

MIRIGO KINYANJUI



MY
SICK & LAME

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Mirigo Kinyanjui

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CHAPTER ONE

Tracy Genesis

AIDA WAS ALWAYS an entrepreneur, an occupation she picked up from her mother, Danita. It was inevitable that she would emulate her mother. This was because it was always the two of them in the slums of Merkato in Addis Ababa, where Danita ran a small restaurant.

It all started the moment Danita discovered she was pregnant with Aida and had to flee her village in the central highlands of Ethiopia. She did not want her parents to force her into a marriage she did not desire with the person who had impregnated her. It was the custom then that a man who impregnated a girl would be forced to marry her. But the young man responsible for Danita's pregnancy was a teenager like her, and therefore was economically unstable—a boy who probably had no idea what pregnancy was all about. Danita was on her own after tasting what her deeply Christian community condemned as the forbidden fruit. She had to forge a life away from her family and community to save herself from the embarrassment of being made an outcast.

After settling in Addis Ababa, Danita would often tell her daughter about the Habesha people whom her tribe, the Gurage, were part of. She longingly talked about the fertile and semi-mountainous region in central Ethiopia the community occupied. Mother and daughter, however, talked little of their village to their Merkato neighbours, who in turn knew nothing about their roots.

Danita and her daughter, therefore, led a quiet life and had made a home in the same premises as her small hotel, in which they lived. The hotel, on its part, was quite popular, serving a special recipe of Gurage traditional dishes

together with *injera*, the signature Ethiopian sour flatbread. The hotel also served a rich blend of traditional black coffee and, in the evenings, *Tej*, a portent alcoholic honey beverage.

In those days, education was not viewed as very necessary for girls. So Aida lent her mother a hand at the hotel instead of going to school. She worked as a waiter and when there were not many customers, she was assigned duties in the kitchen to help with the cooking and doing the dishes. Only in the evenings when revelling customers were enjoying *Tej* would she be given a break by her mother. This allowed Aida enough time to rest so that she would open the hotel early the next morning as her mother slept a bit longer after a long night with customers, or if she had planned to leave early to the market to replenish her stock of food for the hotel. It was a lot of work, but it was the only way to sustain themselves, otherwise they would be forced to pack and go back to the village.

JUST LIKE her mother, Aida became a parent at an early age. She gave birth to a baby girl she named Tracy. And, just like her mother, Aida was not lucky with the man who gave her the daughter. She raised Tracy as a single mother, though with the help of her mother, Danita.

Still, it now meant more work to feed the extra mouth. Aida worked hard and started a business selling muffins, which she baked in her mother's kitchen. This meant that she kept a busy day that went to the better part of the night baking the bread.

By this time, Danita had slowed down due to ill health while, in the meantime, Aida's bakery had picked up business with good returns. Seeing that the business was more paying, she decided to concentrate on baking as her mother's restaurant took a back seat.

As a single mom with a young child to bring up, in addition to an ailing mother to take care of, Aida had no time to feel sorry for herself. She worked at her business, which continued to grow. *Had the bakery been the family business back then when Mom was younger and stronger, wouldn't we already have opened a chain of bakeries with my baking skills?* She would sometimes wonder, more so because her tasty muffin recipe had proved popular, especially with their crust all brown and crunchy with flavourful cherries.

As time went by, the only setback Aida experienced was that she would eventually find herself without a front to sell from. The building that had housed her mother's restaurant had been brought down to pave the way for a new structure. The premises that replaced the hotel turned out to be more expensive to rent, forcing the family to relocate to a residential house. This meant they now had no place in which to sell the muffins. The popular bread nonetheless had to be sold.

To push the muffins out to the market, they were loaded onto a donkey in two huge baskets and delivered daily at a corridor next to the shop of Mr Rashid. Rashid was the new tenant at the premises that used to be Danita's hotel. The shopkeeper was already known to Danita. It is this that earned her daughter favour with the kind-hearted Rashid, who allowed Aida to use his shop corridor as her distribution point each day from 6 am to 11 am.

IN DUE course, the business began to thrive and became a beehive of activity for Aida. This meant that her daughter, Tracy, had to assist her mom. But it was at the expense of regularly attending school, just like Aida herself had lost out helping her mother, Danita.

In the evening just before dusk, they would pack the muffins in polythene bags in batches of twelve pieces of bread per bag. This seemed to fascinate Tracy, who could not understand why the muffins should be packed in dozens instead of the rounded figure of ten, which was her favourite number.

"If we can pack them in twelve, why not ten?" she once asked her mother.

"Maybe it is because is easier to divide," Aida had replied, "Half dozen gives you six, and a quarter dozen three. But a quarter of a packet of ten would give you two and a half muffins, which would mean breaking one in two and that would be messy."

"Yes, now I see," agreed Tracy, "and maybe a customer might complain one of the broken halves is smaller than the other." The thought of this made them both laugh.

The mother and daughter would wake up early, Aida having long allocated each of them the shops to distribute the muffins each morning. This had become a routine for Tracy who, despite her young age, accomplished the task without supervision. This she did with a lot of pride despite the many questions from the shop owners about why she was not in school.

Being asked about school made her wish to join school and she always wondered why the shopkeepers did not direct the question to her mom, Aida, who Tracy never seemed able to convince. She would try to tell her mother that while other kids were able to count large numbers and write their names, she couldn't and was the only one in her neighbourhood who did not attend school. On many evenings, however, after the children were back to the estate from school, Tracy, who was very likeable, would persuade them to teach her what they had learnt. The children were often eager to role-play as her teacher, and so slowly by slowly, she was able to learn.

ONE DAY, as Tracy was headed to her assigned shops to distribute the muffins, a tall, handsome man approached her. The man took a packet of muffins from her load and, without asking her for permission, removed a muffin and proceeded to eat it. She didn't know what to say or do. She just stood transfixed as she tried to process the man's behaviour. She felt deeply angry for his rudeness.

"Where did you get these muffins, young girl?" the man asked, the warmth in which he asked catching her by surprise. "It is tasty! I would like to buy some to sell. My name is Amadi. I need ten packets of these muffins, young girl. But I can see you only have six packets of them."

"Follow me, Sir," Tracy told him, immediately seeing the opportunity this represented. "I will take you to my mom for more muffins as you pay for the packet you have opened." She took the man's hand and led him as if fearing he might escape without paying. Losing him meant losing money, and losing money meant a beating and probably dismissal from her position as a saleslady by her mother. Even so, Tracy was as excited as she was worried about this encounter with Amadi.

"Hello, Mom. My name is Amadi, I met your daughter and tasted your muffins. I want more packets for retail in another part of the city. They taste different from other muffins I have tried before, and I like the size, too. One muffin is enough for a grown-up breakfast."

At first, Aida did not look up or respond to the new client, making Amadi wonder if he was dealing with a deaf woman.

“First, pay for the one you have opened before you continue with your big talk. I do not give free samples of my muffins. I perfected my recipe the hard way, and I don’t force anyone to buy them!”

Amadi was taken aback by what sounded like an overly harsh response. The sneer on her face seemed to say she didn’t care what he thought.

But Amadi was thinking: *What a rude woman. She is meeting me for the first time, and she is not excited about a new client. All she appears to think about is her pennies. I am offended but I have no choice if I want to make money. I have to ignore her rudeness and go about my business.*

“I wanted ten packets, Madam. I already have six from your daughter. Add me four more, and I shall be good to go.” Amadi displayed his might as he stood his tall frame taller and adjusted his trousers to calm his shaken ego.

He was quite offended that this woman seemed to look down on him, yet he was offering to spend his hard-earned cash on her product. This was an opportunity for both of them, and fortune did not always fall on one’s lap like a readymade package. When it happened, it sometimes called for tough decisions. If Amadi was to focus on Aida’s rudeness he was going to lose a business opportunity, and that was not an option for him.

As the daughter of a single mother who had to survive in a male-dominated business environment, Aida had to be assertive. She had worked with her mother selling food to rude casual workers who sometimes refused to pay. When not paid upfront for her products, it sometimes took forever to recover the money. If it was not the food, it was the Tej wine. Drunkards could be mannerless. They seemed to look for every opportunity to provoke Aida and run away with bills. After watching how her mom, Danita, disciplined the drunkards, she learned how to be a better manager. Her experience with the drunkards seemed never to have left her, a distrust that extended to some of her muffins’ customers. With the distrusting attitude, what seemed to save her business from losing customers was that she enjoyed a monopoly because of the unique recipe of her muffins.

“I take orders of six or twelve packets per order; add two more packets to make a dozen packets or you take the six packets—the half a dozen you already have,” Aida added without looking up at Amadi. She was busy going through her stock in hand to ensure she had enough for distribution that day.

Is this woman out of her mind? She seems happy to reduce my order other than sell me the ten packets I want. Does she understand how business is done, or she does do it for the sake of making just enough to pay her bills? Oh, My Creator, help me not to lose my cool. I have a business opportunity here.

Amadi thought this with rage and folded his hands into a fist as if he wanted to hit her. But as a man, besides the business aspect of it, he had his pride and could not agree to reduce his order. He paid for the extra two packets to make twelve as demanded by the business owner, the naïve Aida. In any case, the cost was cheaper than Amadi had thought.

Aida counted six packets of muffins and handed them to Amadi.

“Thank you,” Amadi said as he received the package. He was expecting an acknowledgement of his polite expression of his gratitude for her service, but Aida gave him none.

He left surprised by her poor customer management skills. Aida did not seem aware why he was grateful, saying thank you, despite paying for the products. To her, only free things deserved expressions of gratitude. The distrust showing in Aida's eyes by the way she looked at people could scare any prospective customer. She had no time to create a relationship with her clients. Her baking was good, but her manners were awful to many clients. While at her mother's hotel, where she also played the role of a bar attendant, she had suffered some harassment despite being friendly and all-smiles with clients as bar attendants are known to be. She must have had her reasons to be the rude being she was.

Amadi gave her a perplexed glance as he was leaving, but he thought all was not lost. The daughter Tracy's broad and warm smile more than made up for his disappointment with her mother's rudeness. Amadi thought of Tracy as the little princess. He thanked her and took off.

God has a way of giving us equal opportunities. It doesn't matter whether you are the best or the worst in your field. Provided you wake up to do what you believe in, the whole universe conspires to make your wish a reality. If Aida had competition offering better customer service, I guarantee you she would lose all her clients to the competition. Her competence lies in her invention and being a good baker, but she has no skills for the front office. These were the thoughts going through Amadi's mind as he left Rashid's shop corridors that hosted Aida's business.

He left without another look at the hostile woman. He was eager to start selling the muffins and knew exactly where to set up his table and make a killing on the bread. Otherwise, standing there talking to the woman felt like he was wasting his energy on a lost cause.

On her part, Aida may have been making her muffins on order, but she had never had another walk-in customer since relocating to the residential house. This smart-for-nothing guy, Amadi, was her first such customer.

After he had gone, Tracy reminded her mom that because of the unexpected sale of a dozen packets to Amadi, there would be a shortfall in her supplies to two of the four shops she was yet to deliver. If they were to deliver to all four shops, she tried to explain to her mother, each of the shops would have to receive a reduced order. This would compensate for what Amadi had bought.

Aida, however, did not seem to understand what her daughter was explaining. She impatiently whisked Tracy out to finish with her distribution. And, as the daughter had been trying to explain, two shops did not get their muffin supply that day. Aida did not realise this until she went to ask for payment later that day. Other than knowing how to count her stock, Aida did not seem to know what was important in business. She was like those people who don't seem to have a head for mathematics to be able to mentally calculate surpluses and shortfalls such as her business required. She therefore seemed surprised, if a bit shy, when she asked her daughter as they walked home later that day, "Tracy dear, how did you know that we had a shortfall for the two shops?"

The young girl did not hesitate and promptly replied, "I knew because I saw you sell to the new client a dozen packets of muffins, yet we usually do not have a surplus in case of such a surprise sale. Your sale is precise and only made to existing orders, meaning your business shall never grow Mom. You only make enough muffins for the regular customers. You need to be adding every time so that we introduce the muffins to new vendors. If that guy Amadi gets the market for the muffins he carried today, he shall be back for more tomorrow. That means you shall not have stock for another two or more shops depending on the order he will place."

"How do you call that common sense, my Tracy; the math involved is not for a simple brain like mine. What do we do now, dear?"

“I suggest we should be baking extra muffins just in case, Mom,” the daughter advised.

“And where will we take the extra muffins if Amadi only takes twelve packets like he did today? Do you know how hard it is to get a new client Tracy?” Aida asked the daughter. She asked this using a profit and labour equation that she knew how to solve.

“We have to look for an extra buyer regardless of how hard it is to recruit one, Mom. Better still, we supply to the ones that missed yesterday half a dozen extra to compensate for yesterday. The shops that had not received their regular orders might buy double their usual supplies just in case the supply chain breaks down again.”

Tracy imagined that the customers’ families would consume all the extra muffins and go back to the shop for more the next day. “This might increase the end-user consumption,” she explained convincingly. “It is at four o’clock when families break for tea, and with the extra muffins in the house, it will entice the children to take an extra helping with their tea.”

“That is an interesting way of putting it, Tracy. We need to do exactly that, increase our supply, and create new accounts by emphasising the four o’clock tea break accompaniment. If they do not buy all the supplies, I will pack the remainder and give them to Rashid as a gift. He deserves it for his kindness in allowing us to use the corridor. Thank you, my girl, for the advice.” Aida hugged her daughter.

“I suggest you do not only give Rashid the unsold muffins, Mom. Plan to gift him some whether we sell all the muffins or not. That is part of marketing,” Tracy further advised.

“What is marketing Tracy, why is it essential to give out our hard-earned money?”

“When you give Rashid,” the daughter responded, “he shall open the muffin pack because it will be early morning and he will have them with his breakfast. But he won’t finish the whole pack of twelve all alone. He will have to share them with the friends who come to his shop to visit him. In return, they shall buy supplies from you to go and sell in their shops, including those located out of town. This shall give you more business, Mom.”

“You are a genius child, my darling. I can't wait to see how sales shall turn out tomorrow.”

Aida did not have the words to explain it, but it seemed to her that wisdom and intelligence are inborn. Tracy seemed to have both because no one had taught her these ideas she was giving her. The child must have acquired her reasoning capacity from God knows where. Aida could not explain this, but Tracy made her mother a better saleslady. The daughter had picked business vibes already.

Early the following day they were at their station outside Rashid's shop. Aida handed him the first complementary packet for his breakfast as advised by her daughter. Rashid accepted the packet with happier enthusiasm than Aida had expected. She felt good for the gratitude he showed.

"Another thing, Mom, do not turn away any sales. Even if a client wants to buy only one pack just sell it to them. The money shall amount to the same total at the end of the day as when you insist on a dozen or half a dozen packets per customer. Also, learn to smile at your customers and tell them thank you for the business they give you."

Before Aida could open her mouth to argue, Amadi was back with another order. He was determined to reduce his order should this woman's head still be in the clouds.

"Good morning, madam. I want Twenty packets of muffins. Yesterday was a great day; sales were good. I had returned for more muffins yesterday, but you had closed shop and was long gone. So I had to close business early," Amadi explained.

He was surprised at Aida's overnight change of attitude. Even her face looked more welcoming now that she smiled and had no argumentative notions about the dozen or half a dozen packets per order of the previous day. She took his order with a warm smile and quickly counted the twenty packets and handed them to Amadi. He left happier than the previous day.

Aida and her daughter devised a plan they would hence follow. First, they arranged the muffins on the floor according to the regular orders by the different shops to ensure each shop got its usual supplies, unlike the previous day. The packet arrangement became Aida's daily task in addition to baking. Tracy would concentrate on the distribution. For the first time since Aida opened the business, they were done within no time and had been left with only seven unsold packets in hand.

Before they pondered where to take them, Rashid already had three clients who wanted six packets each, which was more than Aida had in stock. One of

the new clients took three, and the other two customers took two packs each. They closed the shop and left for the day. As they walked to the market to shop for ingredients for the next day's supply of muffins, they met Amadi coming with another order only to discover they had none left.

Amadi told them that he now wanted to be Aida's distributor. He explained that she would sell to him all the muffins she could manage daily on wholesale, and he would develop the retail market for them.

Aida was reluctant and was not keen on that arrangement. Tracy called her aside for a candid discussion.

"We won't give Amadi the clients we already supply the muffins. Our clientele is already an established market. Tell him his litmus test is an order of sixty packets that must be sold outside town. For all the other shops in our area, you will be the supplier. Then we make an effort to recruit the shops that we have not yet approached to buy our muffins." They smiled as they headed back to Amadi to present their offer.

Amadi agreed to the arrangement. By now, he knew the area of the city Aida supplied and took the remaining market. In due course, Aida amassed enough money to buy better equipment and start a bakery in the marketplace she operated. Only now she had a business partner in Amadi who took over the distribution business as Aida concentrated on baking her unique and ever-popular muffins.

Tracy recalled her mother's previous attitude towards Amadi and saw how Aida had changed. She now had more patience even as the guy opened the markets for her. Tracy was impressed by her mom's ability to learn. Just a few lectures with her baby girl, and her business had begun to thrive. Aida was so engrossed in the baking that she didn't even notice Tracy sneak to school with Amadi's children.

AMADI WAS married to an Arab lady and they had two children—two gorgeous boys whose great looks seemed to trace their beautiful mother's ancestors. Tracy and the boys came to know one another as their parents got engrossed in the muffins business. The boys invited Tracy to study with them, and on some days, they would sneak her into their public-school tutorial classes. The mother was too busy with her work and did not have much use for Tracy now that she had a helping hand in Amadi, and by extension, his

wife. Amadi's wife helped with new recipes that Aida had included in her supply list, and they were doing fine.

As fate would have it, Aida contracted what felt like a flu. She wasn't sure what it was, whether it was flu or malaria, or fatigue from waking up early every day. She visited the local hospital, but the doctors didn't seem to diagnose the symptoms to find out what it was.

This did not prevent her from working despite feeling weak. She therefore pushed on with her work until she collapsed one day on the bakery floor.

Amadi rushed her to the hospital. The doctors tried all that they could to treat her, but it turned out to be serious and Aida did not make it.

Aida's death seemed to have greatly shocked her ailing elderly mother, Danita. She did not seem able to come to terms with her daughter's death.

Danita followed her daughter, Aida, a few days later, leaving Tracy an orphan with no other relative to look up to.

Tracy seemed to have died the day her grandma died; the young girl was left feeling deeply alone and lived in constant terror of what life held in store for her with the troubles that soon followed.

Amadi took advantage of Aida's death and took over her bakery as his own, including the many recipes she had developed to enrich her growing list of products. Her creativity had won the admiration of Mrs Amadi, in addition to Aida helping the couple in every possible way to thrive in the business that she had allowed them to be part of.

It, therefore, surprised Mrs Amadi that in the deceased Aida's greatest hour of need, her husband should turn his back on the orphaned child, Tracy. She had always thought Amadi a man of his word as a trusted partner to both Aida and her, only to realise his promises ended where he thought his selfishness had begun. It was, therefore, in Amadi's selfishness to grab the bakery rather than share the business in trust on behalf of the minor, Tracy, so that the girl may reap from her mother's hard work.

This selfishness was something the wife could not accept.

Mrs Amadi felt great disappointment and expressed it in thoughts that took over her mind thus: *Some people find it easy to forget other people's goodwill and sacrifice to make them successful. Leading an honest life means living with a conscience. It means building a life with good intentions for those around you. This creates a strong foundation not only for the work we do but also for the good relationships that come out*

of it. Most of the time, people compare honesty with worldly achievements, status, and influence. An honest person might not always have all the privileges in life, but will often have inner peace, satisfaction, and blessings that no amount of money can buy. Dishonesty may give one many opportunities to create wealth and provide materialistic happiness, but such accomplishments only give short-term joy.

Mrs Amadi had cried as these thoughts passed through her mind. She felt let down by the man she married, the father of her children.

After she had exhausted her tears, Mrs Amadi packed the belongings she could manage and left their marital home with her two children in tow. She was heartbroken that she would have to leave Tracy behind, but there was little she could do. She had yet to attain the status of a naturalised citizen of Ethiopia and therefore needed to process separate documents for the girl aside from her children to get them out of the country to Saudi Arabia, her home country. She left Tracy in God's hands, but she was not ready to be part of her evil husband's betrayal of trust for the poor girl. She decided that, in his selfishness, Amadi was better off single without her than share in his stolen cake.

TRACY WAS too young to run her late mother's business even if she had wanted to. In any case, Amadi had packed all the bakery equipment which he relocated to new business premises on the other side of the town. Tracy had no fallback plan. While her mother, Aida, had viewed her as talented and very bright, she became a wasted talent in Amadi's unawareness of her potential. What had been a family bakery business that Tracy had contributed ideas to its growth closed shop at the death of its owner, Aida.

Tracy felt very alone in the days that followed as there was a lot that did not play in her favour. When her mother died, financial contributions for her funeral and upkeep for Tracy were left under Grandma Danita's care.

And when Grandma Danita passed on, all the money she left behind for Tracy's upkeep including the money collected to cater for her grandma's funeral was grabbed by the village chairlady who took the substantial collections from her grandma's pouch. The chairlady pocketed all the remaining money, leaving the orphaned Tracy to her devices.

The money Tracy had saved for herself when her mother was still alive soon got finished. -She started hopping from house to house looking for a

meal. As if this was not bad enough, the landlord broke into their house and took possession of all household items to cover accumulated rent arrears. She was not at home as the landlord was ransacking the house, only to discover she had nowhere to go when she returned. She slept out in the cold for the first time in her life. It was soon to be the norm. People Tracy thought were family friends feared bringing her to their homes.

She started looking for a job and, every once in a while, she would land an odd job that just afforded her a meal for the day. One lucky day, however, she got a job from a nursery schoolteacher who desperately needed house help. The lady, whom people referred to as Bram's mom, did not mind that Tracy was a minor. This was probably because Tracy looked older than her age, having interacted with adults when she was a salesgirl for her mother.

She proved to be a hard worker as the lady's house girl, especially because she was already used to house chores at home when her mother was still alive. And being an orphan, Bram's mom thought Tracy having something to do was not a bad idea considering her situation. Tracy, in the meantime, was happy with her job, if only because food and bed were assured.

Tracy always finished her chores on time and had enough time to play with other children when they were back from school. She was the kind of girl who easily found contentment with any sort of goodwill extended to her. She always lived within her means and asked for no favours from her employer. She worked like a grown-up woman. When Bram's mom was home from school, she found food laid on the table and the cloth lines sagging with the day's washing. Tracy ensured the compound was sparkly clean, and she was always well-groomed. She continued with her "education" and would often be found seated at the kitchen table reading simple books and finishing her "schoolwork" to hand to Bram's sister, Agnes for marking by her teacher.

One afternoon, the teacher marking Tracy's work insisted on meeting her. When they met, the teacher was sad to see the girl was a minor like the little girls in her class. And the fact that she was an orphan greatly moved her.

The teacher pleaded with the woman of the house Tracy worked to let the girl join her class at the school Bram's sister attended. Hearing this, Bram's mom went into the house and got the school uniform she had earlier bought as a surprise for Tracy. She had discussed it with her husband, and they had agreed the girl should join the school in the new term. But now that the teacher

was willing to enrol her immediately, Bram's mom was more than willing to let her join the class.

