, yet she already has about four boyfriends scattered all over the street. Emeka is number one, Uche is number two, Kunle is number three, Adamu...number four...and so on”. She stopped abruptly as one abstracted from reality.

As the words fell on Veronica like the torrent of a heavy downpour of *Lagos rain*, she was mute, wishing that the sermon will come to an end. “I wonder why you are so lascivious and lewd when your parents had no history of being promiscuous and wayward. Perhaps you are flaunting your God-given beauty the wrong way; and perhaps societal ills of the university have eaten too deep into your soul, making you lose control of your senses. You have decided to live a dirty and unwholesome life Vero, why?” Linda asked as she shook her head dejectedly in agony and sighed continuously and heartrendingly continued. “Why are you doing this? Your Dad had a good job and does his best to take care of you and your younger siblings financially- your Mum too is a successful trader who wants nothing but the best for her three children. What’s wrong with your head?”

Thank you for your pretty words Auntie Linda. But...come to think of it...I don’t think that I’m as wayward as to go to a dirty *aboki* gateman. Obinna told me the romantic story, so you can go on pontificating. I am all ears!” Vero challenged fuming with laughter.

“How dare you talk to my sister like that?” Mama Adaobi thundered, “You good-for-nothing girl! Veronica shrugged her shoulders defiantly and walked away. Mama Adaobi gave her a hot chase and gave her three thunderous slaps in seconds and a deadly kick on her stomach. The pains were too excruciating and debilitating for her. Her eyes were getting dimmer and dimmer and her head was spinning round and she became very dizzy in seconds. She fell down to the ground and screamed in spasmodic pain even as tears welled up in her eyes. Papa Adaobi who had been sleeping heard her agonizing screams and rushed out. Just then Obinna drove in, in his new Prado Jeep.

“Dad, what’s going on here?” Obinna asked, shaken and confused. Why is everyone silent?

“My son...I don’t know what’s going on. I heard a scream, some seconds ago while I was sleeping and just came out. Quick, we must take her to the hospital. I wonder what she’s gone through at the hands of your mother.”

She was still rolling on the floor as she bled profusely. She couldn’t utter a word. Blood was all over the ground. It will really take the expertise of experienced doctors to save her life. The women were in a frightened state of mind, hoping that she wouldn’t give up.

Chapter nine

Two promising lovers, Emeka and Veronica were enjoying themselves at the beautiful Lekki Beach on a Saturday afternoon. Vero had told Mama Adaobi that she was going for a job interview earlier in the morning. Unknown to the lovebirds, danger lurked around the corner.

The duo were smooching and cooing sweet nothings into each other's ears, unaware of the treacherous and dangerous moves of Kunle, a.k.a. *Cobra* and his gang of thugs, who had been spying on them for the past forty minutes, waiting for the right time to strike. Still unmindful of the approaching danger the lovers continued their tete-a-tete, giggling and laughing.

"Ever since you walked into my life," Emeka said, "It has been nothing but true love. Vero, I'm on fire with passion! I will walk on water and through the mountain for you. Mine is a love that will stand the test of time, logic and all circumstances. I will hold your tender hands when you are sick and laugh with you when you are happy."

"Oh! Emeka" She said softly, "Nothing compares to your ever flourishing love that would always take me to the highest plane when I'm at my lowest ebb"

"I just got to say this, Veronica" Emeka continued, "You're the one that fills me with deep, undiluted feelings of joy, desire and love. Your charm is something beyond physical comprehension, it's celestial and cherubic, I must confess! I'll love you always. Your presence in the morning, afternoon or evening makes my day beautiful!

Just as Emeka was about planting a fervent kiss on the lips of Veronica, he got a violent slap on his right cheek. He was dazed.

“What!” he screamed, “Who the hell are you?” He uttered with bloodshot eyes and staggered up, fidgeting and sweating.

“Ha...ha...ha...!” Kunle laughed grotesquely and threatened, “Perhaps you don’t know me but I know you very, very well. You’re my rival. You are dating a lady after my heart and you will pay today for loving her. I swear! You would have been dead now, if Obinna didn’t plead for your life”

“But...there must be a mistake somewhere. Obinna just left here about ten minutes ago. He is a bosom friend, how did you get to know him? Emeka tried to understand, while hiding his surprise. In a jiffy about five hefty thugs descended on Emeka and started punching and pounding here and there with their hard fists against him like boiled yam in a mortar being crushed with a pestle.

No! No!! No!!! Veronica screamed, “Don’t beat him again. Please, don’t kill him. I beg you in God’s name, don’t kill him!” She started crying and shedding tears of sorrow. After so much cudgeling and bashing for close to ten minutes, the hoodlums moved back a little and watched him writhe in his pool of blood. Other picnickers at the beach took to their heels for fear of attack by the hoodlums.

The fact was that Vero could remember the face of Kunle as one of the young men who always admired her. Mama Adaobi had always warned her about Kunle. But Vero never had the slightest love for the young man. They had only gone for a date once. Vero remembered the tattoo and emblem of the panther secret cult on of kunle’s right shoulder while they were on a bed.

However, in a split second she wondered where the present horrifying drama would end. She was afraid of the consequences. How did Kunle find out that she was at the beach with her sweetheart? Vero had graduated and had successfully completed her National Youth Service (NYSC) and was now

looking forward to a good job. She had begun dating Emeka way back in her undergraduate days. Emeka was more than a boyfriend, he was her fiancé. What in heaven's name would happen if these social miscreants kill my fiancé? She asked herself, so many questions but no answer. As she was regaining control from her sudden flight of thoughts and melancholy, the hoodlums prepared for another attack on the helpless and hapless Emeka. Kunle bent down and grabbed the almost lifeless young man and sputtered:

“Hey...Emeka, you don't mess around or play with the head of a deadly cobra! Do you know why I am called the cobra? I assure you, you will pay with your life if you don't leave my girl. I have drunk the lion's blood. I have chewed the crocodile's teeth! The venom of viper does nothing to the back of the tortoise! The ocean never dries! The lagoon never dries! I have swallowed the poisonous fangs of the puff adder. Nothing scares me. I will make you a potion, and you will walk at ease into a refuge of roaches! I am the master of coincidence. The sight of blood makes me happy and excited!”

It is unbelievable how Kunle trailed Vero and Emeka to the Beach. Kunle lived in the notorious ghetto of Mushin and was a never-do-well and a dullard who was rusticated from the university due to his bad, unwholesome and ungodly ways. His body, particularly his face bore the scars of many years of physical attacks which showed him as a seasoned gangster and a thug. But funny enough, he had a secret passion for Veronica and imagined himself as her would-be husband even though she had not accepted his warped intention. Sadly though, Vero would not have fancied such a queer human being although she once gave him a date. She saw herself as being too polished; too academically inclined and beautiful to have such a beastly character as Kunle for a fiancé. She came from a decent home, though her manners were not superb. Her wayward lifestyle is still a mystery to fathom.

For Emeka, she was a perfect lady, virtuous, deeply unassuming and courteous. Also he always thought of her as well-cultured and God-fearing. It was impossible for him not to love her. Her eyes, her smile, sense of humour, and everything were unique. She was so perfect and on the other hand, the man in question, Emeka was a young man of great wealth. He was a ladies' man any day. He was tall, good-looking and handsome and had a light-skin that could make any girl swoon with love not to mention his uncommon impeccable brain and brawn.

As the assault on Emeka continued, he hiccupped thrice and coughed out blood from his mouth, and then fainted and went into coma. Kunle turned towards Veronica.

“Now, to have you in my arms is my ultimate dream and ambition,” he said in a guttural tone, baring his big, brown and dirty teeth. She screamed, when she saw the monster-like young men coming towards her. She collapsed the next minute and fainted.

Kunle and his gang moved towards her with the intention of raping her in spite of the fact that she had fainted. But just then they heard the siren of a police van; they turned and took to their heels. They ran in different directions, like mad and deranged men escaping from the long arm of the law.

Chapter ten

Hell was let loose when Mama Adaobi overheard her son discussing a disgusting matter with his cousin during the early hours of the day. She had been accused severally of eavesdropping by her husband in the past. The discussion this morning would have been dismissed as a phantom but the evidence was too overwhelming to ignore.

“Die! You crazy, stupid witch! Son snatcher! I’ll kill you today!” Those were Mama Adaobi’s terrible, biting and angry utterances as she continued beating and battering Veronica, whose sin was that she was pregnant for her son, who is her blood relation. All the while she was just weeping and sobbing like a little kid. She cried and cried as the fat, saucy and boisterous woman descended on her, beating the hell out of her.

While Obinna had gone to visit Emeka who was assaulted by *Cobra* and his gang about three weeks ago; his father had gone for a beer-drinking spree with his friend. He couldn’t afford to miss it for anything these days. The poor girl was stripped naked and pushed out to the heavy rain. What was left on her body was her bra and underwear. She tore her clothes to shreds when she tried to put up a good resistance and left her shivering inside the rain.

What actually happened was that Mama Adaobi and her husband had travelled for a burial ceremony in the village and stayed two weeks. Before they came back from the trip, their son had sowed a wild oat. But prior to the coming of Veronica, Mama Adaobi’s handling of her matrimonial responsibilities was really bad and unsatisfactory. Everyone always complained about her cooking, rude manners and general conduct which were clearly nothing to write home about. The family’s meal would be served late and when her husband complained, she would get angry and rain abusive

words on him. She wouldn't wash the clothes of her husband but let them pile up, very dirty and unkempt. Her meals were not always sweet and tasty.

So, it was a welcome relief when Veronica visited the family. She had actually come to search for the white-collar job in Lagos. The family took a personal interest in the young lady who was very charming. Before they woke up, Veronica was already awake, cooking the meal. She was a good cook. She would make sure there was water in the tank and would do the laundry. Papa Adaobi was always neat, spick and span. She was loved by everyone except Mama Adaobi who saw her as an enemy. However, Obinna started developing amorous interest in the young lady gradually. So when the opportunity came, he seduced and lured her who had ostensibly won his heart. He was ready to throw caution to the wind and was never bothered about whose ox was gored. Everything appeared to have gone out of existence except his new infatuation.

Some minutes later, Mama Adaobi paid N30, 000 to some thugs and hoodlums to deal with Veronica. Out in the cold, the merciless thugs molested the girl and dragged her in the mud while she begged for mercy with tears dropping from her eyes.

“Die, you bitch!” the leader of the hoodlums hollered threateningly.

“We were invited to deal with you till you have miscarriage!”

There was nobody to rescue her from the hands of the heavily armed thugs. People fled from the scene for fear of being attacked if they intervened. The young girl was in the pool of her own blood when Obinna arrived about three hours later. He was shocked and dumbfounded. The sight of her on the bare floor with blood on her head, arms and thigh nearly moved him to tears.

“Who did this to you?” he asked for the umpteenth time. He was shaking with anger and fuming.

“It’s your mother; she called the...thugs for me!” She was still weeping uncontrollably as he rushed to meet his mother.

“What have you done to her?” Who asked you to kill the poor girl? Is it her fault that she is pregnant for me? It is rather your fault...Yes...if you had truly been a mother, this surely wouldn’t have happened! You should rather go and hide your face in shame...”

At that moment, Mama Adaobi lashed out at him as she was boiling with rage.

“You can go to hell! You...useless son of a bad father! You can take me to court if you like! I’ll make sure that I kill that stupid girl!” She thundered.

“Do you realize that your actions could lead to the death of the innocent girl and you’ll be charged for murder? Whether, you like it or not, she’s having that baby by God’s grace,” he concluded with an air of authority.

“She won’t have that baby while I’m alive! She and the unborn baby will rot in hell!” She left and spat with derision.

Obinna went out hurriedly and rushed her to the hospital. She spent two days in the hospital under intensive care. He took good care of her as he provided all that she needed. However, when they left the hospital after she was discharged, they never expected more trouble for the week.

“The snake emits poison, may your life and that little baby be poisoned as from today! May you face disaster and calamity in your life! May that child suffer and not be happy! May you and your baby die suddenly! May the young baby not live to old age! I command the evil forces and deities to deal mercilessly and wickedly with you and your baby!” These were the bitter words of Mama Adaobi as Vero entered the house. As she was raining those terrible curses, something untoward happened to her body instantly. She

started shaking and trembling. Her tongues and eyes were twitching. Before long, her legs and arms had become lifeless as if there was no blood and bones inside them.

“Yee, I’m dying, I’m dying!” She screamed.

“What’s the matter with you?” Obinna said and came running towards her from the door of the Jeep.

“You may have stroke or palsy! Let’s go to the hospital! This is an emergency!” He said.

Mama Adaobi couldn’t lift her leg and arm again. Tears streamed down her eyes uncontrollably. She was feeling terrible and excruciating pains all over her body.

That evening, Veronica saw the guy who got her pregnant fly into a temper which she had never seen in her entire life. He was so hysterical, calling her all sorts of names and she didn’t even know when she started crying heart wrenching tears of hurt and betrayal. When he later looked into her eyes, he realized how scared and hurt she was. He pulled her close and ran his hands through her hair until she had calmed down and he said in the most subtle voice ever: “Why don’t you have an abortion?” She pulled back instantly, but when she thought of her parents, family, friends and stigma of having a child outside wedlock with a blood relation, she knew that she had no other choice. He had made all the arrangements. The following day, they went to the room-like Clinic. Veronica shivered all through the way but he kept telling her that it would be okay and that he was proud that she made such a brave decision.

A nurse appeared and took her medical history to make sure that the type of abortion offered to her was a suitable one. When the nurse was satisfied, she further requested to see the sanitary pads, referral letter, blood group card, Medicare and any health care card; that she had been earlier

informed to bring along when coming. Vero opened her bag and presented the items, and the nurse ran a quick gaze on them.

“Did you abstain from food, drink or smoke for six hours before the operation as we advised?” The graceful-looking nurse asked”.

“Yes!” Vero answered, masticating the word.

Veronica was shortly given a tablet to soften her cervix and make it easier to open. After thirty minutes, she was called to enter the room where the abortion was supposed to take place. She lay down on the table trying to dissociate her mind from what was about to take place when a young man told her sternly:

“You know, I can’t perform this procedure with your underwear on”. Then, she began to pull it off. As she did this, a sense of guilt suddenly overwhelmed her. First she had pulled off the underwear for pleasure and now she was pulling it off to get rid of the stigma the pleasure had brought...what a shame, she felt so exposed.

A small, plastic suction tube connected to a pump was inserted into her womb and used to remove the foetus and surrounding tissue. All through the times that she felt instruments coming in and out of her, she kept thinking of the lady she had become and the hypocrite she had transformed into.

“If only I can get through this...only if...” Vero muttered and felt a sharp pain pierce through the whole of her body. She screamed but then the doctor told her to be quiet. She felt another pain but this time she bit her lip and then the pain began to come in successions. Instinctively, she knew that something was wrong because she was too weak to talk or to move and then she heard the voices of Obinna and the doctor talking about the fact that she was bleeding excessively. The pain was so unbearable and she felt herself getting weaker and weaker. With the last strength in her, she pleaded with God:

“Oh Lord, I’m so sorry for taking my underwear off, please forgive me.” And she drifted into a world where the pain seemed less hurtful and the voices seemed less distant.

“After having been laid on this painful slab of abortion, I will never involve myself in activities that will bring me back to it again” She sobbed as she experienced mild cramps for which she took simple painkillers.

Obinna loved women to a fault. He made it a habit to sleep with their housemaid from the village. Her name was Sylvia. She was a *local seraph*; her beauty was disarming and out-of-this-world. Immediately, he set his eyes on her, his unquenchable sexual appetite went wild.

“You have to go through romantic baptism first, Sylvia, if you’re to work here. Is that right?” He ordered one mid-night with a sarcastic grin on his face.

“I’ll do whatever you want.” She replied without objection. Some minutes, they were in tastefully furnished bed. He made it a habit later until his mother beat the daylight out of the girl one scorching afternoon and then sent her packing without picking a pin from the house.

Barely a week after Veronica committed the abortion; the snake-eyed guy began his lascivious and lecherous moves again. He opened his small briefcase that was half-filled with crisp N1, 000 notes running into some cool thousands.

“Take everything, it’s all yours Vero! I must ‘*do it*’ right now” He said, gradually unzipping one night.

“Please, leave my room now! I’ll scream that you want to rape me! I won’t do it, even for all the money in the world again,” She said trembling. “I’ll call your mother now!” She threatened.

“I don’t care about her! Even if she would enter here now and brandish a sparkling machete, I won’t be moved! I have to force you right away!” He threatened without any cogitation. He had climbed down the ladder of reason, step by step, bit by bit into the cellar of forgetfulness. He threw caution to the wind and pulled her closer and started fondling and cuddling her passionately. He was about pouncing on the sultry looking girl when she jerked, grabbed his phallus and cut it with a small sharp knife she brought out from under the pillow. He screamed in excruciating pains. Blood spilled on the floor. The cut was nearly fatal.

“Yee! Yee!! Yee!!! Somebody help me.” He yelled in agony.

“Ha! Haa!! Haa!!!” Vero roared with laughter and started ranting senseless and meaningless phrases while he rolled on the floor in gnawing pains. Left with a deep cut on his phallus, he regretted greatly for having taken a risk with the girl, whose madness was deep-seated, alarming and dangerous. She packed her belongings and left the house shortly with her head in the clouds, but unknown to her, her womb had been corrupted; a mistake she would regret all her life.

Chapter eleven

It is two weeks since Veronica left unceremoniously. Papa Adaobi saw the events that led to her departure as the last straw that broke the Camel's back. In an anger-infested move, he walked up, with well-calculated steps like a cat, to someone and shook him roughly. The person groaned and mumbled to himself half asleep.

"Obinna!" He jerked fully awake at the sound of that familiar but unusual voice.

"Papa!" He replied in surprise.

"What are you doing here?" He roared in a strangled voice which made his wife come running out of her room. "Don't start again this morning with my son" She warned.

"What is this good-for-nothing boy doing in my house? Didn't I warn you never to set foot in here, since you allowed your wicked mother to drive away Veronica? Get out before I call the police!"

"It is too early in the morning for this, and he is your son. You cannot treat him like this. We cannot go on like this!" She warned.

"It's you!" Papa Adaobi turned to her. "You spoiled that boy. He keeps bringing an over-abundance of shame and disgrace to the family and you still beg for him."

"I will leave the house." Obinna said, stretching on the bed. He looked round the room at the carelessly flung shirts, jeans and boxer shorts over the

chair, to the poster of the Chelsea football team on the wall ; a typical guy's room. Another worn-out poster of *Tupac Shakur* was on the opposite wall. Sighing, he plodded to the bathroom. He whistled as he took his shower, refusing to think about the morning's surprise. The reason why was a long story; too long to think about on a brand new day.

As he ate his breakfast of *moin-moin* and brown pap, his father entered his room again yawning. He wore a loose caftan over his dry tummy.

“Obinna...What about Ada? I haven't heard from her ever since she left...” He began and stopped and rubbed his eyes, and rubbed them again just to make sure.

Just then, the phone rang, Obinna stood up and reached for it, picked the call and collapsed onto a chair.

“Oh...Ada...good morning and how is life? Obinna grinned as his father watched him, instead of receiving a response to his greeting; he rather received an aggressive bashing.

“How could you be so wicked? You have the soul of the devil in you...You have never called since I was sent out of the house yet Veronica told me how you had been busy fooling around her. She told me everything. You should be ashamed of yourself. Why are you this wicked? Why...?” She gave up with tears and fell into a trance as a history in her memory played out again. It was a part of her which she had tried in vain to suppress because it hurt more than the stings of a thousand bees but the pictures were here again uninvited. She could see a wet, chilly day in Lagos. Dark cloud masses over the blue sky. Rain pouring fast and the sky pelting bodies with slicing strokes. Not too long after, the droning rain begins to utter silent whispers. Though the air is still, and sounds distinct, on the road vehicles crawl. Okunade lives in a two-bedroom flat at Agric-street Agege, Lagos. He is watching a movie while relaxing on a

three seater couch. She knocks and enters the living room, with stress and confusion boldly written on her face.

“What is the problem, dear?” Okunade asked the completely distraught young lady.

“They have sent me packing from home..... They even threatened to kill me if I come back to the house. Okunade, I am in trouble...you know I am pregnant for you ...”

“Good God, what kind of problem is this? Where do I go from here?” He said rhetorically. He switched off the television set and hugged her. Then in a flash he remembered what his own parents always said about the relationship, how they disapproved the whole thing. The words of his parents the previous day came to his memory.

“Okunade”, his Dad warned, “we don’t want you to marry that Igbo girl. This is our joint decision. We sent you to school, isn’t it? And we are your rightful biological parents, if we come to your house again and see this Igbo girl you call your fiancée you would better forget you have parents living. We will disown you as our child, no more, no less.”

Added to this, his mother cuts in, “we have a very responsible, well-mannered, pretty Yoruba girl from a reputable family we want you to marry. Her name is Adetoun, Toun, for short. We’ll bring her to your house this weekend, on Sunday. You can’t marry an Igbo girl...*lai...lai*, over our dead body!”

But mum, dad,” he protested, “you can’t marry a woman for me at this age...That’s impossible! I am an adult. I am in love with Adaobi and she is my heart desire. This Toun or whatever you call her name is a stranger to me I don’t know her from Adam. And sincerely mum, dad, you are trying to destroy

a happy relationship. Adaobi is already pregnant for me and I am honestly in love with her.”

“Whether you like her or not, we shall see when we bring Toun to your house this coming Sunday. You pitiable son of the land that has suddenly forgotten his roots, you have to take back your thinking cap!” His mum concluded and they stormed out.

Okunade reflected on the words of his parents for a moment, shook his head sorrowfully and was lost for words. He wondered if he should tell her the pressure he was getting from his own parents, too. He knew this would break her heart, because she had no other place and he had already put her in the family way. She was two months pregnant at the time. They were both between the devil and deep blue sea. He made up his mind to say what had transpired between him and his parents the previous day so that she wouldn't be shocked when she sees his parents come in with a lady the following day. Okunade sat her down and explained in details how his parents were opposed to their relationship. Adaobi broke down in tears and cried when she realized the dilemma and confusion that had become her lot.

“Your parents will make trouble with me when they see me here tomorrow.” She said between sobs. “What will I do? What is our next line of action? I love you, Okunade. I don't want to lose you...you are my love...you are all I have now...”

“I love you too, Adaobi...I can't deny loving you...” He replied. “You give me so much joy”, he continued, “With you by my side I can face the world...Only the deep can call to the deep. The feelings I have for you are sweeter than honey and nobody can take me away from you...please, just be patient with me while I think...I know this evil wind won't take us along in its gale”.

That very Saturday, Okunade's Parents, along with Toun, contacted a powerful *juju man* who gave them a love potion and assured them confidently that if Okunade sets his eyes on Toun he would definitely fall in love with her and hate Adaobi instantly.

It was Sunday, the D-day. Okunade and Adaobi were having their breakfast when Okunade's parents, Mr and Mrs Olulana, knocked and entered. They were accompanied by Toun, the young lady they wanted their son to marry. Okunade was the first to greet them followed by Adaobi.

"Good morning Ma, good morning Sir," Adaobi greeted Okunade's parents and curtsied gently, but they didn't answer or acknowledge their greetings.

"Let me get you a glass of water." She gestured. "No, thank you," Okunade's mother replied sharply. "And, for your information, we are here to see our child, not you. You can go to hell!" Okunade's father retorted. Adaobi could sense trouble instantly.

"Take it easy, Mum, Dad, please just take it easy with her..." Okunade begged.

"Okunade, take a good look at me very carefully," his mum said, adjusting herself smartly, "This young lady accompanying us is your wife-to-be. Toun get up. Let him see you properly." The lady stood up.

Surprisingly, when Okunade's eyes met that of Toun, he felt the enchanting power of the love potion all over him

"What have you got to say?" His mother asked.

"Er...er... nothing Mum... But..." Okunade stuttered in his new confusion. The love charm had taken control of his entire being and mental faculties.

“Toun, take good care of our son” Okunade’s mother pleaded. “We will soon do a traditional wedding in a matter of weeks to formalise the relationship.”

“Oh, thank you Ma, thank you Sir,” Toun said delightedly while all this drama unfolded. Adaobi had gone inside the bedroom in tears. Without much ado, Okunade’s parents bade them farewell and left. Toun was a typical Lagos lady, short and rotund with a sallow and totally burnt color depicting someone who had bleached her skin too much in the past. She was carrying a big bag containing her personal effects and clothes.