The homeschooling had helped Tracy skip several grades to reach the grade of her age group. Being in school did not seriously interfere with her work in Bram's mom's household. After school, she would take a quick bite and assist Bram's mom with all the necessary chores and still make time to play with the other children. Bram's sister, Agnes, loved Tracy very much and would help Tracy with her house chores so that they could have some time together. She was a kind child and made no excuses for her mistakes. Tracy knew her place and was the last person to point fingers at others when there arose a misunderstanding in the family.

TRACY SPENT many years in Bram's family. She made good grades in primary school and got admitted to a good high school. This time it was a boarding school where, without house chores to tend to, she was better able to concentrate on her studies. Eventually, she was admitted to the national university.

ONE DAY as Tracy was finishing her night duties, she felt somebody grip her from behind and the person gave her a soft peck on the cheek. She froze, as it was at night and she was outside the house alone. Everyone else in the house had retired for the day. She had remained behind hanging some kitchen towels to dry. She turned, only to discover to her great surprise that the person who had pecked her on the cheek was Bram, the firstborn in the family that employed and later adopted her. But Bram was not done. He turned her around and, holding her against him, passionately kissed her lips.

"How are you beautiful, do not shout. I have wanted to do this to you for the longest. I am supposed to treat you as a sister, but my gut tells me otherwise. I love you so much, Tracy. I just sneaked out of school to see you. Say something, my love. I know it feels awkward; you least expected this from your boss's son," Bram whispered in her ears.

Tracy had always dreamt of this moment; she had always desired to have Bram. He was not only soft-spoken but was the kind of guy who did not allow his emotions to easily show to a woman. One could have a brief conversation

with him, but he would not turn naughty or mischievous in an indecent way to a girl. He was quick to help and would always look for Tracy to say goodbye as he went back to school. He sought her out for the goodbye as a family member. He never allowed any affection he might have felt for Tracy to show even when an opportunity presented itself such as when they found themselves alone. She would find excuses to serve him juice in his bedroom, but he didn't grope her blouse and try to peek inside it like other boys did. Tracy always thought that it was her lowly background that made him shy away from befriending her. But with Bram suddenly showing up that evening, time had proven it otherwise.

She held him close and poured all the desire she had pent up these many years. They were interrupted by someone turning on the floodlights in the compound. It was his dad who had forgotten something in the car.

"Who is outside? Why is the door still open?" the father called out.

Bram took two quick steps and disappeared into the garden as Tracy approached Bram's dad to let him know it was her outside hanging the kitchen towels on the lines before stepping back into the house.

"I cannot leave a young girl outside; finish, I shall wait for you," the dad offered.

She took her sweet time in the hope he would leave, but Bram's dad was determined to wait for her to finish.

Bram, observing the turn of events from his hiding, casually walked in and greeted his dad as if he had just landed in the compound. His dad forgot he had vowed to wait for Tracy upon seeing his son.

"What are you guys doing outside at this hour, it is dark and cold is starting to bite?" he asked his dad to back up his pretence.

"Hello son, you are home? I forgot my phone in the car. As I came out to collect it, I noticed the door was still open. Then I saw Tracy. I was waiting for her to finish. It is unfair to leave a young girl outside alone. Now that you are here, wait for her to serve you dinner. Your mom went to rest in bed some minutes ago."

"There is no need to wake her up, Dad. I'll see her in the morning," he said as his dad excused himself and got back into the house.

Tracy and Bram followed him shortly after so as not to raise eyebrows.

Tracy served Bram dinner as they discussed her expectations of university life. This would be the first time in her life that she would be months away

from home since the family took her in. Before this, she was home every weekend, as the high school she attended offered boarding facilities which, despite being a walking distance, she took advantage of from Monday to Friday to concentrate on her classwork. Bram's parents were kind enough to allow her to attend school as she pleased. She was not forced to do house chores but felt obliged to return the goodwill to her selfless foster parents who had been so kind to her.

"I can tell you have never had a romantic relationship, Tracy. The way you fondle and kiss is like you are a beginner," Bram commented as he slyly watched the movements of her sensuous body as she served him.

"You are right, Bram. I only kiss in a movie watching characters in love in a passionate scene. I have no time for anything besides books and house chores. Remember, I am in borrowed space. Being in a relationship is such a luxury. I must wait for what the future holds for me. Now that I am due for the next grade, Bram, what should I expect in university corridors?"

"University is a good life, Tracy. It is the first gateway to freedom. It is the first time in your life that a parent does not check whether you have eaten or not. Your hostel room will be your castle. It shall be the first time a parent will not visit your room, especially if you are a man. You have the freedom to sleep alone or with a woman without fear of being busted."

He waited for Tracy's comment, but she did not. He continued. "Parents shall give you pocket money and expect you to manage your affairs. They will not top it up if you misuse the money. It shall be the first time when no one will care to know your whereabouts. Parents shall not care where you have been and why you are late. It is a transition to adulthood."

"Guardians expect you to start dating and looking for a job at the same time. They do not expect you to come back as a permanent resident in their house. From campus or college, you should be testing your wings to fly. Whether you start life in a shared single room is your problem, not theirs. They have done their part, so you must do your part too. That is why I visit home with every opportunity I get because I know when a job opportunity knocks on my door, I shall be a rare guest here, and even rarer when I get married to you, Tracy."

"What do you mean getting married to me, Bram?"

"I love you so much Tracy and I look forward to us being a couple. I have not seen or met a girl who matches your qualities and the values you display. I

love you as a woman, and I like every bit of your being. You love a family setup, hence why you have been with our family this long. Other girls would have long packed and gone to the city, but you have stuck with us through thick and thin. You are also a perfect chef; I like your food more than Mom's cooking. You love your space too; your room is always tidy, Tracy.”

“When do you see my room, Bram? I sleep in the servant quarters away from the rest of the family. When do you ever get there?”

“I just open that door and step in as you do your chores, Tracy. I knew from day one you are a hard worker. I adore you with all my soul, darling girl. By the way, I got a job. The same company that had given me an internship is taking me in. I shall be able to cater for your upkeep while you are on the campus.”

“Wow, that was fast – getting a job, that is. I am happy for you, Bram. About my upkeep, you do not have to worry. I am used to my peanuts. All I need is the books and the teacher. Luxury can wait a bit longer. You need to settle down too. Your house doesn’t have even a stool for you to sit on, dear Bram.”

“That is beside the point, Tracy. You are my woman, and I need to position myself before other wolves start following you, madam beautiful.”

“Oh, my God. Where have these wolves been all this time for them to show up when I am only a few years from the freedom you have just told me about? Besides, I also do not want to be a burden to your ageing parents. They are almost done with your sister Agnes, who is graduating in a year’s time after you, Bram. With an odd job once in a while, I should manage okay to pay my bills.”

“You are a burden to no one Tracy. Your character won my family over. You are our family member. If Dad can be outside to wait for you that late, consider yourself his daughter, which you shall genuinely become, for I am taking your hand to love, cherish and hold for life. Nothing shall come between us anymore. Just know when you step from this house to campus, you will come back as my wife. After all, the dowry for you will be to the same parents that will pay it for me. Everything cancels out perfectly by educating their son’s future wife. Shall you take my hand in marriage, dear Tracy?” Bram winked at Tracy as he pulled her closer to him, running his fingers under the skirt.

“I shall take your hand merrily. That is an offer I cannot resist, Bram. You are mine to keep, my dream boy. My nights are soothed when I imagine you

and me. I fantasise all the time that I will be yours, darling Bram. It shall be a dream come true,” Tracy says gasping for air, as she is suddenly gripped by a want for him. Bram also feels the same, and he holds her tighter while breathing like someone who has just had an asthma attack.

“Excuse me, guys, are you two dating?” Agnes asks surprised as she catches her brother kissing Tracy.

Agnes was from her bedroom to find out what was happening after hearing a commotion. She was home for the weekend. Watching them kissing, she thought it was the best scene ever. “I longed to see this happen centuries ago,” she said and hugged them.

Bram looked relieved at being validated by his sister. Then, with a passion the sister could not miss, he begged her, “Kindly, Agnes, lock my bedroom from outside. I want to spend the night with Tracy in her room. I shall beep you in the morning to open the door for me. Dad saw me come home and nobody will think I am not in my room.”

“What a coward, you are a grown-up now. Who cares who you spend the night with, dear brother.”

“Not me but Tracy. It is not yet time for them to know about this relationship. We need to protect her to the end. She respects our parents a lot. I beg, dear sister.”

“I eavesdropped on them the other day saying they wish one of their sons could notice Tracy’s beauty and take her for a wife,” Agnes said. “You are doing them a favour by taking her as your choice. I love Tracy very much as a sister, too. She is all I have had for a sister anyway. You better take care of her before you disappoint all of us. Murphy has been eying her, too. Keep true and disclose to him soon that Tracy is now taken. I did not want him to win Tracy before you did. He is a boy with many choices. I wonder when he shall ever find his madam perfect.”

“Hear who is talking now,” the brother replied. “Have you found a Mr perfect yourself? The last guy I saw near you was Frank. What happened to him?”

“He is still my choice, Bram. I hope we shall make it well all through. You guys disappear. I shall do the needful and cover for you. All the best, great couple.” Agnes disappeared again to her bedroom.

“Follow suit, Bram, and go to your bedroom like Agnes. I don’t have the guts to take you to my room. Give me a bit of time until I leave your parents’

house. At least until I join college ... hurry before Agnes gets in her room, dear. No worries; let me get the bedroom key back for you, Bram."

Tracy dashed and got the keys from Agnes to return them to Bram. She quickly freshened up Bram's room as he waited for her. He was a bit confused about whether Tracy's claim of her feelings for him was for real. She placed his clothes to put on after his evening shower and dragged him to the bathroom without entering it with him. She locked the bedroom door behind her. She could hear cursing from Bram as she crossed the sitting room and out the main door.

"What a coward," Bram was surprised by Tracy's strict attitude, but happy he had already won her heart.

TRACY SERVED breakfast the next morning as the family sat at the table catching up with each other about happenings the previous day and their plans for the new day. Tracy was caught up with house chores as always. Bram insisted she held what she was doing to have breakfast with the family. Tracy came in and shyly sat as everyone felt embarrassed that they forgot to invite her more often when she resumed her housekeeping each weekend after school.

"I would like to notify the family that I love Tracy," Bram suddenly announced, taking everyone by surprise.

They stopped in their breakfast astounded at what he said next. "I would like her to be my future wife. Treat her as my wife, not the helper everyone looks forward to cleaning up after them. We are all grownups to do things for ourselves, but you can start looking for a replacement if you shall still need a helper. Once she joins campus, she is going to be my responsibility. I hope everyone shall respect my decision." He smiled broadly at the shy Tracy, who was also caught by surprise.

His dad was the first to talk. "Tracy, are you OK to marry Bram, or are the words he has spoken a fabrication?"

"I love Bram, Dad, and I would like to marry him with your permission as his parents and my guardians."

"Love asks no permission, Tracy. Your heart is the one that decides, my girl, not us. If you guys love one another, ours is to put a seal on it. We love you so much, Tracy, and have always longed for you to be part of this family

for real. If you guys have chosen one another, we are all happy with the choice. May our Lord keep you together until old age.”

Bram's mother stood up to hug them. As they hugged, Tracy couldn't help tears of joy running down her face. Her foster mother was happy to have raised Tracy for her son, Bram.

At that very moment, just as everyone's spirit was lifted and in a celebratory mood, Murphy the second son of the family walked in.

“What is the event here? Why are people hugging and crying?”

“Your brother Bram has proposed to Tracy. They shall be a husband and wife soon,” His mother happily reported to him as she invited him to sit for breakfast.

Murphy's heart sank. He, too, loved Tracy and had least expected his brother Bram to propose to her. He used to joke with her all the time and was bidding his time before he proposed to her. How could this happen so fast and lock him out just when the moment was ripe? She was the kind of woman every man would want for a wife. He never thought his brother, Bram, had a similar intention to own Tracy. She was a pretty and cheerful girl with everything to offer, unlike the demanding women Murphy had encountered. He excused himself and went straight to his room without a word. Everyone was left to their thoughts.

No one shared his pain of rejection except for their parents, who somehow understood. Until then, they had no idea the girl was such a hit with their two sons. Bram was their elder son and more serious with things than his younger brother, who was a bit spoiled and had a few more years to mature. He had dropped out of college two times, but they hoped he would honour their trust in him to be serious with school this time.

Murphy was lazy to wake up the following morning. His mother went to his bedroom to check on him. She knew he was affected by the turn of events, for she had seen him ogling Tracy on a few occasions but had thought it normal youthful play.

“Good morning son, how are you feeling? You need to start respecting your body when it needs a break. These bottles of beer every day have sapped your strength, Murphy. Your mind is seeking rest. Let me cover your weak body, dear. I wonder why you lie on top of the bedding.”

Murphy did not respond; his mind was still consumed by the loss of the woman he always thought was meant for him—Tracy.

“I know you need a moment alone to collect your thoughts after learning yesterday that your brother plans to marry Tracy. Not to worry, the beautiful ones are not yet born, my dear son. Those words you can only hear from Mama.”

She left the room and let her son be.

BRAM IS off to school, and Tracy is back from escorting him. She found Murphy seated in the compound alone smoking a cigarette. She went over to share with him some fruits she had picked from the neighbourhood shopping centre where she had accompanied Bram to help him buy his week’s supply of stuff to use in school.

“Tracy dear, we need to talk. There’s no single time I have not shown you my affection; why did you choose my brother, Bram? Is it that I am not man enough for you, Tracy? I have changed so much, just for you. You suggested I stick to one course and now I am in my second year and almost done, just for you, Tracy. Why have you done this to me, dear?” Murphy said this looking very sad.

“Murphy, you have never proposed to me. We have been sister and brother to one another. I have forever been entertaining your women in this house. At what point did you decide I am the woman you had chosen? Or have I become more attractive now that I am taken by your brother, Bram?”

She laughed at him as he gave her an admiring look, like one resisting the urge to hold her in his arms.

“Murphy, you need to treat life more seriously, my brother. I hope you won't lose Grace in your confusion. Hold her tight and give her the respect she deserves. She is so committed to you despite all your shortcomings. Everyone Murphy is looking forward to being in a happy relationship. No one deserves pain. I am so sorry if I hurt you by choosing Bram. It's impossible to get the rainbow without the rain. This is my season with Bram. Be Patient in bad times like this one. I was not meant for you, brother Murphieeel!” Tracy tried to tickle him.

She went on, “Grace, and you shall make a great couple. Enjoy the good times you two have been sharing. I have never been your girl but a dear friend who gave you hope when life became slow for you. I am being honest with

you, brother.” She kissed Murphy’s forehead and pulled him up from his seat for a hug. This seemed to raise his spirits.

“Thank you, Tracy, for being honest and true to me,” he said. “You are such a precious lady. I longed to be the lucky suitor. Now that you are taken, I have to ride the wave the ocean has handed me. I shall set my eye on Grace as you suggest. Time never waits for one to choose between two equal opportunities. The hasty one gets results as the procrastinator finds excuses and argues forever. Between me and my brother, Bram, he was the better suitor. He won the race despite being the tortoise in dating.” Murphy was amazed to catch himself making such comments.

“It is OK, my dear brother Murphy to be sad after making the right decision. Grace is a great lady. I would like her to be my sister-in-law. She has always been by your side through thick and thin. She is pretty and has a well-paying job. She has been selfless to you even in your meanest moments. She has been your keeper for the longest. No matter how complex your life is, or how bad your days may become, there has always been someone in your life who makes your life peaceful. Be proud of Grace. She has been a cornerstone in your messy life, Murphy.”

“Thank you, Tracy, for reminding me how Grace has been kind to me. The truth is if most people knew your story and all the things you've been through, they'd probably wonder why you're still okay and this brilliant. So, in case you don't hear words of encouragement and consolation from anybody else, hear them from me today, Tracy. I am proud of you, and I am happy you shall forever be part of this family.”

“I am happy you have gotten your self-esteem back; you can do it, and you deserve Grace, Murphy. And thank you for the compliment. You have always been kind to me. I take nothing for granted. I remember the boots you once bought me with the last coins you had saved from your school pocket money. I shall treasure the necklace too. Looks good on me, Murphy.”

“I did buy you boots and a necklace, Tracy. But can you imagine I have no memory of it? That is why you say I gifted them to you as a sister. If I was serious about this relationship, the gifts would have been the first bait I would have mentioned, but now I am just jealous I am not your chosen one. That is quite ridiculous to think, Tracy. But I guess everyone wants the best for themselves.”

“I know that thing, Murphy, but we all have the best that suits us. A woman chooses her man. Now that Grace chose you, life shall be smoother for you, and I hope you pray for the same for me, Murphy. I love Bram, and I am happy he chose me. I am so glad to be your sister-in-law. Come here for a hug, no more crocodile tears, Murphy dear.”

Their long hug was interrupted by Agnes inviting them to sit for lunch.

“I see you are finally in each other’s good books,” Agnes commented. “Thank God this did not turn out ugly. Murphy is a king when it comes to victimising himself. I guess he has been Mama’s baby for too long. You need to be brave, brother. We shall soon be out of this nest too. Brace yourself, man!”

Murphy, now back to his normal playful self, chased his sister to the house. His mother was happy to see him vibrant again. She knew the battle Murphy had with himself was for Tracy. She was the only woman with the temperament to calm the two brothers, one of whom was disappointed after Bram, who they saw as the family lamb for his meekness, declared his engagement to the girl of both their desires. In his meekness, he was the one in the family who had no eye for women. Tracy going for him was applauded and received by the family with open arms. Before this, little had his mother known she was bringing up her son’s wife-to-be. She adored Tracy and was very pleased to have her as a daughter-in-law.

As Tracy was joining her first year in college, Bram was on his way out and soon got himself a good job. As he had predicted, the job was with the same company that had given him an internship attachment. He became Tracy’s keeper and eventually her husband.

Honest hands might not always build big, but they are always strong.

CHAPTER TWO

The Crossfire

IT MADE FOR the most beautiful days for the young couple enjoying and leaning on each other as they carved a new life together.

Tracy got a teaching job after college and was posted to Addis Ababa. She was lucky that her husband, Bram, was already well-established by the time she finished university. Bram was working with one of the major banks in the city. And, as Tracy settled into married life, she was able to balance the demands of the home and work at her new employment. With her experience working, first as a salesgirl and as a house help, she made for a model career woman and homemaker.

They soon got their firstborn son, whom they named Joel. In order to give the son all the attention and balance it with her busy work schedule, the new parents decided to wait four years before getting another child. After this period was over raising the boy, Tracy was blessed with a beautiful baby girl whom they named Abigail.

Not long after the coming of Abigail, Bram was transferred to Dire Dawa, a city about 350 kilometres southeast of Addis Ababa. He was taking up a managerial position with his bank and was soon joined by his young family. Their joining him was necessary, as his new position was not only more involving but would have meant him commuting to visit them. Tracy was, however, able to quickly secure a transfer and join the husband. The family settled in well in the city and took to their new employment with relish.

Their life in Dire Dawa however did not last long. Bram got a better job with an NGO in South Sudan that was paying five times his salary with the bank. This was great news to the family, for it promised to make them more

financially secure. Tracy could now afford to be a full-time homemaker raising their two children as Bram toiled for the family. They relocated to South Sudan, which to them before reaching there was something of the proverbial Promised Land for the prospect they thought it held of a bountiful and easy life a good NGO salary could afford.

Instead, they found a country that had just gained independence and was trying to find its feet after a bitter civil war. Tracy settled on homeschooling her son Joel after discovering the school system in the country at the time did not admit children below the age of six. She was, however, not too excited sitting in the house all day. The best house they could find, despite Bram's good salary, was a bedsitter in the capital city, Juba. Her house chores were usually done within an hour. Finding things to do out of the house was also not possible, for the sun outside was always scorching hot where temperatures could reach 40 degrees Celsius in the shade. Not that there were playgrounds or play centres for kids either. People lived in camps. Not a single theme park for the kids. One had to play with the children before the sun started to wreak its wrath in the morning. In this country, life was only possible with an air conditioner, which the house was equipped with.

Unable to take it, she requested her husband to let them go back to Ethiopia for the sake of the children's schooling. Bram begged her to stay for one more year as he applied for a job in a more conducive place. She agreed to hang in there. Life was expensive, as almost everything including food was imported to the young country.

With little to engage the children except for homework, they had to stay confined in the house, though they sometimes would stray to neighbours' homes. It was difficult to confine them indoors all the time. Shopping was a hassle, so Bram used to do all the shopping on his way from the office. Some days he would pick up the family to eat out and shop together. The city did not have fast-food joints except for a few hotels catering to expatriates that served exciting dishes.

IN THE THIRD year since moving to South Sudan, Bram got a transfer to Europe. They could not wait for the month to end since receiving the news to get out of South Sudan. They were excited it would be a relief to leave the hot environment behind and live in the First World.

Everything looked promising until all hell broke loose just before their departure day. The city of Juba was suddenly engulfed with unrest and things happened very fast after that. Militias rival to the army leaders in power were trying to overthrow the government. There was no time to plan or think. People started running for their lives. Rebels flooded the town killing anyone they came across without discrimination. No one had any idea why and for what. This was seven o'clock in the evening. Bram put his son Joel on his back as Tracy strapped the daughter Abigail on her back. They left the house with nothing but their national identity cards. Their passports had earlier been delivered to the immigration office to process their travel.

They met a neighbour, a European man by the name of Boris, who had a car and was also in a hurry to get out as fast as he could. Bram begged him to give his family a lift, as he had already sold his car pending their relocation to Europe. Boris could not refuse, especially because he knew the family's two children who were regular visitors to his house.

They thanked Boris and took the back seat as they put their children in the middle between them. They managed to manoeuvre the chaos in the city, only to nearly fall into an ambush by militias as they approached the airport. Boris's driving skills were excellent and made it to the airport in a flash, even as bullets smashed into the car amid grenade explosions.

He got out of the car, and as he opened the boot to get his bag, he wondered why the couple was not getting out of the vehicle.

"Come out, guys. We have made it," Boris called out.

This was strange. He heard no sound coming from the back seat. He walked around the car and opened the back door.

He watched in shock at the unexpected sight before him. The two young parents were slumped together in a pool of blood. Their bodies looked lifeless.

His attention turned to the kids. By the look of the children's bodies, which were heaving with gentle breathing, they were fast asleep. They were unscathed/unharmed and had heard none of the shooting.

Boris took the two children from the car and asked the boy to hold on tight on his back and held the girl in his arms. He took the bag from their deceased mother's lap and left the dead to their fate. He needed to check in at the airport as fast as possible. There was no time to waste. He confirmed that Joel and his sister's documents were not in Tracy's bag but got into the queue with the children. Luckily, however, he found their parents' ID cards in the bag. Bram's

family's passports had a few days earlier been submitted at the immigration department for processing through Bram's new office to facilitate their relocation to Europe.

The queue to board a plane was quite long, and for some reason, the immigration officials were not allowing more than one child per adult who identified as a foster parent. Boris saw a couple behind him with their young daughter and handed them the girl in his arms. The man introduced himself as Blaze, and his wife, Jewel. Their little girl's name was Angela.

Boris opened the bag and handed Blaze Abigail's mother's identity card and retained Bram's ID card to enable him to get the gate pass for the boy. The couple agreed with Boris to give back the baby girl Abigail once they boarded the plane.

For some reason, after Boris had already boarded, the couple was directed to another plane.

Boris could never tell what happened, but he never could trace the couple. His plane took off from the runway, and they lost one another for good.

This left him with a heavy heart, as it was his intention that Joel and his sister should keep together. He was sad that he could not save the two children and keep them close to his bosom.

He did not know whether Blaze and Jewel proceeded with the baby girl to their destination or whether they had abandoned her. He blamed himself for not exchanging phone numbers.

As Boris sat in the plane wondering whether he would ever find the baby girl Abigail, he heard a familiar cry coming from the seat in front of him. He stood up to investigate, only to be surprised to discover it was his nephew in obvious distress.

"Twister!... what the hell?" Boris cursed, seeing that he could not find his nephew's mom to calm the boy.

Twister ran to his uncle shouting, "My mom is dead! Mom is dead!"

Boris was very close with his sister Gladys, Twister's mother. It was she who had invited him to South Sudan. That her son should shout she was dead was very shocking. Twister was under the care of a good Samaritan, who told Boris he had witnessed Gladys's being shot. Unable to save the mother, who was desperately gesturing to him to save her son as she lost consciousness, he escaped with her little boy.

The stranger handed him his nephew Twister on the plane. The boy was almost the same age as Joel. That is how Boris became a father of two sons, which he took as a kind of victory to save them and having cheated death himself. He settled back in England and was absorbed by the government and joined the navy.

What Boris feared most—to be a family man—he had now become. He was now a full-time single parent with two needy orphans. Raising these boys was not as adventurous as he might have imagined, but he found it worthwhile.

There was no time for luxury with the children; he needed to be hands-on. He did not want to burden his ageing parents with responsibilities to care for the children. Taking care of them was entirely his call. The level of parenthood at which Boris was expected to raise the boys called for no mistakes or excuses, which was not something he could burden his parents. It was a very trying moment for him. He had to remain tied to parenting for a while as he waited for the boys to grow a bit older to be with him as he worked around the world.

In the meantime, he never thought he would ever recover from losing the baby girl Abigail. He trusted she would be OK with the couple wherever it was they disappeared.

As for the children under his care, he had to shelter them from the uncertainties of life and make it as painless and as fulfilling as possible for the boys. It was all very complex and hard to explain to someone who was not involved in the mayhem that robbed beautiful souls of the young parents of their lives seeking adventure and opportunities in South Sudan.

BORIS WAS GRATEFUL for everything and never complained, though he often thought the experience he had gone through of the madness of the murderous militias was enough to last him a lifetime. The thing was to make life bearable supporting Joel and Twister as members of the small family he now considered his own.

He argues that life reciprocates with more extraordinary surprises if you treasure all that you value. Even with battle-proofed beliefs and the distinguished thinking of a world-class Mindset, he felt that it was a tall order to have a smooth breakthrough in parenting. Though his heart was sometimes full of rage, frustrations, and resentment, he tried his best to be a good parent to the orphaned boys.

The fear of the new situation was real. He had no one to blame for his parental outcome; he was the only parent to Twister and Joel. He had two mouths to feed and was the boys' sole provider for all their needs as they grew up. He needed to offer a masterpiece solution. *How can I deliver outstanding results with toxic feelings weighing me down?* He thought one day as he tried to weigh options on how to raise the two boys to be responsible men.

An idea crossed his mind to take the two boys to a baby class so that they may interact with other children and spend less time in the house. He had also reached a point where he felt he needed a companion—someone warm to come to when he got home exhausted from work. Life was proving too overwhelming to this young man still with the mindset of youth and merry-making.

While he must provide bread and butter to the two boys whom he now fondly referred to as the little beasts whose lives he had vowed to make heaven on earth, he was not fully equipped. He had heard all sorts of stuff but being the last born in his family, he never had the responsibility to take care of anyone, let alone the boys.

No one had ever taught him how to be a parent. And given how busy he was, he didn't seem to find the time to date, get a future wife pregnant, and prepare for nine months to welcome a new family member. Taking care of Joel and Twister was a responsibility without a guiding manual on how to execute. Yet his heart and soul must be geared towards enriching the small empires of these young ones' lives to polish them every day and inspire them as they jointly forge forward. The thought of the untimely death of their parents greatly saddened him and was too much for him to bear. He hoped it would fade as time moved on.

WHEN THE PERSON he had hired to look after the children was not around, Boris was the house chef coupled as the nanny for Twister and Joel, as well as their driver. With the three of them, the home was a male-dominated house and, from a woman's perspective, appeared to have no rules or regulations—rules were either bent or non-existent. The boys were free to run through the house testing their hunting skills on anything and everything in the kitchen or sitting room. Flying objects from the tiny hands led to shattered glasses as the family chef, who was also the children's minder when Boris was no around, was busy in the kitchen or with the laundry—this was a common

thing in the household. Of course, Boris's inability to multitask played a huge part in the mess unleashed by the boys. Sometimes Boris imagined the messy house a field that, in his mind, was all green from water running from the regularly broken taps, letting the water run to all corners to wet and grow the grass on this field.

Even the family dog Peggy knew its place whenever the kids were about. The dog's ears had been painfully chewed enough times by the boys. Now his ears had holes large enough to hang earrings. One of its ears was already missing some flesh from the heavy bites by these unruly bullies. There seemed to be nothing to hold them. If they chanced upon a razor blade or pair of scissors, all the seats and bed covers in the house would be in shreds. One day Boris left them alone at home and had taken two hours to go to the office and request a day off. By the time he was back, he could not recognise his dog, Peggy. He was furless. Maybe Peggy enjoyed the boys' tiny hands massaging his body, but the boys had "borrowed" Boris's shaving machine and used it to shave the dog's fur off. Boris had tried to imagine how it might have happened. He wondered whether Peggy had been a willing participant or had been pinned down by Joel and Twister for the operation. He could only see the funny side of it and couldn't help laughing.

When not harassing Peggy, the boys would be with their toy cars driving them from the floor and climbing them all over the walls scratching off the paint. Nothing could stop them, not even a beating. They would later dismantle the toys to inspect and repair their engines. When they were tired, they would leave the dismantled remains lying all over the house. It was chaos raising the boys, making Boris wonder whether that was how he and his siblings might have been when they were little. His laptops had twice already been given a deep bath in the kitchen tub by Twister, who called himself the water king. Boris vowed the new laptops he bought would never leave his desk at the office. His new watch and phone were water-resistant. The first ritual by Twister upon sighting them was to give the expensive gadgets an immersive water baptismal and those items that could not survive the ordeal had to *rest in peace* in Boris's sinks and bathroom tubs.

Boris's parental approach made the boys feel like small lions, "too noble for anger and too bold to fear," as a visitor had once observed of the two. He hoped they'd grow up to be bold enough to face any obstacle, that they should have no limit. For now, they remained cheerful and a smile never departed

their lips. They had a super daddy whose nature could not be said to harbour any motherly instincts.

Indeed, Boris often wondered whether he needed a wife. He had no desire for more kids either. Bringing up the two boys had been torturous enough. The kids did not seem to understand whether a *no* meant *yes*. He would think this when trying to stop them from messing up something and it would end in chaos with them shouting “No! No! No!”

I wonder at what point they learn that no means to stop, he would wonder. I seem to lack the words to persuade them to stop doing some things. Not sure what works for them and what doesn't. I surrender and perhaps should join them in wrecking my house. I will leave it to the hard knocks of life to teach them lessons I have failed to instil in them, he would tell himself.

Even so, Boris knew that Twister and Joel were not the same, each was different from the other. Their demands were like East and West. When they fought over the same toy, he would try to make them come to a compromise about how to share it.

Twister was a chef in the making. He would wake up every day with recipes to cook. Boris was forced to buy him a toy cooking pot and cooker. He would pluck Boris's flowers from the garden and cook them. If food was not stored high on the kitchen shelves or locked up in cupboards, the cereals would often land in his toy pot. Boris could recover cereals like beans which he would clean and cook them for the family after Twister was done with them. But cornflakes would go to waste. Sometimes the boy would refuse to use toy utensils and use actual pots, spoons and plates. He had broken many of them.

Boris had to start serving them food on melamine plates that could better resist shattering upon hitting the floor. Twister was usually the first to finish eating and clean his plate. Twister loved water too. The laundry area was his favourite. The door to the laundry room was permanently under lock and key.

He would eventually learn how to open other taps, especially the kitchen tap. The mess was unimaginable. Boris had to keep a belt in the kitchen because giving the boys time out for their misdeeds was not a language they understood. They needed a spank.

Any tap Twister opened without permission, a beating would follow. Two-thirds of the time, it works. The third of the time the urge to play with water

becomes too unbearable not to indulge. Twister better be spanked than miss a swimming day with all clothes soiled and wet.

This one day, Twister woke up before everyone else. He removed all his bedding and gave them a *proper* wash in the bathtub, including the pillows and toys. A whole container of powdered soap was emptied into the tub. He then dragged the wet bedding back to his bedroom after realising he had forgotten to ask for permission to clean them. The mattress was drenched too. He made his way to Dad Boris's bedroom to ask for permission to clean the bedding he had already messed up. And, of course, it was a NO from dad.

Not long after his son had left the bedroom, Boris was woken up by a thud on the floor of the corridors followed by a loud scream from Joel who had slipped and fallen following his brother Twister to their dad's bedroom to tell him good morning as he usually did upon waking up.

Boris got out of bed in a hurry to check what was happening with Joel, only to slip and land on his butt on the wet floor. The floor was slippery with soapy water from the beddings Twister had dragged back to his bedroom. The floor was quite wet and would have spared no one who dared the corridors to slide and fall.

Realising what was the cause, Boris's wrath was such that he felt like he could throw Twister out of the house for good. Twister, in the meantime, was in tears and full of apologies. All he wanted, he said, was to do the laundry. He accused Boris of denying him that, yet he had wet his bed by accident and had to clean his duvet. Boris could not believe it and thought he was having a bad dream. The young man hired to look after the boys, however, arrived just in time, helping calm emotions and the tension he found in the house.

Boris left the house that morning without speaking to anybody. This was one of those moments when he thought children were not his favourite beings, and he had two of them. He hated women for bearing children. He, at the same time, hated his creator for such an unrelenting responsibility. Despite his anger, he was grateful God had sustained them thus far.

Joel, on his part, was a mechanic from hell. Some of the toys he chose from his collection on the shelf had to have an engine. For that whole week, he would be locked somewhere in the house conducting endless repairs on the toys. When he failed in his repairs, he would go for anything he could find to dismantle. To do this, he used tools from his father's toolbox or stones he had picked outside the house which he used to bang and dismantle the items.

Sometimes he threw the items into a fire to see what would happen to them. Boris had to devise a way to lock the gas cooker in the kitchen so that Joel could not use it to get fire. Boris had to train him to use a toolbox to deviate him from using fire.

One day there was a power blackout finding the two boys' home alone watching cartoons. Boris had briefly walked out to see off a visitor. With the Television off in the blackout, Joel asked his brother, Twister, to help him move the box and television outside to repair the TV.

They had no idea the TV opened from behind. They tried to smash the screen, which they succeeded, but could not access inside. Luckily, they noticed some screws at the back and embarked on them. The servicing of the TV went on, even as they took breaks from their innocent repairs to snack and play with water.

They were so busy with the repairs that they did not notice Boris return to the compound. He looked at the two small devils unleashing their innocent maintenance on a TV he had bought on hire purchase for them. He did not know what to think anymore. They had to do without a TV for a month as punishment, as Boris negotiated with the insurance company for a replacement with the excuse that it fell as they were cleaning and water splashed on it.

Sometimes Boris reasoned that he needed to be creative to survive the two rascals who had no idea of the cost of living. The insurance people did buy his story and was given a brand-new TV and life moved on. Boris hoped Twister's rituals of washing gadgets in the bathtub would not happen again soon with the new TV.

Fate must have favoured these children to have me, They may not have the best behaviour, except that the age I adopted them was a stage in life – a stage that I have no idea how mothers, like my own mother when I was growing up, seem to cope so effortlessly. Maybe I have not suffered a lot bringing these two up as some parents have suffered with their own children. And though I fear my emotional life is a mess, my experience with the boys has been extraordinary and is not for the weak-hearted. Parenting is hard work and a lesson in self-growth that I find bittersweet. Boris thought to himself that evening as they watched a movie.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wilderness

AS THE UNREST intensified during the coup attempt, an NGO-led rescue operation looking for international workers trapped at the airport found this seriously wounded couple in the back seat of a deserted car. They whisked them away for urgent medical attention. The man had lost a lot of blood and after examining him the medical attendants found that a stray bullet had ruptured one of his kidneys. But he had a good chance to survive.

Bram woke up in the hospital disoriented and confused at finding himself receiving medical attention. He started screaming asking for his family. The alarmed nurses had no idea what could have happened to it and tried to calm him to save his strength, as he was quite weak. But he was too desperate to find them and, not caring to heed the nurses, he walked around the wards, including the women's and children's wards, to try and trace his wife and children.

Giving up finally, he requested a kind nurse to look out for them after giving her a detailed description of his family members: "My wife's name is Tracy. She is in her late twenties and is brown-skinned with long, beautiful hair, and has a gap in her front teeth. My son Joel is six and has dark chocolate skin like mine. He is not very talkative but can be quite mischievous and outgoing. My daughter Abigail is only two years old and has enough words to communicate. Where you will find the mother, you will likely find my daughter and will not fail to identify them."

The nurse moved from ward to ward, carefully examining the records and talking to patients. But there was no sign of them. In the meantime, Bram couldn't figure out what might have happened to his family, or trace the kind

neighbour who had offered to drive them to the airport. They only knew him as their neighbour but did not know his name.

Those who rescued Bram had only informed him that he had been found in an abandoned car at the airport as the coup had raged. After being told the car he was found in was riddled with bullets, he now feared the worst. He engrossed himself in the fight to stay alive, believing he was the only surviving member of his young family. He cried his eyes out for days. Eventually, he vowed to himself that he must live, if not for anything but for the memory of his family.

I will trust in God, Bram assured himself. *The Almighty is still on the throne. Only God knew why he had to take my whole family and leave me alone and empty-handed.* He kept to himself and did not speak to anyone. After all, nothing mattered anymore. He did not even bother to let his parents know he was alive. A huge part of him had died with the loss of his young family, only a shell of him remained in that hospital ward.

ONE DAY as he was basking outside the hospital wards, he saw a woman struggling with four-legged crutches as she tried to sit and enjoy the sun as she got some fresh air. He stood up and helped her. As she lifted her face to say thank you to the kind man who had assisted her, she saw that he was already a few steps away heading back to his seat. "Thank you very much," she called out.

This made the man stop in his tracks. He thought the voice sounded familiar. He turned to see who it was and not imagining it. Bram's heart stopped. It was his wife, Tracy.

Such was the speed Bram ran towards her that, unable to stop in time, he passed Tracy only to retrace his steps and hug his wife. She was still too weak to be as excited and properly reciprocate her husband's excitement. But they sobbed into each other's shoulder until their well of tears ran dry.

"How come there is no information about you in the ward," Bram finally inquired. "I sent a nurse, but she could not trace you my dear wife, Tracy?" He was smiling for the first time since admission to the hospital.

"I only regained consciousness this morning. I gave the admission desk my info a few hours ago," Tracy explained, struggling to speak.

She then went on to tell her husband that though she had survived, her womb had been destroyed. A bullet had ripped through her uterus and was still lodged in the womb. And worse, a dead foetus in the womb had led to an infection, leading the doctors to recommend she get rid of the uterus to save her life. The operation had been successful and Tracy was recovering well, though it greatly pained her to lose her unborn baby and her womb. It saddened her that there would be no more children for her.

“I thank God that you are alive, dear Tracy. Your life is worth all the fortune I desire in this world. Every battle that will come our way we shall win it together, my love.” Bram assured her tenderly stroking her fingers. “I may have lost one of my kidneys, but I am responding well. We should be OK now that we have one another.” He leaned and kissed Tracy’s cheek. She was too sad to respond to the passionate kiss. She was still too overwhelmed by what had happened and felt a sense of lameness for her inability to care for her family. She, however, thanked God Bram was still alive.

“Have you seen the children, Bram?”

“Because where are the children, Tracy?” he asked, thinking they were somewhere in the hospital to be discovered like he had discovered his wife.

“I have no idea,” Tracy replied with alarm in her voice, “that’s why I am checking with you.”

“I really don’t know what happened to us,” Bram calmly said, “but I remember the ambush just before the airport and the shooting. When I regained consciousness, I sent the nurse, but there were no signs of Joel and Abigail anywhere. Neither were you, my dear.”

“Maybe they are somewhere in the wards. Let me walk personally to these wards and see what’s happening,” Bram stood up weakly and headed to the children’s ward. He reasoned that, just like with him and Tracy, they may have been unconscious and were likely now awake.

Boys and girls were lumped together. He walked from bed to bed but there was no sign of their children. He went to the admission desk. There were no unaccounted children on the list. He went to the intensive care and dependency units, everywhere he could think of, but there was no sign of his children.

Bram gathered the courage to go to the morgue. He knew that, if the worst had happened, nobody could be taken from the morgue before being identified by a relative or someone close. This was, however, his first time entering a morgue, and he now realised what love for his children could make him do.

One can go to the depths of the deepest ocean in search of those we care about. Trays in the closets holding bodies of minors were opened for Bram to look for his children.

He summoned the courage and took his time keenly scrutinising all the children's bodies in the frozen boxes in case one of them was his kid. The bodies were clean, but it was still a horrible scene to watch. He imagined that even if one did not recognise the children, it was enough to break any parent's heart. But even here, he could not find his children. He took a moment to mourn the young ones who did not make it alive from the unexpected chaos of the attempted coup. He, however, sat down with the hope that his kids must be alive somewhere because they sure got to the airport with them.

Bram dragged his beaten body back to the women's ward to break the news to the fragile wife. Clinging to hope and lacking words to say anything more, they remained quiet for a long time before Tracy broke the silence. "In God, we trust. He is the one who gave us the kids, and he is the one who shall direct us on where to start our search mission, my dear Bram."

Tracy was too exhausted to process all the painful happenings that had occupied her mind for some time now: Missing children; a dead foetus; a lost womb; a husband with one kidney and him a barren wife.

What did we do to deserve all these misfortunes? Tears started streaming down her cheeks, falling on her hospital gown. She wasn't sure whether it was in grief that Abby, as they referred to the little princess, and Joe were missing, or whether the tears were in joy that they were not in the morgue.

She was not going to rest until she knew the fate of their children, Joel and Abigail. They were the only children she could ever possess in her life. Her womb was shut for life and, with an ailing husband, they both must be careful to ensure their healing process is a success amid their grieving. Tracy felt it was too much for her as she tried to understand the sequence of events.

"Why did this hell have to befall us only a day before we were to leave this forsaken land for good?" Tracy asked Bram in a low tone, but he had no answer to the question. He held Tracy's hand hoping to soothe her to rest, now that she knew Bram was still alive and kicking and would face the hazy future together.

THE COUPLE'S routine varied little during their stay at the hospital. They would wake up, take their medication, have healing progress checked by a nurse, feed, find each other and go out to bask. Some days they might get a fellow patient willing to share their ordeal. Tracy was usually more curious than her husband, as happened one day when she was seated with a European woman, Gladys, who, too, had lost her son.

Gladys was married to an Eritrean man called Yonas who died while undergoing treatment. Just like Tracy and her family, their car had fallen into a hail of bullets during the coup attempt leaving some of them injured. Gladys could not recall much of what happened. All she could talk about was her missing son and important documents that were missing.

"I had a bag with me as we escaped the violence of the militias. Whoever saved our lives might be the one with my child and the documents. Or maybe the child died while we were headed to the airport's emergency wing," Gladys tried to explain but was unsure what happened.

"If that was the case Gladys," Tracy observed, "then your son Twister might be in the morgue with the dad. You mentioned that you were unconscious when the rescue team picked you."

"I checked the morgue, only my handsome husband Yonas's body lying on that cold slab. I couldn't believe that the man I love so much now lay lifeless and heard nothing of my pleas to wake up and hold me. I miss him so much. His beautiful promises echo in my ears every day," replied Gladys, "but I am determined to search for my son Twister to the end of the world. This is the promise I gave his dad, Yonas, as I looked at his lifeless body yesterday. All wards were turned upside down as I looked for Twister. He must be alive somewhere, Tracy. But the uncertainty makes it all the more unbearable when I imagine what he might be going through." Gladys was in tears again.

Tracy got an idea after Gladys mentioned that her passport and those of her family were among the lost documents.

"My documents are missing, too, and my children," Tracy told her friend. "I am a mother of two, a boy Joe and a girl Abby. My husband and I were lucky to survive, though he lost one kidney. As for me, I now have to forget the labour ward, for I lost my womb which had a baby in it."

"Oh No! I am so sorry Tracy," Gladys was greatly empathetic, feeling her new friend's pain as a mother. "That is such a tragedy, my dear. Everyone in this hospital has a tragedy that shall take a lifetime to heal."

Tracy, her mind still on her lost womb and baby, was briefly lost in her thoughts and heard nothing of what Gladys had just said.

But her friend continued, saying, “Tracy, I have no idea where to start searching for my son and my brother Boris, yet I have this husband to bury once I leave the hospital. I am not sure whether Boris made it and is alive, for he lived alone in a different estate. But I am certain I landed with my son, Twister, at the airport.

Boris had come to Africa, courtesy of Gladys who was working for an oil drilling company that had urgently needed an engineer. She canvased for her younger brother, who had just finished college. He had been at his job for only one year before the coup attempt and now Gladys was concerned about what might have happened to him.

Both ladies, Tracy and Gladys, each contemplating their losses and fears, had a reason to wet their eyes with tears once more.

“We need to combine our efforts in their search Tracy. This is a small community, and most foreigners working for international organisations know one another. Let us keep this in mind as our health improves, and as we wait for the unrest to calm down. I am certain we shall find a way to get our children back, Tracy.” Gladys said this with a sense of relief, glad that she had a partner in her planned search.

“I am so sorry, Gladys, for your loss. Life can sometimes be ironic; the sadness we feel is the other side of happiness, it is a reminder that we were happy only a few days ago as a family. The noise and mayhem of the coup make us appreciate the silence in this hospital compound, and our kids' absence makes me appreciate my husband's presence. It could have been hell for me with all of them missing. I am sorry about the loss of both your son and husband, my dear Gladys.” Tracy said this feelingly and stretched her weak body to hug her friend.

“That is the shell I am, Tracy, with my all gone. No husband... I am yet to bury him. May his soul rest in eternal peace. How I wish I was the one taken and not him. Though we are told we all recover from such tragic loss, I don't think I can ever recover from it, Tracy. My son is missing and I have no idea where to start looking. My brother Boris is gone, too, and I don't know what to tell my mom, who did not want her dear son to come to this war-torn nation. I feel very sad about it, Tracy.”