“Where do I put this bag?” she asked the confused and befuddled Okunade,” follow me to the bedroom,” he replied, apparently under her magical spell. When Okunade entered his bedroom and saw Adaobi sitting all alone and weeping his countenance changed

“What are you still doing here, Adaobi?” he asked. “I thought you had left my flat, I don’t want to see you here anymore! Is that understood?” He threatened.

“Okay...but please Okunade, let me sleep in the sitting room...Please...I beg in the name of God...” She spoke in tears. That was it. That afternoon Adaobi slept in the living room. Toun came to her and spoke very insulting and provocative jokes at her. The poor pretty girl would cry and cry. She was very confused. That evening, Toun called Okunade and told him point-blank that he should send her away from the house. That day was the most disheartening and terrible day for Adaobi. It was the month of June and the weather was very chilly and cold.

It was raining heavily that evening when Okunade, who was still under the powerful *juju* and charm imposed on him by Toun, with the connivance of his parents, started assaulting Adaobi.

“Please...stop it! Stop beating me! Please...please...for the sake of the love I shared with you...please...” She cried as he beat the daylight out of her and dragged her out into the rain, throwing her bag at her. Toun was happy and satisfied as she watched the gory drama. Drenched with the rain waters and in tears, the pregnant young girl left for the house of her old friend Ifeoma who lives in Ajegula, on the outskirts of Lagos. Ifeoma married and with two kids allowed Adaobi to squat with the family in the children’s room with the consent of her husband-Mr. Peter.

Chapter twelve

It was a cool evening in Mr. Peter's living-room. The style of furnishing was rather that of urban household. Ifeoma and her old friend Adaobi were having a deep conversation while the kids were playing the game of ludo. Mr. Peter had just returned from work with an unusually long face.

"Honey, you look very hungry, can I bring you food immediately?" Ifeoma asked. "No", Mr. Peter answered. Ifeoma was surprised. Her husband had never refused her food before! He was even a glutton who could gobble down within minutes a mountain of a very tasteless food.

"Honey, please, you have to eat something". Ifeoma persuaded further with pure concern.

"Go away, you ugly and rotten woman." He roared like one threatening fire, thunder and lightning. "And don't you ever let me see you again. You don't seem to know when one is not hungry, if you dare talk to me about food again, I will chop off your head and that of your useless children and give them to the dogs. I'm sure; they will like to eat them".

Ifeoma was perturbed at her husband's reaction. She became sad and left the living-room. Adaobi was very sad as she couldn't figure out why men sometimes could be as thoughtless as a lark, even with the over-abundance of love rained on them. The women were yet to understand what was going on. It all started this morning when Mr. Peter spotted a very pretty lady just opposite his own house. Was it love, infatuation, charm, or just mere lust that caused this? Or was it simply madness? One cannot say precisely what brought about

this incident on Mr. Peter, a mere factory worker with little educational background. It is no news that Ifeoma accepted his demand for marriage because he was generally acclaimed to be a disciplined, quiet and straightforward person. When Mr. Peter saw the lady, he was so overwhelmed by her extreme beauty and charisma that he stood like a statue in open-mouthed wonder at this very rare work of nature. Never in his life had he seen such a paragon of beauty! He sighed, smacked his lips and scratched his head, exclaiming: "My God! My God! You are indeed great! This is beauty! What an angel!" For fifteen complete minutes he gazed fixedly at this lady as she talked and gesticulated with some of her friends. Not until the lady stopped talking and left the spot did he regain consciousness. He had travelled far into "Fantasy Island." Not even his bosom friend, Akpos could draw his attention. Immediately, the lady disappeared he started making enquiries about her: her name, working place, if she really lived in the house; if she was married or not and many other petty things. His interest was surprising.

Akpos was so taken aback by his frenzied inquisitiveness about the lady that he joked: "Peter, Peter...my friend...how many times I call you...*Wetin dey do you self? You chop juju for this Lagos? Why you dey always dey fall my hand for women matter? You too like women. Because say, you see that Mami-water, you don forget say you get wife and two small pikin for house?*"

"*If I get wife for house nko?*" replied Mr. Peter. *You dis Akpos sef. You no know better thing sef. Chei! My beautiful...yellow pawpaw. I go die for you o! I go die for you. You hear, yellow pawpaw. I swear!*"

Thereafter, Akpos told him the little he knew about the lady. Her name was Mma. She was still unmarried and she lived exactly opposite Peter's house. She was very fond of friends and worked with a private company in Lagos. He learnt she loved dancing and good dancers too, particularly disco dancers, and

that she was a very sentimental person. Mr. Peter who is a very good disco dancer was happy with the piece of information.

That night, when Mr. Peter retired to bed he dreamt about Mma. He dreamt he and her went arm-in-arm to a night party, that they were welcomed well. And they had fun together under the envious eyes of people. He dreamt again that they went to watch an Indian film after which they decided to marry each other. The marriage ceremony was extraordinary, for in the dream, the king of the sea, the king of the sky, his queen, the owner of the land and all the eminent leaders of the terrestrial and extraterrestrial world graced the occasion. He even dreamt that, Goodluck Ebere Jonathan and Barack Obama were among the prominent leaders that graced the memorable marriage ceremony. In the dream, they pledged never to leave each other even after death.

Mr. Peter was very happy. It was a very rosy and sweet dream. When he woke up the following morning, he sat on his bed ruminating about what happened in the sleep. He was really surprised. He thought what he dreamt about Mma was real. He believed she must have had the same experience. Ifeoma could not understand the unusual smile on his face. Adaobi could not understand it too. What is happening? The women kept wondering. What did he see in his sleep? The women could not fathom. The following morning, after the sweet dream, when Mr. Peter left for his work, he was full of thoughts about Mma and the marriage. His co-workers wondered what could have put such a brilliant joy on his face that is usually as hard as steel. One of his friends came to him:

“Peter, you win promo? You dey surprise me o. This smile we dey your face too much for one person. Wetin dey tolori your face like this?” Mr. Jonah asked expecting an immediate answer, but he ignored him and was in high spirits

throughout the working hour. One could notice his unusual euphoria because of the smiles that brightened his brows every now and then.

That evening, a real conflict started when Mr. Peter came back from work. Immediately he saw Mma, his thoughts went into turmoil. He took a chair, sat down confidently and starred longingly at her. The gaze was somewhat fanatic and too sensuous. When she moved, he followed her and watched her every step. He watched her lips, her smiles, her backsides, and gesticulations, all these interested him. He was deeply infatuated by her beauty, lost in dreams but never summoning up the courage to speak to her for fear she might reject him or probably be annoyed by him.

Mma herself did not understand why Mr. Peter kept his eyes on her, and always gave her that long uninterrupted look. However; she was prepared to teach the old man a good lesson. Truly, she was an angel and a rare gem. She was tall and slim, not too slim though with a round and well-shaped forehead; moderate nose and a well-formed mouth. But her most notable feature was her eyes which were widely spaced, brilliant and of the deepest brown. She is light-skinned and possessed a very succulent body. Her lips were as fragrant and smooth as the softest floral. Her voice was as melodious as the sweetest opera singer. She always dressed elegantly. Truly, everything about her suggested moderation, beauty and excellence.

Mr. Peter was by now carried away by the violent tide of adoration. He fell in raptures if Mma ever smiled in his direction and was downcast if she failed to notice him. He was still basking in sweet thoughts about her when Ifeoma came to him and questioned:

“Honey, your son Uche was sent back from school today because of illness, you came back from work today and you didn’t even care to ask?” Mr. Peter became very angry at the words of his wife. She did not know she had troubled a sleeping dog. He burst out in annoyance: “May *Amadioha* pluck out your eyes

Ifeoma and *Sango*, the Yoruba god of lightning strike you dead for disturbing my peace this afternoon! You've been too troublesome for me to handle these days. I'm fed up with you. Pack your load and leave my house immediately, before I open my closed eyes. Before, I come inside there and find you in my house with those two devils you call your children and commit murder with my cutlass!"

Ifeoma at first thought her husband was not serious about the matter, but at the mention of committing murder she became very afraid. She knew Satan had a hand in the matter. She started trembling and went inside in tears and started packing all their belonging. She had been a very loving and understanding wife. They had been together while they were both very young. She was a courteous and sympathetic woman who had helped her husband a lot, financially and morally. To Ifeoma, her husband was not a poor man. She believed he could still be rich. She believed that with the little money her husband earned they could still keep body and soul together. She never grumbled. She took things lightly and was full of optimism for a better tomorrow. But what her husband did to her was the greatest shock of her life. Her two sons, Uche and Ikechukwu cried continuously as their mother packed all her belongings and was about leaving the house. Mr. Peter was adamant to the pleadings of Adaobi. He did not show the least concern as Adaobi begged in tears. Adaobi, who had been sick over the agonizing and very painful experience of her friend, looked thin and gaunt. She looked like someone who needed to spend a fortune on a myriad of health problems.

"Oh death, come and snatch me away from this debilitating and consuming pains!" The pregnant young woman prayed in her heart as Mr. Peter continued gazing hopefully in a prayerful manner at Mma who was having a conversation in front of their house.

As the ugly drama was playing out, Akpos, Mr. Peter's bosom friend was also having a hard time at his home almost at the same time.

"Why are you leaving me Iyabo?" Akpos asked in tears. He moved closer to his wife and tried fruitlessly to change her mind.

"Leave my bag and let me go! I can't die in poverty!" The woman replied adamantly as she headed for the door.

"Mummy, please don't go now..." Her three children uttered in unison, with tears streaming down their skeletal brows.

"Don't leave Papa in this condition...your presence gives him strength and joy..." The eldest child begged, mopping his face with the tip of his ragged and torn shirt.

That Wednesday morning, Akpos watched helplessly as his wife packed her belongings and left for an unknown destination. Akpos was a cheap Laborer working as a digger in Pammaz Construction Company, Lagos. He could be called "Mr. Poverty" if ever there were such a title. He was so poor that one could say that church rats were richer than him. He had only a tattered shirt and trouser. He lived in a very poor hotel in a notorious slum. He oozed poverty. His dilapidated room lacked all the little things that put smiles on the faces of people-radio, television set, refrigerator etc. He was so poor that he couldn't afford a single chair in his room. His three children and his wife always sat on a torn mat whenever they had the opportunity of drinking *garri* and groundnuts.

His take home pay was nothing to write home about. Before he collected his paltry wages, he had already borrowed money far above it from kind-hearted neighbours. At the last count, he owed only Mr. Peter the sum of thirty thousand naira. So the next thing he did when he collected his peanuts was to settle his debts leaving him with nothing at the end of the day. He even owed

his Landlord two years' rent. And the Man had threatened to throw him out in three weeks time. Akpos stood at about 5ft tall, was dark-skinned and round-faced. The three children he had through his estranged wife were two girls and a boy. Despite his problems and travails, he had a faint courage in his heart that there was a flickering light at the end of the dark tunnel. His late parents had no money to send him to secondary school. That was the main reason he resigned himself to fate and became a cheap laborer, saying what he couldn't get with his brain he would get with his brawn. All the same, he eked out a living with his strength. The life of a digger is tough and difficult. It takes more than guts to be a digger because the digging tool is not friendly at all.

Most times when working on a site, he never forgot to take along his Bible. When he had worked for many hours and felt like resting, he would find a quiet place, lie down and read his Bible, praying to Almighty God to change his fortune and destiny for good. He wasn't so educated but he could read his bible without anybody's assistance. He attended the primary school. He was about entering the secondary school when his parents died of food poisoning and he was left alone to face the challenges of life.

Before Akpos got the casual job as a digger in Pammaz Company, he had worked with almost five different companies, doing menial jobs. They always sacked him mainly for the reason of reading Bible at work, which had never changed his love for the Holy Book. At present, a fat and tall Asian supervisor had threatened to sack him if he should ever leave his duty post to read Bible again. This actually left a gaping hole in his heart but whenever he picked the Bible to read, his troubled soul was always at a mysterious peace and he was ready to sacrifice anything to preserve it. In the past, his wife had tried in vain to convince him to always keep his precious Book at home when going to work but failed abysmally. At times; tears would stream down his face when he read some powerful psalms. He wouldn't know when he would doze off into the

comfort of dreams. The dewy hands of sleep would take him away temporarily from the painful, hard and harsh realities of life.

As Akpos was about going out, his eldest child Chijioke was also preparing to go to school, along with the young ones. Chijioke asked: “Now that Mummy has left us, how do we go on? You know that she always supports you!”

Akpos was startled, confused and dumbfounded on hearing the question his eldest child threw at him.

“Em...em...em...I just don’t know what to do now Chijioke.” He said as he fought back the tears streaming from his swollen eyes. “I will go and see my friend Peter immediately. He may lend me some money for a petty business”. He left his children and trudged up the road laden with hunger and sorrow for the next fifty minutes. .Coincidentally, he arrived at the height of Mr. Peter’s madness. He was shocked at the unfolding drama in front of him.

“Peter! Peter!!” He shouted. “What is happening to you? Where do you want Ifeoma to go with the children and her belongings? My wife just left me this morning because she is fed up with poverty. You should be grateful to have such a good wife. What is her fault?”

“Don’t ask me, Akpos, let her go”, he answered. That crazy woman must go for God’s sake. She’s giving me headache”, he retorted. “*Ah...My yellow pawpaw*, I will do anything to have you as my wife. You are the only true woman in this world. Oh...I love you. I swear that I will save every kobo I have to get you my *yellow pawpaw!*” Akpos was convinced that he had gone out of his mind. He simply went and took back Ifeoma’s belongings into the house. Mr. Peter left them and went into the parlour and started writing poem after poem about Mma. In these highly romantic poems, Mma appeared as the goddess of love; the embodiment of grace and beauty. She rode a dazzling white horse over flowing meadows, her honey-coloured hair flowing in the wind, a gold-

coloured mantle falling to her feet in majestic elegance. The skies sang, the moon bowed, the oceans sighed, the sun danced and joy accompanied her beautiful body everywhere. Mr. Peter was so infatuated with her that he lost his sense of reality and was dangerously compromised in his dreams even though he never spoke to her, never made any moves towards her, yet he believed she was aware of his most intimate thoughts. He had convinced himself that he would meet her soon and everything would become clear without a single word being exchanged between them. He was quite sure that she knew what he was thinking and shared his immense enthusiasm for the ideas he expressed.

When Akpos had been able to calm down Ifeoma, Adaobi and the children, he came to Mr. Peter and interrupted his romantic line of thoughts. "It is quite possible Mma is not the least concerned about your mad ideas or thoughts, because you have not even spoken to her about them!" Mr. Peter became furious and screamed: "You are very stupid! How could you say such a thing? You understand nothing! You have not the slightest comprehension of what is called extraordinary love!" Akpos was confused and questioned whether it was possible to communicate complicated ideas to a girl by merely exchanging long glances and uninterrupted stares.

"Let me teach you something Akpos. You see, I am the best teacher of love in the world. I am the Maradona of love. It is possible, Akpos. No one can explain these things. All that is in me is also in Mma. Exceptional people understand one another by intuition. There is absolutely no need for the usual form of spoken communication when two exceptional beings are in love. Today, Mma, I repeat, today, I will meet you and then we can recount all that we have shared together in our love experiences". He taught with authority.

Mr. Peter was very determined to confront Mma and then make his feelings known. She was at the centre of all his hopes, his ideas, and his thoughts and within the structure of his fantasies she reigned supreme. If she smiled, it

meant she approved of what he was doing and of his very existence, and if she failed to see him, preferring to look in the eyes of another young man living in her house, he believed what she was saying to the guy was: “You have done wrong and must be punished. I have my own secret lover, who is looking at me and watching everything I do and every movement I make.

As Mr. Peter’s dreams and fantasies with his invisible seraph increased, he summoned courage to meet her. He left Akpos, who had been standing hands akimbo watching him from his room. He carefully looked himself in the mirror, studying how handsome he was in the eyes of his love. Though, he wasn’t very handsome, he believed he was extraordinarily and perfectly handsome. He changed his outdated and already worn-out clothes, changed his aged oblong shoes because that shoe was a sore sight. Completely transformed from his erstwhile clownish and poverty-stricken funny attire, he started contriving plans to “hook her”, but truly, he was not handsome at all. He had a bump protruding on his forehead and a wide mouth. He was short with a rather big head and fleshy lips that obstructed his rather thick tongue, and a scrubby nose at the top. But he was confident and determined to woo her because they had been married in his dreams, gone to places and shared love experiences through long glances.

“Please, Peter run away from that Mammy-water...but instead think about Ifeoma and your children!” Akpos tried to persuade. Mr. Peter hushed him instantly: “You want me to forget about my life? I’m sorry; you don’t know how much she means to me.” He could not bear it any longer; he left for the mirror and combed his hair. He was certain that he had changed into a complete lover boy now. He left the room while Akpos continued to watch the funny movie of the century. Mr. Peter stood in front of his house, inserted a disco rhythm and blues CD into his music player and started shaking and twisting his waist seductively to impress Mma who was standing opposite the house. Ifeoma came out only to see the strange creature dancing. She could

hardly recognize her husband in his new attire and romantic dancing steps. Even Uche and Ikechukwu could not have believed that their father was such a good dancer. What of Adaobi? The house is crazier today. In fact, if anyone thinks he is crazy, let him come here now. He will see someone crazier than he is. The house will thrill you and if you are not careful, the house will kill and bury you with laughter. If you think, you are a dance star; I invite you to meet the new super star in town. If you think you are handsome, your handsomeness will turn to ashes with Mr. Peter in his perfection of beauty now. Mr. Peter had been doing the romantic dance of all ages for about fifteen minutes now. He was very happy, not even noticing his wife, children, Akpos and Adaobi. Akpos thought he was mad and admonished: "Peter, why are you making a fool of yourself? You won't get her, you are a joker."

"*Sharrap!* You jealous little brat! Don't you know she has fallen for me already? You will see what happens next! Heaven knows that she has fallen already!"

Being enthralled in sublime ecstasy, he left Akpos immediately and headed for Mma's direction who, all the while Mr. Peter had been dancing, was actually having a conversation outside her house with a friend. Her friend, who had just returned from USA, visited to share her experiences especially that of the Nigerian Airport. When she landed at the Murtala Muhammed international airport, the signs of hell were visible everywhere. First, the lift and the escalator were both not functioning. Passengers with heavy hand luggage had to either carry them on their heads or dragged them through the narrow staircase to the ground floor. The arriving hall had no working air conditioner. Those of them coming from the freezing weather in New York with over coats on had to strip themselves virtually bare, because the whole place had turned into a steamy oven. The lights in the airport, unlike those at J.F. Kennedy's Airport were very dull. She could hardly see her feet. And it took her two hours of baking in the suffocating hall before she retrieved her luggage. Mma, who

had been listening with rapt attention contributed rather reluctantly: “I hope that the government will do something about the aviation sector. The stories are always the same; a rehearsal of hell. I must be on my way now for the shopping at Shoprite. I will visit you in the evening to collect my gifts”.

Mr. Peter moved delicately towards her in well-rehearsed steps. He started memorizing some sweet words he would tell her on getting nearer to her. Mma was startled on seeing him coming her way. She composed herself, waiting for what would happen. When he moved closer, he cleared his frog-like throat and began: “You see, darling, I know all you are thinking. I know how much you love me; there is no need to talk too much. I’m just requesting that you come with me. You are the sugar in my tea, the rose of my heart, the moon of my night, sun of my day and the one that makes me truly happy. Because of you, I have not taken food for three days from my stupid wife. I’m prepared to send her away. You are truly my missing rib. I love you with everything in me. In heaven, on earth and under the earth, you are the only reality I have. Only you exist; everything else is dead. My darling, my love...will you come with me now?”

Mma was disturbed and confused. Her amazement gave way to anger because of the manner he addressed her. She thundered: “Are you normal at all, *Mister Man*? I think you should better go to a psychiatric hospital to seek a cure for your mental disease. Who do you think I am? A Lagos prostitute? If you don’t leave me alone and leave here, I will deal with you! Darling! *Darling ko, darling ni*, you have not seen your darling and the sugar in your tea! Keep fooling around, stupid old man, instead of taking care of your wife and children”.

Mr. Peter was shocked. “Ah...! Ah...! But darling, why are you treating me so? What have I done wrong? Is it a crime to love such an angel like you?” he asked.

“I repeat...leave me alone, you shameless and senseless man!” She snapped.

“Did you call me a shameless and senseless man?” But...we are married, isn't it?” Mma gave him a pitiable gaze and left while giving more attention to her cat-like steps to mesmerize. His eyes turned red instantly and his face became pale in the face of the insult. He was shocked, surprised, dejected and disillusioned, nay really embarrassed. Instantly, he started sweating profusely and couldn't believe his eyes and ears. Then, it dawned on him that all these days, he had been in a dream world.

“Didn't I tell you not to go? Didn't I tell you to think instead about your beloved wife and forget that beauty queen? See...how you made a fool of yourself in the presence of your wife and her friend and your little children? I hope, you will learn from this experience. I will be on my way now. I will see you tomorrow.” Akpos advised hiding his joy.

Chapter thirteen

The morning was beautiful, lovely and sweet. The leaves and flowers around Papa Adaobi's house were having a gentle dance, twisting and swaying graciously to the tune of the breeze as Obinna entered into his Prado Jeep. It is the kind of morning lovers would like to stroll together. His father had sent him away and he was filled with thoughts about where to go when his phone rang. It was his bosom friend, Emeka, the young man that Cobra nearly killed two months ago at the beautiful Lekki Beach. To his surprise, the Jeep refused to come alive. Without much ado, he decided to leave his *mobile house* behind in order to feel the raw flavour of the Lagos roads which he had missed greatly over the years. He knew this journey should take half an hour but due to the constant gridlock experience, he prepared his mind for two or more hours. And he knew that he would be hardly disappointed.

His journey started mainly at a terminus in Idumota. It was 7 O'clock and the entire area was full of activities of people trying to locate the particular "*Molue*" that will take them to their destinations. He selected the "*Molue*" when the conductor shouting at the top of his voice, calling names of various destinations mentioned "Ketu-Ojota". The driver had a good knowledge of the city roads; he was now competing with so many other vehicles on the dual carriageway as he wove through traffic. Now, that the bus was on the move, he was experiencing the spices and flavour of living in a big city like Lagos. There was indeed a peculiar flavour with Lagos. The passengers were sharing in animated conversation about the latest happenings in the country's politics and

social life. One could easily notice Jonathan's apologists and the firm believers of the Buhari's change mantra.

The entire place had turned to a rendezvous of sorts as some of those standing found their trip turning to an ordeal, with male and female standing closely and intimately while the bumping ride continued to rub one passenger's body part against that of another.

"I beg! Make everybody listen to wetin, I wan talk. I wan collect money now now. Make person no find my trouble, because I get plenty trouble, make una just corporate fast fast".

Musa the serious-looking conductor announced from where he was hanging by the entrance. Musa had filled up the bus. Even after the seats, were taken, the aisle between the rows of seats were also occupied by standing passengers. Now, there was no place left for one to turn. He had commenced his ever-difficult task of collecting fees from the noisy passengers. There was no time to entertain any squabbles. It was either the person paid or the "Molue" would stop immediately and the culprit told to alight.

"Owa"! "Owa"! "Owa"! Musa screamed as he hit his hand on the bus. He had just alerted the driver of those wishing to disembark while at the same time; being on the lookout for others desiring to board the vehicle. Although, there were designated places for all commercial vehicles to stop, the "Molue" could stop, anywhere at any time to either pick or drop passengers. The bus had now come to the final bus stop uptown in a small suburb of Lagos, where the majority of passengers are getting off. Obinna who was now exhausted by the bus' characteristic mode of operation and the cacophonous noise being generated from discussions bordering mostly on history, sports and government alighted from the bus. That he really had a good time was evidenced by the over-flowing smile on his face. At least, he had suddenly learnt that when it comes to discourses on sports especially the game of football, most Nigerians appeared to possess an expert knowledge of the

coaching job. The “*Molue*” was now about to make a return trip to the bus park where it came from.

He had been cutting slow steps for the past ten minutes. The house was that of a very wealthy man. To be precise, he was a mega-rich businessman who had visited many parts of the world. The atmosphere was highly tensed up. Emeka was happy at his arrival but Obinna could see immediately that he was looking like one condemned to be executed. In fact, he was perplexed to see his once robust friend who often took him on beer-drinking spree with *amara* partially paralyzed after being hit by a mysterious and devastating stroke, just three weeks after the assault at the beach.

“Audu! Get the key of the car. We have to leave immediately. The pain seething inside of me is too much. My long-standing friend will accompany me for this all-important journey. You will take us to Oshodi to see *Jagajabu*, the great medicine man. You must not tell anybody about this!” Emeka warned in a weak and distorted voice.

“Oga, I don collect the key since...since. I no go tell anybody. I no be mumu. I get sense well well!”

Audu responded with a tremble. He was scared by the fire emitting from his Boss’s eyes which always tintured his heart. He had tried in vain to work on his self to gain mastery over this unnecessary fear but all had proved abortive. This had made him give up the struggle. Mingling raw strength and goodwill, Emeka was carried into his 2015 Honda Pilot. Sadness was beautifully inscribed on the face of everyone in flawless cursive. Musa turned the ignition on and in a matter of seconds the engine blossomed a great deal. The car was now running on a good speed.

“Why are we running from pillar to post trying to solve the fiddle behind this strange sickness? I prefer you spend your money medically in the country

or even outside the country. I don't trust those soothsayers and medicine men. They always take advantage of people's health problems to milk them dry". He spoke with a shy and throaty whisper while sprawling on the backseat.

"My good friend, you don't understand. I will explain. The mouth and the nose are too close to be enemies. Thinking I will die, as a last resort, I have decided to make this journey. But I am not afraid; the physical combat between the bear and the tiger is not a threat to a lion's kingship. We are going to see the great medicine man who did the money-making ritual for me many years ago. It has been long since we saw each other. You spoke about orthodox medication. I have already spent millions of naira yet the illness is getting worse by the second." He snapped in agony.

"Money-making ritual?" Obinna asked like a virgin about to be deflowered.

"Yes, that was the reason why my wealth grew at an amazing pace. That is the secret why my garage was filled with very expensive and sophisticated cars worth several millions of dollars. And as you know, I have many grand mansions all over the world. That is the reason; I have no wife... That is the reason I'm not yet married to Veronica your cousin. And that reminds me...Veronica left my house this morning immediately I called you to come over. She gave the reason that, you did something really terrible to her. She wouldn't like to set her eyes on you again and she never told me the...." He stopped abruptly. The car had screeched to a stop. They had reached their destination and the car was stopped a few yards from the shrine. Musa alighted and hurried towards the doors and flung them open. With the combined effort of Obinna and the driver, Emeka was carried to the shrine like a pack of cards. Audu was dismissed with a crispy one thousand naira note and instructed to go and guard the car by Obinna. He was very excited to receive the gift as he readily stampeded the spendthrift guy with a litany of praises.

Emeka prostrated on the ground and began begging the powerful spiritualist for a final solution to his health problem:

“All hail Jagajabu, the master of magic and fetish concoctions. You are the greatest guru and perfect master of occult mysteries. You are the only living grand master of the order of Astral and Terrestrial Hierarchy. You are the matchless defender of the ancient order of Lord Yima of Persia. First leader of the COMANS order of Nigeria, fellowship of the International Society Patanjali Yaoga of India. You are the curator of the White Eagle Ashrama of Tibet and Legate of the Great Brotherhood of Tibet. You are the expected Messiah and the worshipful master and Grand man in every plan, region and zone of the occult kingdoms. I desperately need your help!”

“What is it my son, tell me quickly?” Jagajabu replied and added, “The gods are not asleep, and they can hear you. Speak! The trees understand the language of the birds, likewise the ocean and rivers understand the language of the fishes! Speak!” Emeka cleared his throat and began: “I’ve been nursing this painful and debilitating stroke for the past three weeks and I’m afraid it could take my life. Please, I don’t want to die. Rescue me from this daily torture, pains and the ghost of death. I beg you in the name of our ancestors! The sickness came the following week after I slept with my beautiful housemaid. What should I do to stop the health problem and be healed totally?”

Jagajabu instantly stood up, took a long black rod, waived it seven times and chanted: “Ozabadi! Ozabadi! Ozabadi! The god of ancient magic, this job is for you. My son ...you have slept with Sandra, the queen and angel of death! Unless you pay the sum of ten million naira for this ritual, you will surely die very soon. Ozabadi, the god of ancient magic, come and rescue your son...”

“No amount is too big to pay for one’s life. I will get across the money tomorrow.” Obinna philosophized.

“You have spoken well my son...I will start the preparation of the most powerful magical concoctions for you immediately I see the money. The ball is on your court now.” Jagajabu advised while staring at a black wooden statue placed on a white cloth in his front.

“Thank you very much Jagajabu, I know there’s virtually nothing you can’t do. You will definitely get the money tomorrow. Thanks a lot!” Emeka concluded with a forced smile and turned to Obinna who had been busy quaffing a bottle of champagne. “Guy, we can begin to go home now. Please, call Audu”.

The streets were magically enchanting as they welcomed the mobile house running as a cheetah on the busy road. There were street lights and lights flashed from billboards displaying fat faces of politicians and celebrities. Noisy Yoruba cheerful music sounded from shops and restaurants. Obinna was still lost in thought. He was yet to understand why his friend had decided to take the extreme path for the sake of money. He could have done better to join his gang. Maybe, his love for women may have contributed to his choice of joining a deadly cult.

The truth is that Emeka could spend all his money on a woman he so desired. His insatiable appetite for anything in skirts was legendary and shocking. If there were a competition or contest for the man who had slept with the most number of women, he would surely win unopposed. His name could enter the Guinness book of Records as the world’s most sex-hungry man of all time. You would wonder why he had this crazy penchant to sleep with women the world over. The reason isn’t far-fetched. The juju or voodoo he did many years ago was that the more he slept with women, the more money that would come his way.

But there was a day, he would never forget in his life. He had just returned from a month's holiday in France and was richer with millions of new currency. He thought of sleeping with a teenager as his next victim. He knew how to lure and seduce any daughter of Eve. Money was his bait in this ungodly adventure and no woman had ever escaped from his deadly hook. After an affair, he would undergo a certain money-making ritual and the woman would start getting thin and gaunt, as if she had been infected with a deadly disease. The more the woman got thinner, the more money the affluent guy would have on a daily basis. Then within one year, the unfortunate lady would die suddenly, but the he would get richer and richer.

That fateful day, he started eyeing his new housemaid; Sandra was a very beautiful and charming young lady. Her enchanting and voluptuous carriage could turn a saint into a sinner in seconds. She had a seductive physique that could make any man swoon and beg for love. When he set his eyes on her, he was head-over-heels in lust. He wanted to have her there and then. He admired her from head to toe and called her instantly into his expansive living room to have a chat with her. Pronto, Sandra was there and the he began his lecherous moves to woo the delectable housemaid who was in her late teens.

"Hey, Sandra, from today onward, you cease to be a housemaid. Your beauty is out of the world. You are a queen and the goddess of beauty!" he said enthusiastically. "Take, this is the sum of two million naira. It's all yours. You cease to be a housemaid from today, but on one condition. And that is..."

"Sir, that's just no problem so far you will make me rich. I will give you my body and soul. I promise, to make you happy," Sandra replied in a most alluring way, shaking her backside in the process.

The ethereal beauty and charm of the angel of death had captured and imprisoned the wayward young man. He stood up when he couldn't control his

libido again, and said in a most sexy and lascivious style: “Please, let’s go inside my bedroom immediately. Oh...lala. Oh...lala...my gosh! I can’t resist your celestial beauty and charm again...” He cooed gently. The eagle-eyed dog was very happy after the two hours of frenzied life in his cosy bedroom. He thought that she would go the same way like hundreds of women he had played with. He handed her money instantly but he didn’t know that he had bitten more than he could chew and swallow. The fact was that she was a very powerful queen of the extra-terrestrial world whose main duty was to kill any man who slept with her through her metaphysical powers.

“I had earlier thought of asking you about Sandra, where is she? Obinna asked as he was now coming back from the inexhaustible warehouse of the day’s surprises.

“Well...well...she disappeared from the house and nobody has seen her around the area again. Forget about that evil omen. After the monkey has eaten the banana given to him by his owner, he decided to challenge his owner for a wrestling contest. You heard me promise Jagajabu the sum of ten million naira. You got to go to bank tomorrow morning to help out on that. Delay could be dangerous, you know. I hope that I wouldn’t get broke and penniless over this sickness like an accursed pauper. I’m afraid; I am realizing the meaning of life without a wife and children. You see that my palatial mansion is already looking like a ragged and decrepit abode for mad people. The house is fast becoming a shadow of its former structure. In truth, sowing good seeds should be the watchword for every human being so that one can live a peaceful life bereft of heartaches and sadness”. He pontificated with a heart filled with grief.

“What are friends for? You can count on me but I still have problem with the ten million naira. That is really a whopping amount of money. I just want to believe that you have found the solution to this terrible state health. I hope the help will come real quick, so that it doesn’t get to the point where you find it

difficult to breathe. However, I would like to use one of your cars tomorrow for the bank transaction. I have really developed a serious fear for that death trap called commercial buses in this city. They really killed me this morning.” Obinna spoke with a gust of laughter.

“Oh...that wouldn’t be any problem. Thank you for your concern and goodwill”. Obinna snapped.

“You are welcome...don’t mention.” Guy...what do we eat for supper? I got to go out now and buy some good stuff from shoprite.” He capped up the conversation with a blissful smile as he headed for a bottle of brandy on the table.

The following morning, Obinna paid a whopping sum of seven million naira into the spiritualist’s bank account and fraudulently embezzled the rest. He had yet to learn the wisdom of avoiding the temptation of stealing from the wrong people despite his years of experience in the crime world. He never foresaw the implication of this criminal act as Jagajabu felt disappointed and vowed to revenge the insult. Nobody had ever toyed with him and gone scot-free

Emeka was still full of hope thinking that he had found the solution to his terrible state of health. He expected a call from his master in the occult world but it never came. Within a space of two days, his health condition had degenerated to the extent that he couldn’t go out again. The excruciating pains were all over him. It got to a state that he couldn’t sleep all day and at night. A week later after the visit to the spiritualist, he died a painful death in his palatial mansion like an accused pauper.

Chapter fourteen

It was a chilly morning. Okunade had grown considerably thinner and more unkempt. He had been cut to size by the spell of Toun who had proven to be a first-class scoundrel. Something spectacular happened yesterday that changed his charmed mindset. He had gone to a popular eatery for lunch where he finished eating and was about leaving when, he suddenly saw Toun giggling heartily and hugging a pot-bellied, bald-headed elderly man standing beside a Mercedes Benz Jeep. From all indications, it showed clearly that the elderly man was her *Sugar daddy*. That very morning before he left for office she had told him she wanted to visit her mother who lives in Ogun State and that she would be back in three days time. For a long period of time he was transfixed on the same spot and was sweating like a young first offender jailed for life. His mouth was agape with shock and bewilderment nay complete sadness. He wanted to cry, but something far greater than him withheld the tears. He started shaking while moving towards her, as she was still enjoying herself with the pot-bellied man.

“Toun! Toun! Toun! Is this true? He screamed.”

“Er...er... what’s the matter? *Any problem young man?*” Toun said, sounding as if she had never seen him in her entire life.

“Who is that young man, Toun?” The elderly man asked.

“I don’t know him. He looks like someone out of his mind.” She spoke while chewing bubble gum in a carefree manner. At that very moment the veil of charm covering Okunade’s eyes suddenly cleared, making him realize the true

situation of things for the past few weeks. He knew he had been charmed. The first thought that came to his mind was Adaobi.

“Adaobi...what’s happening?” He whispered to himself. Where could she be at this moment?” He asked again. He entered into his car and drove back to his house. He was indeed very lucky to have survived having a fatal accident owing to the absent-mindedness he suffered on the wheels. Sprawled on the floor of his luxurious parlour, he tried to remember all important events that had taken place in recent time. He could remember that he beat Adaobi and drove her out of his flat. He wondered how he met Toun. It must be through my parents who wanted me to marry a Yoruba by all means. “What kind of a bad dream is this?” He thought. How could I do this to her? A lady who was disowned by her parents simply because she was dating me; he reasoned as tears gathered in his eyes which he cleared with his right hand.

The love that existed between him and Adaobi was deep. The love was beyond tribal or cultural boundaries. Throughout that day, he couldn’t eat. The following day when he got to the office he couldn’t concentrate on anything. His colleagues in the office knew something was wrong with him, but he didn’t disclose it. He was just brooding and moody. The third day, he still could not do anything at home, he was in deep melancholy.

Desmond, Okunade’s bosom friend paid a sudden visit at home while he was in the parlour visibly battling not to explode. Desmond was clean shaven but for a neat moustache and wore a very neat and expensive looking black suit. His coming paunch and well-groomed face advertised him as a prosperous young man in his white semi-stiff collar. While the suit emphasized this impression, he had a smile, then a smirk on his well-groomed face. The signs were ominous, for he gave the appearance of annoyance, disappointment, satisfaction and arrogance all at the same time.

“To what do I owe this honour? You are welcome Desmond. What do I offer you?” Okunade rose with pain and went to have a handshake.

“I decided to visit today.” Desmond said while going to take a seat and continued: “Because your looks at the office yesterday were nothing to write home about. I have never seen you in such a debacle before. This looks confusing to me. You got to open up, because you need help. You got to tell me what’s eating you up! What’s smoldering your heart? What has reduced you to ruin? I am here to help you...whatever the matter is...I would like to know what is scattering your once blissful life into potshards...” Desmond concluded with the voice of one sucked and withered by the wind of affliction.

“Thank you for your concern. You have a way with words. Your words are like the talons of a hawk clawing on my breast. You just pierced my ears. I have already started pulling out the smoldering logs and extinguishing the fire. I am not yet defeated. Life recently displayed an insufferable drama of absurdity. But I will soon pull through! Permit me to plead against your request. For some reasons, I would like to keep the matter under the carpet for the time being. I plead for your understanding; but it’s the logic of extreme times. I must confess that I’m broken. I will be fine. The deer must defy all odds and seize the gun from the hunter! The cows must take over the narration of their own story. History will teach us. I hope that we will learn. The heralds of horror and death came with flaming brands in their talons and displaced us. But they shall be defeated. I pray that they do not suffer the indignity of unremembered graves for forcing their uncommon merchandise on me! I keep asking myself. Ah...am...I the one sprawled on the ground like this? In the dust like a common mongrel!!! But what’s the use of getting up? To go where? Or to achieve what purpose? When fate has decided to strike you down what amount of worry can help? Is there really no armour against fate? But nature is weak and my tears pour out nevertheless. Can one ever be strong enough against misfortune? In spite of our courage, disaster drains us....” Okunade stopped to

regain himself as his eyes had grown wearier with tears trying to force the gateway open.

When Okunade got to his parent's house about four hours later, he opened up his repressed emotions. He felt so bad to have injured the real love of his life.

"Mum, Dad," he said. "I really can't understand how the girl you brought to my house that day became my live-in-lover. It's a mystery to me! Why I am here is to let you know that I caught the said girl red-handed with a *Sugar daddy*. She is a harlot of the highest order. Adaobi is gone and I don't know her whereabouts. I wouldn't allow that harlot reduce me to ruin. This will not be the final word in the dirge. Now I believe that insanity is the drug of misery. I keep wondering, why you people prefer that harlot that stinks in her underwear to a descent girl like Adaobi?"

"Go on with your talk," his Dad pleaded.

"We never knew that Toun could be that bad and irresponsible, that is a most horrible and detestable thing for her to do", his mother interjected and continued: "If we had known her to be so bad and wayward we wouldn't have forced her on you. It was a mistake on our part. It is our culture and tradition that our children marry from our tribe. We are so sorry. So, what are you going to do now? You said you can't find her, and you once mentioned that she's pregnant...hmm...I pray nothing bad happens to her. If you can find her we will welcome her back with our whole heart. We've learnt our lessons. Sorry, Okunade...my son...you look so bad, depressed and worried."

"Don't be annoyed with us, Okunade," his Dad chipped in. "We are not God and so we are not perfect. You will marry your heart's desire. If bitter kola was not bitter, it would not produce its desired result. But...where shall we see her now? Please...my son...we will be on the look-out for her and if you see

her...tell her that we are in support of the relationship. It is all over now. We will go and see her parents and do the necessary things as their custom demands”.

Okunade, all this while was just shaking his head in agony. He was at a loss because he didn't know what to do. Then, he thought of going to Adaobi's parents to beg them for the hand of Adaobi in marriage. He reasoned that Adaobi must be at home with her parents. That was a grievous mistake on his part. The kind of anger shown by Adaobi's parents is better imagined than described.

“Where did you put our daughter?” Papa Adaobi asked in fiery anger. “We heard she's been with you for the past three months since we drove her out and disowned her for loving you! May *Amadioha* strike you dead! You must have used my daughter for money-making ritual, you wicked soul!” He screamed and started pacing nervously. “*Mr. Lover-boy*, listen to me: When the evil-plotter beats his drum for the downfall of the innocent, the gods will not let the drum sound!” He maintained philosophically.

“Wait sir; let me explain,” Okunade begged, “Sincerely I don't know her whereabouts.”

“God! Hear what he's saying? Mama Adaobi interjected with a raucous voice, “If you really knew me...you wouldn't have come to show your maggot-ridden face. You will learn a good lesson today; I will soak you with the trouble you brewed.”

“Please...let us stop heating up an already...” Okunade said whimpering with fright.

“Shut up”! Mama Adaobi thundered “You murderer! You have the mouth to talk! You must...” She was interrupted by her younger sister Linda who had been cooking in the kitchen. She had been listening keenly to the hot words of

her sister. She was clad in a wrapper, with a veil fluffing loosely about her shoulders while holding a porcelain dish and a napkin with which she had obviously been wiping the dish.

“What galls me most is wasting time like that!” Linda who looked disconsolated started speaking. “We should be more concerned with how to find her. Trading blames cannot help the serious matter at hand. I simply cannot concentrate on cooking any longer, hence I came out”. Mama Adaobi gave Linda, a long stare full of contempt, then turned and left for her room while Papa Adaobi followed her behind.

“Please...Okunade, do not be perplexed. I know my elder sister, she is such a headache”. Linda spoke to Okunade while momentarily recovering control. “Thank you for your concern. I really appreciate it”. Okunade spoke forcing a smile.

Mama Adaobi stormed out, wearing a tight jean trouser and shirt. She grabbed Okunade by his shirt and started dragging him to the police station very close to her house. Okunade knew the logic of defeat that when one is defeated by an enemy he should expect the worst. He knew it was a waste of time trying to convince them, because they did not have any respect for reason. He offered to follow them to the police station, but it didn't stop Mama Adaobi from dragging him about in the street like a condemned criminal.

“Please...Mama Adaobi...Stop dragging him about! It is disgracing. He has accepted to follow you, stop misinterpreting his quietness for foolishness. He is innocent of all this!” Linda intervened amid tears.

“Go back to the kitchen Linda. Although, I know ... you are a bad cook. I hold a cup in my hand, full of wine, foaming and spiced. He must drink it to the dregs. He must drain it”. She rebuked with pride.

Linda went back to the kitchen while Papa Adaobi followed his wife behind as she drags Okunade to the police station.

At the police station; Mama Adaobi was just sighing repeatedly with these words on her lips. *“Please, help us o, please, help us o, our daughter is missing after spending weeks with her boyfriend!”*

“Take it easy, Madam”, The Inspector in-charge of the case said to her, “We’ll get to the root of the matter, we are on top of the situation.”

Papa Adaobi instantly gave the Inspector the sum of five thousand naira and leveled a false accusation against the ill-fated young man, saying that he had used his daughter for money-making ritual. He was shocked when he was remanded in prison custody immediately. He broke down and wept, but the police officers further harassed and put him behind bars even while he cried that he was unjustly treated, begging them for leniency.

Two days later. Okunade’s parents heard that their son was in a police cell. They were very worried and quickly made efforts to bail him out. He had been so beaten and assaulted by the inmates of the cell that one could hardly recognise him with a swollen nose and bleeding mouth.

“You see, Okunade, what we always tell you, this Igbo people are hard nuts to crack. Their culture is too receptive to change, individualistic and highly competitive. I do not understand this kind of creatures, fearing neither God nor man. I hate their hubris, over-whelming pride and thoughtlessness, which invites envy and hatred; or even worse, which can obsess the mind with material success and dispose it to all kinds of crude showiness”. She spoke visibly worried.

“My wife, you are right. There is no doubt at all that there is a strand in contemporary Igbo behavior which can offend by its noisy exhibitionism and disregard for humility and quietness. I was at the Ikeja Airport on one of those

days when all flights were delayed or cancelled for lack of aviation fuel about two weeks ago. And I tell you, when you hear a man's voice high over a subdued and despondent multitude the chances are that he will be an Igbo who *"has made it"* and is desperate to be noticed and admired. And another trouble with the Igbo people is clannishness. They are always unduly favouring their kindred and running to their defense at all times. Okunade, you see how they have dealt with you. I told you but you wouldn't listen to me!" He admonished.

"Its one of those things, Dad" Okunade replied, "I have to see Adaobi quickly. I don't mind losing my life in the process. She's all I want in life."

"What's wrong with you? It's high time, you stopped this nonsense. You are still talking about Adaobi. Look at the mess you have found yourself in just because of a girl. You have not learnt your lessons." Okunade's Dad spoke while his wife watched with obvious emotional support, which could be seen from the thick layer of her eyes.

"I will, when I find her", Okunade responded.

However, Okunade's Dad secured a bail for him. That night when Okunade got home, he couldn't sleep. He was full of thoughts. Where could she have gone? He thought. He remembered the only friend she always talked about who was close to her was Ifeoma, who lived in Agege, on the outskirts of Lagos. They had both gone to her place during the naming ceremony of Ifeoma's last child. He made up his mind to trace the house. That early morning, despite the heavy rain, he set out on his mission at about 8:00 am. When he was negotiating a bend he had a punctured tyre. He got down from his car to change it. It was still raining heavily and he was soaked to his underpants in a matter of seconds while he was changing his punctured tyre. As he was about entering his car some area boys robbed him of his money and mobile phones. He considered all he was going through as a price he had to pay for his sweetheart, who God forbid, might be in serious trouble. For close to two hours he could

not locate the house. He was about giving up when he saw Ifeoma alighting from a taxi cab very close to where he parked his car.

“Hello, Ifeoma,” he called out excitedly. “Do you remember me, Adaobi’s fiancée?” She was dumbfounded instantly as she remembered him.

“Please, is Adaobi with you?” he asked.

“Wow, I am surprised you came looking for her after beating and driving her out of your house,” she taunted.

“It’s the devil’s handiwork, I couldn’t have done that if I were my true self and in my right senses. I’m sorry, please, is she okay?” he demanded. “Yes,” she said, and he followed her closely behind. He was so worried and anxious. A couple of minutes later Okunade and Adaobi were face-to-face with each other. He didn’t know what to say as he was totally lost for words. He lowered his head in guilt and started crying. Adaobi moved toward him and sobbed gently.

“Have you come to beat me, again?” she asked in tears.

“No, my dear, Okunade said in tears, you know I was possessed by something inexplicable when I beat and drove you away. How’s the baby. Are you okay dear...I miss you so much...”

“I’m okay,” she replied softly. “How are your parents?”

“They are fine. Let me take you home immediately. Tomorrow, we shall leave for your house to see your parents; they thought something bad had happened to you.”

Suddenly an ugly drama began to unfold. Some thugs hired by Chief Eze had invaded Mr. Peter’s properties. Chief Eze, a heavily built man, strong, healthy even in middle age was there watching the gory scene. He was about fifty and looks like a determined self-made businessman. He was the sort of man who liked to drink and clearly considered himself successful in his own

way. In the company of good friends he will be hearty, even noisy. He wore a pair of dark grey flannel trousers and a pale blue, pencil-striped open-necked shirt. He carried a brief-case and dangled his car key on a short, heavy chromium chain with a leather tab.

“Please, I beg of you in God’s name; don’t let them pack my properties inside the rain.”

Mr. Peter begged his Landlord while prostrating on the wet ground in tears and continued pleading for mercy from Chief Eze who was as rigid and as adamant as death itself.

By all standards, Mr. Peter had been having an economic crisis having lost his job just two days after he accosted the pretty Mma in the street about a month ago. Worse still, his Landlord had snatched his wife from him. As the tragic drama unfolded, Ifeoma Mr. Peter’s wife and the mother of his two kids laughed and mocked her frustrated husband as he rolled on the floor, begging God for justice and mercy.

Mr. Peter was shocked when he first heard the rumour from his bossom friend that his Landlord was dating her wife. He later caught her red-handed on the lap of the randy man in a hotel. Akpos who is an expert in *love affairs* had monitored them and given the information to him to prove his expertise once again. That day, Mr. Peter went wild with anger and threatened fire and brimstone! But now, he regretted ever protesting that very day he saw them having a good time. He remembered saying:

“But...Mr. Landlord, you already have three wives! Why are you messing around with my only wife for God’s sake?”