“Take it one day at a time, my dear Gladys. Do not quit being a good person because of this evil we have experienced. I am sure your brother came here out of his free will and that is all that matters. It sucks, but we have to be strong for our loved ones. People like us are the ones who give the world hope, for we have so much to recoup from our loss. We shall get better and sort out all this mess.”

“I really look forward to that, Tracy. I am hoping to see my husband’s family members today. I have never met them before. I trust all shall be smooth, Tracy. I hope they understand and do not blame me for bringing him here with me, only to meet his death.”

They were interrupted by nurses calling patients back to the wards for their medical review and discharge for those who were due. The ladies exchanged contacts and agreed to meet up later. They retreated to the wards.

BRAM AND his wife Tracy were among the lucky ones to be discharged later that day. Gladys had to remain an extra day as her doctor was engaged elsewhere that day and did not show up. Tracy and Bram bid her goodbye and promised to help with her husband's burial as they jointly crafted a strategy to look for their children.

The unrest had calmed down, but Bram's house had been ransacked. Everything had been looted. And this was everywhere in the city, including government offices. Even their passports were missing because the immigration offices had also been vandalised.

They signed up for asylum, which they were granted and given jobs abroad. They wanted to relocate to the United Kingdom because the planes taking the rescued international workers and their children happened to be landing in London. They had a feeling the children must have been rescued and must have ended up somewhere in Europe. They reasoned, therefore, that London was central to shuttle between countries depending on where the children might be found.

They were sent to the relevant government offices to get an affidavit explaining their identification documents had been lost and that they needed to be given the necessary papers to enable their travel. They hoped it would be a short process, probably taking only a few minutes.

They walked to the nearest office they had been directed to fast-track the process. They found officers cheerfully chit-chatting. However, as soon as the couple said hello to them, the officers' cheerful mood suddenly vanished; not one of them answered them back, except for one who lazily walked to the counter to assist them. They explained their situation – their ransacked house, lost documents and urgent need to travel – and what they needed to enable their onward travel.

As Tracy sat down with recurring pain from her womb operation, her husband, Bram, was being put to task by the unfriendly officers.

“How did you enter this country without Identification documents?” the officer demanded.

“We had entered the country with our passports, but they along with our national identity cards were lost to looters,” Bram tried to explain to the seemingly agitated officer. *What a question*, Bram wondered to himself. *Why come to this office if we had the documents?*

The officer gave Bram a form to fill out as the other officers continued with their jokes, which Bram thought were probably about the mayhem. Tracy had stood up to listen to the conversation between her husband and the officer, but her discomfort from the healing stomach operation was too much for her. She sat down again and tried to have happy thoughts admiring her husband as he struggled with the forms. Bram was done with the exercise in five minutes, and the filled forms were ready to go.

The officer-in-charge looked at them and told Bram that he had forgotten to attach his parents' death certificates. He was shocked at this, especially because his parents were still alive. He informed the officer of this. *Did I need to show up with them for him to believe they were alive? Why would he want their death or birth certs yet I do not belong to this country, and neither am I a minor?* He wondered, perplexed.

The officer, without smiling, told Bram to get a gun, kill his parents, and present the death certificates to him. *I wonder why one must be that rude to a harmless stranger.* Bram had no energy to engage in a war of words with the officer. The guy was rude all through, but Bram kept calm.

Bram imagined the officer's life to be one of hardship, but it bothered him that the same officer should allow his personal troubles interfere with his work as seen in his bad attitude to the people he was serving. *This is the worst place to*

find myself in. But so are we nursing severe injuries. My wife is barren for life, and I survive with one kidney. Our mission is one, for now, to be reunited with our children. When things were moving as they should be, the officer's awkward questions can be treated as a joke, but such a joke to a needy couple is greatly inhumane. Showing arrogance to desperate people needing your assistance is the biggest and highest level of stupidity. I look forward to the day robots shall offer customer service. At least they won't be rude. Unlike this unfriendly officer, it will only give me a list of requirements without having to repeat them a thousand times as if I didn't get it the first time.

These thoughts passed through Bram's mind as he waited for the officer's next awkward question or comment. True to his fears, as if that was not bad enough, he was asked to go and come back with eight passport photographs just in case some got lost before the processing was over.

"Do ten copies of all the documents and bring them to me," the officer shouted at him as he walked out. Tracy remained behind to wait for Bram to look for a photocopy shop and finish with what she thought were crazy demands by the officer.

I wondered if they would take care of the copies if taking care of the filled copies is such a tall order for them. I have to buy anyway. I have no option. No guarantee that they shall remember where they stored the copies. These offices are a total mess. These thoughts so occupied Bram's mind that he almost passed the photocopy shop. As the copies were being done by the old machine that kept breaking down, Bram was occupied again by thoughts of the South Sudan officers, especially the officer at the counter earlier serving him.

I never thought that after I went to the best schools in the world and with a degree, life would still throw its ugly curveballs at me. As far as I could tell my career path was good, and the market was always ready for my type. I am left wondering whether it is true the world is fair to all if we work hard. This is my first time to meet this mean guy and I hope the last one. I should keep as calm as I can be to get the results I desire. After all, there is nowhere else I can get these documents from.

He went back with the documents. Tracy watched the whole drama unfold and didn't comment.

Bram thought of the officers as former militias who, in their half-baked training, were destined to take the opposite direction from their ancestors and their loved ones if they should get a chance to make a family. Either way, to them, it didn't matter. They had a job to do, and the brainwashing that went

on during their training and experience in the workplace must have done enough damage to their poor minds. They viewed the world through their commander's eyes and heard through their commanders' ears. They were tools of command delivery, like robots; they could no longer use logic to survive. You rub them the wrong side, and you would be dead. not for any personal reason, but because their training was to kill, not to judge and give a thoughtful verdict. In their eyes, you were already condemned and the sooner you cleared from their sight the better.

Finally, the couple got the papers they sought and were relieved to be out of the mean officer's presence. They had been lucky to have arrived early, as queues had grown of other foreigners begging to apply for the same documents.

GLADYS WAS FINALLY discharged. She did not want to notify her family back in the UK that she was safe, more so because she did not want to be bombarded with questions about her Brother Boris's whereabouts. All that was on her mind was her child Twister. Everything else could wait.

Tracy and Bram were early at the morgue. They had little to offer except moral support as Gladys's husband's body was moved to the airport for Eritrea.

The two friends were all Gladys had for company in her grief. Others who would have been there for her were relatives on her husband's side, who had remained in Eritrea to await his body. They had feared being caught in the ongoing violence in South Sudan.

The small group, which would accompany the body, watched wordlessly as it was being loaded on to the plane and were engulfed in sadness as it took off from Juba Airport. Tracy looked back and vowed never to return to the God-forsaken country. The country had not only robbed her of her motherhood but had dispersed her children to God knows where. Bram's thoughts were similar to his wife's, although he had a sense of guilt that had it not been for his tagging his family looking for greener pastures, this might never have happened. He remembered that his wife had wished to return to Ethiopia.

Finally, they arrived at Yonas parents' compound where neighbours and relatives were waiting to receive the body. The burial took place the day after the body arrived. Gladys's husband had been very popular at home during his life, as the huge turnout showed. Everyone expressed how they had been close

to the deceased. Family members were given a chance to talk about the moments they cherished with their departed soldier. His workmates could not attend, the chaos having scattered everyone to their far-off homes except a few of the deceased workmate's countrymen forced to pack and indefinitely head home.

Grief was overwhelming as his agemates and cousins took turns to view the body. The pastor from the church the family attend expressed the following in trying to instil strength in the mourners.

Sometimes I wish we have definite answers why we get premature deaths.

But only God could answer that for he harvests according to his season only.

Regardless of age, season or responsibility. He takes a beggar, a rich man, a child and sometimes the unborn who never see the light of day.

As the survivors, we still have to come out of the limbo and forge a way forward in the absence of our departed loved ones. Seat with the good deeds that Yonas did to us as we forgive his weaknesses so that his journey is complete without us holding onto the guilt of the small quarrels we had with him or debt that we failed to pay him while he was still alive. Now he is a spirit and all you have to settle with him is through prayers.

For his wife, Gladys. The Lord is with you and Twister. It's all in God's presence and when its time, you shall definitely meet your son again in good health. We shall all rally behind you as you look for him.

To the parents. It is very sad to lose a child to the cruel jaws of death before you depart this world. But just know, Yonas shall forever be with you and when it's your time, he shall be waiting to receive you in the world of the spirits. You have many days to live in this world and one task to find Yonas Son Twister should be your motivation to live longer.

May God preserve Yonas soul with the angels. Rest in peace great hero - Yonas.

Before her final departure, Gladys had a few things to conclude with her late husband's family. Tracy and Bram opted to leave her and reunite with her once she landed in the UK. She was happy with the arrangement.

Gladys seemed to remember something and said, "My parents taught me how to comfort the grieving, and to always remember that losing someone can be a heavy burden and to always help someone carry it by being there for them. Yet with all those who have tried to comfort me, it has not eased the burden. I have not only lost someone I cherished, but neither do I have my child and

my brother has disappeared too. I owe my parents a lot when I remember those life lessons. I realise they are priceless. And yet my unconditional love to my parents now is meaningless. I have caused them enough pain. I should keep on my own and look for my son as I grieve my dead husband. My husband was not known to my family members back in the UK. For some reason, Boris never got a chance to meet him either. What a shame!”

“Let's trust everything shall fall in place soon. The uncertainty is what keeps us miserable. We have to keep strong in our difficult journey to get our children back, Gladys.” Tracy hugged her as she gifted her with a necklace and placed it on her neck. It was a simple beaded necklace from Ethiopia but it was already very precious to Gladys because of the circumstances she had received it. She held it tightly like it contained all the answers she was looking for.

A YEAR WENT BY but there was no news about their children Joel and Abigail. Gladys also has not gotten any information about her son, Twister. Nonetheless, their lives still revolved around the kids and without them, nothing made sense anymore. This was the most difficult year of all for them – a year of desperate hope that they would reunite with the children and dread that they may never see them again.

Where does the child come from? Tracy sometimes wondered to herself. She knew that to even answer this question was to acknowledge that a human being is amazing. She remembered reading something by the famous Austrian spiritualist Rudolf Steiner who suggests there are three parts that make a human being. The first aspect, she recalled reading, was the spirit which describes a person's individuality—the ‘I’ or ‘real me,’ an aspect that is eternal. We are all Spirit, coming from the Creator, says Steiner. Each person is a Spirit made in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, has a spiritual nature that can create, develop, and grow. As Spirit, we never die – Spirit is beyond birth and death.

The second aspect of the human being is the Soul or the psychological nature through which we experience thinking, feeling and will. The third aspect is the Body, the earthly, physical body through which we experience the world we live in.

Steiner explains that religion and cultures speak of a “heaven” or “paradise” or “divine world” from which we come and to which we eventually return after

death. In order to be on earth, as Spirit-Soul, we need two parents to create a physical body for us in which we can live. The parents provide this body through conception, and the mother carries this body for nine months, preparing it for birth.

Bram and Tracy had passed this stage already. They had Joel and Abigail. So was Gladys, who had Twister. Years however came and went with no signs of their lost children, diminishing their hope of ever finding them as years passed. They were reduced to zombies, who worked just to pay bills without profitable investment because all the resources they made were channelled to looking for the children in countries all over Europe in the hope of reuniting with them.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Mirror

SINCE THEY MET on that day at the Juba airport, Abigail never saw Angela as different from herself. They had both immediately noticed their different appearances – Angela’s pinkish-white skin and straight hair, and Abigail’s chocolate-brown skin and kinky hair. These differences, however, didn’t seem to matter. What mattered was their likenesses: They were of similar age, both being two years old with Angela only a few months older, and they enjoyed the same programmes on TV and liked the same games, including playing with dolls. These were the most important things to the two girls, and they quickly took to each other as sisters.

Initially, Abigail had cried for her mother, but Jewel had calmed her down before eventually deciding with her husband to adopt her as their second daughter after failing to trace her parents. Abigail’s new family was, therefore, as nurturing as might be expected, particularly with Angela to keep her sisterly company.

Outside the home was a bit different. The first racial encounter Abigail ever had was in her neighbourhood, being the only black kid in the all-white locality. There were monkey calls directed at her by mischievous boys which had perplexed her. A girl had once pinched Abigail at a playing field to see whether she would feel pain, to which Angela had angrily protested scaring off the girl.

At other times, in her nearly all-white school, she would be bullied because of her being black. But her sister Angela was always there for her, standing up to the bullies and physically being in fights with them in the defence of her sister, which she always made clear. Angela became her guardian, and every kid

in the neighbourhood and school knew better than to mess with Abigail or make her their punching bag.

These encounters, however, only served to make Abigail more conscious of everything around her, reminding her she was different. This brought to her mind vague memories about her past, making her seek answers from her foster parents Jewel and Blaze about her real parents and their origin. With few forthcoming answers, she eventually had to come to terms with her life as the black daughter of her white family.

ABIGAIL WAS still on the younger side of her preteens when her personality started asserting itself. Jewel, her foster mother, noticed this and thought it very encouraging. She saw it as Abigail coming out to make a name for herself and craft her own identity away from the shadow of her more dominant sister, Angela.

She should not always be known as Angela's sister, Jewel thought to herself.

She thought that her black daughter, just like her biological daughter Angela, should be the fabled bejewelled water drop. When a drop of water falls into the ocean, Jewel recalled reading somewhere, it loses its identity. But if it falls on a leaf, it sparkles and shines for all to see.

Abigail started participating in everything other kids were engaging in and started distinguishing herself. And just like the sparkly drop of water Jewel was observing in her, Abigail was emerging from the shadows of the more popular Angela to also stand out among her peers, just like her dark skin.

While still in their very young preteens, Jewel had taught her daughters three things that she termed magical: To always acknowledge their mistakes; encourage and build their self-confidence with the small gains they made; and always acknowledge the kindness of others.

Where either of the girls had failed, she instructed them, they should always admit their mistakes and that each of her daughters should tell herself, *I am very sorry; I promise that shall not happen again.*

When they would succeed in the games they would play with other children, the mother encouraged them to always self-affirm themselves saying, *Congratulations, you are so good in this game.* Abigail, just like her sister, did not

know this then, but slowly by slowly she would gain and cultivate her self-confidence.

The two girls were also reminded that whatever their accomplishments, it was often with the help of others and, therefore, to always remember that were due, to give those who had been there for them a *Thank you, you are so kind, May God bless you.*

By and by, these phrases that their mother termed magical made Abigai not only self-aware, but appreciative of those around her.

It helped that Abigail had a stunning smile impossible to ignore, but she started applying her mother's affirming phrases to other kids during play, clapping for and with them in joyful laughter and feeling with them in their hurt after a fall. They began to want to be around her, gaining her friends one by one into neighbourhood popularity that extended to her school. Within no time she had become what the kids called a celeb, not unlike those celebrities they looked up to on TV.

When she was outside playing, it was always so entertaining that none of the kids playing with her wanted to leave whatever game it was and go home in the evening.

Abigail loved playing mother with toy utensils and a set of a kitchenette, a sitting room, and a bedroom. This made her the favourite of most girls. This was quite entertaining for them, as they rarely helped in their real home kitchens because their nannies or their mothers would worry the girls would hurt themselves. The parents or nannies would also just be impatient with them to let them play in the kitchen.

Every once in a while, she would be skipping rope with her friends, but she hated panting and usually quickly gave up and her mind would turn to shopping for toys. Just like her mother Tracy, she owned a play shop in which she stored the extra toys she found in the field abandoned for sale later.

She also didn't fancy hide-and-seek with other kids, seeing it tiresome and uninteresting to find herself under cars in the parking lot hiding or looking for her playmates in the game.

Life was all play to her when she was a child. When later it dawned on her that work is not done for fun but to earn a living, her child's mind wondered, *Why can't jobs be done for fun, more so do the job you like, not one that puts food on the table?* She could find no answer, even from the adults.

She recalled the Bible saying you shall eat the fruits of your labour. This didn't apply to humans alone but to the animal kingdom. If a bird did not wake up early, sing to the Lord, and hurry to the forest to feed, it would surely die. Likewise, the lion, the king of the jungle has to hunt. It doesn't matter whether it took three days without a meal, or whether the meal decides to bite or use its horns to strike back and hurt the lion. It had no choice but to bring down the antelope or buffalo without mercy if it was to survive.

Abigail thought the human kingdom was more accommodating. It was very hard to die of hunger, for most humans had jobs. She had also seen people who slept on the streets and thought that one could be lazy-bones and still get the leftovers or alms from caring people in their community. It was different within the animal kingdom, where the sick and lame, as well as the unfit and injured, were left to their fate to die or be eaten by fellow wild animals. Life in the jungle did not favour the weak. Abigail knew that this was what made the difference, that human beings understood what was important to keep and let go, and that the lame and sick are part of the human race and must be taken care of.

She was, however, surprised to discover that some people only seemed to focus on the physical lameness and ignore those who were psychologically lame and yet had nowhere to look for help. Abigail viewed them as voices in a barren desert – voices she sometimes wished she could speak for. She did not wish to speak for the lucky ones, as they had been born on fertile land where drought was never a threat to their wellbeing.

All these she observed by herself and had no one to ask, lest she unnecessarily bother the adults. She was, however, keen to explore all the mysterious feelings she had or thought to be true. None of what she felt had come up in family discussions and neither had she come across them in Bible bedtime stories. She had no idea how to ask just in case they were in the category of taboo stories never spoken about in children's Bible stories.

ONE DAY, while out on a walk with their parents when they were still very little at around four years old, she and Angela pointed a finger at a disabled person. They were cautioned never to point at persons with disabilities and mad people in the street, nor ever look at someone naked. The parents might have seen it as an opportunity to give the children a life lesson, but disability is

one thing and nakedness another, and such cautions don't always work when unexpected things reveal themselves to young, curious minds that can't avoid unseeing what is already seen.

Such is what once happened that Abigail could not dare mention to her parents or ask Angela with whom she shared the predicament.

It was a beautiful day that ended with a bedtime story narrated by their mother, Jewel. Outside it sounded like it was about to rain. Rumbles of faraway thunder could be heard in the sky. Jewel said a prayer, tucked the girls in bed and went to her bedroom.

Soon, soft drops of rain started hitting the roof lulling Abigail to sleep. However, the soft rain quickly developed into a windy storm that rattled the roof. Abigail, already fast asleep thought she was dreaming when she felt someone creep beside her. She shot up and put on the lights to see who the intruder was. It was Angela, who had left her bed frightened and coiled herself in Abigail's blankets. Her eyes were tightly closed and covered her face with her tiny hands.

"Why are you in my bed, Angela?"

"Abby, I am scared of the thunderstorms." She replied crying. as lightning suddenly brightened the room, flashing frightening shades of colours that led the kids into weird imaginations making them scream in fear. It was turning out to be a horrible night. Some of the sounds they heard were new to their ears.

They were young enough to never have experienced such a violent storm before, such storms having happened years before they were born. They felt fearful enough to want to be near their parents for safety and assurance.

The two tiptoed to their parents' bedroom for refuge. The storm, it seemed, was like a soothing lullaby to the parents, Blaze and Jewel, who were sound asleep. They did not hear the children open the door.

Abigail turned on the lights to find the way to their parents' bed.

"Abby, look!" Angela pointed in the direction of the bed just as Abigail was turning around from the light switch.

The scene before them left them in puzzlement and shock. They had never in their young lives ever expected to see their parents like this. Their mom and dad were both asleep and naked and were facing away from the girls so that Abigail and Angela could only see their butts. Blaze was completely nude, and Jewel was partially covered from her waist up.

The girls remembered their parents' caution never to look at naked people and, confused, didn't know what to do to unsee what they had already seen.

They left the room in a hurry and didn't remember to put out the light. They were too traumatised to discuss it among themselves, as they usually did when they experienced or came across new things to them. They slept in Abigail's bed that night. The girls were not well-rested when their mom Jewel came into their room to wake them up and prepare them for school.

They both looked disturbed, but the parents had no idea why and didn't think it was worth investigating. The girls sometimes woke up grumpy, and this was normal for the parents. In class at school, the usually lively girls who liked to mingle with their friends kept mainly to themselves. Keeping to themselves raised no suspicions because they were desk mates in class. Other children, therefore, didn't notice much difference. During break time, the sisters sat down together in the field and revisited what they had seen in their parents' bedroom the night before.

They didn't understand why they slept in different beds, yet their mom and dad shared a bed.

The second issue was why they slept in a zipped romper, yet their parents were naked on such a cold and rainy night.

The third question was, why did they look exhausted and sweaty, while locked in such a curious embrace with only their backs showing?

They separated the girls every time they were too close, whether fighting or playing, yet their parents were fast asleep and in what looked like a happy embrace by their dad holding their mum from behind.

"Remember what we were told, Angie, that we should never look at naked people?" Abigail reminded Angela. "These questions will not make our parents happy if we ask them," she warned.

"We have to figure it out on our own," Angela responded.

The bell rang and the girls went back to class. By lunch time they had relaxed a bit and enjoyed the lunch break with other kids. They eased back into their normal routine for the rest of the day. Their dad Blaze passed by the school to pick them up. He looked happy and in his best element.

'Hello my beautiful girls,' he lifted each of them in a fatherly embrace and gave each a packet of crisps he had bought on his way to collect them. They entered the car and buckled up at their usual spot on the back seat.

Looking at their dad from where she sat, Angela's thoughts went back to their bed. She visualised him locked with their mom like inseparable twins. She thought it must have been a very happy experience.

Abigail, for the first time, having never thought of it before, noticed their dad wore only trousers, shorts and boxers. Their mom, she also noticed, was in pretty dresses on some days and skirts on other days. She wondered why their dad didn't put on dresses or skirts, yet their mom wore a pair of trousers on some days.

This question couldn't wait and asked their dad, who was happy to answer. "Because your mom is a girl, and I am a boy."

"What does that mean that mom and dad are not the same," Angela picked up with the questioning.

Abigail's thoughts turned to images of her mom Jewel and dad Blaze to spot any difference between them. But all she could see in her mind was their naked butts in bed because their fronts, which were hidden from view, did not allow them to tell the difference.

She gave up trying to find the difference between her parents. She would revisit it with Angela when they were alone in their bedroom before they went to bed. This was the only time they had some privacy when at home. They usually helped their mother with the evening chores and retired early after the usual Bible bedtime story, which on this evening was about Jesus feeding the crowd with ten fish. The story was followed with a prayer by Abigail before their mom left the room and turned off the light behind her. However, none of the fish-feeding miracle stories was on the tiny minds that night. Before Abigail moved to her sister's bed, their mom came back in, turning on the lights. She had forgotten to kiss them good night, which she did and left the room again.

Abigail took this as a lesson to always wait for a few minutes before sneaking to her sister's bed, just in case Dad might decide to come also for a good night hug. Finally, the house went quiet. Their parents must be in their bedroom by now and in bed, as there wasn't any movement in the corridors. The girls moved from their beds to the floor, opening the curtain to illuminate the room with light coming in from the street.