As the thugs continued to throw his poverty-stricken properties into the rain, it could be tagged, “*operation no-mercy*” as the doom’s day prophet would say. His belongings were drenched with the rain water. His two children cried

and cried but there was nothing their tears could do. Not even the pleadings from Okunade and Adaobi could change the mind of Chief Eze, who was determined to make life hellish for him and marry Ifeoma as a fourth wife. He had now accepted his new fate as he had been beaten black and blue and warned seriously to keep quiet by the crafty, virulent and wicked street thugs who had no sympathy for the suffering of a fellow human being.

“Honey, you can help him. I know that things are difficult in the country. Please do it for me because I took refuge here when I had nowhere else to lay my head,” Adaobi begged seductively.

“It’s okay, you know I love you,” Okunade replied enthusiastically as he planted a tender and long kiss on her. Immediately he approached Chief Eze as she watched with great expectation.

“Excuse me sir. How much does he owe you?” Okunade asked.

“Oh... forget about him he is almost ejected. If you wouldn’t mind, I will like you to leave him alone. I am determined to deal with him until nothing remains in him”. Chief Eze replied with an air of importance.

“I think this is not the right way to go about this. The issue at hand is about money and not his person,” He spoke with a voice clothed with raw anger.

“You see, my good-looking gentle young man...I totally agree with you. But come to think of it, why would you want to waste your hard earned money on a fool like him? I beg you to forget about him. Or better still...you can use some money to transport him to his hometown. I promise to take good care of Ifeoma and the children,” Chief Eze persisted.

“I’m fed up... fed up fit to burst, why can’t you listen to the voice of reason? It’s high time; someone talked sense into your head. Maybe the police

will do just that. I vow to make sure you are arrested and sued to court for violation of human rights. I hope you understand the implication of that very well. That, Mr. Peter is your lawful tenant doesn't make him your slave and a fool as you have already considered." He reacted with a hectoring voice as he brought out his phone and started going through the directory.

"Oh...young man, you don't have to do that. Do you have the sum of forty thousand naira with you?" He asked in an abstracted manner. Okunade left him for his car, opened the briefcase and counted some money out.

"Take, this is forty thousand naira. Get your boys to take his properties back immediately". He commanded as he handed the big wad of naira notes to him.

Chief Eze grabbed the money and commanded his busy *boys* to stop and enter his car immediately. He drove out. Mr. Peter who was now clad in rags and smelt like a mad man moved to meet Okunade.

"Thank you very much. Thank you for your good heart. How can I ever repay you?" Mr. Peter said in tears.

"Oh...don't mention! Thank you too for being grateful. Gratefulness they say is the least of virtues while ungratefulness is the worst of vices. Take...this is the sum of ten thousand naira for your hospital bill. You must go to hospital immediately for treatment for the internal injuries you must have sustained. You have to go back to your wife and ask for forgiveness. Adaobi has just told me the whole story. You will agree with me that she was an angel before you started maltreating her because of that Mma of a girl. I have no power to forgive you. Only God... and of course your wife and children whom you rejected can forgive you. I sincerely hope you can make your family happy again." He spoke to the satisfaction of everyone present. "I promise to make all things new again!" Mr. Peter spoke with a solemn voice.

The atmosphere was lit up with a sudden happiness. There was an abundant exchange of pleasantries as Adaobi put her belongings together for departure. When they were utterly disgorged from the inexhaustible warehouse of ecstasy, Okunade and Adaobi started cutting slow steps to the car. The little kids, Uche and Ikechukwu followed them very closely while Ifeoma and her husband weren't left out although they were far apart. On reaching the car, he *buried* his hand into his suit and brought out the car key and carefully opened the door for his fiancée as is the tradition of polished men. She, with his help entered with some difficulty due to the heavy pregnancy. Now in the driver's seat and with the seat-belt well-fastened, he called the children for a chat.

"Uche, Ike, listen to me...I want the two of you to take your studies very serious. Be obedient to your Mummy and Daddy. And when you go to school... be obedient to your teachers and never make noise when a teacher is in class. Aunty Adaobi told me that you are wonderful children. I was very...very happy to hear that. I was also told that you-Uche came second in the last term examination and you-Ike came second in the last term examination too. That is very good. It shows that you are very intelligent children. Now, I want the two of you to take your studies more seriously. Just get the first position. I have already promised your Mummy that if you come first in the forthcoming examination, I will come and take you for your third term holiday. I know that you will like to spend some days in my house. Then, I will take you to the Bar Beach. I know you will like to go there, it's a good place to visit."

"Yes...yes...Uncle. We have read about the Bar Beach in our English *reader*. It's very...big water. Even...Toochukwu my friend has gone there. I would like to go there too. I must come first in the next examination. I will read my books...very...very well." Uche spoke while breathing fast because of the hope of ever visiting the Beach.

“Me...too...I will go with my brother. I will tell Mummy to follow us to the Bar Beach,” Lara added.

Okunade who had been enjoying the moment with Adaobi continued: “Alright...I like your determination. Just get the first position. And one more thing...what would you like to be when you grow up Uche?”

“Er...Uncle, I would like to be a footballer. I like to play ball a lot in school. Whenever...I score a goal, people usually call me *C. Ronaldo*. I like *Messi* too. My friend Toochukwu told me that *C. Ronaldo* has a lot of money and a fine house. I will like to build a very fine house for Mummy but Daddy said, I should be a banker”. He spoke with uncommon maturity that enticed everyone.

“I see...Uche, you like football. That’s okay. And you Ike?” Okunade asked.

“Uncle...when I grow up...I would like to be a pilot. I like *aeroplanes* a lot. I used to make *aeroplanes* in school during *break*. When I become a pilot...I would carry only Mummy to America. I will not carry Daddy. He used to make Mummy cry all the time. He hates Mummy. He hates us...” He maintained.

Everybody was surprised at the girl’s reaction. Her parents were ashamed. They could not find enough hands to cover their face.

“No...my little angel Lara, it’s not true. Daddy loves Mummy and he loves you and John too! Is that okay?” Adaobi spoke, hoping to convince her otherwise.

“Okay!” She answered.

Minutes later, the children waved satisfactorily as the car moved out of the compound. Just before they were about entering their house, Obinna drove in and was wide-eyed with shock to learn that his sister had just left. Mr. Peter tried to persuade him to take a kola before leaving.

“I’ll get to everything somehow. First things first.” He replied with a sour expression and drove away.

When they alighted and walked towards the house, Adaobi could see the fire in her Mum’s eyes as she stood arms akimbo.

“Adaobi...Adaobi...what are you doing here? I stand on oath that you will never enter my husband’s house. Thank God...that you know me very well. I’m not the kind of woman to toy with! When I say one thing, I stick to it till death. So...please, take that thing you call your *Yoruba boyfriend* and get out of my sight now”! She thundered as her husband watched with consent and satisfaction. Someone drew out a knife from her handbag and stabbed herself in the chest.

“Nooooo!” Okunade screeched. “Why do you have to do this? Why?” He turned and rushed towards her on the ground, already drenched in her pool of blood and rushed immediately to the nearby hospital.

“Please, don’t die, Ada m!” was all Papa Adaobi could say in the hospital. She was placed on danger list and taken to the emergency ward immediately. Mama Adaobi appeared to have suddenly lost her lion’s heart. She was on her side, weeping and begging God to spare the life of her beautiful daughter. Drips were administered on her while everybody waited with bated breath for her to recover. Okunade called his Dad to inform him of the sad situation. His Dad was perplexed and promised to visit the hospital with his wife the next day. The following day, the two families in war prayed fervently to the Almighty God.

“Don’t let my daughter die God...” Mama Adaobi said in tears while mopping her tears with handkerchief. Even someone with a heart of stone would weep on seeing her now. She had been vomiting blood for over six hours which had made her gaunt as doctors battled to save her life.

There was a particular young nurse, Nkechi, who took special interest in the matter. She was deeply touched by her condition and prayed privately for her survival. The doctors too were really worried as she continued vomiting blood. When it seemed her case was considered hopeless by the medical team, Obinna wept bitterly but in private. He had been long deep in thoughts, hopeless and forlorn. He kept shaking his head sorrowfully as he gazed at his sister who lay unconscious on the bed.

Nkechi, the nurse was always by the side of Okunade, praying for her recovery too. However, their prayers seemed fruitless as she continued vomiting blood. On the third day, she went into coma which made the team of doctors to remove the drips attached to her body. They had tried all they could. They only waited for her to take her last breath. Everybody had given up hope even the stone-hearted Obinna. Vero and Linda had lost all strength. The Okunades were in deep regret and sorrow. The doctors directed a nurse to cover her body with a white cloth. Now, everybody began to weep.

It was then that Nkechi the good nurse did something unexpected. Like someone in trance, with both eyes squeezed shut, she moved to the prone body, flipped back the cover cloth and laid both hands on her temples and then launched into a strange tongue. It was obviously a prayer. The only intelligible word was "Jesus"! Nobody moved to stop her. She went on and on. Then somebody coughed. It was not any of the doctors. Nor any of the grieving parents, friends or sibling. It wasn't any of those nurses in the ward attracted by the strange tongue. She coughed again. And there was no blood in the cough. Then her eyes snapped open. Adaobi's eyes and Okunade's locked. And Nkechi stooped in mid-prayer. "*Halleluyah!*" She screamed with joy.

Mama Adaobi exclaimed: "My daughter is awake!" Okunade's Dad exclaimed: "O my good God, she has awoken! He spoke scarcely believing his eyes. The doctors ran back to the ward when they heard the joyful screams.

They could not explain the recovery or the stoppage of blood but it was clear to all that she was back and well.

Okunade who had been frolicking and kissing his love asked: “My dear...God has been so kind and merciful to us...but why did He let us go through this?” Adaobi sighed and replied, “We are too puny to understand fully the ways of Love”.

Everyone thanked Nkechi and glorified God as Adaobi was discharged. And that was it. The two families became united with love. They were happy at last. It was a matter of life and death but they had finally chosen life.

Chapter fifteen

“Would she survive? Okunade soliloquized while stepping down from the staircase of Mobat Maternity Home Ikeja. Will she live?” He asked himself again, as he moved towards his automatic chauffeur-driven V-Boot Mercedes Benz car parked outside the maternity home. It was barely two months after Nkechi *the nurse* did the unexpected at the hospital bed.

Okunade was repeating the words when he unknowingly collided with a young man “Sorry Please,” he said and shook his head dejectedly. By now he had reached the spot where his car was parked. His chauffeur who was standing beside the back door quickly opened the door for him.

“This way sir” said the chauffeur. Okunade turned and entered the car; sweat streaming down his smooth, plump face.

“Is she okay sir?” asked the chauffeur. “I still can’t say. The doctor said I should come back in five hours. I pray she comes out successfully”, he replied and turned away, looking pensively through the window as if searching for somebody among the pedestrians. His chin was resting on his right palm. He was totally lost in a wild, deep and sad thought about his fate.

Okunade’s sudden fear for child-birth had to do with the demise of Kemi; the wife of Desmond, his bosom friend. Desmond’s wife died during child birth just two weeks ago. He could recollect how Desmond so loved the young lady. He knew she loved Desmond too. She was a light-skinned woman, slightly plump, gorgeous and full of life. He could recollect how Desmond met her. He and Desmond were once moving along the departure lounge when Desmond’s briefcase suddenly slipped from his hand and fell. Kemi was just behind them and she quickly bent down and helped him with it. Desmond was glad and that

was how it began. They both exchanged addresses. When they came back from Paris, Kemi called at his place then another romantic saga began. An informal marriage took place and she moved in. For the first four years of their relationship, Desmond thought she would take in, but she didn't. Before long, he started feeling rather disturbed and confused because he was a young man of great wealth.

A lot of people believe that one can buy happiness with money, but with Desmond Jacobs, it wasn't so. Talk about money, he had it. He had a chain of companies spread all over the country and was a shareholder and chairman of many manufacturing companies. He even had shipping and airline concerns. Indeed, he was a millionaire and a very contented young man. However, something greatly troubled him; it was childlessness but he was only 35 years old. There were some painful and agonizing questions that always tormented him. Questions like:

“Who will inherit my properties when I die? Who will head my business empire when I'm finally gone? Would my heartless relatives who treated me so hatefully and neglected me when I was poor, inherit my business empire? Why has God given me money instead of a child?” These turbulent questions worried his mind daily and echoed in his head over and over again till he would burst into tears and weep silently. The more he thought of his many assets and investments, the more he strongly felt he should get at least a child to inherit them.

Just before Kemi took in, she started getting uncomfortable living with her husband. She became very suspicious and started making life unbearable for the young man. She called him all sorts of names and accused him of being the cause of her woes and barrenness. She saw him as an impotent and foolish young man who worshipped mammon.

“When will you have a baby, you wicked man?” She roared one night. “I’ve heard stories about you. It’s all money and wealth you know. It’s a pity. I can’t spend my last years with you like a nun or a witch. My parents love children and they will curse and disown me if I don’t get pregnant before the end of the year. When will this end my impotent husband?” She mocked.

Whenever Desmond heard these humiliating words, he often visited Okunade for consolation. That was how she always taunted him every day when he came back from his business trips. One day when he couldn’t bear it anymore, he drove her away. She was damn too saucy and impatient for his gentle and amiable disposition. Kemi, a fiery and hot-tempered lady soon realized that she was pregnant just two days in her father’s house after being sent home.

Okunade was back at Mobat Maternity Home in Ikeja. His chauffeur-driven V-Boot Mercedes zoomed sleekly and packed just at the entrance gate. He stepped down and moved hastily towards the hospital building. It was a three-storey magnificent building. His mind was in a tumultuous state. Never had he been so worried. Never had he been so eager to know his fate. He had not even taken his breakfast. He was just full of prayers. He prayed fervently as he had never done before.

“Adaobi is my only love,” he murmured sorrowfully, “If she dies that means I’m done for. I’d rather poison myself than live”.

He had reached the second floor where the labour room was. He moved closer to the reception. The receptionist, a tall lady greeted him with courtesy.

“Are you Mr. Okunade?” She asked politely.

“Yes he replied, tremblingly. “What’s the matter? Is my wife okay?” he stammered.

“Well, Dr. Williams said, I should tell you to stay here, work is in progress. Your wife is undergoing a painful and difficult labour, but he said he’d be with you shortly,” the receptionist said.

Okunade sat down gently and quietly, expecting the worst and was ready to put down his life. Suddenly, a gush of violent thoughts swept across his mind. He remembered how he met Adaobi. He could still visualize how Obinna, Adaobi’s only brother pleaded with him to take good care of her because she was the only girl-child of his parents. He could also recall the first time he took her out in his customized Range Rover, how people stared at them in amazement. They must have thought that she was his sister because they truly looked alike.

“Damn it!” Okunade said. He was determined to face all odds. He made up his mind to dare the gods and kill himself, if anything wrong would happen to her! He was shaking and trembling giddily and was sweating profusely in spite of the air-conditioned environment. His pulse was beating at an alarming rate. Seconds ticked away. Minutes ticked away. The atmosphere was cool and serene. Two hours later, a young lady nurse breezed out of the labour room and approached the receptionist.

“Please, where is Okunade Matthew?” the nurse asked

“Yes. Is she okay?” he stammered. “Tell me quickly... tell me...Is she okay?” he asked again in a shaky voice.

“Hmm, dear Sir, that your wife is something else, she died...” The nurse said gently.

“What! Ooooooh...my God!” He wailed and collapsed instantly and went into a coma. He looked every inch a dead man.

“Hey, what have I done? It’s just an *April fool*,” cried the nurse. I was only joking.”

“My God! What’s happening?” she was utterly confused. Instantly, the receptionist came running towards the guy in coma. “What’s happening, sister Yinka...What’s happening?” she inquired from another nurse who just stood there mouth agape.

“Sister Yinka, what did you tell him?” the receptionist asked.

“Help! Help!” Yinka cried. The other nurse, who had been confused and panic stricken soon joined her in the shout. Okunade was rushed to the emergency ward.

“I was only joking. I was only joking,” the nurse kept repeating on the way to the emergency ward. People had gathered at the area. There were sighs, hisses and contempt for the nurse. The fact was that Adaobi had just been delivered of triplets-two bouncing baby boys and one girl. And she was hale and hearty. But the young nurse was merely joking, not knowing the grave implication and enormity of her joke.

At the labour room, Dr. Williams, the man in charge of Adaobi’s welfare, got wind of all that happened to Okunade. Adaobi too had heard about the whole sordid episode, but she was still in labour pains and not fit to strain herself much.

“Everything will be okay,” Dr. Williams said. “Your husband will not die. Please don’t worry about that,” he pleaded.

“Please Doc.,” she begged, “Let me go and see him...please, let me know his condition.”

“Relax yourself, he will be okay,” Dr. Williams replied and went out after informing the nurse to keep watch over her.

Back at the emergency ward, Okunade was still in a critical state. There were about five highly skilled doctors attending to him. Drips were passed to his body. He was given injections at regular intervals; still he was in a coma. He was just lying motionless on the sick bed. The day passed on until night came. Still his condition did not improve.

The time was 12pm. Adaobi could not sleep, her anxiety kept mounting every minute. She called Dr. Williams and tried to persuade him to let her see him but her request was turned down on health grounds. When she persisted, she was sedated and she dozed off.

It was around 6a.m. and the harmattan haze was thick in the sky. The atmosphere was extremely chilly. She woke up. The first thing that came to her mind was her husband. She stood up from her bed and sneaked off silently to the emergency ward. On reaching the ward, she opened the door gently. There was nobody in sight and she moved towards his bed and sat delicately beside him. She looked at his closed eyes and tears welled up in her eyes. It's obvious that she loved him. She could not help it, and then summoning all her strength, she called softly but most tenderly:

“My Love...I'm here...please wake up, don't die this way...” She took his hand and caressed it gently, fondling it with the greatest sympathy and love. Surprisingly, as she continued crying and muttering those thought-provoking emotional words, Okunade moved his leg and coughed thrice. Then he kept quiet for a moment and the next thing his eyes opened for the first time. She was so happy that her *love* had regained consciousness. He hugged her lovingly.

“Oh...Is it real? Are you really alive?” he said in utter surprise.

“Yes, my dear, I’m the one,” she said, “And you’re now the father of triplets, two boys and one girl.”

As the highly romantic sensation continued, and joy enveloped both of them, they did not know when the emergency ward was filled with people-sympathizers and well-wishers. They were not even aware.

“Thank God!” exclaimed Okunade. “A father of triplets...Oh thank God! Oh, I love you Adaobi!” He stood up from his bed and was instantly fit and okay. Arm in arm, they both went out, smiling and hugging like long lost lovers.

When Okunade reached where his three babies were placed, and set eyes on them for the first time, his eyes glowed with immeasurable joy and happiness. He shouted to high heavens:

“This is the day the good Lord has done wonders for me and I will show my appreciation! *Oya*, let the celebration begin! Thanks be to God! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”

He jumped up in sheer ecstasy and started dancing, for he was unable to control the incredible joy throbbing in his heart. It was sheer bliss as he set eyes on his new born babies and his heart skipped a million times. Adaobi, his beautiful wife was engrossed in unmitigated joy too! She felt fulfilled at last. Her *man* pecked her on the cheek, hugged her tenderly and tears of sublime joy enveloped them as they cuddled softly. Okunade instantly made a fervent promise to do a grandchild naming ceremony for his new born babies. He couldn’t hide his feelings as he shook hands with the doctors in an excited manner.

“God!” he exclaimed, I’ll spend millions for the naming ceremony of my new born babies! Everybody will know that something great is happening in my locality that day!”

“Oh, I’m so happy, my dear husband! This is a dream come true,” Adaobi responded with a face overflowing with joy.

Chapter sixteen

The day after the extravagant traditional wedding between Okunade and his Adaobi, he instructed a printer to print several gold-coloured invitation cards for the special guests that would grace the christening ceremony of his new born babies. He bought ten big cows to be slaughtered for the occasion. Expensive chairs and out-of-this-world canopies were rented. The venue of the naming ceremony was a nearby open field which could contain large numbers of people and dignitaries from all walks of life. The couples were socialites who hobnobbed and rubbed shoulders with the high and mighty in the society. Choice drinks were bought; both locally made and imported, to soothe the palate of the invited guests who came from the nooks and crannies of the country and even from overseas.

The new couple's budget for their children's christening ceremony was the whopping sum of forty million naira. His friends also supported him financially to make the day a memorable one. There was no doubt about it; the couple had made a solid preparation to make the ceremony a day to remember for all and sundry. However, unknown to them, some daredevil armed robbers had heard about the proposed great children naming ceremony and made up their minds to storm the venue in disguise as if they were invited guests too. Their mission was to dine and wine with the couple and later move into their apartment after the celebration to rob them of cash, jewelries and other personal properties.

Finally, the great day came. The venue of the party was filled to the brim with important guests from within and outside the country. On the stage to

thrill and entertain the guests were popular musicians like *2Face Idibia*, *P square* and *Flavour*. As early as 10 am, guests had started trooping in. There was actually no wine, brandy, whisky or beer that wasn't available. Television stations like Channels and A.I.T. were also present to relay the splendid event on the screen. The triplets were named Balajoko, Uchenna and Njideka amid pomp and pageantry.

The armed robbers came in two exotic jeeps. They were well-dressed and blended perfectly with the guests at the occasion. Their AK-47 rifles were hidden in their over-flowing agbadas. Some of the robbers wore expensive suits and cleverly hid their sophisticated guns inside them. When it was about mid-day, people started dancing and making merry and the couple started receiving very expensive gifts from the excited guests as was the tradition. The sweet and sonorous voices of the highly experienced R and B musician *2Face Idibia*, enchanted the audience making them spray several thousands of naira. Some of the guests that came even sprayed foreign currencies like dollars and pound sterling. The money spraying later turned into a spree of sort to the delight of all. It was joy all the way without any inkling that danger, absolute danger lurked around the corner. Okunade and his wife were more than happy! They got cash gifts worth millions within the few hours of the celebration.

When it was around 10.30 pm, they retired to the comfort of their cozy house and had no premonition that some eagle-eyed, daredevil robbers were on the prowl, watching the proceedings of the joyful celebration. Few minutes later, they were busy taking off their clothes and arranging their gifts, both cash and material with John. At about 11.30pm, as they were making preparations to sleep, they heard the booming of guns. They were gripped with fear on hearing the nerve-racking sounds of the sophisticated weapons of the armed bandits. It was like Armageddon had finally come! They were really panic-stricken and filled with morbid fear.

“Open the door now or we’ll break it down!” echoed the guttural voice of the kingpin of the daredevil robbers; who was Adaobi’s only brother. It was the height of betrayal.

“Yee...the robbers are here!” The couple said while shaking nervously. They were filled with horror. In a jiffy, the robbers were right inside the apartment of the couple. They entered in commando style with masqueraded faces. It was like a movie scene.

“Where is everything-naira, dollars and pound sterling? All the money! Bring out the gold, mobile phones and other valuables right now, then lie facing the ground! I’m Judas, the merciless robber that kills with joy! Don’t mess with us! The sight of blood makes me happy!” Obinna demanded.

Okunade was very rich from all indications but he got his wealth through hard work and God’s blessing. He was a deeply religious young guy and a very kind and humble person. He was generous to a fault. The robbers were about twelve in number and were fully armed with deadly weapons. The couple were visibly shaken, trembling and sweating like lily-livered kids who saw a ghost in the dark. The thoughts on their mind were of absolute doom and gloom. No one had ever escaped from the bloodshed of Obinna and his gang of robbers. People living in the other houses along the street were afraid because they knew their flats would be the next to be raided by the robbers who shot sporadically to scare their victims.

“Where are the gold, cash and mobile phones, I mentioned just now?” Obinna threatened, hitting Okunade on the head with the butt of the AK-47 assault rifle. There was blood instantly on the forehead of the plump looking handsome man. He was filled with biting pain from the wound.

“Please, spare our lives. Take...everything but please spare our lives. Don’t kill us! Please we beg you in God’s name,” they pleaded. “These are the

things you want...Please don't kill us..." He handed them all the cash, jewelry and expensive mobile phones worth several thousands of naira to the merciless and heartless robbers.

"God! You just mentioned God! Who told you I know God? To hell with your God! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Obinna burst into hysterical cynical laughter. "I'll waste you and your wife right now! I'm always happy at the sight of blood and when people die! Are you sure that this is everything?" The kingpin further demanded.

"Yes! Have them please, take everything but please don't kill us. I beg you in God's name..." the mother of the new born triplets begged the robbers with tears streaming down her checks. At the mention of killing them, she had burst into tears and wept sorrowfully. She could remember now clearly how much pain they had endured from their parents.

"Rubbish! *Make thunder strike both of you dead!*" the kingpin of the robbers growled threateningly.

"Please kill me and spare the life of my wife," he begged in tears. "I'll gladly die, but don't kill my wife and our babies please...Okunade closed his eyes and sobbed like a baby.

"You want to tell me what to do? Obinna hollered. "You are a stupid couple! He growled again. "You spend millions of naira because of the birth of new born babies! Just imagine! This is a wasteful expenditure! A common child, a common baby! You celebrate it with so much money! You waste money because of these new things! You want to tell me what to do? Now both your little toys will go first," the kingpin grabbed the leg of one of the babies where it was placed.

"Please, spare the life of our babies," begged the couple in tears "don't harm our babies, instead kill us!"

“*Sharrap*” screamed the red-eyed giant kingpin. “You can’t tell me what to do! You are both crazy!” he thundered.

This very moment the baby was crying. The couple were trembling and fidgeting like lily-livered toddlers who saw ghosts in a dark cave.

“I’ll teach you the most painful lesson you will never forget, you nasty couple!” A female voice thundered in annoyance. She held the leg of a baby and shook it. The pain made the baby give a shrill cry. The couple were trembling and praying fervently for the girl to spare the life of their bundle of joy. The girl moved forward and at the command of the leader raised the baby up and was about to fling it powerfully against the wall of the room when a siren of the police team was heard. Adaobi’s heart shook giddily as she couldn’t understand how a girl could be so evil. The tears streamed down her eyes. She was really covered in heartrending tears. Okunade had lost all strength. It was like they were in hell.

“Boss, we are surrounded,” the girl said. “Let’s go and deal with the police outside and come back to finish our work here.”

“That’s okay, Liza. Let’s waste those police first!” Obinna growled thumping his chest in annoyance.

“We will be back; we are not through with you yet!” the female armed robber boasted.

As they went downstairs, Okunade and his wife who had almost fainted started praying fervently with tears cascading down their checks. They begged God for his intervention and help. They also prayed for the safety of John, a good family friend. They were unaware that it was John who had contacted the police team.

Within the next twenty minutes, the notorious armed robbers engaged the police in a fierce gun battle. The police couldn't match the superior firepower of the daredevil robbers and about eight policemen lay dead, while two of the robbers suffered injury. The police retreated and the two surviving officers went back to their base to bring reinforcement.

Obinna and his gang were happy and felt like heroes or warlords. Confidently, they went back to the flat to take more loot and probably kill the couple and babies. Okunade and his wife were still crying helplessly. No sooner had the robbers entered the flat again than a heavy rain began. It was unusual for rain to fall at that time of the year. Despite the strange torrential downpour, the robbers didn't mind but ordered them to lie down on the floor while they carted away more goods worth several millions of naira. They had really rendered the house bare.

The heavy rain continued ceaselessly-the robbers were more than happy. They raided the tastefully furnished flat with glee. Okunade and his wife were still down on the floor weeping sorrowfully.

Obinna moved towards the couple after they had finished the operation and hollered, "Now I have to give you couple a parting shot to say goodbye! I have changed my mind out of pity. I will kill the babies when you both are gone! I think...that is better or you give us everything. Everything and nothing else now...!" He raised his gun up and pointed it in the direction of the weeping couple.

"Please, I beg you in God's name to spare our lives; we have given all," Okunade pleaded in tears again, "Oh, please...oh please..." his wife added frozen with morbid fear.

"Oh no...Don't kill us please" Adaobi begged between heavy sobs. But Judas and his gang were in no mood to pity the couple. Judas was about pulling

the trigger to silence the babies when a deafening thunder rattled and struck him suddenly. The thunderbolt hit all of them at once. For a couple of seconds, it pierced through the already charged sky. It was a fearful and awesome sight! The thunder had a devastating effect and mission. After the frightening peals of thunder, the rain then stopped slowly. They were surprised at the strange development.

Miraculously, Okunade and his wife were not affected. The babies weren't touched. They were shocked and surprised to see how the almighty God had fought for them! When they regained consciousness, they were so elated and happy. The first words that came from their mouths were, Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" they continued screaming, "Hallelujah, Praise God!" the joy pervading the entire area was indescribable.

The neighbours in the next flats and John who had been hiding under the bed came to celebrate with the Okunades for their miraculous escape from the snares of death. About fifteen minutes later, the police arrived the scene to assess the situation. The dead robbers were all carried away to the morgue for autopsy. Only Obinna was spared but he left the house as dejected as a wet hen as he couldn't muster the courage to carry the loot.

Chapter seventeen

“Please!!! Don’t beat me!” she pleaded in tears as her husband, Mr. Peter, descended on her, pummeling her with his iron-like fists.

“Leave my house now or your family will come for your corpse today!” He growled as he continued kicking and slapping his wife. It was a hellish day. She was on the floor, writhing in pains.

“I swear by the devil I’ll kill you, if you don’t leave my house and you won’t take a pin with you,” he opened the door and dragged his wife out of the house into the hot sun.

With swollen eyes, bleeding mouth and a bruised body, she found herself on the hot street in the excruciating heat of the day. This attack on her person today definitely looked like the last straw. She had no idea what always came over her husband at the slightest misunderstanding. In those moments, he will seem possessed by a wicked spirit that had no mercy at all. A mother of two and married for almost eight years. She had always endured but now she had had enough. Not even her children Uche and Ikechukwu could change her mind. Not even Akpos who saved the day some three weeks ago. Her mind was made up.

This last fight was caused by a minor argument over family issues. She knew her husband would definitely kill her one day should she continue living with him. Drenched with sorrow, she walked away towards nowhere in particular. She was still very beautiful and had a charming disposition. She was a loyal, dutiful and hard-working woman who never shied away from her

matrimonial duties although her affair with the Landlord was nothing to write home about.

She wept as she trudged on the tarred road. She knew that she was suffering and facing this hardship because of the love she had for her two children. She had realized long ago that she was married to a man she really loved but who didn't love her the same way. It was a misplaced love. What manner of man would treat his wife like that? She asked herself.

After trekking for what seemed like ages on the streets of Lagos, she felt dizzy. She staggered and fell. She lay still for a spell, and then she mustered all the energy she could and stood up again. She resumed her trekking again to nowhere right in the middle of the road. Motorists blared out their horns as they tried to avoid her. All the while, the scorching sun continued unabated with a fierce glare of rays. As she continued staggering along, she was almost hit by a BMW Jeep. The man swerved and applied the brakes, coming to a stop a few metres away. He got down and walked hastily towards her.

"Mrs Ifeoma, what's the problem?" He asked with a voice full of concern.

She didn't stop; but only spared a glance and kept walking. He held her hand: "Please I'm Obinna...Adaobi's brother. "Who treated you this way?"

"Sir...please...let me go...let me die," she said. But as she attempted to step away, she went down. It must have been exhaustion. He was a bit alarmed. But he rose to the occasion. Lifting her carefully, with some difficulty into the car, he drove to a nearby clinic.

Hours later, she had recovered enough to speak. He listened with interest as she narrated her story. She had made up her mind not to go back home. In fact, she confessed, she was contemplating suicide. Obinna tried to comfort her. He persuaded her to dismiss all thoughts of suicide and to consider her children and not make them motherless. She felt, she had found a perfect man.

At exactly 6pm she was discharged from unity clinic and the super-rich guy paid the bill and promised to help her and put a smile on her face again. He drove her to Rose Gardens Hotel located on the Lagos Island and booked three days for her. That notwithstanding, he gave her the sum of twenty thousand to take care of her needs. Ifeoma was surprised by this seeming unalloyed generosity. She thanked him profusely.

Four days later, he rented a two-bed-room flat for her and gave her the keys. This came as a big surprise to a woman recovering from years of maltreatment. To cap it, "*Obi m*" as she now called her benefactor, gave her the sum of two million naira to start a business of her choice. Tears of joy streamed down her face as she received the cash gift.

Ifeoma invested her money wisely and within a space of four months, she had become a rich business woman. She was also the proprietress of a flourishing hotel in Lagos and lived in a tastefully furnished duplex of her own, located in a rich neighbourhood in Lagos.

She was seated in the parlour, busy gulping a bottle of big stout and munching the laps of roasted chicken before her front when Obinna paid a visit. She had been admiring him and had been looking for the slightest opportunity to seduce him to bed not minding the abomination and damning consequences of such act. Surely, she knew it was a taboo. But to her it was better to die and burn in hell than to live in paradise without sexual bliss. She must use this opportunity to lure him to bed. She had been waiting for this moment to '*do it*' with someone she loves and whom she was convinced loved her back.

"*Obi m,*" she called; I want to have a chat with you. Please, see me in the bedroom quickly.

“Okay,” he answered, not knowing what plans she had up her sleeve. As soon as he entered the bedroom, the enchantress began her lecherous moves cleverly.

“Please, unzip my brassiere; it’s really itching me at the back,” she said seductively. He knew what was happening. He responded to her request.

“You...are...beauti...” he tried to say as she turned and faced him. Before he could say anything further she moved closer and hugged him with these words on her lips; “Don’t you know you are my husband now? I will be happy to be your second wife. I’m a divorcee. I’m ready to marry you if you can only say ‘Yes’. I’m already in love with you! I’ll take good care of you and I assure you that you will enjoy every bit of the marriage. I will spoil you silly with love and care. Your good heart got me hooked and I just can’t help it. I need you badly. I have waited for this moment, I just can’t help it anymore... please ...,” the chubby-looking woman pleaded.

He was lost for words. He could feel his chemistry reacting violently as she grabbed him and pushed him on the well laid bed. It was a marathon *‘love duel’*. He soon realized that it was a betrayal of trust her wife had reposed on him, but something more hypnotizing and enrapturing had gripped his sense of reasoning. The *‘romance’* lasted for three hours, that eventful evening, thereafter; she went to the bathroom to have a good shower. He later wobbled into the bathroom extremely tired and fagged out.

The following morning, Ifeoma was at a wedding party and was enjoying the scenery when she suddenly saw her former husband approaching her. She couldn’t believe her eyes. Yes the same husband that maltreated and threw her out in the scorching sun. Mr. Peter went on his knees and pleaded: “Please,

Ifeoma I'm begging you...Come back home. Let's resolve our differences. Come back home..."

"It's too late Peter," she replied, "the caged bird has flown away and landed in paradise. It will never go back to dine with the devil! Very soon, I'll come for my children because they deserve love, care and all the good things of life. Don't waste your time... I'm not a dog that goes back to its vomit. Moreover, I know very well that leopards don't change their spots". She left in anger as Mr. Peter looked on like one thrown into a miry clay pit.

Cupid's arrow had struck the heart of Ifeoma and she had fallen in love with the handsome and ebullient multi-millionaire young man. But Obinna had a wife at home called Funke. It wasn't that she came from a poor background like Ifeoma; her parents were very rich but she had a passionate and sincere love for the seemingly good-hearted guy, who indeed understood the science of worshipping women.

Although Funke's parents kicked against the relationship at the initial stage, telling her to look for a well-educated suitor she had already made up her mind. She told her parents that she was deeply in love and that there was no going back. Within a short time, she dropped a couple of men who were also interested in marrying her and stuck wholeheartedly to her heartthrob. It was he and nobody else; and he had promised never to disappoint or break her heart.

After dating for four months, they had a society wedding and became husband and wife. Funke and her husband enjoyed conjugal bliss as time progressed. There was no cause for alarm as he spoilt her silly with money and showered her with love and adoration. She travelled all over the world, both for visiting and business trips; Dubai, France, the United States and Europe were places she frequented on weekly basis. Her globe-trotting trips were sponsored by her loving husband. Theirs was a marriage sealed and

consummated in heaven, or so it seemed. Three years into the relationship, she bore him three lovely children.

Ifeoma knew from the outset that he was married with children but she was very ready to damn all the consequences. She went headlong into the relationship not minding whose ox was gored. She was really happy that he fell for her antics. She was the ultimate seducer. A couple of days after the love affair in the bedroom, Obinna had mesmerized her senses completely with cash.

“I have hit it big in this *dry* Lagos, Chinyere!” she said to one of her intimate friends one night on phone.”

“What’s it?” Chinyere asked.

You know about the big fish! Nothing is going to stop me from eating it anyhow I like!” she replied with a self-satisfied grin on her face.

“You mean the married man? Are you dating him? She probed further.

“Of course yes and very soon I’ll take over his house,” she answered sarcastically and continued: “I know he is married. I even know his wife but she’s no hindrance for me to actualize my goals. I have caught a big fish and I have a big plan in my mind on how to eat it.”

Obinna kept his new romance affair from his wife. She didn’t have any reason to believe her husband was seeing another woman because he continued to shower her with the usual love.

She became pregnant after a litany of bigamous affairs. He still kept the relationship secret and dear to his heart. He even bought her a brand new Lexus Jeep and bought a better duplex with all the trappings of wealth to celebrate the pregnancy.

Nine months later, she was delivered of a bouncing baby boy. Secretly, a low-key traditional wedding ceremony took place. Funke was still unaware that her husband had become a father to another child out of wedlock.

A year later, Ifeoma took in again before one could say “Holy Tommy” she had been delivered of her second child-a baby boy too. After the christening ceremony of the new baby, he suddenly felt he should let the cat out of the bag, open the secret and bring her in as his second wife.

After thinking over it for a while, he felt his family should come in to break the news to her because anything could happen. The following day, his immediate family called Funke for an impromptu meeting, and the bombshell was dropped. Obinna himself was in attendance but his father was absent. He had had enough of his son’s madness and had left that morning as cheerless as the grave to visit a friend for a beer-drinking spree. Mama Adaobi even went on her knees and pleaded with tears. The family members pleaded too and begged her to welcome the new wife with her kids in the spirit of Christian love. For a moment, tears streamed down Funke’s eyes. She was shocked and lost for words and continued to cry even as she stood up and headed for the bedroom. Her husband followed her, petting and consoling her in the process. The elders of the family came into the bedroom too, to lift the heartbroken woman out of her obvious sadness and melancholy. Between sobs and heartrending tears, she bared her mind:

“I bear no grudge or hatred for the new wife,” she said “but I’m a human being with feelings...and it’s painful when the man you love turns around to stab you in the heart. She’s welcome into the house and I accept her with open arms.”

In a jiffy, Obinna went on his knees, hugging her affectionately, with tears dropping from his eyes. “Please, I beg you in the name of love don’t be angry

with me or feel bad. I really can't explain how this whole thing happened...please darling, forgive me...I'm very sorry..."

That was it. Funke welcomed the new wife with utmost sincerity, love and magnanimity. Three days later, Ifeoma packed into the expansive mansion with her two new kids. Also with her were Uche and Ikechukwu; the children she had with Mr. Peter. She had earlier approached a court to grant her the custody of them. This new development gave her a great joy because she could now hatch whatever plan she had on her mind.

Chapter eighteen

“Ifeoma, you are the most evil and ungrateful person I have ever seen in my life! Your children and you shall be stricken with calamity and a maiming disease because of the evil things you always think about me!”

Those were the words of Funke that eventful Friday seven years after Ifeoma had packed in. Obinna himself was getting highly irritated with the ceaseless fights between his two wives every day. He was fed up with the whole painful embarrassment.

As Funke was about standing up, Ifeoma replied: *“I’ll show you pepper today, you crazy old witch! You think you can hurt me and my children with your witchcraft, er? Thunder will strike you dead today, you harlot, wicked, good-for-nothing woman! You think you’re the apple of our husband’s eye? Let me tell you, I always hear what you say behind me, and I am ready for you today! I’m ready to kill you and your stupid children with this cutlass in my hand!” she spurted angrily.*

When Ifeoma brandished the shining cutlass, Obinna knew that blood would flow in a matter of seconds. He sighed, turned and moved towards her.

“You can’t do that Ifeoma,” he begged, “Put down your cutlass...give it to me. You’re all fond of fighting each other. One day, I will run away and leave you all to do your worst. Please, give me the cutlass, I don’t want bloodshed.”

Just then one of the children of the first wife appeared, brandishing a knife. “Leave her alone, Daddy,” the little man by name Victor warned his

father. "If she wants to join her maker today, let her insult my Mummy again. I'll stab her in the neck!"

The uproar and confusion was really getting out of hand. The children of the two wives were around and soon joined in the altercation. All available objects were freely used-bottles, planks, iron objects and even buckets. The neighbours were terrified. They were petrified as the whole children and women engaged themselves in a dangerous free-for-all fight.

Obinna's ageing mother was so aghast at the sight of blood that she collapsed and went into coma. Some concerned neighbours rushed to the police station to make a report about the apocalyptic situation. At the mention of Obinna, the police officer on duty shrugged his shoulder and said:

"If it's that house, we can do nothing about it. It's a family affair. That's how they always fight each other on daily basis. The Nigerian police don't dabble into family problems, thank you."

After the fight that day, Obinna was always pensive and moody, thinking what life would be like when he finally joins his ancestors. He wondered why his wives and children always fight one another over some flimsy reasons. He was in his late 30s when this unhappy development began in his family. His children were becoming unruly. His wives too were getting more rude and disrespectful. At a stage, he broke down and cried, wondering what would become of his children and wives when he dies. He had about four houses in Lagos. He wondered if his wives and children would not kill one another after his exit over his properties. The cantankerous nature of his wives and children was gradually damaging his physique and taking a toll on his health. He that was once full of life, vibrant, jovial and lively now looked wrinkled and worn.

In those good old days, he used to be tall, handsome, fresh and chubby. Now, he looked like someone who bore the troubles and problems of the whole

world. The rancour and bitterness in his household got so much that he became sad and withdrawn and at times, he would start gesticulating and soliloquizing when he was alone. The soliloquy was getting too much but his wives felt unconcerned and never worried about his state of health. It didn't bother them that he was gradually losing his mind.

He regretted marrying two wives. Before very long, his blood pressure began rising at an alarming rate. He was now always indoors for the most part of the day. But his condition didn't stop his wives from fighting at the slightest provocation and over flimsy reasons. He always adjusted and changed his will every month. He was indeed a confused and unhappy man. His happy and romantic life before the arrival of Ifeoma was now as sour and bitter as a month-old grape. Worse still, his health was getting worse every passing day.

Before recently, he was never lonely because of his seemingly nice and generous attitude. He could give out his eyes, if possible, just to make people happy if he had anything to gain. So, a lot of women often swarmed around him like ants on sugar, just to get one favour or another. But whenever, he was with a machine gun, no man could beat him, because he would be as distant as the horizon.

Ifeoma was a pretty woman, who was highly possessive as well as jealous. She was already blessed with three children in her new marriage, two boys and a girl. Indeed, a ravishing beauty, spotless and enchanting. Despite her five children from two marriages, she looked like a teenage beauty, elegant and delectable. Her rudeness, craftiness and mischief were legendary.

Shakespeare, in one of his books once said: "You can't read a man's mind by his looks or physical expressions" and he also mentioned that, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

These two glaring witty ideas aptly described Ifeoma and the helplessness of her husband. Gradually, she started getting tired and irritated by her husband's relationship with people, particularly the womenfolk. She thought he was having extra marital affairs with women of easy virtue. Her suspicion continued to grow every day and she bared her fangs in a most wicked and atrocious way.

She thought that if her husband should have another wife, she and her children wouldn't have the opportunity of claiming a good share of his properties after his demise. So, to avoid this "ugly incident", she started planning how to have him totally so that she could influence the will.

"I want my husband to be my slave and do whatever I want. That's my heart's desire. Men should be slaves to their wives. I'm sure he is dating another woman; I can't share my husband with anyone. He must do my wish and dance to my tune any day and any time. I'll go to Okija Shrine this weekend for a charm that will make my husband become my slave so that I can toss him and use him anyhow I like".

For ten minutes Ifeoma was talking to herself absent-mindedly. Her five children had gone to London for summer holidays, and they would arrive tomorrow with their father. Talking about money, you could never underrate her. She was a very rich woman, yet she tired of her husband's constant doling out of money to the first wife. She had everything, any woman could ever dream of. Their beautifully-furnished mansion in highbrow Victoria Island, Lagos was simply breath-taking and out of this world. It was a paradise on earth. There were cooks that took care of the family meals; drivers and housemaids that made sure they did not labour at all. They had ten exotic cars at their garage; and her husband still showed unlimited love and passion to her. She was always travelling to the United States and Europe for shopping. She always wore the most expensive clothes and jewelries befitting a queen. Her

skin was smooth and velvet, like the softest flower. The fact was that they were living in super abundance. Thanks to the evil genius.

Ifeoma called her husband's personal driver aside for a secret meeting.

"Anayo, see me after the day's work," she whispered, "there's something I want to discuss with you. Is that right?"

"Okay madam, I don't hear you," the soft-spoken driver replied, wondering what she wanted to discuss with him.

In the evening, when he had closed for the day's work, he hurried to meet his madam to hear what she had to say.

"My dear, I have a big business for you. Nobody must know and hear about it. This business will fetch you twenty thousand naira. All you need to do is to take me to Anambra State tomorrow. I have made all the necessary arrangements for the journey. We shall leave by 4am. I hope you understand all I've just said?"

"Oga Madam, ha, ha, ha, that's no problem!" he replied radiating joy in his face. Then he continued: *"I go drive you go that place again and again. So far...I'll get my money!"*

"I assure you, the money is yours"! She reassured him and patted him gently on the shoulder.

"Thank you Oga Madam, thank you Oga Madam," he said while walking away, smiling surreptitiously and happily. But sincerely and honestly, deep down in his heart he was not happy. He was convinced that she was a wicked woman, but the lure and attraction of easy lucre was high on his mind. And he had a premonition that the wicked woman may be trying to unveil one of her devilish intentions. He wouldn't want to be part of any deal that would hurt his boss, because he had been kind and loving to him.

That evening, Ifeoma was at the shrine of *Mmuo Ifagbegbe* who was so skilled in the occult art of divination. Her mission was to get a potent love potion that would make her loving husband become her slave totally. In the whole of Nigeria, no one could compete with the bald-headed old man in the occult art of divination. He had secret disciples in different parts of the world. He is a living grand master of the order Aquarian cosmos and had set in motion all the esoteric techniques that would operate in the twelve Temple Degrees of psychic and occult initiations within this society. He had also set in motion one hundred and twenty metaphysical techniques designed to awaken the “*Psychic Powers*” of members of the society by *which* they could perform occult miracles in their *secret rooms*.

He was feared by all and sundry simply because of his spiritual and metaphysical powers. “Now, *Mmuo Ifagbegbe*,” the fearless woman demanded, “*I need the most powerful love potion that would turn my husband into my slave. To act like my houseboy and do whatever I order him. Just name the price, I’ll pay it. I have to be at home before the end of today because he would be arriving home from London with my kids tomorrow morning.*” She adjusted her headgear and knelt in front of the diviner.

Sat Gopinatha, the spirits of evil and good have heard all you want,” he said, “but this kind of love potion will cost you four hundred thousand naira. The gods will take care of your heart’s desire. If you pay me the money, I’ll bring the love potion from my magical bag of power now and hand it to you”. He spat thrice inside a ram horn containing black soap.

“Money is not the problem as you know, I’m always loaded,” she said and delicately opened her handbag and brought out the crisp bales of N1, 000 notes, N400, 000. She handed the four bales to the old herbalist. The diviner gave a toothy smile and giggled. He reached for a bag hanging on the

bloodstained wall of his shrine. He opened it instantly and dipped his hand inside.

“Now, take this black powder,” he said, nodding his head confidently. “You will put it inside his food. Once he eats it, he must turn into your slave and do your wishes. He will take orders from you forever. This is the most potent love potion that the gods handed to my forefathers from generation to generation. Humans mustn’t play with the gods. There are powers beyond the reasoning and sense of mere mortals! You can take your leave!”

Before Obinna got home the following day from his trip to London, she had already reached home and prepared a special dish for her husband and sprinkled the love potion on the meal. She knew his favourite food and reasoned that if she prepared it, he would fall for the bait because it would be irresistible. Some few minutes after the food was ready. He called Ifeoma that he had arrived Murtala Mohammed International Airport Lagos and was on his way home.

About an hour later, Obinna’s exotic Mercedes Benz Jeep was at the gate of his mansion. His chauffeur honked once and the electronic gate opened instantly and he drove in. When he stepped down from the jeep, Ifeoma was already at the door to receive him and the children.