They talked a bit about what made a boy different from a girl. They have never had a boy in the house, besides their dad. They tried to analyse their

mom and dad to try and understand what made their parents different from each other. They took turns to tell each other the differences.

“Mom has breasts. She has soft skin and long hair, Her voice is soft.” Abigail said.

“Dad has a beard. He has a deep voice and keeps his hair short. He is muscular and strong. He helps mom to lift heavy stuff,” observed Angela.

The girls wracked their tiny brains but could come up with nothing more to compare their parents’ differences. They slept on the floor that night after sleep caught up with them in their tiredness and stresses of the day trying to figure out their parents.

Mom Jewel was surprised to find them asleep on the floor the following morning. “Why are you on the floor? What happened, my beautiful girls?”

Angela and Abigail had no answer to that.

However, noticing the window curtains had remained open, Abigail quickly said, “We opened to watch the storm and dropped dead asleep on the floor. The sky was roaring at us, and we were afraid to come out to call you. It was scary, and lightning from outside was flashing all over the room.”

The cooked-up story saved them from further questions, but their mom discouraged them from doing so in the future.

They were dropped at school and left the car in a hurry, seeing that everyone was rushing to the assembly on the ground to raise the national flag, which schools were required to do each morning.

The girls were however still not done with the important question of parents’ differences. They were curious to find out more. They waited until break time to consult with other children, especially with their classmate Leirya, who seemed to know a lot.

As everyone else was busy playing in the field, the girls were locked in a conversation that at the time they did not know would shape their destiny.

“Have you ever looked at your private parts, girls?” Lierya asked Abigail and Angela as she laughed awkwardly. The sisters held hands and looked at each other.

How many things are we supposed to know in this life? The naïve girls thought they knew it all.

Abigail and Angela had no idea there were any private parts in the bodies. No one ever used such terms with them before. Leirya signalled them to follow

her to an isolated part of the field. She told them to remove their pants, which they obliged without hesitation. The girls were curious to know what this was all about. Lierya sat facing the field to shield the girls from eyes that might see them.

Lierya separated her legs and gave Abigail and Angela a clear view of her pussy. She explained from which opening urine flows, and the bigger opening of the vulva. She also touched her clitoris and told them it had a magic feel and should touch it that night when they went to bed.

Lierya touched hers and made a pleasurable moan that enticed the girls to do the same. It was short-lived but very pleasurable. Lierya saw a young boy passing by, not too far from where they sat experimenting. She called him to where they were seated on the grass.

“Let me show you what a boy looks like. And what your dad had put in your mother the night you saw them naked.” Lierya winked at the girls.

“Young boy, there is a butterfly in your trousers. Let me help you remove it.” The boy let Lierya open his trousers to remove the butterfly. This was the first time the girls were seeing the dangling male organ. It left their mouths open for a minute. The penis looked disgusting, like poop. On closer look, it seemed like a bell and a thin pen-like thing in front of the bells. Abigail closed her eyes as Lierya put the boy's pants back.

She pretended the butterfly in his trousers was in her hand and asked the puzzled boy to see it fly away as they all chased it together, just as the bell was ringing to return to class.

The girls were in a daze the whole of that day. They did not know what to make of what they had learned that day. At home that evening, they said they wanted to rest early. Their mom is impressed that they should want to go to bed early in preparation for the following day. She did not push them to do their usual chores.

SINCE THE DAY Lierya sat them down, waking up early for school became a struggle for Abigail and Angela. They never slept on time to get enough rest. They always delayed waiting for their mom to finish her evening chores as they played around her. Something had changed since that day with Lierya ... They would finish their homework, shower, and read a bedtime story together in the sitting room to discourage their mom from coming to their bedroom to put

them to bed. Their room had become a place for secret activities. They needed their privacy.

The sexual feelings the girls were experiencing were not rare or abnormal, but a common human experience. Even girls and boys below 10 years old start getting curious about who they are and their changing bodies, which they begin to explore. This often begins with their sexual organs which they are strongly warned not to touch, expose or let anyone else touch them. Just like the Adam and Eve story in the Bible, what one is denied, the desire becomes higher to do it. When below 10 years, girls are confined with other girls and boys with other boys of their age group. They explore stuff together, some having already been exposed to sexual activities by older kids or adults.

As they juggle their way to teenage, they expose one another to forbidden activities, including sex. A vast majority of parents around the world attest to not engaging in discussions with their children about sex and sexual organs, especially before they reach teenage. Nevertheless, their sexual fantasies don't fade at teenage, it gets worse. This is the stage at which most are attracted to the opposite sex. A small number engage in same-sex relationships. However, the urge to engage in a same-sex relationship sometimes begins even earlier and may be inborn. Either way, they feel the urge to find sexual relief from curiosity and, also from the hormone-driven feelings boiling inside them.

Due to negative social attitudes towards masturbation and homosexuality, little is spoken about it in homes or in public to prevent what some consider '*evil*' practices. The truth, however, is many do practice it, though mostly in hiding.

In their defiance, Abigail and Angel left it to their curiosity to explore. They didn't see anything wrong to try, for their bodies knew exactly where to be touched – their clit – to relieve the physical need the body longed. The feeling was beyond explanation, and her sister Angela's fingers had this golden touch that sent her to a height of pleasure she never imagined possible. In the olden days, the act might have meant death in some societies. It might be an abomination for some people to talk about what they might condemn as a weird need, but it remains in the human experience.

Still, the girls did not have a way to justify the action. Taking each other for one another's partner was socially condemned. It was condemned by most in society and by religion. It was a treacherous journey they had embarked on, and they could not tell how it would end. Angela and Abigail were already in

the bad books of many in society, though the act was already well known if not accepted by all. Some people believe homosexuality is wrong, and others believe it is okay, and both of those beliefs are right.

When Abigail was a bit older, this is how she tried to explain it: *Thanks to the law of attraction, I must identify with the likes of me, brought together in the urgency of our physical need. Our souls search for one another all the time. This is, however, always in private. Even my teacher has no answers for this, talking about it risks punishment and being put to task by parents and guardians demanding to know how you could have known such things... Why! Ulisikia wapi, na nani? Where did you hear it, from whom? you might hear some of them ask.*

THEIR PARENTS, Blaze and Jewel, were happy that they were raising ordinary girls they could vouch for as upholding biblical values as taught to them through bedtime Bible stories.

In the meantime, Abigail and Angela furthered discussions of their recent self-discoveries with kids in their neighbourhood. They were surprised to learn that most of them seemed to understand these things better than they did.

Some other two girls who belonged to a local pastor's family also had a tale to give. They were introduced to sex by their uncle, who lived with them. They didn't know it had a name – incest, but it had been going on for some time now. They enjoyed it a lot and were not about to quit.

Another girl explained how their family driver usually babysat her in the house when the parents were away until they came back from work. He had been her refuge from loneliness. When the parents threatened to sack him for reporting to work late, the tantrums the girl threw were enough to save his job.

It is irresponsible that children should get information from unreliable sources but their parents and schools, many of which do not have sex education in their curriculum.

Ali, a neighbour playing mate, once told Angela and Abigail of DVD video discs his parents always hid. He suspected they might be interesting in the girls' eyes, but their DVD player was always locked away by his parents. He said that it would be interesting if they watched the video, and discover what was in it together with the girls.

The girls told Ali that their DVD player was never locked away in their house. They needed to agree on a day when both their parents would be out long enough, like on a Saturday, to sneak and view the videos in the girls' house. They worked as a team and came up with a plan to invite neighbourhood kids. They joked that all the neighbourhood kids from zero years of age to ten years old were welcome to their sitting room which they called a theatre to watch the free movie.

When the day came, the neighbourhood kids filed in one by one into Angela's parents' sitting room as Ali and his twin brother Hassan set up the DVD player on the TV screen.

It was a rare site to see the many kids, who would usually be all over playing, seated together for a whole hour in silence fascinated and yet horrified by the pornographic images playing on the screen. They found it hard to comprehend and knew the images must be bad to watch because the DVDs were always kept hidden by the parents. Still, in Abigail's mind as they watched, the men in the porn video seemed like attacking beasts, and told herself she would never entertain one near her. The men were rough and seemed rapists. The women's moans in Abigail's ears sounded desperate from the pain she thought the beastly men were causing them.

But the unexpected happened, just as the incomprehensible drama was reaching its height. They heard the door open. A neighbour, Mrs Jessie, whose toddler was in the mix, entered the room. She could not believe her eyes. She quickly turned off the TV and ordered everyone out. When she examined the tapes, it was evident they were not from Blaze's house. Ali and Hassan quickly snatched from her as they disappeared to their house. Mrs Jessie was aware the two sets of parents, Abigail's and Ali's, had already left home for work, and would return late.

Kids have a way of betraying themselves, and Mrs Jessie now knew the whole story. Within no time she was discussing it as breaking news with the whole estate group on their favourite social media platform, WhatsApp. Estate WhatsApp group was where parents got their news about happenings in their local area while they were away at work or other business and was, therefore, never ignored. It was often the only way to know what was going on at home. The real owners of the streets were kids, and if a household did not have a closed-circuit TV to monitor what was happening when lights went off, one had to consult the kids. They knew where to source information the CCTV did

not capture and would find it through hook, crook, or proxy. The kids knew it all. This meant that each of the kids' households would know what they had been watching.

Parents usually defend their children, and it was going to be unbearable to know what they had been watching. Angela and Abigail's parents had never had pornography in their house for fear of exactly the same thing that had happened in their home that day. They only watched such videos shared by a friend on WhatsApp and quickly deleted them because their phones were commandeered by their kids often without warning to watch cartoons or play games.

On the WhatsApp group in the meantime, no parent was ready to admit their children had gotten to such a level of curiosity to watch porn. The parents of the twins Ali and Hassan were pointing fingers at another neighbour's boy who they found with their boys urinating on the fence as they touched their private parts.

The mother of the toddler, Mrs Jessy, was up in arms about Jewel and Blaze's home. Their daughters were known in the neighbourhood to be daredevils, which made some parents think they should be careful when the two girls were near other children.

Another neighbour wanted the parents of the children implicated in organising the viewing of the video to pack and leave the estate with their naughty children.

Not one parent suggested holding a meeting with the children involved to know the root of the incident. They seemed not to care to know why, but how the incident had happened.

One of the parents in the group advised they deal with the offenders as well as the viewers of the nasty video. But almost none of the parents seemed ready to act but vowed to leave their offices early that day to deal with it.

Not all members of the WhatsApp group were friends with each other. But some of the parents in the group became permanent enemies because of that incident. Though some of the parents had been introduced to sex early in their childhood, they now argued that they did not give a fling who introduced them to sex when they were children or how they were introduced to it. All they knew was to protect their children from exposure to it the best way they knew how. Their children, they said, would learn about sex from the hell knew where. Just like their parents who were Christians, these WhatsApp parents did not

want to imagine a journey of raising Adam and Eve of the Bible in their houses. That snake, the devil or angel in the Bible who introduced the forbidden apple would have to hold until heaven opened the door to adulthood when their children came of age. Only then, when they become bound in the matrimonial ceremony of "*I do*", will they be allowed to engage in the act. After that, they could engage in whatever they wanted and experiment with sex together through trial and error. Then will be free to buy all the pornographic images they will need to help them engage in the act.

Better still, one parent joked, the newlyweds could go to the hospital for the bride to break her hymen because the groom would probably have no idea about the cultural importance of the ritual to break the hymen.

The unflattering view of the parent joking about the newlyweds echoed Angela's innocence when she later asked her sister, "By the way Abby, what is the hymen, I heard one of the beasts mention that word in the free-to-air movie, and why was the woman was urinating blood?"

"The hymen is a thin piece of skin that partially covers the entrance to the vagina. For some women, it may stretch or tear when they start having sex. Other women may bleed when she has penetrative sex for the first time because of her hymen stretching or tearing." Abigail told her sister she knew this because it had been explained to her during the viewing by an older girl who slept with their family driver.

She added, "This is why I tell you, as we wait to be skinned alive tonight, this is an area I am not ready to explore with a man any day. That woman was in a hell of pain. Mom and Dad can rest assured I will not be be part of that 'Discovery Channel' adventure. I am happy with the clit ecstasy. Thanks to Lierya. Anything else I am so glad to skip."

"I agree with you, Abby. Your hands-on me is all I desire. I hated the yukky discharge part that those men kept removing like pus oozing as if from a wound. It looked smelly. I wonder why those women were licking it with their mouths."

"Yuk!!" the girls said in unison, disgusted.

"I hope it is not as sticky as the pus in a wound, but I doubt it Abby," Angela said, still unable to believe it.

"It doesn't matter, Angela; that is not for you and me. We better eat and retire early, Today, we have a death warranty. Not one TV shall be turned on in this estate tonight. Just pots and pans frying everywhere as the blame shifts

from mama to dad to the teens to the maids to cousins to drivers, to neighbours, to everyone. The foul mood shall be unimaginable.”

“Oh my God, the untold stories have invaded a quiet, peaceful hood and will make good neighbours ban everyone from visiting their houses in the future. Innocent children will suffer because they did not understand these things but will be treated as criminal suspects. Relatives will have to be housed elsewhere not to ever hurt these parents' heirs, Abby.” They thought this a joke and laughed a bit even as fear engulfed them again.

“Angie, some parents will have to do house chores going forward after chasing away their housekeepers for failure to notice the young ones were not in the compound playing but entertaining their eyes with porn.”

The girls soon heard their parents' car skidding in the compound before coming to a halt. They peeped through the window and saw them throwing words at each other and knew things would be thick once the parents entered the house.

Both the girls thought they were going to faint trying to think of an explanation to give to their parents. They were certain they must have been informed about the video.

“We should have ended our curiosity the very day we understood the difference between our mom and dad, Angie,” Abby said regretfully. “We should have known what we have done is condemned because nothing like it is found in our story books about Barbie and in the Bible stories.”

“If I am asked here and now to quote any biblical verse, I can't, Abby. My head is blank and spinning, my eyes too. It was the most awkward moment the girls had ever experienced. “ I shall be OK with fasting if our parents decide no food for us for some days as punishment. That shall help me shed the fat that I have accumulated of late due to my sweet tooth.”

They tried to laugh it off, despite the fear they felt. “Why must we be punished for a sin we have never been warned about, Abby?” Angela asked.

She is asking the wrong person, Abigail thought to herself. She better wait for Mom and Dad to get the answer. Anyway, we knew it was no good thing to do. Were it not for our strategy backfiring on us, we would not have failed. We had taken care of all the necessary precautions to fail.

“This topic on our desires needs to be forgotten, and very fast. We have failed one another, them included. Had our parents taken the time to explain

all this to us, we would not have reached where we are now.” Abigail finally said.

“It started long before watching the video. We are lesbians in the making. If their fear is us getting pregnant, they should be on their knees praying we quit with it, otherwise, they shall have no heirs from the two lesbian daughters. Anything else we shall quit but not the recurring urge to do the act.” Angela whispered to Abigail as they stood up to receive their parents in a panic.

The door is opened, and their eyes follow their parents’ entry not knowing what to expect. Their usual entrance started by dropping the shopping in the kitchen as they brightly shouted their hellos to the girls. On this day the shopping was left on the front step of the main door as they charged towards the girls. Both of them poked an accusing finger at Abigail as if she was the only one involved.

“As your parents, we made sure to teach you to forgive others when they offend you, and that it is wrong to lie because that is an abomination before God. We also made sure to use the language you understand, language suited to your age. What didn’t you understand from what we have been teaching you all along to hear what I’m told you did today?” Their mom demanded as the dad frowned at Abigail.

Angela fell to her knees and broke down in tears. She apologised on behalf of her sister, saying it was her and not Abigail who was approached by the boys. She removed her sister from blame adding that Abigail didn’t know the DVD would be shown in the house.

“It was me who invited Abigail; she was in the bedroom tidying up. Leave her alone and deal with me. I shall explain everything,” Angela pleaded, but it was to deaf ears.

Their parents had decided Abigail was the devil here. She was to be sacrificed for the sake of their daughter, Angela. Only they knew why they should pick on their African daughter, yet it was for Blaze and Jewel to show empathy for both girls, whatever wrong they may have committed.

I am on my own, Abigail thought to herself, confused. *I had nobody but defenceless Angie to protect me. Do parents hurt others' children for their child's sake?* This was the first time Abigail had ever felt alone. She missed being given the same protection her sister Angela seemed to receive from the only parents she knew.

CHAPTER FIVE

On The Edge

ABIGAIL CONCLUDED THAT her kinky hair – her African-ness – must have had something to do with evil, at least that is what she thought her foster parents, Jewel and Blaze, felt. She felt sidelined by the people she trusted the most, her parents. For the first, time she realised her sister Angela appeared the more preferred by their parents. That made her very sad.

Knowing that there was no escaping it, Abigail was eager to know what the punishment was and get done with it. In any case, she told herself, she was as guilty as charged, despite being the one their parents had chosen to blame for the DVD incident. But whether they thought her sister was as guilty or not, she knew it did not make Angela any holier.

Their parents pronounced the punishment, that, Abigail and Angela should never again share a bedroom. They would also not attend the same school going forward, and the one to be transferred was Abigail. She would not only be transferred to a new school but to a boarding school.

The girls took this with shock and cried a good deal, but their parents' decision was final.

Abigail by now knew she was an adopted child, and never thought much of it. But with her foster parents' apparent sudden change of attitude towards her, she now became more conscious of it.

It occurred to her that the safety she always took for granted as a member of the family could no longer be guaranteed. Panic set in. Fear gripped her heart that she might now be on her own. Her young mind told her that she

must listen to her conscience, be strong and uphold her values no matter how bad things would turn out in this house she called home. The path her life would take would be based on her own choices, decisions, and actions going forward. As long as she shall live, Abigail convinced herself, she would make sure her life would be the most rewarding and amazingly adventurous for herself.

Angela must have sensed what her sister was thinking when she said, “You have the power Abby to make your journey the best you imagine it and in the direction you shall decide. It is the two of us and I promise not to be greedy. I promise you there is enough for me and you to share, though we know we are not biological siblings.”

Abigail had nothing to say but hug the sister she loved so dearly.

Perhaps because of emotional exhaustion soon after, Abigail felt drowsy and slept for some hours. She woke up with vague recollections of her biological parents. She vaguely remembered calling her biological mother, Mama, even though she already had her Mom, Jewel. For some reason, it was never clear to her whether she was saved from deceased parents to end up with her foster parents, or was a surrogate product, or whether was picked from a ditch somewhere. By now she already knew that she was adopted after picking hints from her parents over time as they discussed things about her.

As sleep cleared from her head, she had an urge to ask her foster parents but after how they had treated her, she had no courage to ask questions about her origin. She however acknowledged that she would need them for some time to grow and flap her wings before she knew which direction to fly.

The girls spent the night together defying their parents, and promised each another heaven. Angela had sneaked to Abigail’s bedroom and was back in her newly assigned room before dawn.

AS THE DAY for Abigail to report to her new school neared, she was taken for shopping. Unlike other shopping days, this one did not have the air of fun that usually accompanied such outings. This one was precise in the purpose it was for and very annoying. Though the whole family saw Abigail off to the boarding school, the outing felt cold, and the girls were not treated to snacks or a meal after breakfast. Abigail's next meal would be in school if she would be lucky to make it before lunchtime. When she reached the admission block,

she was quickly whisked away like someone who had been expected but was late for the main event. She did not get time to properly say goodbye.

Abigail followed the family car with her eyes until the car disappeared from her sight and was waving at her sister who was in the back seat waving back at her. She kept close to her guide who led her to two other students also joining the school that day. They had to wait until four o'clock to be picked up by old students of the school assigned to usher them to their new stations.

All three newbies did not have the will to greet one other. They looked very unhappy, like people taken to boarding school against their wishes.

Abigail felt someone tap her back. She turned with a smile not to show her disappointment to the stranger. This, after all, was going to be her home for the next three months, whether she liked it or not.

It was Lierya. They locked in a long embrace.

"When did you move into this school Lierya?"

"Yesterday, Abby. What's with you here, girl?"

"Same question to you," Abigail said laughing, "And what happened, my dear Leirya for you to be transferred here?"

"My parents divorced and have not agreed on who is taking custody of me. They decided to put me in a boarding school until their war with each other ended. It was lonely, but now I have a companion in crime." She winked at Abigail.

She opened all the emotions Abigail had the first day she showed them her clit. Abigail squeezed her fingers as she narrated the ordeal that landed her in boarding school.

"Unfortunately, my sister Angela was saved from this. I was the one to be exiled." She felt tears come to her eyes at the thought of not being with her sister, but she quickly composed herself.

"Welcome to the club, Abigail. I have learned not to tell everyone about the seeds I am planting in this life about my future. The disagreements between my parents are part of my secrets. They used to tell me about each other, until I realised I was the cause of their pain. There is power in silence. I quit reporting to either Dad or Mom. I let my seed grow without their disturbance. As their fights became intense, the safer I felt, especially being by myself. I have kept my thoughts to myself until I'm ready to share them. That shall be the time they will answer the hard questions in my mind. One day, they shall

explain to me why they thought I was an object to be tossed between them as they hurl words at each other.”

“Oh no..!,” Abigail said to her friend expressing dismay, “You mean it is a parent thing to find a punching bag Lierya!” *At least, she thought, Lierya was pushed away by her own parents, unlike me by foster parents.*

“All I urge you to do, my dear Abby, is to believe in your God-given abilities. They are enough to help you realise your ambitions. Your voice may be the only thing you need to tap into your dreams. You're the only one with the power to turn your energy on or off, for you are the creator of your imagination and thoughts. We shall overcome Abby. Hang in there.”

It was as if Lierya had kept a lot bottled inside her that she wanted to share with someone and took the time to tell her friend more. “My parents have been in court corridors for some time now, Abigail. But their case has now been decided. The magistrate ruled that the marriage between my mom and dad had irretrievably broken down and my mom’s divorce application was granted. She had cited adultery, desertion, denial of conjugal rights, and dad’s cruelty as the cause for divorce application. But in my opinion, she too was guilty of all of the above, not just my dad. Yet, according to my mom, her marriage to Dad had permanently broken down and there was no way to mend it back. She said Dad had slept with different women, some known to her, and others not. According to Mom, Dad is a total Casanova, that he spends almost all his weekends away from their marital home. Those are all lies, for I stay in the same house, and Dad is always present. My mother fooled the judge. She further said that she denied him conjugal rights on multiple occasions because of his wild behaviour, and when they’d get intimate, they’d use protection because trust had been eroded between them. The safe sex, she said, began five years ago. I wonder what glued them together this long if the statement is correct. They used to place pillows between them as a buffer. No one was to come close to the other to a point where Dad opted to be sleeping in the guest room.

“Dad denied all the allegations against him and said he was heavily invested in this marriage. He said he loved and adored my mom a lot. I wonder what demon got into her head. Dad was of the opinion that problems in the marriage had not become a crisis yet. My dad was angered by the magistrate’s decision. He decided to file an appeal at the High Court, charging that Mom had no proof for the allegations ruled by the lower court. The judge of the High Court,

nonetheless, found it evident that the marriage between the petitioner and the respondent had long ceased to blossom for reasons he could not understand.