“Hello Darling,” Ifeoma exclaimed. “How was your trip? Hope you had a nice time,” she giggled and smiled bewitchingly.

“I’m okay *sweetie*,” he replied, taking off his suit. “How are you Mummy?” the kids asked delightedly.

“I’m fine. Hope you enjoyed yourselves,” she said, hugging her children. The children scurried happily into their room the next moment.

“I bought lots of beautiful and precious things for you from the trip darling, things that would make you happier than before,” he said excitedly.

“Your food is on the dining table dear,” she replied. It’s your favourite food. Pounded yam and *egusi* soup with all the condiments that would sweeten your palate.”

“Thank you my dear,” he said happily. “You’re an angel, the one that always fills my heart with joy.”

Before long, he settled down to eat. And he did it with relish. He was almost through with the pounded yam when he noticed the development of some strange stomachache. About six hours later the stomachache became unbearable.

“Oooooohs, I’m not feeling well,” he said in pains while holding his belly. “God what’s happening to me?” he screamed. Funke, the elder wife wasn’t around; she had gone out for a date with her *boyfriend*. Ifeoma who had gone into her bedroom, came running towards him when she heard his screams. He was rolling on the floor, while clutching his stomach.

“What’s the matter darling?” She asked really terrified. She was actually shedding crocodile tears but he couldn’t utter a word. He was sweating profusely and shaking. The following minute, he started vomiting blood and gasping for breath.

“Yee, help me! God, help me!” she continued to scream. This attracted the chauffeur, the security man and a couple of housemaids in the sprawling mansion. Anayo was also there deeply in thought pondering how very wicked and ungrateful human beings could be; he drove his boss to Hale well Hospital Lagos. Ifeoma excused herself from accompanying them immediately, thinking that it was useless. She was convinced that he was already stone dead. Shortly, her conscience became heavy as she ran into her bedroom.

“Ha...God! Ha! Ha!! Ha!!!” she repeated in tears, I’ve killed my husband. I never knew it was food poison that *Mmuo Ifagbegbe* gave me to put inside his food.”

She rushed to the hospital thinking that he husband had died. On getting to Hale Well Hospital Lagos Island, she was shocked to discover that her husband was still alive and breathing. Drips were on his body and the doctors scurried here and there, battling to save his life.

Obinna spent one week at the hospital recuperating gradually. On the eighth day when he was supposed to be discharged, fate dealt a cruel blow on him through the hands of his wicked wife. Ifeoma, being overwhelmed by a strange fear connived with three among the nurses treating him to inject him with a potent deadly poison. She paid the nurses a whopping three million naira for the deadly deal. Alas, at last, he had been cornered. He will soon succumb to the cold hand of death, she thought. However, the nurses had pity on him and decided not to inject him with the deadly chemicals. She was dismissed from the hospital to make other necessary arrangement with the promise that he will die in two days time.

The satanic wife became the happiest woman on earth. Within the next six hours, she had already influenced the will, so she knew that she would now possess more of her husband’s many properties. Now, he wouldn’t marry another woman to divide her lot.

Surprisingly, Funke and her children were not worried about her husband’s supposed death. Immediately he was thought dead, the women rushed inside his room and started ransacking for close to an hour. The first wife discovered the sum of three million naira under the rug and the second wife found a million naira in the briefcase. A fight ensued over the discovered money. The violence was just indescribable. It was a matter of life and death, nay more of death.

“Haaa! We will all die today if anybody tries to take this money from me!” roared Funke.

“That’s a lie, you can’t take that money away,” objected Ifeoma. “I won’t depend on this will alone. My own children must benefit more from it or we must go to court.”

The shouts, the screams, uproar and hullabaloo that heralded the supposed Obinna’s death could only be imagined. It was like Armageddon. A bespectacled, rotund old man of God living very close to the house and who had been following the events in the family wondered if the young man would ever have a peaceful rest in his grave with all the tragedies.

“I can see his spirit moving restlessly, unsettled and angry at what is happening. He was a man who struggled day and night to free himself from the shackles of poverty and lack only to end up in the hands of evil and strange women,” the old man sighed heavily.

Chapter nineteen

“Help! Help!! Help!!! It’s a ghost!” Obinna was also confused and surprised! He wondered what was happening. He continued *climbing* and the stark reality instantly dawned on him that he must have been taken for dead. However, he strolled and sauntered home, whistling and humming an old sweet song. It was a very bizarre and shocking sight to people when they saw him walking his way leisurely towards his house. Neighbours took to their heels when they saw him approaching. The fright that descended on them was chilling and palpable.

“Yee, my God! That’s Obinna’s ghost!” screamed a young woman with a baby strapped to her back. She turned and ran inside her house, breathing heavily with fear. She almost had a heart attack.

“Yee! A ghost! Help!” Those were the words that came from the mouth of the frightened people. Before one could say “Holy Moses” he was right at the door of his house. The cooks, drivers and the housemaids took to their heels in a disorderly manner. The fear that consumed the children and made them bury their heads under a bed was as dreadful as a gathering storm. When rumour filtered into the ears of the children and women that the supposedly dead man was on his way home, they couldn’t believe it.

“Darling! Is that you or your ghost?” Ifeoma asked for the umpteenth time. Funke was yet to find the courage to come out to the living room to see her husband. She was still as frightened as Macbeth before the ghost of Banquo.

“Don’t be afraid, sweetie, it’s me and not my ghost! I didn’t die as you people thought. I only passed out,” he said with a smile. “The lion never dies

like that. When the elephant finally dies, the jungle would echo its earth-shattering howl for a long time!" he added, chuckling with excitement.

The shock, he received on learning the events that took place in the disgusting anticipation of his death was indescribable. He couldn't just bear the trauma. He simply went into his room, collected a car key and drove away. He was unsure of where to go but while on the highway, he decided to spend the night with a friend and colleague in the crime world.

The vulture-eyed *AK 47* was delighted to see his boss. He looked down from the great height of his magnificent house and felt concerned at the appearance of his master as one going through the worst of a crucible of humiliation in life. *AK 47* in his late 30s was a very tall, dark-skinned and handsome man who liked to wear expensive gold on his neck and arms. His plethora of girlfriends nicknamed him "*Jewel*" which showed that he was passionate about it. He was never angry nor did he feel felt insulted when addressed as such.

As Obinna alighted from the car, *AK 47* climbed down the stairs, dressed in very expensive clothes. He adorned his neck and arms with cherished gold and precious jewelries. He ran to his boss and shock hands with him.

"Welcome to my little hut big boss, I planned to visit you in the hospital when I learnt about the food-poisoning stuff of your wife. However, I was very busy with a big deal worth 15 million US dollars. The road is clear now...we've got to hit the operation tonight or miss it forever. I was about coming to your house to discuss it *big time* when you called about your coming," he spoke with wry smile and a contagious yawn.

My man...it's a waste of energy. My wives and children ain't worth the risk. I'm out of it. I will persuade *Mosquito* to lead the attack tonight. He is as good too," he gave a countenance of finality as disappointing as wet gunpowder. He was really as complacent as the cat with regards to the

operation, but when the other female members of the gang kept an unmitigated pressure on him, he finally gave in. Everyone was surprised to see the present weakness of his mind. He was really a shadow of himself. This was a man widely acknowledged in the world of crime in Africa as a grand master when it comes to *comprehensive posture* for defense and attack. The dexterity and harmony between him and any kind of gun remained a mystery. He was simply a genius in the choice he made from the outset of life. Little wonder, he had sent many police men to their graves over the years.

About five hours later, the family of Chief Obi while having supper heard a hoarse and guttural voice: “Open this door or we’ll break it down! Open it quickly or you all will be dead meats!”

“Who are those people banging at the door and threatening me?” The Chief asked himself. He was terrified; a departure from the euphoria he was basking in some minutes ago with his family about being the next governor in the forthcoming polls of the state. His heart pulsed with indescribable trepidation. He could hear war-like and bizarre voices downstairs.

“Who could these people be?” he knew his family was in for big trouble by all indications. His wives and children too were shocked and frightened when they heard the blood-chilling utterances of the bandits. The children were really alarmed; they knew that bigger trouble was in the offing for their kind-hearted Daddy.

Chief then summoned courage and moved towards the door to allow the unknown attackers in, since he knew he hadn’t done anything evil or atrocious. The people threatening him were a deadly criminal gang led by Obinna. The old man was at the moment fidgety and trembled to open the door. But he knew he must just open it, even if it would cost him his life. With shaky and trembling fingers, he opened the door but alas, what happened afterwards was too terrible and horrifying to recount.

“Yeah, we got you at last!” the leader of the gang hollered. “The devil will set fire on you now if you don’t cooperate with us.”

“What service can I give my children?” Chief asked innocently. In a jiffy, about three hefty-looking men of the gang descended on him and beat him black and blue.

“God help me! Help! Help!!! Help!!!” Chief screamed as he was being assaulted. His screams further infuriated the angry bandits. His wife however was forced to come to his rescue.

“Please don’t kill him...Please in the name of God”. Njideka begged in tears as the fiery hands continued to descend on her husband. She started crying when she saw blood gushing out of his body. She was really scared and moved to pity.

“Stop! Stop!” ordered Obinna. “We must not shed his blood! He is a good man!”

The chief was already lying on the floor in a pool of his blood. The woman was on her knees, in tears begging them to spare her husband, who though looked every inch a dead man regained consciousness shortly and stood up.

“Chief, we are sorry for that,” the giant-sized leader apologized. “We are convinced that you are willing to cooperate with us now. We’ll deal mercilessly with you if you act funny! Just play according to the rules and you will be fine...I repeat...if you act funny, I will slaughter all your children and your wife before your eyes. I will drink their blood right in the presence of the whole world! And I will kill you with this dagger I’m holding,” Obinna barked while swinging a sharp-edged dagger in his right hand. Chief was drenched in sweat as the leader of the gang pulled him closer and pointed the nozzle of the gun to his chest with an order.

The chief led the way to his room for Obinna and three other bandits to pick up the millions of naira he hid under the rug for his campaign for votes. To his great surprise, not a kobo could be found. The chief was grief-stricken and sad. He mopped the tears off his face with the tip of his cloth. His heart was heavy. He didn't know what to do. He shook his head sorrowfully and sobbed. He silently prayed that something calamitous and disastrous wouldn't happen. Ten minutes later after hot investigations with highly philosophically probing questions, the truth was revealed. Sadly enough, there was no money in the house. His eldest son had made away with all the money much earlier in the day, probably to massage his already over-bloated wayward lifestyle. The Chief offered to let go of his most exotic cars! His offer was gladly accepted and the cars' keys immediately exchanged hands. Just when everybody thought that the war was over someone said:

“Boss, let's go to the woman and the ladies! Maybe it will teach them not steal from the man as the guy did,” *Scorpion* suggested. *Scorpion* was a tall, heavily-built man, with a string-like moustache. He was wielding a gun and a sparkling machete. His body was adorned with a brown leather amulet believed to have supernatural powers for protection. Immediately, six fierce-looking male bandits received a go-ahead order from their Boss, they rushed in commando fashion to the woman and her three female children. The rapists were still smacking their lustful lips with utmost delight when the leader called for a stop. It appeared that, they were pulled to and entangled with by the charming and enchanting bodies by a magical spell.

Chief had wished that death would come immediately and plunge him out of the “*lustful drama*” or at least some good spirits would come and give him an overdose of a sleep-inducing capsule.

“I say...leave them now!” Obinna shouted to the stone-faced and unrelenting *Scorpion*; who had gone to drive in again. The angry leader pushed

the nozzle of the gun harder on his chest and was about pressing the trigger when they heard the loud and deafening siren of the police. If he had ignored the order, the penalty would have been an immediate death. Obinna had a history of giving such penalties during operations so easily; so Scorpion thought it wise to cooperate immediately.

“Surrender all your weapons!” a voice rang from the megaphone. It was the voice of the Lagos state commissioner of police.

“We have got you all surrounded! There’s no escape! Put your weapons down and come out or you will all die!”

At that point, armored tanks of the police were everywhere. Obinna ordered his men to lay down their arms. He knew that the game was up. There were about sixty policemen in the vicinity. The members of the gang protested against the order of giving up like cowards without a good fight.

“The tiger is never afraid of the hunter but the gun in the hunter’s hand. I had a strong premonition that we might not make it today. It takes a warrior to stop a warrior. We simply lack the required fighting spirit today. How do you want us to face them? When most you are still panting heavily from the *marathon attack*? We all know who we are. The foot prints of the elephant and the antelope are not the same. Let us be wise; we lost today, we shall win again and come back stronger,” Obinna pontificated convincingly and with a brave heart. Minutes later, they were arrested, handcuffed and driven away in about ten police vans.

When Ifeoma heard the news of her husband’s arrest, she saw an opportunity to revisit her heinous and devilish plan of killing Funke through food poisoning. She had been nursing this wicked and satanic plan for a long time. She always thought of how to take over the house so that she could

inherit the properties and assets of the stupendously rich guy who was now in the net. Now, she was in a hurry to act fast. She reasoned that if she should die, her husband would have no other option than to will his properties to her and her kids. To carry out her demonic plan, she went to the market and bought some sweet apples and injected them with a very potent poison.

Funke thanked her on getting the apples and put them inside the refrigerator, with the intention of eating them later. She didn't suspect anything evil as their relationship had for once improved wonderfully in the past few weeks. About an hour later, she took out two of the apples to eat. She was about eating them when she got a call from a friend based in the United States of America. She put the apples on the dining table as the call persisted. While on the call Uche and Ikechukwu strolled in happily towards her. They were the children Ifeoma had in her failed marriage to Mr. Peter. The children requested for an apple. Funke paused during the call and gave them an apple. The innocent kids took a bite each. It was a most gruesome and shocking scenario! The two kids collapsed instantly and started convulsing and foaming through the mouth.

Funke dropped her call and screamed for help. Before she could get help, the two kids were stone dead! Ifeoma herself rushed into the living room in trepidation. She was transfixed with morbid shock when she saw her kids on the floor, completely dead, and the apple beside them.

She wailed in pains: "God, I killed my own children! What have I done? I killed my own children!" she cried and confessed to the people around.

Funke was overwhelmed with surprise. She opened her mouth in utter disbelief and sighed continuously. When the tragic news reached Obinna in *Kirikiri* prison, he shook his head many times and cried like a baby. It was a shocking sight as his friends couldn't believe it.

The following day, she was arrested for murder after the police did a thorough investigation and charged her to court.

However, an investigation was carried out to know the exact cause of the children's death. She confessed to masterminding everything in order to inherit her husband's wealth alone. At the court, she stunned the bespectacled elderly judge and those present by her confessions which made the elderly judge deliver his judgment without mincing word.

"Ifeoma, you are worse than a snake," the judge said. "You murdered your loving children because of mere jealousy, suspicion and greed to reap where you didn't sow! You will spend the rest of your life behind bars with hard labour at the dreaded Kirikiri Prison of Lagos State."

At the mention of the sentence, she broke down in tears and wept sorrowfully. She shook her head pitifully and gnashed her teeth regretfully. She was sweating and talking to herself, with her legs and arms shaking giddily. A smart NTA television reporter moved closer to her to ask her some few questions but she turned down his request with these words: "If I had known where my evil plot was headed, I wouldn't have dared it. That was a big mistake."

The *Kirikiri* prison condition was so harsh and intolerable that she nearly gave up the ghost in the first month of her jail term; but she learnt to cope against all the odds.

Chapter twenty

Ifeoma had spent three months in prison; it was very early in the morning and still dark when her former husband woke up to happiness shaking himself roughly. He jerked fully awake at a thought. He had met and “*toasted*” a young lady and surprisingly she agreed to his request. He thought he must enjoy life even without his wife and money. He had given up all hope of getting his wife back, who was now languishing in a dreaded prison. He had fallen head over heels when the angelic young girl smiled back and said: “I love you too!” Those magic words stole his heart.

He had been dreaming of the day he would win her heart. He had no iota of a doubt in his mind that she was his “*Juliet*” and ‘*Miss right*’. In his estimation, she was the most perfect “*Lagos babe*” in town who came from a well-to-do and respectable family. He wouldn’t want to date girls from a poor or poverty-stricken background because of the heap of problems on their heads. He had gone into the relationship hoping to benefit financially from the “*goodness*” of a rich girl in the deception called love.

He had a date to keep. His dream the previous night was all about Rose and it was a sweet and fantastic dream. She had agreed to visit him for their outing. Sincerely, she was like an angel. She had the look and physique of a beauty queen. Her eyes were starry and tempting. She was light-skinned, tall charming and really gorgeous. Her teeth were as white as snow. Her boobs were orange shaped and full.

But Mr. Peter was a mere labourer now. Life appeared to have taken everything from him ever since he drove away his wife. He had none of the

qualities that would make a lady swoon at his feet in love. He felt really surprised at how easily he got her, although he knew that she made a good choice. He was not even a handsome guy by any standard but he had an eye for beauty. Even Ifeoma, his former wife was a rare beauty despite the poverty that was fierce as a famished wolf. Actually, no one could resist the enchanting curves and voluptuous sight of Rose.

They had agreed to meet at a spot very close to his *house*. She was ten minutes early. The time was 2pm when she called on phone and pronto, Mr. Peter was on his way to join her. Everyone in the compound was impressed to see him in such a “youthful look”. He told them that he was going for a job interview.

“Hi Rose,” he said, “I’m really happy to see you. I never knew you could make it!”

“This is me and not my ghost,” she said snobbishly. “Now, where do you think you can entertain me?”

“Hey dear,” he replied being surprised because he had expected her to take him out and spoil him a bit.

“Let’s go to a local ‘Mama put Joint, I know one very close from here. I’ll give you a treat there. We could eat Amala, eba or Isi-ewu, and their foods are not always expensive. We could even eat rice at affordable prices.”

“Nonsense, rubbish, balderdash, insult,” she sighed in annoyance and continued:

“What kind of ‘Lagos babe’ do you think I am? Me go to a local food joint to eat? You must be out of your mind! Gibberish! I’m from a rich home and a sophisticated lady. I don’t eat such a terrible local food or poisonous concoctions! I’m a high class babe and I don’t come cheap. If you are interested in this affair,

it's you taking me to any popular eatery of international standard or I kick you out! Is that right?" she spoke in obvious disappointment.

For some minutes, he was lost for words. He knew he had bitten more than he could swallow. He remembered Mma and her troubles. Big girls, big headache, he thought. Actually he was broke. The company he was working for had not paid him for four months which made him turn into a labourer. He was perplexed, sweating and confused. What kind of situation is this? He asked himself. He knew there and then that he must act fast lest this "*babe*" would think he wasn't man enough to date her.

He had only a thousand naira with him which he had borrowed from his bosom friend, Akpos. He reasoned that the money could neither take care of the bills of a popular eatery nor be enough to take him to work the following day. The Buhari economic crunch or the global economic meltdown had actually melted his little pocket. But no matter how, he felt he must give her a nice treat even if it involved incurring more debts. "Such a classy and high profile lady should not be embarrassed", he thought. "Such are the traits and character of silver spoon girls who are children of millionaires!" he reasoned.

"I'm so sorry Rose," he said apologetically. "Do you mind if I take you to Bright Fast Food International, very close to the Airport? They serve continental dishes that could sweeten your palate."

"Now you're talking," she replied feeling really excited. "You know such fine and beautiful places and you are talking like a dunce. There are others like Mr. Bigs, Zweet Zensation, Finger Licky...These are the kind of places I go to eat and enjoy myself. I don't patronize or enter local food joints to eat such poisonous things as you mentioned earlier. Now, let's go to that fine eatery you know very close to the Airport."

“Let’s go,” he said getting jittery, anxious and unsteady. A few minutes later, they were at the Popular Bright Fast food International. Really, it was a very beautiful and sophisticated environment. The eatery was paradise on earth and very comfortable. The waiter came to them, gave them the menu list as they sat down admiring the wonderful serenity of the place. He only demanded for a bottle of malt drink because he knew how lean his pocket was. Rose was more than happy when she got her menu list. Her eyes glowed with indescribable joy as she salivated over the continental dishes listed on the menu. Her palate and appetite were instantly filled with greed.

“Er...er..., I need roasted chicken and potatoes,” she said smacking her lips. “Spanish Bugger, hmmm...Italian salad, hot dog, ice cream, American doughnut and these two delicacies with names I can’t pronounce properly...and lest I forget, this bottle of wine made in France...”

Within a minute, their table was filled with all that she demanded. She began to munch the foreign dishes she requested for in a jiffy. He watched with unmitigated surprise and awe as she devoured her meal with relish and excitement. Despite the fully air-conditioned atmosphere, he was sweating and gasping for breath. He was really restless like a rat caught red handed munching its way through a loaf of bread. He sighed and sighed and continued sweating. She didn’t notice his impatience and troubled mind as she continued salivating over her meal. She was actually delighted and happy. Then something happened a few minutes later that caused panic and embarrassment to the dashing *old lover boy*.

She suddenly clutched at her stomach during her gluttonous adventure and said: “Yeesh, good gracious, my stomach is rumbling!”

“What’s the problem?” He asked, wondering why his date stopped eating abruptly. Before he could say another word, she opened her mouth and vomited the whole content of her stomach. It was a really irritating, disgusting

and embarrassing sight. The whole floor was littered with her vomit, containing *garri*, groundnut, hard roasted plantain, local popcorn and the hard leather skin of a cow.

She felt a great relief but was really ashamed. Mr. Peter was so embarrassed and squeamish. He wondered at the sickening sight of her vomit showing the entire local and poverty-stricken food she had denied ever tasting. It dawned on him that she was a pretender of the highest order and a great liar. He knew there and then that it was all a ruse and that she wasn't from a wealthy home as she claimed. He had never been so ashamed in his entire life. Rose herself was sweating and making all efforts to compose herself against the prying eyes of people at the highly expensive eatery. To her, it was one embarrassment too many. The cleaners at the eatery were busy cleaning and mopping the dirty floor when Mr. Peter excused them with an intention to visit the gents. Before one could say "Jack Robinson", he had vanished out of sight by taking another exit route.

She sat alone on the chair for some minutes, under the watchful eyes of the security men and the waiters. When twenty minutes elapsed and Mr. Peter didn't show up, she was given the bill to pay, totalling the sum of thirty-two thousand naira. She gasped for breath, sighed and sweated continuously as she was apprehended and held to pay for the exorbitant bill of the menu. At a point, she tried to escape but the cleaner and eagle-eyed waiters spotted her, so she was detained instantly. She begged them to allow her go, and get the money. The marketing manager intervened after much plea and her shoe, wristwatch and necklace were taken so that she would find a means of settling the huge bill. She was even made to write an undertaking in the presence of a police officer, regarding settling the huge bills, before she was allowed to go. She would never forget the day in a hurry. She had just learnt a new lesson that not all men are dunces as she thought.

Chapter twenty-one

A week after the embarrassing date with Rose, Mr. Peter paid a visit to his bosom friend who had been in the news lately as the latest millionaire in town.

“Tell me Akpos, how did it all happen?” Mr. Peter asked while drinking the dregs of palm wine in the cup.

“Well, it’s a very nice story. Promise me you won’t tell anybody,” he demanded.

“Okay, I swear,” he answered; “you know I’m not a journalist, nobody would now about it”.

“Well, let me start from the story of how I died four days ago,” he spoke and *washed down the* bush meat in his mouth with the remaining palm wine in his cup and continued:

‘It was not easy being penniless. It pained me deeply when my wife left because of poverty. How I wept that day she left. It was the saddest day of my life. What was I going to do now that she was gone? I asked myself. How was I going to feed my children and myself? All these sad thoughts filled my head. I couldn’t help it. I cried and cried. For two weeks, I was absolutely downcast, disillusioned and desperate. I didn’t know where to go, or what to do next. I had gone to other companies looking for work but all these outings met with failure. I wrote many application letters but did not receive any acknowledgement or any letter of apology. They did not reply so I did not know if I was wanted or not. I was really in a sorry state. My children had stopped

going to school since my problems began. My children were the worst hit. They cried and cried until their eyes were red and bulging. They looked tattered and unkempt. Their features were sorrowful to recount. Since the problems mounted everybody and there was nothing to eat, they suffered from kwashiorkor, their heads were big and their bellies were round like palm-wine kegs. I only gave them *garri* to soak once a day, at times twice, with nothing else to go with it, of course. And even the *garri* was given to me by sympathetic neighbours in the *house* I live.