“Some people in the court hearing the proceedings thought the judge had a sense of humour when he observed that my parents’ marriage was no longer as rosy as when they were younger. Instead, the petals have withered, leaving the prickly thorns that are not endurable to one party – my mother. This judge was full of drama. He even brought the snake into the picture. Eventually, he said to my parents that the love bug that had bitten them when they first met each other had lost its fangs as age took a toll on the couple. However, he clearly stated that their marriage had been reduced to a mega shell with no flesh beneath it. The judge had the audacity to state that no amount of resuscitation could save the marriage, for the union was long dead. I supported his verdict, though. I wonder why Dad is fighting to stay with an evil woman like my mom. She is mean and selfish.

“I am not saying my dad is an angel, but mum is too petty to stay in a healthy relationship. Maybe she shall miss her man after this divorce and revive her dead love fangs. Or maybe she is lesbian. All she wanted was a baby, and I am here already. I haven’t seen her in another relationship, but she is permanently in these endless women groups. I wish I shall meet a cool guy like my dad the day I choose to say ‘*I do*,’ and I hope my marriage vows shall never be broken, for I am the only offspring of the couple.”

Lierya smiled as she finished speaking, but there was sadness in her voice, with a small tear dripping down her beautiful cheeks.

“Wow, what a story! I am so sorry about your parents, Lierya. I don’t know how you have been able to keep sane this long. I was almost going nuts because of this arrangement by my foster parents, but this is nothing compared to what you have had to endure. You’ve said there is power in silence, I will learn from you on that. Lierya.”

“Abby, when anger grows, beauty fades. Be a girl of good cheer. All this drama shall come to an end in a few seasons.”

“Same with you Lierya, whether your parents live together or apart, your parents shall be true to you for life. Whether they love each other or not, you shall forever be their child. I believe so in the absence of both my biological parents. Wherever they are, I am sure they say a silent prayer for their daughter Abigail, I am sure I was a loved child, and that their love for me shall stand forever.”

“Parents certainly love us, and we are here to fill the gap for them. Abby, not in the best way, but in the best way we know how,” Lierya said, as she hugged Abigail, this time in tears.

THE STUDENTS assigned to usher the newcomers collected Abigail’s bags and went to the dormitories to prepare for a tea break as they toured the school. The dormitory consisted of many cubicles accommodating two students each. Lierya didn’t have a roommate, and Abigail was happy to join her.

Abigail now did not miss home as much as she would have had she not found Lierya in the school. Lierya filled the gap left by her sister Angela's perfectly. Abigail was now a double-dealer with two girlfriends. During holidays, she had her sister by her side and when school came around, she was with Lierya, who was likewise happy to have Abigail as she nursed the disappointment of her parents' separation.

Theirs was a missionary school with a good academic system and an accommodating learning environment. Food was well prepared and served in adequate portions to keep children healthy and well-fed. Students were required to do their chores like laundry using washing machines provided by the school. The school offered cookery lessons so that by the time Abigail went home for her first holiday she would surprise her family with her newly learned culinary skills.

In the meantime, after Angela got back home with her parents after dropping her sister at the boarding school, she decided to keep her feelings to herself about anything good or bad her parents did to her. Their decision to punish their daughters by separating them depressed the only child they thought they were fighting to protect.

Many years later when she was grown up, she would learn that there is no blueprint on parenting and would feel justified for her being unhappy that her parents had pointed fingers without caring what it could do to a child. She would learn that parenting is a collective responsibility; and that with children, whether one deserved punishment for a crime committed than the other as her parents thought they were doing in her case with Abigail, both deserved equal treatment whether one was spectating as the other committed the wrong. She would also learn that kids learn by example. These parental lessons, however,

still lay in the future for Angela, from where she would also observe the following of her parents:

The divide-and-rule style of parenting they used often destroyed the good lessons kids picked up rather than instilled discipline. Kids become more radical and speculative when guardians take sides. Punishing and letting kids learn from their mistakes helps them cope and motivates them to better themselves, which would be rewarding to their parents. When parents are extreme, children fight to win. Not that I know it, but that's what I feel.

This observation however still lay in the future. For now, the young and unhappy Angela separated from her sister kept herself busy with schoolwork and was not interested in accompanying her parents anywhere unless ordered to. She would withdraw to her room as soon as the parents entered the house. Only when the half-term school holidays came around, and her sister Abigail was back home did she return to her usual vibrant self.

The two girls spent time together and defied their parents by sharing a bedroom. Jewel and Blaze chose not to reprimand them, as it had affected them that Angela had become withdrawn after the separation and did not want her to withdraw further.

They reversed their decision to separate the girls and requested Abigail to come back home and resume school as a day scholar. But, to their surprise, she declined, insisting that she wanted to remain in boarding school. She said she was comfortable at the new school and would like to continue in her boarding school life.

I am not my foster parents' punching bag. I do not know what mayhem may break out tomorrow and I become victimised again. It seems like I am their idea of forgiveness. It seems like no matter how they wronged me; I am the one to forgive first. I will also be the one to be exiled should another mistake occur. I am happy with my current exile. I do not need to be moved again. I know us – me and Angela – mistakes follow us all the time. The farther away I keep the better. I now know I am different from my sister because I am not Blaze and Jewel's biological child, and I am OK with that for now.

On her part, Angela was sad and wanted to be in boarding with her sister, Abby, as she fondly referred to her. The parents were, however, not keen to let her go. They loved their biological daughter dearly and could not bear parting with her, perhaps only until she was old enough to leave home for and after college. They began to realise that Abigail was also as important to them.

While they had merely taken it that they now had to take care of Abigail after being gifted her by Boris in the plane during their evacuation out of South Sudan, they now realised Angela their daughter was tightly bonded with her. Blaze and Jewel started to fully embrace the stranger in their lives.

In the end, however, they could not hold on to Angela. She protested until she, too, was taken to a boarding school, only that it was a different school from Abigail's. But Angela didn't care which school she joined. She was happy enough to wake up somewhere different in the morning other than waking up to her judgmental parents every day. Even though she had observed her parents embrace Abigail of late, she was not convinced and still could not understand what their grudge was against her sister, a child who knew no other parent but them.

Abigail was all Angela cared about, and Abigail knew this as shown in this thought recalling a saying she had come across in school but was not sure what it meant: *I wonder whether souls come back and meet again in this world. That may be why we have the saying beauty is in the beholder's eyes. Angela loves me unconditionally and can sacrifice anything for me. I can only try and reciprocate her love for me the best I can. I hope this lasts forever.*

Angela's parents were happy to adopt Abigail, but not like an equal to their daughter but like a toy for their daughter. Something like a human pet, like a dog or a cat to keep their daughter happy. It appeared that, despite the parents seeming to embrace the African girl, they were bent on abusing her dignity likening her to a pet.

Still, a doubt had crossed Blaze's mind when he recalled the saying that when you dig a hole for others, know that you are likely to fall in it before your enemy does. He was not sure why it should come to his mind. But he seemed to think that their biological daughter wanting to join a boarding school like Abigail, despite his wanting Angela to remain with them at home and have only Abigail in boarding school, was similar to digging the hole for Abigail to fall in in the saying but have his biological daughter fall in as well. The few comments parents Blaze and Jewel sometimes made in the absence of Abigail signified this hole. But Blaze could not understand why Angela didn't want to enjoy the privileges they wanted her to have without including Abigail.

Meanwhile, Abigail and Angela remained inseparable whenever they were home from school. They did everything together despite efforts to keep them

apart. This was to a point their parents gave up trying. The more they tried to impress their daughter Angela the more she became aggressive. Abigail was her soul mate, and nothing should change that.

WHEN ABIGAIL'S final year in primary school arrived, she desperately wanted to do well to secure herself a good secondary school. So did her friend Lierya who was now able to concentrate on her schoolwork, now that she has no family problems to talk much about. They were both good in their classwork, though average students.

It probably helped that schools are a place where students are equal, avoiding the unnecessary distractions in which children measure each other according to their social statuses. They wore uniform, from their classroom attire to their Sunday best, and black shoes from Monday to Monday. In school, they all ate from the same pot, slept in similar dormitories and were taught by the same teachers. The only difference, as their teachers insisted, was the student's mindset. It was as much one's choice to get good grades as it was one's choice to sleep and not work hard or lead a mediocre school life. All would be graded the same, and each would open the door their grade allowed.

This reality made Abigail and Lierya work to get the best grades. If they had been lax in class previously, in their final year something shifted and buried themselves in books. It paid off and they both got good grades.

Abigail was admitted to the same college with her sister Angela, reuniting again after a five-year separation in different schools. The college – Cambridge – was in a different city from where their parents lived in Manchester. Being away from home, they had the option to pay for private accommodation or stay in the college hostels.

They were accompanied by their parents when reporting to the new school and picked two rooms opposite each other. The sisters, however, immediately moved into a one-room apartment as soon as their parents left them and went back to Manchester. They lived as a couple, where Abigail was the femme between them adopting feminine qualities and Angie butch by emphasising masculine qualities. Angela was a perfect provider and undertook chores such as shopping as Abigail played in the kitchen in their new house.

Abigail no longer asked anything from her parents, Blaze and Jewel, only waiting for them to provide her with what was necessary as a student. And for

this, she was grateful. She recalled reading somewhere that showing gratitude for others' kindness opens more doors. To concentrate on what one didn't have was to turn into a wind chaser, yet life has many gifts to offer if one trusts and stays focused. Overthinking was the most significant cause of unhappiness while engaging with a new leaf of thoughts made one better.

Jewel and Blaze, however, pampered their daughter Angela, who spent the extra pocket money she received with Abigail. The girls were happy, and everything was going well. In due course, their parents upgraded their lifestyle and bought their daughter Angela a car. The parents, however, paid for driving classes for Abigail so that she may help with the driving. She realised it was only by default that she was enjoying the lifestyle she desired, all courtesy of her sister.

The girls worked hard in school, determined to pass their final A-Level exams. The grades were on their side again; they did not disappoint their parents. They were done with high school.

They were both admitted to medical school at university, but Angela declined. She hated the sight of blood and feared dead bodies. Abigail had no problem with all that. Any career was good enough for this African girl as long as it made enough money to give her freedom not to beg or be forced to be under someone's roof. Being a doctor was more than she could have bargained for. Angela chose to become an engineer and wanted to go on and become a lecturer. She found road works and building construction too involved and wanted something easier like teaching. She was a bit laid back and not as outgoing as Abigail.

No matter what they call me, I am all I need to survive in my beautiful world, Abigail remembered thinking as their parents begged their preferred daughter Angela not to switch courses.

CHAPTER SIX

A Sparkle

“HELLO TRACY.” It was Gladys on the phone. “I have taken an emergency flight to join you. A friend directed me to a home where displaced and orphaned children from the South Sudan mayhem were housed. I want us to try our luck there. I hope we will be able to locate the home. I am told it is a bit in the interior, some distance from London.”

“Gladys, it doesn’t matter whether we take a year to reach that place provided we come back with our children,” Tracy replied and dropped the call.

Gladys wondered why her friend should suddenly hang up yet they had not finished the conversation.

She tried calling Tracy again. The phone went unanswered. She went about her preparations to fly to London, hoping Tracy would return the call.

She packed her bag in a hurry and requested her colleague at her new employment in Sweden, where she had got a new job, to stand in for her. A fortnight away would not derail a whole organisation just because one Gladys had missed office. If anything, she had been a liability of late. All she seemed to talk about was her lost son Twister and she was often crying and didn’t seem to eat. She, therefore, looked frail because of this and the sadness that weighed her down. Everyone felt sorry for her and tried all they could making calls to their contacts in South Sudan to trace the lost son, but in vain.

Gladys got to the airport two hours before departure time. Seeing that she had some time to kill, she decided to put her thoughts in writing, hoping it would ease her mind. By putting them down, she also had the intention that should anything happen to her, someone coming across the written thoughts would give them to Twister one day should she never find him:

“I was once a beautiful girl and was brought up in tender loving care by dotting parents who saw the promise in their girl. I got the best grades in school and eventually got the best job. Before I knew it, I was in love with the most handsome dude in the world, who I later married.

“We were just two siblings in my family – me and my brother Boris. As the elder sister, I invited my brother to join me in South Sudan, where I was working. There were many good employment opportunities in the country which had just gained independence.

“I loved my brother Boris a lot for his gentle and polite nature and his generosity. Sometimes I think back and smile. I remember the many times mom trusted me with Boris’s snacks, and they would end up in my tummy. Mom did not find baby talk easy, and I was good at communicating with my toddler brother. I scored all the time because Mom expected me to interpret for her my little brother’s prattle. For some reason, I could understand what he was communicating.

“Boris settled in the new country and was happy. He was earning four times what he was getting in Europe. South Sudan was classified as a hardship area so the allowances were mind-boggling and tempting. He sent eighty per cent of his salary back home to Dad to invest for him.

“My hands were full, in the meantime, with a baby and a husband. I had nothing extra to put away in savings. But thank God Yonas had saved a bit and bought a house in Europe that brought in excellent rental income. One evening as we rested in the camp after office, violent mayhem broke out in the country, and everyone was running for their dear lives. I tied my Twister to my back as we joined the panicked crowd to the airport, which was near where we resided. There was no time to start the car engine, which we didn’t need anyway, the airport being so close. I was shot in the hip even as a bullet got Yonas in the head. We fell and were unable to get up as people trampled on us.

“That is how I lost Twister. Yonas died on the spot. It was Good Samaritans that saved my life after they took me to a Red Cross camp where I received treatment. I didn’t know what to tell my in-laws. I had nothing to offer to them; their son was dead, and I had lost their grandson. I was left empty-handed. To add salt to injury, I had gone against my parents’ wishes and invited their son Boris to greener pastures, only to have him killed, just like happened to my love Yonas.

“I could never forgive myself for the loss of my brother. I knew he was dead because his name did not appear in the official register of survivors, nor was he anywhere in the camp or morgue. I still don’t know whether he disappeared by road and then got killed somewhere or what happened. With nothing to say and without my brother’s body to show, I felt trapped and was in great fear of facing my parents for what the loss of their son Boris might do to them.

“I had also lost the love of my heart Yonas, who my parents hated for his family’s initial rejection of their daughter and wanted me to end the relationship. I miss Yonas so much and I wish parents of dating children could stop cursing them for their choice of soul mates. A relationship is beyond those in love. The sooner outsiders leave such couples alone, the better. A relationship between two lovers is not for parents to call. When a child comes of age she should be let be. There shall never be a perfect spouse to fit a parent’s expectations for their child. This should be the one rite of passage parents should keep off for the love of their children.

“My only hope now lies in finding Twister. I know he is alive somewhere, otherwise, I would have found him in the morgue like his dad Yonas. It has been a painful spell waiting to reunite with my little one. It makes me sad when I remember how young he was and how scared he used to be when separated from his mother. He was my heartbeat. I wonder how I have survived this long in this lifeless dimension if it was not for the hope that one day I would unite with Twister. I eat with other people, but all the food has been tasteless. I dance with others, but the rhythm is always off. I laugh with others, but I just grin to keep the laughter going. I work in the same office with others, but I have no idea what the goal has been and whether we meet our targets or not. I only work for the money to find my lost baby Twister. I have been offered love several times by colleagues and well-wishers, but my heart is lost in this wilderness that is filled with unending grief.”

It helped that Gladys had her two friends Bram and Tracy with whom she could work towards their shared goal of finding their children – she, her Twister and them, their two children Joel and Abigail. The two sets of distressed parents had been consistent in their relationship looking for their children despite disappointment at all the centres they had previously been directed to look for their sons and daughter.

I hope the planned visit to the orphanage will yield results. Even if it doesn't, we shall keep looking. We are one decade down, and it has been one of most difficult periods. We are now used to knocking on doors. No matter how hard the knocking has been, it is the only way to keep us sane from the frustrations and cursing we sometimes are subjected to in some stations where we go looking for these kids. Our day shall come, and we shall not fail. In God we trust.

Departure time was announced and Gladys had to postpone writing her story for later. She hadn't realized it was boarding time and almost missed her flight. Were it not for an attendant who informed her that everyone had left she could have gotten another reason to sink her heart deeper in distress. She made it onto the plane to the UK.

Writing down her thoughts seemed to have left her relaxed and was soon napping as the plane took off. She only woke up after being interrupted by her seatmate who was pushing to alight after they arrived at Heathrow Airport in London. She had even forgotten to call Tracy or Bram again before departure. It was late now. She decided it was better to just show up, after all, Tracy had cut her phone rather unceremoniously. She needed to apologise to Gladys.

Gladys was a bit hungry. She had slept as the air hostesses were serving the usual plane snacks. She decided to go to a hotel in town that served her favourite steak and mashed potatoes, which she liked accompanied by a glass of red wine. She was served within ten minutes of ordering. She enjoyed the food before finally leaving to join Bram and Tracy in their home three streets away.

She knocked on the door and was happily surprised that it was the couple and not one of them who came out to welcome her.

"Why did you cut my call before I was done, Tracy?" Gladys was fighting already.

"Most welcome, darling Gladys. Did I leave you hanging? There is a monkey in the neighbourhood that is messing us up a lot. It had entered the house through my kitchen window and left with my bananas and bread in a basket. My wallet was in the basket. We went to find a way to beg it, at least to get my wallet back. But it was like my people say in Ethiopia, an animal once full has no granary. After he had eaten his fill, he threw everything else down the tree. Unfortunately, the basket got hooked on one of the branches. The

drama was endless as we tried to retrieve it back. I came back in a hurry to fix dinner, and completely forgot about the phone, dear.”

“I am so sorry; it was such an ordeal for you. It would have been fun to witness all that drama with the monkey.”

“No worries, Gladys, it shall not be long before the monkey is back. You’ll see it by breakfast. We no longer leave food in the gazebo unattended. By the time you come back, all the plates will be in pieces on the floor. Before, it was just one monkey, now it is a troop of them. The monkeys have acquired a sweet tooth too. We have to learn how to coexist with them going forward. Have a seat dear, we have forgotten you are from a safari. A drink or do we indulge in eating right away? Food is ready and I can assure you it has great flavours.”

“When I failed to hear from you again, I decided to take dinner out, just in case. I was starving, Tracy, but I shall bite with you guys. Let me help set the table.”

“You don’t have to, Gladys. I shall help Tracy as you take a quick shower. You must be tired, my dear. Get to the tub. I am on the table. Tracy dear, please help Gladys settle down. I’ll take over from where you have left off.”

“Thank you, Bram. I shall also take a shower. I have burned hot in that kitchen marathon to have the food ready.”

“No worries, I shall be waiting ladies, try to be quick; I am hungry.”

He set the table and realised the leftover wine they were going to take with the food was not going to be enough. He got into the car to buy some more.

By the time he was back, the ladies were already done with dinner. He ate alone as the ladies enjoyed the drink. They needed to rest early. Travelling to South where the orphanage was starting early the following day.

They thought to go directly to the home they had been directed to as soon as they arrived in at the countryside, but it was already late. They booked themselves into an inn. It was not luxurious but a good space for tired travellers.

They met this guy seated alone and requested to join his table. It was the only table with space for three. They had dinner together and the guy introduced himself as Bethrow.

Bethrow was, however, not keenly listening as the ladies introduced themselves. He had just lost his family and was not up to chatting up two talkative tourists or engaging in serious talk. The women were not a priority to Bethrow. They, however, soon parted, and the three went to sleep.

Tracy, Bram and Gladys were careful not to talk about their mission with those they met. To use an African expression, they reasoned that it was not what they were here to gather but what they would scatter that would speak of what they had come to do and the kind of life they led. Theirs was a life united in their loss and had nothing to offer to the local community. The three parents were consumers of their sorrows and none of them had any love to give. Beauty shines from the depth of the soul and they were souls lost in their pain.

Breakfast the following morning was stale, and they didn't have much appetite. Bram, Gladys and Tracy were soon out of the restaurant. A waiter followed them in hot pursuit as they had forgotten to pay the hotel bill. Their minds were on their children. It was now over ten years since they lost their babies. They would now be teenagers. They found children in the home dressed in the same uniform. It was difficult to tell them apart. The sight of so many African children was a bit unsettling for them. Tracy and Bram scanned the faces and, finding no luck, they walked to the administration block. Gladys was in the meantime going haywire as she turned every half-cast boy they passed along the way. Finally, at the administration block, they found the Matron pleasant and sensitive to their predicament. She invites them to her office.

"I am pleased to receive you in our home. We are a missionary set up with a mission to rescue disadvantaged kids including orphans and those affected by domestic violence. We pay for their education until the time they get a job. I do not know the best way to check on your children, for sometimes the kids' names are changed before they get to us. The best I can do for you is to bring you the files to first see whether you can find familiar names from ten years ago. If that won't yield, I shall get you all the teenagers in the age bracket of your children."

"I trust that can work for us, madam Matron. Thank you for your kindness." Bram complimented her,

The files were brought and were in huge volumes. That did not discourage them. They perused them to the last copy while ticking all the names that sounded like Joel, Twister and Abigail. They requested to be presented with all the kids whose names they had ticked in the list. They inspected the children one by one. It did not seem to matter to the desperate parents whether the name holder was two years old or fifteen years old. They were finishing

scrutinizing the child at 3 p.m. They then requested to see all the children in the age bracket of Joel and Twister, as both were agemates.

They scrutinised the lot that was brought before them in vain. They asked for girls who might be Abigail's agemates. Again, no luck. It was a horrible experience, both for the parents and the hopeful children. The children were in tears, just like the disappointed visitors asking them questions they could not answer. Most of the children had also hoped to reunite with their parents one day. The home was left with an air of sadness after the visit. Not even the gifts the three parents had brought with them to give children similar in age to Twister, Abigail, and Joel made them feel any better. They missed their families, too.

The day was already gone, so the visiting parents could not make it to the city. They opted to spend one more night in the same inn. Gladys was happy to see Bethrow again. He was on a mission to sell the family land after the death of his entire family in a road accident. He was yet to complete the land documentation process. After expressing their condolences to Bethrow, Bram and Tracy excused themselves. The two were too beaten to enjoy any fun that night.

Gladys wanted a drink. She had no patience with mourning that night. She sat with Bethrow to share a bottle of wine as she easily narrated her ordeal without her baby boy whose dad died. She was careful not to mention her son's name to this stranger, who said he had never heard of any lost children in his life. All he cared about was to offload his pain by having good sex with Gladys before she disappeared on him like his perished family. The accident left him the sole member of his family. Both Gladys and Bethrow were hearing what each wanted to hear. Eventually, they got too drunk to make sense anymore. They ended up in one bed and did all they had missed from their late spouses.

Gladys was to start the journey back to London early together with Tracy and Bram. It was after she had woken up, however, that she noticed she was in bed with a stranger. She got out of bed and dressed and quietly left so as not to wake up who she called the sleeping dog. She paid the bills and hastily called Tracy urging her that they should leave immediately because she had something to attend to before noon. But the real reason was that she wanted to avoid meeting Bethrow again.

On their way back to the city, the three parents felt sad comparing the loss of their kids with the children in the home who also wished to reunite with

their parents or get foster parents. It was a sorrowful day for them. They went home empty-handed. All the bad memories of their lives without their children came back to them, leaving the women in tears throughout their journey back.

Once in London, Gladys tried to book a flight online but there was only one available seat which someone had for some reason just given up. She decided to take the flight back to Sweden, earlier than the two weeks she thought she would be away. She could not bear any more pain after the disappointments of the previous twenty-four hours. It has been hell on earth for her.

Bethrow woke up to a bed without the woman he was already in love with. It left him feeling empty again. With Gladys, he had believed he had healed from his ex-wife's loss. He felt unstoppable; nothing would limit or control him except fear, but all these were silly beliefs. He was sure everything he required to move on was within him, but Gladys proved him otherwise. He lost his wife and had now lost the Cinderella he had just discovered. Besides never being willing to promise any woman his love, Bethrow was certain about his feelings for Gladys. He got out of bed and packed his stuff without any future expectations for love. He was not ready for another heartbreak.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Whispers

YEARS PASSED and Twister and Joel soon became teenagers under the guiding hand of their attentive adopted dad, Boris.

Boris never married but turned out to be a great parent who, in addition to ensuring they lacked nothing in their education, gave them his passion for the outdoors. They were a close-knit family that often went for bike rides and fishing together, including hunting where the law in the United Kingdom allowed for hunting. Their weekends were, therefore, usually full of adventure. One of the highlights of this was when Boris took the teenagers to Kenya for a game drive and to participate in what was known as the Rhino Charge, an annual off-road 4x4 vehicle competition to raise funds for the conservation and protection of ecosystems in the country. Life was great fun for the young men and their dad.

The only passion the boys didn't seem to share with Boris was his love of jazz, whose beat they found old-fashioned and boring. Therefore, when they would accompany their father to his favourite jazz joint, Twister and Joel would often enjoy a swim at the large hotel pool. When they were tired of swimming and had had their favourite hotel food as they waited for their father, they would engage in other activities as the billiard tables, where they would compete among the two of them as well as other enthusiasts of the game.

Boris's open-minded attitude towards life distinguished him from the more overbearing parents who seemed not to have set ground rules but tended to be controlling of their children. He not only listened to the boys but reasoned with them on important issues in their lives to guide them. He instructed the boys to always follow the rules, whether in school, residential estate, hospital,

church, or otherwise. “Be ready to deal with the consequences should you not adhere to set rules,” he would warn them.

Being well-travelled, Boris interested the boys in food from different cultures that his chef would prepare from recipes he often brought with him. Twister and Joel grew to love many different cuisines. Twister, already an excellent cook, would try his hand at some of the recipes and make meals that Joel enjoyed a lot. Joel, who preferred tinkering with machines, was never a good cook and could put up with any meal as long as he was not in the kitchen to cook himself.

Boris treated Joel and Twister equally and either of them could freely come to him as their parent for anything they may require. Though life could be difficult at times, he kept true to the boys.

THINGS STARTED to change when Boris’s new friend, Bethrow, came into the picture. It might seem that the stress of bringing up the boys had slowly been getting to him when he met the new acquaintance. Bethrow was younger and more energetic than Boris and was great fun to be with. Slowly, through Bethrow’s influence, Boris was drawn to a more frequent pint at the pub and women. His parental responsibilities started to grow lax, leaving the teenagers to take care of themselves more often. Every day after work found Boris in a pub somewhere, but he never failed to pick the Twister and Joel from school. Some days he would buy them a snack before dropping them home.

It might also seem that Boris was experiencing a midlife crisis, exhibiting symptoms of anxiety and depression as he grew older, and a lack of interest towards activities he once enjoyed like going out fishing with the boys and hunting. Life didn’t seem to matter anymore, even as he slid deeper into drinking and womanising accompanied by his friend Bethrow. This had the effect of leaving Joel and Twister on their own so that the teenagers became each other’s keeper.

Still, Boris tried the best he could with the boys. He was not fabulously wealthy but had enough to afford a good life for the boys. During this period, he sometimes would narrate to Joel and Twister about the fun and merry-making life he led back in South Sudan. Yet this recollection of the good old times was yet another symptom of a midlife crisis that sometimes includes increased feelings of nostalgia.

But it also offered the opportunity, especially when he had had a few pints, to tell the boys about their roots, and about the coup attempt in South Sudan that had led to his adopting them. He would mention the names of their parents and how he lost Joel's sister, who he liked to say would have been his daughter to complete the family with the two boys. He, however, could not recall the girl's name, and neither could Joel.

IN THE MEANTIME, Boris continued with his gallivanting and merrymaking with his friend Bethrow. Somewhere at the back of his mind, Boris knew this friendship might not end well. He conceded that while God had human beings free will, it also meant one had to bear with the consequences of the choices they made in life. Still, it did not seem to matter; he saw no reason not to enjoy life accompanied by his younger friend.

Bethrow was the charming new intern in Boris's office who seemed a good fellow to be friends with. He was not only charming but quite entertaining but seemed to know where things were happening and could show Boris a different party to attend each day if he so fancied. He seemed to know all the hip joints one could have fun including the best massage parlours "where willing girls offer extra services," Bethrow had informed his friend with a knowing wink, and Boris had understood they offered sex. "So long as you have extra quid, the girls are yours for the taking," he had added and in due course, Boris quickly identified his favourite masseuses and became a regular patron of the parlours, which he nonetheless recognised for what they were as lucrative, well-disguised brothels that cost him a fortune.

Boris soon saw a business opportunity he could exploit. He was not only happy to make arrangements and get the extra massage services at home, but he saw it as an opportunity to not only cut costs but have friends pay for the services in his house, which he turned into a parlour.

Boris did not seem to factor it in, but his decision to make it into this kind of business had the obvious effect of disrupting the lives of his shocked teenagers, Joel and Twister. The boys had until then led innocent and sheltered lives but now were rubbing shoulders in their home with all sorts of badly behaved girls and men who patronised them.

The home became a place of chaos, leading the newly employed chef-cum-housekeeper, who took care of the boys, to quit his job. And without the housekeeper's firm hand, the teenagers were left free to mingle with the call girls gracing Boris's den. A concerned friend had tried to bring Boris's attention to this, observing that the many non-family members frequenting the house for sex ought to have been doing it in Bethrow's house, more so because he lived alone.

Things soon took a surprising turn. Boris's favourite masseuse started to dominate the spaces that defined the boys' home, including the kitchen, sitting room, garden and their dad's bedroom. Eventually, the masseuse, who had become something like a brothel madam, incited the women to invade the boys' bedrooms.

Twister and Joel had to give way and made a storeroom in the house their bedroom to avoid conflict with Boris's guests. This was bad enough and though they suffered abuse from some of the women, they realised they could not go crying to their dad. They had to learn to fight their own battles, which not only included exposure to erotic activities but sexual abuse that bordered on rape by two particular nymphomaniacs by the names of Amy and Emma. But it is in the nature of teenagers to explore their awakened desires, with women handy to release their sexual urges. This became their life, using their favourite partners as protection from harassment by Amy and Emma. The two sex pests would sometimes threaten to withhold food from Joel and Twister's dad's kitchen for sexual favours with the boys, which they wanted no part of.

TWISTER AND JOEL thought Bethrow had his good side, and that he was more sensitive in paying them attention than their dad, who was consumed in his new life of fun and merry-making. The boys wished they could get the old Boris and their home back. Their home seemed to have long ceased being their home, occupied by all manner of Boris's friends.

The boys had by now gotten used to taking charge of themselves. The converted storeroom was only an extension of this and felt comfortable away from the noisy commotions in the house. Bethrow, who was already resident in their father's house, helped the boys settle down in their new space, even though it was to allow more room for the clients visiting the home by taking

over their bedrooms. He helped the boys remake the store into a nice tiny house. They now had a kitchen and study space. They now had no reason to go to the main house, which was now out of bounds. The place was already too suffocating for them.

Bethrow, in his caring manner, also took over Boris's role of providing for Joel and Twister. He did all the shopping for them and gave them enough pocket money. He seemed so committed to them that they began to wonder what was motivating him to be so supportive. The boys asked themselves this because the other side of him was what they called the devil's sanctuary that he had helped make their home.

They prayed to God to soon liberate them from their dad's messed up home. They were grateful and deeply cared for Boris as their father, but for now, they craved refuge elsewhere. He, however, remained their super daddy who they knew deeply loved them despite the new turn of events.

In the end, they were enrolled in a boarding high school, never to return home for holidays. They rented a small house and started working to sustain themselves.

When they did eventually decide to visit what used to be their home, they found that their father had only gotten deeper in his life of booze and women. It took the boys' breath away to see their father looking much older and exhausted from the life he led. The only consolation was that he still paid for their upkeep in school. But, Once again, they longed for the day their dad would be back to his old self again.

It would be a long time before Boris was able to gather himself and gain back his old parental instincts. He told his adopted sons that he had fought his way back to see them mature, but it was already too late. Twister and Joel's wings to fly from the nest had long developed. All they wanted was a life of dignity and self-sufficiency. So they turned down their father's offer to go back home. They explained that they were old enough and were already used to being on their own.

However, not taking up their father's offer came at a price. He said he was not happy that they should turn him down, and that they would have to cater for themselves from then on. They were forced to take odd jobs to sustain themselves as they attended college. Sometimes they got well-paying jobs and other times survived on little when the jobs were less paying or unavailable.

BOTH TWISTER and Joel did well in A-Levels and managed to secure a place in university. Joel, an “A” student, would do medicine, and Twister would study to be a laboratory technician. Their Dad Boris had by then gotten over his disappointment with them and surprised the boys by taking credit for their doing well in school despite condemning them to work odd jobs to support themselves. But they laughed it off and saw it as an opportunity for the father and his sons to make up. In the meantime, Bethrow was on hand to help the boys shop for their university requirements. With the renewed attention of their father with Bethrow to help, the good life they knew as teenagers had returned, although far from home. Bethrow furnished their new house, but the boys declined any other offer saying they could now manage their bills. All they wanted was their privacy. Being dependent on Bethrow who had been part of their problem was not welcome.

IT WAS UNLIKE the first day of university when new students seemed nervous and a bit overwhelmed by the new surroundings on the college campus. But there were still some minutes to kill as Abigail calmly walked into the lecture hall and took a seat to wait for the professor or lecturer who would induct them for their course. She quickly scanned the room and noticed a guy with kinky hair like hers. It was long since she had seen a black person in any school she had ever attended. She sat next to him and gently touched his hair. He turned with a big smile, making her wonder whether she had sent the wrong signal in her urge to touch his hair. But, for some reason not caring what he would think, she hugged him. This took the young man by surprise, who hugged her back enjoying the embrace.

“My name is Joel. Where are you from, beautiful?”

“I am Abigail. I do not know where I am from, but I belong to foster parents who have one biological daughter, my sister Angela. They are the parents I have known since birth. I am staying with my sister Angela. She is also a student here in civil engineering,” she explained not realising she was telling the stranger more than was necessary.

“Wow. I also live with my brother Twister, and we have our dad Boris who does not give a damn whether we eat, sleep or die of hunger,” he tried to make it a joke, though he also seemed to say more than was necessary. “He is too

busy cleaning after the politicians in intelligence and making merry. It is unbelievable. He provided us quite OK but did not know what parenting is. We have brought ourselves up, the best phase of our life when we needed him most. The experience with Boris's women made Twister and me close. Eventually, we turned out to be gay."

"You are gay! You and your brother Twister?"

"Yeah!" Joel responded.

"Sweet Lord, you do not fear the piece of hell spared for gays, Joel?" responded Abigail, teasing him. "I can see a perfect slot in that place kept for the two of you in the afterlife. That aside, don't you think a practice we create today becomes tomorrow's culture, Joe? Is it what they call social progress? The majority decides, not because it shall be a perfect solution but because it shall be the majority consensus."

"Walk my journey with me for my lameness is invisible...hidden in the heart of life and love. I am a mysterious, lovely being, Abigail. You speak of hell, but I was brought up in a hellish home. Which other hell am I waiting for, my darling? The world has only one problem Abby: human beings."

Joel seemed not to want to stop as if he had been waiting for just this moment to unburden himself of his family's disappointments. "My Dad Boris always came home with different women as crazy as him," he was saying before suddenly changing the subject and confessed, "I never thought a man could be raped, just like a woman. Twister and I have been abused over and over by our dad's women, and all he said was, 'Teach them to be men!' We couldn't take it, and when we were old enough, we decided to protect ourselves from the women. We built a wall between ourselves and Dad's guests. I lost my virginity to a woman Amy, twenty years older than me, and the first time we did it, it was a blowjob before she guided me to penetrate her. The slimy feeling inside her made me hate the experience, making me dislike women. The only thing is that she gave me that feeling of arousal that makes one want to do it, except that I didn't want to do it with her but my brother Twister. The same thing seemed to have happened to him, and he was attracted to me. We vowed never to sleep with women again. I don't know why I am sharing this with you, beautiful, But that is how me and my brother became lovers."

Joel seemed relieved as he finished saying this. He paused momentarily, then asked, "How old are you, Abigail? Not for anything, just to know."

"I am twenty-three."

“That makes me your senior by four years,” replied Joel, “yet we find ourselves in the same year in class. That is because I took some time off to financially support Twister when we were in high school. After all, he also did the same for me after we left home to live by ourselves. At some point, I wondered whether freedom can also not be some kind of slavery. You are free and yet not free when you have no way to make a penny to achieve your goals. That was our situation, me and my brother, often finding it difficult to make a living. But the lesson we learnt is that life is about ambition, Abby if I can call you, Abby. Twister and I cannot condemn ourselves or lose hope. We must keep our focus on a better future, imagine it, and live it, regardless of the reality we currently are in. We will work towards achieving better outcomes until we are there. The far we have come has been by God's grace, who saw to it that every bead was in place to address our needs. What you see now is that complete necklace. I love God, and I meditate and study spiritual knowledge to daily empower myself. This has helped me accept my reality to be who I am. and be more forgiving of people who don't accept me for the gay man I am.”

In unburdening himself, he became emotional and started to cry. The sobbing was such that Abigail did not know how to soothe him. These were the thoughts that went through her mind: He appears in so much pain, it is unbelievable. Maybe it has to do with how to reconcile his gay life with being a devoted Christian, as homosexuality is against his faith. He doesn't know any better, yet adding to his dilemma the Bible prohibits fornication, that one should never engage in sex before marriage. Perhaps another issue that could be bothering him is that he cannot consider marrying before he knows he can manage sexual relations with a woman after the experience with the two women he referred to as Lucifer's agents in his father's house.

Maybe his breaking down is from a desire to be brought up in a regular home. Had his real parents not been killed during that coup attempt long ago, maybe life would have turned out differently. Their adopted father Boris's commitment as a dad appears to have faded over time in his womanising lifestyle.

Maybe he is crying from his suffering trying to make ends meet both for himself and the brother Twister to cater for their daily needs, which they are often unable to.

Maybe his sobbing is out of gratitude to God for His Grace and unrelenting care and providence which overwhelms him, especially because he is still years away from becoming financially self-sufficient after completing medical school to become a surgeon.

Maybe he was uncomfortable with his homosexuality, a pain I totally understand because I am lesbian myself. I understand and empathise with Joel.

“Sorry Abby,” said Joel finally. “I have no intention to hurt or manipulate you in any way. I am just a victim of my habits, perceptions and beliefs.”

Abigail saw his distress and hugged him in a show of sympathy. As a person also engaged in a same-sex relationship, she saw much of herself in what Joel was saying. Just like him, she and Angela had to keep their sibling love relationship to themselves and not reveal it to anybody for fear of being stigmatised. She felt compelled to also give her confession.

“What a discussion on our first day Joel,” she finally said. “Thank you, for trusting and sharing with me such a personal experience. You will be surprised that I’m just like you, though the dynamics are a bit different from yours. I, too, fell prey to similar erotic demands as yours and it was fate that landed me there. I am a lesbian who couldn’t escape her curiosity. I got involved with my sister Angela, my mate, just like you and your brother Twister. In my case, it involved a friend in school and a pornographic video, and it was never the same again with our parents.”

Abigail then went on to narrate about Lierya and transfer to boarding school as punishment after the showing of the video in their home, and what happened after. “I hope you do not hate me now that I am a lady and you’re a gay,” she concluded by saying.

Joel’s mind was far away and didn’t seem to follow what Abigail was saying. He, however, snapped back to attention after realising she had paused in her talking.

“So, I cannot laugh at you, dear,” she said to him, trying to bring him to what she was saying. “My sister Angela and I are lesbians, despite being brought up in the love and protection of two dedicated parents. So dedicated were they that they were always on our case trying to ensure we followed the straight path. They were not relenting, even now that we have joined university. They came to be sure that we did not share an apartment.”

“Oh my God. What!” Joe was now attentive, his eyes popping out in disbelief. “It must be tough having parents pay such close attention,” he said. “Twister and I have been a lot freer; we do what we wish.”

“Yes, you are lucky that way, Joe. But where there is a will, there is a way. Their paying rent for separate apartments has not prevented us from living

together the way we wish. But I don't think my parents have ever suspected that Angie and I are lesbians. They seem proud that their girls are close to each other and closely collaborate to deliver chores they assign us."

"I should then stop being a crybaby that life might have been different had I had a more responsible parent. What this tells me is that life sucks generally. The devil has a cunning way of messing things up. Those who think their lives are secure and those who are more vulnerable are all lumped together and can't escape the devil. We need to pray for one another, Abigail.

THE LECTURER suddenly walked in carrying specimens of human bones that noisily rattled as he placed them on the table. He says something that Abigail does not follow. Her mind is occupied by what Joel had just said and is trying to imagine the chaos in Boris's house, she also wonders how a father could be that irresponsible.

This is too much for me to conceptualise in my head. How can a dad be so evil? It doesn't matter whether their mother was present or chose to abandon them, Boris needed to summon his parental instincts and keep a distance between his boys and the unruly guests. How uncaring can one be to turn his house into a brothel?

I hate him already. He may have his reasons and desires, but I can kill him with my tiny hands if given a chance.

Abigail thought this with anger eating at her, drawing her attention from class like one who had a bitter grievance to settle before she could listen to the lecturer. *I was sent to boarding for an act that my parents condemned while another parent invited women to teach his sons how to be men. This world is confusingly twisted. Who is right, and who is wrong? My parents for not showing us the way and reminding us to keep to the word of God, or this devil's angel Boris exposing his sons to these Delilabs, who are beaten by life and had nothing to lose?*

Abigail decided she would hold further discussions with Joel to know more about Boris. He needed to take a step back and evaluate what is essential rather than enjoying life, and ignoring his sons. Boris could reinvent himself as many times as he wanted, but Abigail now knew that the purpose of life was to accomplish goals that left everyone better off. This one reinvention might be his last and could be all he needs to be a better parent for his sons. He might have had the best intentions as he raised the boys, but the chapters of life kept

turning, whether favourably or otherwise. *Boris did a good job of raising Joel and Twister. Two children to raise as a young bachelor could not have been easy and even though they are grown up now, he remains there for them.*

Abigail was so consumed in her thoughts that she didn't realise when the class ended. All she caught was the lecturer signing off saying, "I hope you shall take time to come to the laboratory for a more practical discussion. I shall be waiting." The lecturer quickly walked out, leaving the student puzzled that he did not seem to care to request the students to introduce themselves to each other and to him. Abigail could not remember whether she had heard him give his name. *Maybe he mentioned his name and I somehow missed it pondering Joel's life.*

"What was the name of our Lecture Joel?" Abigail asked Joel

"He said he was Willy. I heard it by chance, for it was wrapped in a sentence about the human skeleton. The topic had nothing to do with the bones he showed up with. I guess it was a way of killing his anxiety. He did not seem comfortable with these new students. Tomorrow might be a better day for him. We take a break for a cup of coffee, Abby."

"A pack of crisps shall do me good as we walk home Joe, I don't feel like a drink of any nature today," replied Abigail.

Later that day after classes, she invited her new friend, Joel, to her apartment with Angela. They had long ditched the hostels and rented the two-bedroom apartment.

It happened that the hostels accommodating Joel were in the same direction they were headed. They had not walked for long before they met Joel's brother, Twister, a paragon of male beauty. His curled hair made Abigail wonder whether he was a male-female hybrid.

He gave Abigail a hug and joined in the walk. "Twister, meet my desk-mate Abby." They exchanged pleasantries.

When they got to Abigail and Angela's house, Abigail insisted they stay for dinner. The boys seemed impressed by the apartment, with their eyes all over the house admiring family photos and the well-chosen furniture and wall hangings. They confessed that having been brought up by their dad, they had never entered a house run by younger women. The only other house they frequented, especially when they were younger, Boris's mother's house. She was too old to know much about the youth, though would give them advise.

She was keen to live out her golden years without worry about how the boys would turn out.

Angela helped Abigail serve the food on the table. She was surprised her sister would invite male guests to the apartment on their first day of school. She was curious to know who they were and how Abigail was able to get close to the boys and bring them over without alerting her. They had not been near men since Ali and his brother's DVD incident. But somehow, Angela was excited too to note that one of the men was African like her sister, Abigail.

Abigail was surprised by how Angela generously served Joel and Twister, who looked quite hungry. After dinner, the girls escorted them for quite a distance from their apartment. As they turned to head back after saying their goodbyes, they saw the boys also turn to follow them.

"We cannot let you walk back alone, beautiful ladies," Joel told them, "We have to walk you back. We are men."

Only after the girls had reached their doorstep did the men walk back, happy that the ladies were comfortably home.

"That was fast making friends, Abby." This was the thing Angela said when they got back into the apartment. "How did you meet these brothers who look like a crossbreed of a kind? The black one I particularly love; I see you in him, I don't know why. I found him happy and pleasant to be around. I think we haven't been socialising enough, locking ourselves out from interesting people. At least for a friendship, it is not bad, I guess."

"Joel and Twister were born to different parents, but brought up by one interesting dad Boris?" Abigail revealed.

"You mean they are adopted? And what's that about interesting dad?"

Abigail narrated to her sister how the young men were brought up, their dad's many women and how they had to leave home and support themselves. "It made me feel angry hearing this from Joel," she finished by saying.

"Me, too," agreed the sister. "I feel like I would skin the guy alive."

"Joel is my classmate, We chanced to have sat together today. He is an exciting guy to hang out with. As you heard, they are gay. I think they have no interest in women, so they are good to have on our side, just to be in good books with Mom and Dad in case they should ever wonder about us," Abigail said winking an eye.

"Of course, Abby. I am sure Mom and Dad are expecting us to start dating, should it ever happen. I am frustrated with this pretence knowing that

that ‘I do’ thing will never happen,” Angela said as they entered their bedrooms where Abigail flopped herself on the bed ready to sleep.

Angela remembered she was starting early the following day. She had a class assignment to finish before she retired, which saw her reluctantly leave the bedroom to the sitting room to do it. The dining table was still cluttered with dishes after entertaining the boys. She collected them to the kitchen sink for washing later.

The assignment was not an easy one, which gave her a little trouble trying to understand the new, unfamiliar subject. And, unable to concentrate, she decided to tidy up the kitchen first. Maybe this would clear her mind a bit to tackle the assignment.

The dishes were done, and everything was back to order. Angela felt a gentle touch from behind. It was Abigail.

“Why are you up, dear?” Abigail asked worried.