That was me left with nothing! I had sold most of my belongings to feed my children. If you had seen me last week, you would have cried. My hairs were rough and dirty like that of a mad man. I was very thin. I can still see my head dangling on my very thin neck. I cried and cried until the tears ceased to come. I thought of it over and over again, and decided that I must end the suffering. Yes, I must commit suicide! This was too much and unbearable. Then, my eldest son told me that he will be going out to *watch Chelsea football* and begged me not to try anything funny. It was as if he knew what I was planning. I told him not to worry, that I was hopeful my prayers would soon be answered.

When he was finally gone I stood up, I moved closer to a sachet of tablets. It was supposed to be dissolved in water and later sprayed to kill insects and bacteria in the environment. Desperate, I picked them up. Then I gave my last two children the last look. I took about ten tablets and swallowed it all. Yes! It was better to die than be alive in eternal hunger, I thought. I took some water. At that time, my two little children were just looking at me; they didn't know that their father was killing himself. They must have thought it was *panadol* that I was taking. After taking the tablets, I sat down peacefully, expecting my death.

Some minutes later, it started its death job on me. I couldn't breathe. It held back my breath for some minutes. I struggled to regain it. My belly turned

into a troubled ocean, like some sort of thunderstorm. My head started shaking giddily and swinging like those big bells in *Capuchin* churches. I gasped for breath. Then my belly started enlarging. My eyes bulged and shot out like someone being strangled with a rope. I was dizzy. I struggled and struggled in terrible pain. Then some minutes later, I collapsed as the dangerous tablet seized by breath finally.

“Please...go straight to what happened there,” Mr. Peter pleaded as he had lost patience with his friend’s knack for telling long stories unnecessarily.

“Then I suddenly found myself in another world,” he continued. On reaching there, I was welcomed by some strange red angels. I can still see myself traveling to that world. These angels that welcomed me were holding swords in their hands. Immediately they saw me coming, they charged at me and started manhandling me. They seized my two hands and tied them to my back as if I was a criminal. I was shocked. I enquired what I did wrong. But they wouldn’t answer me. Then I was dragged to their leader. All along the way, they kept whipping me with their swords. They even kicked me in the stomach. They injured me severely. I begged and begged, but they wouldn’t listen. Then we got to their leader. I can still remember that big, fat red angel they call their leader. He was the one that did the biggest injustice to me. He commanded them to throw me toward him. I was booted towards him. I fell down, with my hands still tied. Then the leader angel thundered:

“Akpos! Akpos! Akpos! I called you three times. You know by now you are a dead man. You are from the other world. But it is a painful thing to see a poor man before me, worse still a poor man that committed suicide. It is a crime in this land. A big crime! We don’t allow it. It’s a taboo. You did it because you are hopeless, stupid and ungrateful. It is a pity we don’t allow poor people here, only rich men enter this land. Poor people are full of troubles, so we only welcome rich people. In fact, to tell you our secret, we hate poor people; they

are irritating and disgusting to our sight. Go back to your world and be patient enough to find yourself a good job, which I know you will get if you are prayerful, hard-working and hopeful. But one thing you must note is that you have soiled and brought disgrace to our territory, with your presence. And you won't go unpunished. Little red angels, start your judgment. You all know what we always do to such people; see to it that he regrets ever coming here."

The big, red angel stopped talking. And immediately, I was dragged up again. I was later taken to a very big fire where some iron rods were red and hot. I can still see them scorching and injuring my skin. Look at it! Yeah! This is the scar, where my skin was seared. I will never forget that moment in my life. I was flogged several times. When I cried and pleaded for mercy. I got no reply, no pity. They were full of hate for me. I have never seen such magnitude of hatred in my life! They were full of anger towards me. I was later taken through a corridor, which looked like a cliff. Then I was pushed and suddenly, I woke up and found myself back on earth as a living human being, right on my bed. I tell you, I will never forget that experience. Please don't tell anybody," he stopped to take a cup of palm wine.

"I won't tell anybody, just trust me...it was really a stomach crunching experience that you had. But...why did you stop going to work for three days now? And...and how did you get all this money I see? How did you get that car?"

"I will tell you," he began with an air of accomplishment. "The morning after the death incident, I woke up very tired. My heart was heavy with pain and grief as if I was bereaved. I got to the site that morning. The Asian supervisor was very annoyed and angry because of my lateness to work. But he later accepted my pleadings. It was a building site under construction. For eight hours I worked tenaciously and painstakingly. I was crying, but without the physical tears. I bled inside. I hadn't eaten anything that day and hunger

gnawed at my intestines in a horrifying manner. I endured the pains of hunger as I dug and dug hard at the soil with my digger. I was drenched with sweat.

I had been digging deep into the bowel of the earth about six feet below the earth's surface when I suddenly struck a hard steel box. I was very surprised and inquisitive. I dug further and brought out the box from the muddy soil. I opened it and got the shock of my life. The box was filled to the brim with gold, diamonds and precious gems worth several millions of naira! I couldn't believe my eyes. The sweet tears of bliss streamed down my eyes as I sighed: "God...you're so good!"

The tears of joy continued to flow freely as I wrapped the box with my ragged and torn shirt and climbed to the earth's surface. I put the box inside the bag containing my labourer's tools. I walked towards the supervisor and told him he had to let me go home in order to take care of pressing family matters. He got angry and replied: "You're going at the risk of your job. You are fired!"

I thanked him for sacking me with smiles radiating from my long-suffering face, and I walked out of the site a happy man. I know that when my estranged wife, Iyabo hears of my amazing wealth now, she will come begging on her knees. I had already withdrawn my children from that ignorance-infested hut called *government primary school*. I'm already searching for the best schools in town and they will go chauffeur-driven. Tell me about the date you had with Rose," he spoke with a self-satisfying smirk.

"I will never forget the day I took that little demon called Rose to an eatery. It was a day filled with sharp heartbeats and a sober reflection. It is sad to hook a lady whose tongue is filled with lies and deception. I hope I wouldn't set my eyes on that demon again...," he was interrupted as the latest *Lagos millionaire* gave a ghoulish laughter which left Mr. Peter wondering at the immense power of money. He had never seen his friend this happy.

Chapter twenty-two

Akpos drove his friend to a traditional wedding ceremony in far away Oyo state. The men had been having a good time these days. At the peak of enjoyment at the party, Mr. Peter set his roving eyes on a dark-skinned, buxom woman who was in her early fifties. He inquired from the host detailed information regarding the status of the woman. She was a divorcee who had only a fifteen year-old girl for her former husband before they parted ways after a quarrel. There and then he summoned the courage to woo this attractive socialite of a woman. He got up instantly and walked gaily towards her as Akpos watched in utter delight with the air of a big man. He was gradually learning the demands of his new status. The woman was busy gulping a bottle of big stout and munching the laps of roasted chicken before her.

“Excuse me lady,” he gestured, “I’m sorry to bother you, you look very familiar to me. Your beautiful visage got me hooked and I just can’t help it, I have to speak with you. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all Sir!” the chubby-looking woman replied excitedly, “you can sit beside me here sir. Do you live in Oyo State?” she asked.

“Actually I stay in Lagos”, he replied I’m an accomplished man. My wife, Ifeoma left me for no good reason. She had two children for me: John and Lara. John is a young man now and Lara is equally a young woman. But that’s deviating from the main thing. You see, I like you so much and I want to have you as my wife. What’s your name?”

“Jumoke is my name. I’m from this State. I’m a divorcee. I’m ready to marry you only if you will take good care of me in all ways, if you understand what I mean.” She enthused.

“Good heaven! I’m already in love with you. I’ll take good care of you; I assure you that you will enjoy every bit of the relationship. I will spoil you silly with love and care. Don’t think about my look or age. I’ll satisfy your yearnings and craving my dear,” he exclaimed.

“What’s wrong with your *tokumbo phone*?” Jumoke asked as he brought out his phone to access the directory in order to give his new love his phone number.”

“The phone is blackberry Z3. It is the case of a broken screen. I took it to a young man to repair it at computer village in Lagos. He assured me that his shop had everything, I was looking for. I didn’t know it would come back worse than it was, with some parts missing and some damaged. When I gave it to him, he first assessed it, and went ahead to loosen it. It took him more than thirty minutes to tear the phone apart as I kept asking him if he had the screen that would be used to replace the broken one. My confidence began to soar again as he showed me all the screens he had, including batteries and chargers. After two hours or so of working on the phone, he suddenly found out that he did not have the screen that could match it. He went to other shops to look for it. Eventually, he wasn’t able to find it. He said he was sorry. He had to put back the bad screen. I couldn’t recognize the phone after that. The broken screen was even more disfigured than ever with scratches and glue stains,” he narrated hiding his embarrassment.

“I don’t trust those technicians”! She snapped. “Most times when phones are given to them, it usually comes back worse. I will always go for new phones anytime, any day. My daughter once bought a phone at that computer village. It was tested and everything worked perfectly. But when she left there, she

opened the back of the phone and what she found in the space for the battery was *fufu*! I mean...*fufu*..."

"*Fufu* in a phone...*Fufu* in a phone...ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ah...!"

Mr. Peter went into a volcanic laughter. "I think...I think what happened was that they swapped it with the bad one when she was about to leave that shop". He managed to contribute while controlling his laughter. The robust laughter attracted the gaze of everyone around, including Akpos, who couldn't fathom any reason for such thundering display of happiness by the new friends.

Because of Jumoke's dislike of low standard handset, Mr. Peter had a sleepless night that day and was very sad. He made up his mind to borrow some money from his friend in order to buy a new handset immediately in order to impress his new *love*. This was a very serious decision because he had a phobia for brand new things. His room was filled with all sorts of fairly used gadgets, ranging from the television set, the CD player, the fridge and the ceiling fan. He could be called *Mr. Tokumbo* because of his penchant and love for second-hand products which are over-abundant in the Lagos markets.

He left for the popular computer village at Ikeja the following day to get another handset that would put him on a higher pedestal in the eyes of his new lover and people in general.

"I'll make sure I get a '*powerful*' and sophisticated handset that would impress Jumoke today!" he mused on his way to the park with a fast pace.

It is difficult to tell where the road begins and where it ends. But the centre is not a long way off the major Ikeja bus stop. A visitor is often asked to get to "*under bridge*" and then ask questions.

There are many pointers to the fact that one has reached computer village. Memory card sellers are everywhere, their wares displayed on long metal hangers.

"Memory card...card reader! Memory card...Card reader!" they make this sound like music.

Seated under the hundreds of umbrellas scattered all over the market are technicians or engineers, as some of them insist they should be called. Signs on their posters read: *"Repair, flash, unlock"*. Further into the market, young men stand along the way, brandishing all kinds of mobile phones.

"Swap your phone, buy, sell," they chant. The phones sold here can be *"brand new"* or *"fairly used"* some are described as *"London-used"*. At computer village, there were a lot of young men whose stock-in-trade was selling expensive handsets at cheap and give-away prices most of them do not have offices or shops of their own. But it is often really a question of availability rather than cost.

As he was strolling amid these sellers of second-hand phones, they started whistling at him and calling him with endearing words. He surveyed them quickly but he was yet to find the right kind of handset that would impress his darling. Then out of nowhere appeared two young guys putting on torn, patched and faded jeans trousers.

"Hey, Oga come buy Blackberry handset!" they beckoned. *It's for big guys like you!"* they chorused.

He turned and took a closer look at the costly handset in the hand of the second guy. Instantly, he could see that the handset was a very expensive one that had all the paraphernalia and components of modern-day technology. He had seen the advertisements of the phone on the television and he knew he would join the clique of moneybags if he owned such an expensive handset.

“How much is the handset?” He asked the guy holding it.

“You can take it for 80k, na because I like you Oga. Blackberry Bolds are out of stock! Blackberry has stopped producing the bold series! You are lucky, Oga,” the guy maintained.

“Bull shit, you mean N80, 000? Who will buy this handset from you for N80, 000?” He replied questioningly, advancing forward.

“Okay, how much you wan pay Oga?” The guy asked, looking really desperate.

“I’ll give you N10, 000 only. Is that right?” He said, turning his head and gazing at the handset.

“Okay, bring it sir, we like you that’s why we are giving you at that price. You know it’s a costly handset but you can take it all the same, the guy said, smacking his lips.

Mr. Peter brought out his wallet and counted N10, 000. He gave it to the guy and he was handed the phone in a jiffy. The two guys disappeared among the sea of people in the twinkling of an eye. He admired the handset briefly and boarded the next available bus for his house.

The new handset brought joy to his heart; he never hesitated to show it to his friends. He would lie that he brought it at the cost of N80, 000. He felt on top of the world.

The following day, Mr. Peter was called for a work of clearing a garden at a duplex located at Ajao Estate. He negotiated with the customer, who was a successful banker and got the job. The banker was a man in his early forties. He gave him the sum of N5, 000 as advance payment for the job and told him to start work immediately.

He was doing the job when his phone rang and he took it out of his inner pocket to receive the call. The caller was Jumoke, his lover. He was really excited as he chatted heartily with her. The banker was standing close by as he brought out the costly handset to receive the call; he was curious to find out certain things with regards to the handset. And he waited patiently for him to finish his conversation with the caller before making some inquiries. The fact was that the banker, Mr. Albert Nnamdi lost his wife a couple of months ago to an attack by some daredevil armed robbers who operated at his residence and carted away valuables worth several thousands of naira, including a sophisticated Blackberry phone which resembled the one he was holding.

“I like the handset you are holding”, the smooth-talking banker said to him. “I hope, it’s not so costly,” he asked

“Ha *Oga*”, my phone is an expensive one o,” he said.

“Let me see it briefly,” Mr. Albert replied. He gave the handset to him and continued with his job. He surveyed the handset for a minute and he realized that the very phone he was holding was the same handset he bought for his late wife to mark her 30th birthday celebration. He scrutinized it very well and saw a particular mark, like a scratch, that was on the phone while his late wife was using it. Instantly, it dawned on him, without a doubt that the phone was the very one he bought as a gift for his late wife. He gave the handset back to Mr. Peter and hurried out to make an urgent call to the police.

“Hello, is that the police department?” he asked. “Okay, please I need your assistance quickly. This is Mr. Albert Nnamdi. One of the armed bandits who robbed my house and killed my wife four months ago is right here in my house.

“We’ll be there in a few minutes time Sir,” the DPO said at the other end.

Mr. Peter was still busy with his work. About ten minutes later, four heavily armed police officers arrived Mr. Albert’s house. The banker narrated

how he got the clue and why he suspected Mr. Peter as one of the robbers. He briefed them that the very handset belonging to his late wife was in Mr. Peter's possession. The officers moved swiftly into action and before Mr. Peter knew what was happening, he was arrested for robbery and taken to the police station.

"What have I done?" He asked really bewildered and puzzled.

"Shut up, you armed robber!" one of the police officers barked at him, hitting him with the butt of his gun. He went down in pain and agony. That was how he was locked up in the police cell that very day. He would appear in court very soon for the robbery and murder of Mrs. Monica Nnamdi.

It was the greatest shock to Mr. Peter why he was apprehended and put behind bars on the charge of murder and armed robbery. It was the mystery of all mysteries. That day when he was handcuffed and marched into the cell, he cried and cried and begged for mercy. He said he was honest and sincere; that he bought the handset from some hawkers at computer village but the police officers wouldn't listen to him as criminal charges were leveled against him without any evidence.

"You'll say the truth when you reach court and you're sentenced to death by hanging." The officer said without mincing words.

"Officer," he cried, "I'm not a robber; I didn't know the handset was a stolen one by armed robbers. Honestly, I'm saying the truth."

"Shut up and mind your words. Whatever you say shall be used against you in the court of Law. You'd better tell us where the other members of your gang are hiding so that you won't be the only one to suffer and die over this case!" the stern-looking officer threatened.

“Oh God,” Mr. Peter cried, “Believe me, I’m not a robber but an ordinary labourer. I bought the handset from some hawkers. That’s the plain truth and nothing but the truth”.

“I said shut up, you lousy criminal!” the officer barked at him, giving him a heavy slap on the cheek. He screamed in pains.

“Now that we’ve interrogated you, we have every right and reason to take you to court in two weeks time. Pending that time, we’ll take you back to our cell. You still have the opportunity to confess now.” An inspector admonished.

Jumoke was at the police station the following day. She spoke with the DPO and begged him that she knew Mr. Peter was not an armed robber. She argued that her man bought the handset from some hawkers at computer village Ikeja. She begged them to temper justice with mercy.

“Officer,” she pleaded, my love may have some enemies in the neighbourhood. He may also be uncompromising and not be in the good books of some people but I’m cocksure he’s not a robber. Nobody is perfect you know, I’ll get a lawyer for him,” she was saying all this in tears.

“Young lady,” the DPO said thoughtfully, “the judge will determine if truly, your *fiancé* is a robber or not. The case will come up in two week’s time. The only thing, I will advise you to do now is...get a lawyer for him. This case is beyond our power and capability. It is really a high profile one and the eagle-eyes of the press are watching very keenly. So, we got to be very careful.”

He was really assaulted and molested by the inmates of the cell he was clamped in. They beat the living daylight out of him. There were very tough and hardened rogues in the cell. Their eyes were as hard as a rock. He begged for mercy in tears, but they were never lenient with him. The police officers had to

take him to another cell when they realized that the hardened criminals could kill him if he remained there.

Jumoke brought food, water and clothes. She prayed to God to set him free. Despite his shortcomings, she loved him. He had narrated to her how he got the handset, and this further confirmed and proved that truly he wasn't a robber. She stood by him. She believed that nobody was perfect and she paid for the service of a lawyer to represent him. The day everyone was waiting for drew nearer; it was the day it would be decided finally after six months of a brutal legal battle.

The judgement day had finally come. He was taken out of his cell amid tight security and driven to the court where the case would come up. The judge was a pot-bellied, bespectacled elderly man in his mid-sixties. The case was called by the bailiff. He was all the while sweating and trembling as his name was mentioned and the accusations read against him. The tears had gathered in his eyes. He looked up around the court premises and shook his head in a pitiful way. The judge spoke for ten minutes condemning the act of Mr. Peter as a robber. He wondered why people indulge in armed robbery when they could work hard and wait for their time. He believed that if people were patient enough there won't be robbery cases. Mr. Peter's lawyer was a young man in his mid-thirties. He argued the case beyond all reasonable doubts that his client was not a robber but someone who bought a product from the wrong people. Jumoke too was very moody and sad as the case proceeded. She had been praying real hard for the case to be in favour of her fiancé.

The judge took a gavel and hit on the table and rose. He promised to be back to deliver judgment in a moment. Mr. Peter was just crying and sobbing like a baby. Jumoke mopped the tears off his face and told him that he wouldn't end up at the gallows.

“My love, you won’t die,” she implored, “they won’t kill you. You’re not a criminal. They won’t kill you.” She further assured. When the judge came back from the chamber he was swift with his judgment. The court was filled to the brim with people who wanted to know what would be the final judgement and fate of the unfortunate man called *Mr. Peter who had been in the news for months*. He appeared to have taken every space in the social media, radio stations, television stations, newspapers and what have you. The press men too were ready with their cameras. Trust the Nigerian gentlemen of the media. Even, Ifeoma, Mr. Peter’s former wife who was currently serving a jail term in *Kirikiri Maximum* prison sent her younger sister to observe the proceedings of the case. She had been following the case for quite a while with a keen interest.

The judge cleared his throat and gave the sentence:

“Mr. Peter, I hereby sentence you to death by hanging for the murder of the wife of Mr. Albert Nnamdi and robbing of her handset and other valuables. You are a hard-hearted criminal. May God receive your soul.”

At the mention of death by hanging Mr. Peter collapsed and fainted, ditto for Jumoke who thought the case would be in their favour. He was carried out of the court premises by some prison attendants and was revived some minutes later. Some minutes later, he was driven away in a Black Maria Van, a vehicle normally used to carry dreaded criminals to the prison where they would meet their Waterloo and ignoble death. Jumoke was rushed to the hospital by her parents who were also in the court premises as the case progressed. She cried and cried. Her parents placated her and advised her to be careful lest she lose her life in the process.

Mr. Peter was remanded in the terrible and dreaded *Kirikiri Maximum* Prison. Ifeoma sprawled on the ground totally broken when information reached her that her former husband was cooling off in the same prison with

her. It suddenly dawned on her that, this was all a conscious volition for self-destruction. "We missed it all," she thought.

Mr. Peter was to be hanged in two days time. He regretted the painful absence of his bosom friend who had gone for a trip with his old lover Amara in far away Dubai. He had started dating her when his wife left for good. The thought of Amara always made his stomach crunch. Naturally, she was beautiful in the true sense of the word, charming, enchanting and alluring. To add to her beauty, she used artificial means like bleaching the skin so that she could look more sexy and attractive in the eyes of men. She appeared to have a good heart but treated Akpos with absolute disdain just as Mma and Rose dealt with him. He kept wondering why men can't reason well whenever they have an erection! He was always annoyed and enraged whenever he set his eyes on her. He couldn't understand why his friend was so crazy about her now that he had got the precious money despite the fact that there was an over-abundance of responsible, dutiful and lovely *angels* all over Lagos. This should be payback time and not a time for a jamboree with *gold diggers*.

However, he came to hate her more when his friend took him into a secret. Amara once dated an eighty-eight year old man popularly called Chief Gburugburu, who spoilt her silly with money. Little wonder, she didn't notice the poor Akpos then. She could date a great grandfather so long as he had money to spend. To her, love had no age barrier. The old man died of cardiac arrest with her in a popular hotel located at Owerri. However, she was lucky to escape arrest by policemen when the randy old man collapsed and gave up the ghost. Before the policemen came to the scene, she had bolted away after beating the eagle-eyed security men of the hotel. It was later relayed on AIT that the old man had a history of hypertension and high blood pressure.

Three heavily-built hangmen brought out Mr. Peter that day as he was still lost in thoughts on how life could be so unfair. His face was blindfolded

with a black cloth as he was dragged to the hangman's noose to mark a date with death. The hangman brought down the rope to strangle him. He was asked to say his last prayers by a Catholic priest who was in-charge of the inmates. The priest later prayed for and blessed him.

The stockiest of the hangmen was about putting the rope around his neck to strangle him to death when Okunade and Adaobi appeared with the Inspector General of Police! The fact was that they had contacted the Inspector General of Police to further investigate the case. And it was discovered that he was innocent of the charges. The actual robbers who killed the wife of the banker had been arrested at Hotel De Gold located in Abuja and they had confessed to the crime. In fact, they were already cooling off their heels in the police net.

This made Mr. Peter a free man instantly. The inspector General of Police, in company with a couple of security operatives instantly bailed him from the hangman's noose. Mr. Peter hugged everyone in tears and wept continuously. It was tears of joy. He kept wondering why he should receive such a good gesture despite the acerbity of his manner towards Adaobi, when she was with his family.

Chapter TWENTY-THREE

It was a balmy Sunday morning. The Okunade's family had returned from church with Mama Adaobi. Her distress visit had lasted for six days now and she was determined to use the influence of Okunade to get her son free from the deadly hook of the Nigerian Police force. He hadn't been very impressive, but she was unrepentantly unmoved. Her philosophy on stealing is truly embarrassing. Little wonder, she allowed her son to spoil beyond redemption from the cradle. He was overfed and over-pampered from the womb that it seemed he had become so rotten in manners that maggots were dropping from his body.

Immediately Obinna and his gang were arrested, the news was aired on most national television stations and radio stations. The social media and print media were not left out. When the news reached Mama Adaobi that her son had been arrested during a robbery operation, she found it hard to believe until she saw him and his partners in crime being paraded on the screen with arms and ammunition placed in front of them. For Papa Adaobi, it was not a news item, he had always believed in the karmic law. Five weeks later, they were arraigned in court and charged for armed robbery. The Chief Judge presiding over the case, Hon. Henry Nnamadika did not mince words when he sentenced him and ten other members of his gang to death by firing squad.

Obinna broke down and wept in the court's premises on hearing the sentence. Wonders shall never end. It was a dramatic surprise to people at the court premises to see the kingpin of a robbery gang weeping like a baby.

“So, people who take delight in making others cry could shed tears when their time is up?” an old woman, who had been following the proceedings muttered sadly.

An hour later when they were through with their breakfast, Okunade and Mama Adaobi sat glued to the television, watching an interesting movie. Adaobi had gone downstairs to pack her children’s school uniform.

“The frogs cannot reject the call of the stream and neither will the birds reject the call of the sky. See it as a command, and act fast because time is running out. You must do it now...I’ve waited too long. I’ve no other son...” she spoke with a mischievous frown on her face.

“Mama...you know that I’ve been doing my best! It’s a very serious case. Let’s keep our fingers crossed and hope a miracle will happen,” he snapped.

“If you can do that for that *Mr. Peter-the-criminal*, why can’t you do it for my only son?” she burst into uncontrolled tears.

“Ah...this suffering is too much for me to bear! I can’t take it any longer! I wish death will come speedily to take me to its bosom...look at my legs! I feel terrible pains in them. It started swelling for ten weeks now and the excruciating pain had almost numbed my senses I have visited many hospitals for the care of the swollen legs but got no solution. My husband is there unconcerned hitting the green bottle as if his son’s life is not at stake...and...”

As she was still speaking, Okunade’s second son Uchenna who was playing video game in the parlour with them jerked and coughed.

“What’s the problem, *Uchenna m?*” She stood up and rushed towards him. Before she could get to where the boy was sitting, he had collapsed. The boy was gripped in another convulsive and epileptic fit. They were confused and heart-broken.

“Oh my God! *Uchenna m! Uchenna m! Uchenna m!*” she screamed, totally confused “What’s the matter with my darling son? Help! Help! Help!” she wailed as she trembled all over during the hopeless situation.

John, who was actually coming to remind his friend about his club’s final match heard the screams and instantly hurried up the stairs.

“Sir, what’s wrong with him?” John asked shaking with fear.

“John...emm...he’s always having the convulsive and epileptic fits for many years and we’ve tried many traditional and orthodox medicines but no cure. I don’t even know what’s keeping my wife downstairs,” he sighed, looked up and sighed once again.

“Do you have onions and bitter kola at home, Sir?” John inquired.

“We have onions, John...but I don’t think we have bitter kola...it’s in the kitchen store,” he replied still trembling.

“Okay, I will be back shortly,” he ran out of the parlour.

The next minute the young boy was foaming in the mouth and still jerking spasmodically.

“Yee! *Uchenna m!* Don’t die please, *Uchenna m!* God help me,” she cried.

In a jiffy, John was back with onions and bitter kola. He knelt beside the young boy and forced the onions down the throat of the boy and put the bitter kola in his own mouth, chewed and sprayed it on the boy’s face. The next moment the boy hiccupped thrice and staggered up. He touched his belly, lowered his head and vomited three dead lizards one after the other!

“My God!” exclaimed Okunade, what is this? Good gracious!”

Then the young boy sat down gently and cleaned his mouth.

“Sorry, dear,” John said, “Are you okay now?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m okay, thank you Uncle John.” He replied softly.

“Oh, I’m so grateful and happy John!” said Okunade, “Oh, this is awesome and great! Haaa...how can I ever repay you for this marvelous feat you performed? You’ve healed my son! You’ve healed my son John! You’ve healed him!” he repeated excitedly.

“Not to worry, Sir! It’s not my doing! It’s God’s miracle!” He replied. “From today onwards your lovely son won’t suffer this convulsive and epileptic fits again, I promise,” he added.

“Thank you my son John! Thank you! We shall forever remain grateful to you! Mama Adaobi said and embraced him.

“Thank you Mama,” he replied with an over-flowing smile.

“Oh, John... what exactly do you want me to do for you? I will do it. You’re simply great,” he spoke with a voice overwhelmed with a deep joy.

“Sir...what else do I need from you? You’ve given me shelter and food. I want nothing more.”

“I still want you to think about it,” he insisted.

“Sir...I actually came to invite you to the final match. It will come up tomorrow by 4pm at *Teslim Balogun* Stadium. You know, you asked me to remind you.” He smiled.

“Consider it done! I’ll be there to cheer you up. I hope you will be at your best form tomorrow. A goal will fetch you...N200, 000...Two goals N400, 000 and a hat trick... N1,000,000!”

“Thank you sir,” he enthused and left happily.

Just then Okunade's phone was woken up by *Mr. Shotgun*; the fearless and merciless kidnapper, who was known for wreaking havoc on many families and leaving pains and sorrow in his trail. He was reputed to be behind many dangerous and diabolical kidnappings in the country and the police had been on the lookout for him for years with no positive result.

"Okunade, I've got your wife in my den," he growled, "If you want her alive, you must pay a ransom of 100 million dollars and secondly your boy-John must not score a goal in tomorrow's match. If you fail to cooperate with us I'll butcher her like a cow in an abattoir and give you her severed head as a valentine's gift. Is that clear?" Mr. Shotgun handed the phone to Adaobi after giving her four hard and dirty slaps in quick succession. The beautiful woman fell down in pains and cried as she spoke with her husband, begging him to do as they demanded.

"Yesss sir...I'll do whatever you say", he stammered, "but please don't harm my wife. Please, I beg in the name of God," he was sweating and fidgeting as he shook his head, not knowing what to do.

"Shut up and do what I said", *Mr. Shotgun* retorted sharply, "Who told you that I know God? To hell with you and your belief! I don't give a damn whose ox is gored. I don't care or know God, you mother fucker!" he bawled and hung up.

John Odika-Okunade's bosom friend was in his mid-twenties and was tall, dark-skinned and handsome and was seen as the lifesaver of his team, Shooting Stars of Ibadan. He was a very talented striker and his team depended on his skill and dexterity in scoring goals even at odd times. That very year's Valentine's Day fell on the day the final match would be played between the Shooting Stars Football club of Ibadan and Enyimba FC of Aba.

Okunade shook his head again in deep sadness and confusion. "What would I do now?" he thought questioningly, "I have been warned to stop John

from scoring any goal in tomorrow's final match," he knew that the success of John's team greatly depended on his awesome skill and knack for scoring goals. He wondered what would be the result of the match if John failed to score his usual fantastic goals.

He had always cherished his wife. What mattered to him now wasn't money or pride but the life of his wife. Whatever *Mr. Shotgun* said, he always meant it and nobody played with him. A painful tear dropped from the corner of his right eye as he remembered his cruel fate. He wondered how he would wriggle out of the deadly snares he had now found himself in.

Okunade couldn't sleep in the night as he sighed for the umpteenth time and the time was exactly 5:00am. He thought over the whole thing in a flash and by instinct, something greater than him said he should instantly call Mr. Nathan Nduka, who was in charge of crime in the UK police at that point in time. He picked his mobile phone and called the experienced police officer who was noted for solving mind-boggling crimes in the UK.

"Hello Okunade, how are you doing?" Mr. Nathan said, "Is everything okay?"

"I have a very big problem Mr. Nathan," he said morosely, with tears streaming down his eyes, "and it's a matter that requires an urgent attention..."

Within a few minutes, he had narrated the strange development to the highly-skilled crack detective. Nathan assured him that the British Police would try their best in unraveling and arresting the demonic kidnapper, *Mr. Shotgun*, but he should be prayerful because he had been on their wanted man's list for some years. He was advised to allow John play the match but he should be smart not to score any goal.

Okunade trembled and sobbed like a baby as he spoke with the officer during the telephone conversation. He later called John on phone and explained

the latest ugly development to him. The good striker who had planned to use the match to send a message to the European Football agents rumoured to be in the stadium accepted the new situation.

That Valentine's Day Final match between the Shooting Stars of Ibadan and Enyimba FC of Aba was to be played at the prestigious Teslim Balogun Stadium in Lagos. The match was supposed to start at 4pm prompt. John had already joined his team half-heartedly, with misty and tearful eyes. His teammates and coach wondered why he wasn't his usual self because he looked sober, terribly sad and melancholic. But he didn't disclose the reason for his sadness and taciturnity

That day, the stadium was filled to capacity because it was a national League Cup final match. Spectators and fans had trooped in from all the four corners of the country to watch this great and eventful final football match.

Pronto, the match began in earnest, with the underdog team, the Enyimba FC, dominating the game in the first twenty minutes. John wasn't composed at all in this great match. Thousands of his fans and spectators wondered why he couldn't make his usual dazzling moves and wonderful strikes. His coach and team manager were all worried and sad. They knew that losing the match would spell doom for the Shooting Stars Club, because they would lose millions of Naira and their record as the Champions would go down. No one knew the dilemma and trouble raging in the mind of the *star*. His mind was heavy with grief, sadness and confusion.

Somehow, the first forty-five minutes ticked on and the referee blew his whistle marking the end of the first half. As the Shooting Stars Team strolled to their dressing room, John's teammates asked him what the matter was, but he wouldn't say a word; he just shook his head in the negative. He wiped his tears with his right hand and said nothing.

His coach and other teammates then told him to be more focused and forget whatever was bugging him and play his usual style. No one knew that the life of his friend's wife was at stake. He would never make the mistake of saying what was raging on inside of him, as doing so would mean he would lose her to the cold hands of death.

The second half started and the Enyimba FC were still dominating the match, making life hellish for the Shooting Stars Team. But it was still goalless fifteen minutes into the second half. The attackers and strikers of the Enyimba FC made deadly moves that could break the defense of the Shooting Stars, but the goalkeeper was always there to rescue his team.

The fans of the Shooting stars realized that this was a tragedy and calamity of high magnitude waiting to happen. What would they do now that it seemed that the chips were down? They knew something was definitely wrong with John alias *C. Ronaldo*, but no one knew exactly what the matter was. They were all cocksure that he wasn't the person playing the match, as his mind definitely was not on the football pitch.

It was exactly two minutes to the end of the match when someone rushed towards John as he was about taking a corner kick to whisper to him that Adaobi had been rescued and saved. It was in the dying minutes of the second half.

Instantly, life came to his heart and he kicked the ball with his awesome skill and there was a stampede and struggle at the goalmouth. John emerged like a bolt out of the blue with a great header that penetrated the goal post of the Enyimba Team.

It was the only goal of that eventful match. The Shooting Stars had won the final match and there was joy and great jubilation. As the happy crowd

cheered and raised John high, he saw Adaobi coming towards him. She was all smiles and giggles.

He got down from the arms of his teeming fans and walked happily towards her. The ebullient police officer told John how he collaborated with Mr. Nathan to arrest Mr. Shotgun and his gang in their hideout that very day. Shotgun was now cooling his heels at the police headquarters for further interrogation and would be charged to court as soon as possible. Okunade was full of praise and thanks to God for saving the life of his wife from the deadly kidnapper. He also thanked the police officers for risking their lives.

The jeep was already waiting. Few hours later, the family was on their way to the Bar Beach with John and Mama Adaobi to celebrate the day amid pomp and pageantry.

“What a brilliant valentine goal you scored there!” Okunade spoke from the wheel to John amid a mouthful of biscuits.

“It was a goal, I would never forget in a hurry,” he replied and smiled.

Chapter twenty-four

The day Obinna and his gang were executed by firing squad was a memorable day. It was a day the largest number of prisoners was executed in a day in the history of Nigeria. And it was certain that it would draw more international attention. The government said that the Saturday's execution was intended to assist a crack down on a recent upsurge in violent crimes across the country and it would be carried out in batches.

Obinna and his gang were taken out of Kirikiri Maximum prisons with forty others to face death at the firing range, close to a hushed crowd of 1,000 people gathered at the Kirikiri firing range to witness the killing.

The armed robbers with Obinna leading in the front stepped down from the Black Maria Van at about 10:40am. They were in chains and handcuffs. A couple of minutes later, they were tied to the stakes to face hot bullets. Gun-wielding soldiers dressed in camouflage and with black shoe polish on their faces were positioned smartly opposite the condemned 46 men and 4 ladies. The soldiers were eager to fire their semi-automatic weapons to execute the convicts who were tied to stakes in five groups. All the while, Obinna was trembling and crying at the stakes. The other members were just silent and waited patiently for the last order from the commandant at the firing range. There were a catholic priest and three Muslim Imam present to prepare the convicts spiritually before their deaths.

The priest appeared at the scene and moved each Christian member of the gang, praying and asking them their last wishes and requests. Some of the

members just mumbled inaudible words; others shook their heads sideways signifying nothing.

Suddenly he was forced to travel down memory lane as he remembered that his first attempt into full time crime was as a pickpocket. He would go to bus stops and position himself at strategic places. Whenever a bus came to a standstill, he would struggle with other passengers and in the process dip his hand into their pocket and filch some money. He was always successful at bus stops such as Oshodi, Mushin, Ojota, CMS and other places in Lagos. At times, he made thousands from such unholy ventures. On such days, he would be very happy and spend lavishly on his girlfriends. He lied to his parents that he was doing casual work at a nearby factory. He would even buy things for his mother who didn't bother to investigate the true source of his income.

Unbelievably when the concerned priest got to his turn, he sighed, looked up and down and gazed penetratingly at the huge crowd.

"Father, I'll like to have a word with that woman wearing brown *ankara* over there," he said.

"Who's she to you?" the man of God asked really surprised.

"She's my mother," he answered quickly and the priest left to call the woman in *ankara*.

"Woman" the priest called, "Your son wants to have a word with you."

Mama Adaobi was shocked and confused, her legs became so heavy and her whole body felt bloodless instantly. She moved forward with numbed senses. The whole crowd wondered what was happening.

"Mummy", he whispered when she was within earshot, "let me tell you a secret."

"What is it?" she answered, moving closer.

“You see, I am...” he opened his mouth, bared his teeth and in a second bit off the right ear of his mother. Blood spurted all over the ground in seconds as her wound bled rabidly.

Mama Adaobi’s right ear was at the moment in her son’s mouth. He continued the chewing, while the woman writhed in pains and anguish, screaming:

Yeeee! Yeeee! I’ve no right ear again! I’ve no right ear again! I’ve no right ear again...I’ve no right ear again...”

She was led away by a priest. The ground was soaked with blood and the crowd was stunned at the bizarre drama that had just taken place; but not Papa Adaobi. He was satisfied with the turn of events. His predictions had finally come true. He had always warned his wife that their son would end up in a disastrous way. He was happy that she had finally reaped the seed of disgrace she had sown from the cradle. He could remember the countless times that he was starved of food and peace and that, because of his frank stand that it was wrong for the hen to flirt with the hyena. “Good riddance to bad rubbish!” He muttered and continued to gulp his beer fiercely like a famished wolf.

Okunade who had been driven to the scene by his driver, had been worn out by sorrow. He had seriously advised his wife against her desire to accompany them. He thought that it was a bad idea to allow his tender-hearted wife witness the gruesome killing of her only brother.

“The men who carry out the barbaric act of killing their fellow men are unfit to live in a real human society,” Okunade complained to his driver. “We have been executing robbers since the early 1970s and we are still having armed robbery attacks.”

John who had been listening with divided attention managed to reply: “How many more times must we kill ourselves before we realize that we are one? May God grant our leaders the gift of wisdom to lead us.”

“Amen,” he responded and reached for his conspicuously expensive suit and removed it baring his white shirt and red tie. He had been sweating profusely as he always does whenever he is disturbed.

“Execution will only make the robbers harder and more violent. I have always argued that the rise in robberies was due to the poor state of the economy and the influx of weapons from the Nigeria-led ECOMOG peace-keeping operation in Liberia...”

As Okunade was speaking, he saw the ugly sight of a man opening different bottles of beer and gulping them with an unequalled velocity. This action had attracted a sea of eyes from the crowd. It was obvious that the man was sweating profusely but was in a state of bliss as his face seemed to say.

“What gave Papa Adaobi the temerity to come here with those bottles of beer when he knew that his son was about to die? Is that an eruption of madness or what?” Okunade spoke hiding his disappointment.

Sir, do you mean that the man over there soused with beer and cigarettes is the father of one of the robbers? Maybe...he is trying to make a point.” John contributed trying to unravel the mystery.

The interest of the crowd in a man also attracted the mind of Obinna. He could see the man with a green bottle with a hand held up gulping the substance with an amazing smile. He became very curious like a fish. “What kind of man would be drinking beer and smoking cigarettes with a frenzied passion in the midst of a sea of soldiers armed to the teeth with firearms?” As he looked further, the man in question seemed to be the police man who arrested him on a burglary mission many years ago, to whom he gave a

handsome amount of the loot and was released without prosecution. But he was not in uniform. On a clearer gaze, it dawned on him that the man was no other person than his own father. He could remember the promise he received from his father some years ago that he would be in a lighter mood with a good number of green bottles on the day of reckoning.

Just as he was about to recover from the present trauma, a woman walked towards him with an *ipad* held firmly on her hand with a smile. She was beautiful, with shiny black hair swept down, a flawless complexion, and intelligent eyes, cat-gray. She was wearing white, off-the-shoulder gown that accented a slender, seductive figure. Around her throat was a diamond and ruby necklace. Obinna could recognize her as Veronica, the woman he once assaulted sexually. The woman, he forced to commit abortion. It was obvious that she was enjoying the video coverage.

There came marching and deft movements by the soldiers and Obinna's line of thought on Veronica was interrupted by the noises from the crowd of people. He lifted up his head and *pierced* the crowd for the last time, a sort of valedictory gaze at the world. Something mysterious struck his eyes and his heart went dumb and immediately he felt like regurgitating. He saw the unspeakably beautiful Angela kissing Ikenna, his bosom friend turned enemy. Angela and Ikenna were adorned in the same rich traditional Igbo attire. This was the only lady he had ever loved. The lady over whose love, he killed the rich South African guy Mr. Silverworth many years ago when life was beautiful as the sunset. The very lady, he nearly got drowned over because of an unreciprocated love at a beach. He had always felt that she was going out with Ikenna, but she always denied it; calling it a baseless rumour and the nefarious work of good-for-nothing gossips. He suddenly realized the reason she left for the United States of America. She must have eloped with Ikenna who was once a member of his gang, but his interest in Angela broke them into mortal enemies.

“What a wicked world!” Most women are no good! Damn it!” He spurted and unleashed the rage seething inside him. He had been trying to pull himself together to think, but his concentration had been greatly disturbed by the pain, he was carrying in his heart.

“Most girls are bloody suckers! No good! I should have known that Angela like the rest of them is no good. That smooth talking Ikenna would simply use and dump her! Then, she will realize what a stupid girl she has been,” he spoke really smarting with regret and disappointment. It really hurt to think that all those beautiful dreams he had about her could not translate into reality. It hurt even more to think that she preferred another man to him after all he did for her. After picking her up as a mere prostitute and showering her with all the love he could muster.

“What’s so special about Ikenna? Is he more handsome than I am? I don’t think so. Is he richer than I am? No...no! I blame myself for this; I really have been so naïve. I should have struck while the iron was hot. I must admit that I am a good-for-nothing dreamer,” this soul-shattering thoughts more than anything else made him feel like one possessed by all the demons in hell.

“God, take my life. I want to die! What more is there to live for?” He cried in between sobs as the soldiers pumped volleys of hot bullets into the stomachs and chests of the condemned armed robbers.

Chapter twenty-five

“Why do I have to live this kind of life, after all I did for my three children? Or is it a crime to bring children into the world?” Ifeoma reflected that Sunday morning in her cell. She was alone in her own poverty-stricken world. Her three children whom she had from the second marriage; one a banker lived in Victoria Island, his name is Chibueze. The first among them Ekene, lived in California, the United States of America. He was in his late twenties. Helen, the last child was a successful trader based in the UK. But who would dare believe that a great woman like Ifeoma alias “*Thick madam*” for that was what everyone called her could live in such squalor, such penury after all she did for her three successful children?

Her three children were living very flamboyant lifestyles while their mother lived a terribly poor life in a cell. Even, Helen who made a promise to her mother that night before travelling to UK that she would keep in touch was nowhere to be found. She hadn’t even written a letter to her mother for the past sixteen years. The last letter Ifeoma got from her was the one she sent informing her that she arrived safely in the white man’s land.

Chibueze, who was an Executive Director of a bank, lived in a mansion in Victoria Island and owned many sophisticated cars and modern day buildings. The last child, Helen was a rich and successful business-woman. She frequented the country once every three months but she didn’t give a damn about her mother though was her mother who once gave her the greatest love in the world.

The crux of the matter was that she was getting weaker and older every passing day and had resorted to begging for many years for survival in the prison in order to feed at least once daily. Her family was already fed up as she had eaten too deep into the family's resources. They appeared to have had second thoughts that taking care of a woman who poisoned her children with the meagre resources of the family wasn't worth it. All her friends had deserted her to allow her see the daylight. She often wondered why she had to undergo all this gnawing hunger and pain when she had greatly invested all her life savings and sweat on her children, when she was with them.

That year she was sixty-seven but she looked exactly like a ninety-nine-year-old woman. She was haggard-looking, forlorn and starved. Her hunger was really an eternal one, as she was actually always hungry. Her health was failing her. Her looks could bring down tears from people's eyes. She knew that her time was up.

The day she died was the most painful, traumatic and agonizing day for her neighbour inmates who really knew her. She collapsed beside a gutter in the front of her ramshackle cell and breathed her last. But before she died, the last words she uttered were:

"O my God, what have I done to deserve all these treatment and pains? Why are they so unforgiving? My children should not mourn me; if they do I'll surprise them. My soul will never rest if my heartless children make parties after my death." She died with tears dropping from her eyes. Rumours quickly spread and it came to the knowledge of Chibueze that his mother had just died. He didn't even give it a second thought or feel touched by the sad news. The message was relayed to him while he was frolicking with some of his numerous girlfriends in a posh hotel. He stood up gaily, took his mobile phone and dialed his elder brother in the States, telling him of the latest development.

"Men, what's up?"

Ekene replied gleefully on wheels in California while heading to a party, “that’s great men.”

“I learnt she died two days ago,” he spoke with a smile.

“Okay men, I’ll take the next available flight tomorrow morning and boy, I’ll be right there with ya in Naija. We gonna throw a big party.” He grunted with enthusiasm.

Then Chibueze phoned Helen who was then in UK. She was really excited and volunteered to spend millions at the burial ceremony. Ekene himself flew in with joy from his base in the United States and agreed to spend about 200,000 US dollars at the burial ceremony. He lodged at the prestigious Sheraton Hotel and Towers for the two weeks he was going to spend in the country. Helen too flew in from the UK and withdrew close to five million naira to spend at the burial ceremony. The family of the late Ifeoma had gotten wind of the highly expensive party the late woman’s children were about throwing and had warned them that she warned that no party should be thrown after her death. But the children, in a closed door meeting had rejected the stern warning and insisted that willingly or unwillingly they would go ahead with their plans to throw a great party.

No one will ever believe that she gave birth to the three children. This was a woman who lived a sorry life in a cell for eighteen years. She slept on a bug-ridden mat and a in mosquito-infested room while her children were enjoying super-abundant wealth and lived in total opulence.

The harmattan haze hung thickly in the atmosphere announcing the arrival of another new year. The burial ceremony took place as planned by the three children with no inkling of the negative. It was reported in the newspapers, beamed on the television and covered by almost all the radio stations in the country.

Some lines of the burial announcement message in the *Guardian* and six other national newspapers shocked many observers. People felt that the sponsors of such uncouth lies should as a matter of urgency eat their words immediately. It was really an insult to the sensitivity of the deceased woman's siblings and her family members. There could never be a higher level of such reckless and provoking cruelty.

The lines read: *"We your children are muffled with pains as the cold hands of death eclipsed you at the crack of dawn. We are glad that we shared your moments of deep grief and joy. The memory of your life on planet earth shall forever be in our memory."*

It was a grand event. Millions of Naira was spent with important dignitaries gracing the occasion. There was much to drink and eat. Many cows were slaughtered while champagne and wines were in surplus.

Then something inexplicable started happening a day after the burial. Chibueze went to the toilet to ease himself but on entering he saw his supposedly dead mother sitting on the WC. He scratched his head tremblingly and stared unbelievably.

"What's the fucking crap..." he stammered.

"Mama...Mama..." he further shouted. He turned back and took to his heels naked. His wife ran out, followed him and asked what the matter was.

"Mama...it' Mama...I saw Mama just now..." was all he could utter as he shivered continuously. His wife thought he had gone out of his mind. She phoned the hospital instantly and he was rushed to the hospital. He was diagnosed to be having psychological problems. He never recovered from that day onward.

Ekene, the eldest child was on his way back to his US base when he suddenly saw his late mother at the M.M airport checking-in-counter, brandishing a horse whip with which she started flogging him.

He shouted: "It's my mother...please don't whip me again...no...Help me...It's my dead mother...nooo...I can't believe this..."

Security officials at the airport thought he was having mental problems. He was grabbed and handed to healthcare workers. He could not make the flight as he was referred to a psychiatric hospital for treatment. He remained there ever since.

The last child, Helen was about travelling out to her UK base the following week after the burial when she was arrested at the airport for drug offences. It was discovered that she had wraps of cocaine and heroin cleverly wrapped in her shoes and private part. She was arraigned in court some weeks later and sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for drug trafficking.

When all these misfortune and calamities befell the children of the dead woman, the elders of the late Obinna's family sought the help of a skillful diviner. They were told that, it was the karmic forces that were at work.

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