I came to your bed and missed you. Abigail kissed her on the neck. It sparked their desire for each other. She turned and gave her a compassionate kiss that lingered on for some time.

“Before you get all naughty, Abby, I am supposed to finish an assignment here now that my head has refused to understand. It is good you don’t look sleepy,” Angela said pulling her sister towards the desk to show her the assignment which she knew Abigail would understand as they both had passed their A-level science subjects. “I know your course is in medicine,” she said, “but we are still at the introductory level, and I think you will assist me grasp some of these questions, Abby.”

Abigail thought that perhaps Angela was not only desperate not to fail in her first assignment but wanted a good start not to upset their disciplinarian parents should they want to follow up on their progress. She read through the questionnaire and, as she did some research on the internet, saw her sister curled up on the sofa already asleep. But she thought it was an exciting topic she was reading and got caught finishing Angela’s paper.

Abigail slept very little trying to complete the work. She therefore couldn’t say she had a good night, having woken up slightly tired. This was unlike Angela, who was refreshed in the morning and dressed up ready to hand in the paper she didn’t even look at. The first person to see it was going to be her professor.

Abigail freshened up and she, too, went to class. Had she thought about it, she would have agreed that it is good to be young, for, despite her having slept little, the tiredness in her body was not a bother; she felt fresh enough to face the day.

Meanwhile, in Angela's class, this was the first time her professor had received such a well-done paper from a student just beginning his class. So impressed was he that he was keen to know whether Angela had somebody in her family with an engineering background. She became the lecturer's favourite student. Even she was surprised and inspired by her sister's performance. She knew she had to work very hard if she was to continue being the best in the course. She told herself that having drawn inspiration from someone she adored, she would never dare let her down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bridges

ABIGAIL WAS STILL TRYING to get used to the medical terms in the introductory unit but knew it would take patience to master them. She was determined to be the top student, but she already saw competition in Joel, whom she liked and saw as her new cheerleader. Joel did not seem to struggle as much to master the terms, an early sign that he could be the one to beat.

Their friendship had only deepened in the days following the dinner at Abigail's apartment in which they each introduced their siblings. So close had they grown that they might have known each other for years.

"I need a tot of brandy to clear my mind," Joel said after class as that week came to an end. "The lecture today was too difficult to understand. I didn't know medicine could be so demanding. I shall buy you a glass of wine, dear Abby."

"Sure. With you, Joe, I feel comfortable in a way I cannot explain. I feel like you have become my keeper. I have no idea why, but that's how I've been feeling of late."

Abigail took his hand as they walked to the nearest pub. She did not talk much, but her radiant smile made Joel feel good inside, but he, too, had this warm feeling towards her. The brandy, however, turned out not to be a tot, as a bottle of the liqueur and a bucket of ice cubes were placed before them.

They talked a bit more about their lives, with Abigail taking it upon herself to keep his spirits up, seeing Joel's sadness as he explained how life haunted him growing up without his real parents. Time had wiped out much of his memory of them, but he vaguely remembered his African mom and dad. He remembered he had a sister, and often wondered what became of her. For

reasons he could not explain, Abigail's presence with him in and out of class gave him a lot of comfort.

They had not yet got tipsy when Angela walked in looking for Abigail. She was not happy with her classmate, who now seemed to take most of Abigail's free time. Joel invited her to join them, and Angela accepted. But she insisted on sitting between her sister and Joel.

After a short while, the anger Angela had joined them left her and she was all smiles. Abigail excused herself and took the opposite seat facing them. She wanted to have a better view of the people she loved most. However, as she was about to take a seat, she stepped on someone only to turn and see Twister, who had just walked in. But he seemed to have been drinking and looked a bit tipsy. His brother could tell because, usually a good storyteller, Twister now seemed more talkative and made jokes that filled the girls with laughter.

Soon the group loosened up on account of the happy drink and stood up to dance. "The house DJ is on point," commented Angela excitedly.

Tired of dancing finally, they took to karaoke to try out their vocals, but amid much laughter, they all agreed that they lacked the talent to sing. It was close to 11 p.m. when they decided it was time to leave.

The two brothers decided to take the girls home first. Joel was not too drunk, so he took the wheel. When they got to the girls' apartment, the boys felt in no hurry to go home and slept there, with Twister sleeping on the couch and Joel on Abigail's mattress on the sitting room floor. Abigail spent the night on Angela's bed.

It was midday when Abigail woke up and saw her sister still asleep. The heat from the blazing sun outside had already warmed the room. Abigail tried to shake her up, but Angela's eyelids seemed glued together. Abigail wondered what this dream must be that she couldn't wake up from. After a few more shakes Angela opened her eyes.

"We need to do breakfast for our guests. Remember it was you who invited the boys to spend the night."

Angela was confused at first, having forgotten they had guests. They quickly dressed up to prepare breakfast.

The girls, to their amazement, found the table already set and the apartment clean, including the previous evening's utensils. The girls were impressed and, from what they already knew of the boys, they knew it had been the absence of their dad, Boris, in their life that they had learnt to do things for themselves.

“This is not a breakfast anymore, look at the time,” said Joel with a laugh at the look in the girls’ eyes, and they sat to a hearty brunch with the hosts congratulating the guests.

“Life is short,” commented Angela brightly. “We need to live each day with gratitude and live it well. And, even better, grab the opportunity when it comes to making others smile as our newfound boyfriends have done today.”

“I thank God for that drink last night. It helped dampen my sister Angie’s anger at having been invited too late,” Abigail joked.

“And today Angela is more the host than you are Abby,” Twister replied. She does not want us to leave.”

Angela’s anger the previous day from her misplaced suspicion that Abigail was in love with Joel was long forgotten. The newly established friendship with the brothers now seemed to have enriched Angela’s life in a way she had never experienced before.

Abigail, who knew her sister very well, could feel her and these thoughts passed through her mind: *She must be consumed by the sunshine of selflessness Joel and Twister have shown today. Maybe she fears losing me again since our parents tried to separate us. She must imagine I am getting sucked into the embrace of a man’s love and fears how lonely it might feel when she aches to have me and I am not on my bed to give myself to her. I should assure her that sharing me with another person is out of the question. Holding onto jealous anger is the poison she drinks often wishing any intruder between us to drop dead.*

“I have what’s needed to sustain us all in this house, boys. If you do not mind, you can join us here. We live together as one big family,” Angela offered to everybody’s surprise.

Joel didn’t hesitate. “Thanks a million, Angela,” he said. “That is precisely what we would like, but we are comfortable living by ourselves in our small way. We shall invite you too to our makeshift home next week.”

The two brothers had already discussed this, so Twister nodded his confirmation.

Angela suggested they go for a swim and the girls laughed at the shyness that immediately showed in the boys’ faces. But it was not shyness, especially for Joel, who was relieved that the ladies seemed to have accepted that he and Twister could not move in with them; the reason being the boys’ privacy, especially when they needed to be alone in the house to freely be intimate with

each other. More so, neither did he want his hate for women to ever erupt and hurt the girls. If anything, the thought of living with Angela and Abigail under the same roof took him back to their father's house, somewhat reminding him of the sex pests Amy and Emma when he and his brother were younger.

In the meantime, Abigail seemed to have been disappointed at Joel's decline to live with them and thought to herself: *We are not interested in their sticky lovemaking but would be very happy having good fun together.*

"OK, darling boys," she said as they downed their second glass of wine, "let us know when we should come. We shall be happy to flower your makeshift home. It should be fun spending a night in a boy's house. We have never done that before and would be worth the adventure."

"I agree love is like a butterfly that flies where it pleases, pleasing the eye that finds it wherever it flies. We love you girls, but no swimming today. We have homework to do. Tomorrow is a working day for some of us; we will be introduced to practical lessons in hospital wards, guys!" announced Joel. Twister picked two flowers from the hedge outside and pitched them on the ladies' heads.

The ladies seemed pleased with this in the way they took selfies. They were interrupted by a cell phone ringing. It was Twister's, and the call was from their dad, Boris. He was in town and wanted to see the boys. The girls insisted that they should go with them. The young men didn't seem too enthusiastic, but they agreed.

They used Angela's car, and Twister offered to be at the wheel. The traffic had started to build up, but Twister knew all the back roads to beat the traffic. A few minutes later they were face to face with the dad, who they had christened "Mr Boris, The Great, the saviour of the abandoned and the killer of their dreams." The girls were eager to meet the subject of the tales they had so much heard about from the sons.

He is better looking than my classmate Joel had described him, Abigail decided after laying sight of him. *He looks like an easy-going and jolly guy who seems pleased to see girls tagging along with his sons.*

Boris adjusted his shirt inside his pullover, but one side was left awkwardly hanging outside the pullover.

Despite Abigail complimenting his good looks in her mind, she and Angela felt no love for Boris, their hatred for him consumed their hearts and shut him out.

Abigail's big smile when greeting him was, therefore, very deceiving. She imagined Boris might have seen it as he hugged her and Angela. She, however, intentionally clung to the hug a bit longer than was necessary, hoping he might feel what she could offer to those who mattered to her. She was surprised to feel Boris's warmth and somewhat felt like she was hugging her real dad if that was ever to be possible. She thought that he may not have been the perfect dad to the sons, but he must have been a very committed father to Joel and Twister. He finished the hug by holding the girls' hands for longer than a moment, leaving them longing for more.

Their Dad Blaze usually didn't tightly hug someone, even those close to him; one hardly felt his chest. But Boris warmly wrapped his large body around them making them feel a kind of love coming from deep in his soul. *What a 'fatherless' dad. Boris deserves a wife and children of his own*, the girls seemed to be saying to each other.

"I am Angela, and this is my sister Abigail."

Boris was struck at the coincidence that the white girl should claim to be a sister to the black one, just like his two sons – one white and the other black described themselves. He looked at Abigail and again at Angela and suddenly looked very thoughtful, his mind seeming far away. He shook his head, as if to clear it then asked Abigail where her mum and dad were.

She was surprised at the question but promptly answered. "I only know our parents, Jewel and Blaze. They are the ones who brought me up, and I thank God for that."

The answer seemed to trigger a sadness in her and a tear rolled down her cheek and onto her t-shirt. Angela noticed this and held her sister's hand to comfort her.

The girls may not have been blood relatives, but Boris noticed Angela's protectiveness and love for her sister. It was clear the white girl was not going to tolerate any other intrusive question. He also understood there might be some unhealed wounds he must not open with his curiosity.

But for whatever reason, Abigail had thought that Boris was trying to flirt with her, asking such an innocent-seeming question. *He is not my age-mate, and*

he doesn't know whether I am dating his boys. He can rest assured I am not the kind that bears heirs for families. I, after all, am a lesbian in a committed relationship. What a nonsensical question from Boris!

Abigail hoped never to cross paths with this father of the boys ever again. She wiped her wet eyes, as Angela excused them and left the boys with their dad. Abigail turned to look at Boris and gave in to an urge that gripped her to wave goodbye at the father and sons. They waved back with a smile, as Angela drove away.

The boys wondered at the girls' hurry to leave but were a bit relieved that Abigail had recovered quickly from whatever it was that had brought tears to her eyes. The girls looked at them from the car's side mirrors before it made a turn and lost them from view. Then the boys turned to give their dad their full attention.

"We need to do a bit of shopping to take home and see our parents, now that we are free and the boys are with their dad. We can even spend the night there, Abby. I offer to clean the dishes and you do the cooking with mom."

When they reached the supermarket parking lot, Angela gave her sister a peck on the cheek as she opened her door to get out of the car.

Abigail saw an ice cream trolley and wondered at the life of the man attending to customers. *Maybe his family slept hungry after a night out with the wrong type of women with who he must have spent every penny of the day's takings. Maybe he has an ultimatum from his wife not to get back into that house if he doesn't go with all the items in the shopping list in his shirt pocket.* Abigail felt sorry for him, telling herself that if she could entertain Boris's boys on borrowed money from her sister, Angela, why not the ice cream man?

"What special flavours do you have, Mr.?" she enquired from the vendor when they reached the trolley.

"The best is this one with nuts, young lady," he spoke in a kind voice, pointing at an unfamiliar brand to Abigail. This is what she told herself, even as she nodded her head to indicate to the man that she would take it: *The ice cream looks crunchy good and shall make you forget you had a beef with Boris, and the day ahead shall turn out OK.*

She thought the vendor was a good salesman, noting that he seemed to sell some of the most expensive ice-creams, no doubt to make enough money to return home with food for his family.

Angela looked on a bit irritated that Abigail seemed to take too long talking with the ice cream man, but she decided to keep her cool. She did not want her sister to break down again.

Abigail finally settled the bill, which turned out to be for the most expensive ice cream this guy had on offer. They sat on a kerb to first enjoy the treat before its goodness melted down.

“I MISS THE boys already, Abby,” said Angela. “I wish their dad did not choose a day like today to visit them. He spoilt it, and I so looked forward to spending the day with them. Anyway, it has given our parents a chance to see their girls. The sun is fading. We need to be out of the city before it is dark.”

“I am feeling a bit low, Angie. The buzz I had from the wine we took before leaving the house disappeared the moment Boris asked that question. I wonder why he wanted to see the boys, yet he was never a good parent to them. And why was he curious about me?”

Angela said nothing and concentrated on the shopping. She asked Abigail if they might have forgotten something. Abigail went through the items on the trolley and noticed they had not remembered a dishwashing sponge and went to get one from the shelves.

Angela paid the cashier and were on their way, with Abigail at the wheel this time to allow Angela to take a nap. She was still tired from the previous night’s partying, and the girls knew there would be little sleep when they reached their parents’ home. They expected the night to be long as their idle parents tried to catch up with them on every little detail about their college life.

Angela was soon asleep, allowing Abigail quiet time admiring the scenery and farm fields as she drove. Her attention was drawn to a wheat field belonging to a farmer she recognised. He planted the crop year-in-year-out and was impressed that he was still at it for as long as she could remember. She remembered having once paid the farm a visit as a child. It is from the farmer she learnt the importance of bees which, as they gather nectar, also pollinate crops. He was known for his generosity to his neighbours, with whom he shared information and new better-yielding varieties of wheat developed at the farm.

She remembered feeling special that the farmer should confide in her how he nearly didn’t want to share the new varieties for free with the neighbours,

telling himself that they too had a brain and could come up with their own ideas to improve their yields. With this going through Abigail's mind, the thought that seemed to summarise it all was this: *Being kind can sometimes bring with it unexpected rewards.*

Abigail was inspired to become such a visionary farmer when she grew up. She smiled to herself remembering this, seeing how things had turned out now that she was studying medicine and not agronomy.

Abigail came by a ranch whose owner she also knew. *I wonder why he considers himself a rancher. The livestock don't seem to be well looked after with their ribs protruding like guitar strings. Even his dogs look miserable. He should be sued for animal abuse.*

"It is true that life is sometimes happy and other times rough, but here in the rancher's farm it is rough all through," Abigail caught herself saying it aloud.

She remembered the popular book *Animal Farm*, where animals rebel against their owner, hoping to live a free and happy life. The only hope she could see for these animals on the farm she was passing by was probably animal rights activists fighting for them. Abigail did not like their owner for the abuse the poor animals were suffering. *He needs to be a little more generous and magnanimous to these poor dependents. I wonder who fights for animal rights and why they had never noticed this animal farm. Whoever breaks you beautiful animals has no capacity to heal, but the God who loves you shall not leave you alone to die. Keep strong animals. Your God lives.*

She went taking in the beautiful scenery of her old neighbourhood. She wondered when she would be back to always enjoy it, now that she and her sister were miles away in college.

Abigail soon hooted at their gate to alert the parents their daughters were home. It is the hoot that woke up Angela. "Haiyaal!" she said in surprise. "Home already? You mean I've slept all the way, Abby?"

Both the parents came to open the gate. Angela got out to greet them, as Abigail parked the car before joining them. They however seemed to be too distracted with their favourite daughter Angela to notice Abigail.

"The doctor is here demanding to be inspected too," Angela protested jokingly, as Abigail opened her arms and closed her eyes smiling as always heading towards them. They both ran to her with Angela closely following

before they were all locked in this endless embrace. Even so, with what often appeared like the parents' favouritism of Angela, Abigail always remembered this thought she had read somewhere: *Knowing your space when you do not belong to a family or a clique of friends is very important so that your expectations are not too high, and then you get compromised in the long run.* Abigail had cushioned herself in a bubble of contentment.

"It is such a pleasure to see you girls. How is school life treating you?" Angela had put on a few grams even as Abigail's weight seemed not to have changed. "Where is your food going to, young lady?" Jewel asked her, adding with a smile, "It would be best if you ate more than Angela going forward."

"I do not touch the food before Angela is done eating. She has become a pig these days," Abigail ran from her sister after making the comment, as Angela charged at her.

The parents were happy to see the girls' spirits so high, and their friendship as beautiful as when they were little girls. With the chase over, the girls removed the shopping from the car and dropped in the house. Then the family settled down to a meal Mom Jewel had initially prepared as dinner for her and her husband. She had not counted the girls, having not been alerted of their coming. But it was enough for the four of them. It was an early dinner, as the parents liked to eat early as they had aged so that they could retire early. The parents explained that with age even a three-meal arrangement every day sometimes became a challenge, especially with their deteriorating health. Jewel was hypertensive while Blade was having to cope with unrelenting arthritis.

The girls are not used to this. They could eat at any time, even at midnight, if it so demanded to keep up their energy.

The subject soon turned to the girls' time in school, with Abigail taking the spotlight.

"Life has not been easy," she was saying. "I now realise that when I become a doctor it shall not be a walk in the park. It is a hell of a lot of work. We never sleep or rest, from the hospital wards to class, from class to endless books to read, and then the exams that are not easy. It is not a course for the weak-hearted. However, not to worry, I am determined to win this battle, dear parents."

"Abigail dear, life is not about perfection. Give yourself the grace to grow in your career. We all tried out stuff. We learn through our mistakes. We loved

some things, and in the same breath, our system rejects some,” Mom Jewel observed before their Dad Braze picked it up.

“When this happens my dear Abby,” he advised, “we get the courage to say yes to what we support and a no to what we do not believe in. This is how you create your path. You have the potential to do lots of things, but motivation determines what you choose to do, and attitude determines how well you do it. Always get up after every fall, and whether you have to run, walk, or crawl, set your goals and aspire to achieve them all. The difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how you use them. Once you change how you look at things, the things you look at shall automatically change.”

“Whatever it amounts to, shall forever be you. That shall be your story, Abigail,” their mother added, picking up from her husband. “You will have walked the journey in the best way you know how. You shall forever be the same beautiful girl we brought up. It doesn't mean that you shall be different if you change that course. Neither do we guarantee you shall be better in any way, my dear. College is a new different experience that everyone needs to experience in this life. It is the bridge to adulthood and a bit scary. Home doesn't feel the same anymore, and one does not look forward to finishing college and coming back home. We all look forward to being independent indeed. Be true to yourself, your inner gut never lies. It is you summoning you. Just oblige and flow with it, Abigail.”

The dad took over again. “All said and done, I urge you to be patient and trust your journey shall amount to greatness. These feelings have nothing to do with your ability. Create a world that shall be beautiful to you as you go through the turbulence of medical school. I shall be a pillar where I can, dear. Remember you are close to the greener pastures of your profession, my girl.”

“Look at who is crying here,” said Angela laughing at her sister. “Eeeish! You have been encouraging me all along not to give up, Abby. We are still in our first year Abby; there's time enough to work on the grades. You were so excited to do medicine and you have good company there, you know! Hang in there, dear sister.”

If she had previously felt overlooked and ignored as Angela seemed to get all their parents' attention, this was proof to Abigail that they never abandoned her. She was very happy to come to the realisation that she had the family's full

support. *Excuses kill perfect dreams, Abby... you shall be saving lives. Do not be afraid*, she assured herself.

CHAPTER NINE

Betrayal

THE BOYS WERE happy to see their dad Boris and appreciated every moment they would share with him. They had long come to terms with the life he led of booze and women. And now that they were in college, they knew the day would come when they would wonder where the years had gone when they enjoyed adventurous outdoors with the dad. They now had a fondness for him, remembering that he had sacrificed his youthful days to raise them.

In their renewed love for him, they felt they could move mountains to protect him from anything mean that threatened him. Overtime they had come to appreciate that any hardships they may have encountered leading them to leave home were nothing compared to the sacrifices Boris had made. His coming to visit them showed how he remained committed to his sons. This made them feel even closer to him and decided that he was not himself when he appeared uncaring of them when they were younger. Joel and Twister, therefore, felt they could never give up on this man who had been the only parent they knew.

Boris was answering a phone call as they entered a restaurant to have lunch. "Each moment has its value," Twister said to his brother thoughtfully, as their father continued on the phone. "We had good moments with the girls right up to when we cooked for them in the morning, and now we have this moment with Dad."

"A moment, should I say, to have a healthy sons-dad conversation," replied Joel, "and show our unreserved love for him, make peace and reconcile."

They found a table and sat for what they knew would be a feast. The restaurant was Boris's idea, telling the boys that he liked the place for their

Italian food. "I guess dad must have been an Italian priest in his other life before reincarnating with the devilish traits stamped by Bethrow, his mate in their adventure with women and booze," Twister whispered to Joel. They laughed at this as they waited for their dad to finish with the phone.

It was not yet lunchtime, and the boys were still full after the brunch with the girls. They persuaded their dad to have a drink first before ordering something to eat. The boys were, however, careful not to get drunk. The conversation they planned with their dad demanded some soberness. They had in mind to first get done with the issue of the sex pests, Amy and Emma, whom he had once said he wanted the women to "show them (the boys) how to be men."

"Dad, we hope it shall not offend you to discuss something that has been disturbing us for some time," Joel said projecting humility and respect in his voice. "You gave us your best as a dad, although there were troubling situations as we were growing up that eventually made us leave home trying to find ourselves."

The humility and tenderness they showed addressing their dad was not to flatter him, but a sign of the confidence they had gained from life lessons after they moved from home.

"Cut to the chase, Joel, and say what you want to say," urged Boris, though he didn't sound impatient. "I am interested to know what the issue was because I all along thought you left at your will to enjoy your freedom. Having been a young man once, I knew that's what you wanted. I also knew that should life become too difficult for you, you would come back home. I am happy to say you disappointed me on that; I am proud that you've turned out to be responsible and self-reliant young men.

"Thanks, Dad, glad that you are happy with us," replied Twister. "But it was your women Aimy and Emma that drove us out. All they seemed interested in was removing our pants and performing the unimaginable on us. We did not know how to fight back because we were too young to understand what sex was. We hated the experience, especially because it was not consensual even after were old enough to understand. We felt abused. It was only after we consulted with other boys that we realised it was a kind of rite of passage. We didn't want to fight or beat the women and have you throw us out of your house. It was a sad reality, but we thought it easier to walk away."

He spoke in a tone of voice that showed their determination to clear this between them and their dad and move on. Joel picked it up his brother stopped speaking.

“They had keys to our bedrooms and used to sneak in when we were asleep. They would warn us not to scream. Screaming is for girls, not men, Aimy and Emma would say. We cried in silence. It was traumatising but we didn’t have the courage to tell you or Uncle Bethrow of our nightmare with them.”

Joel was a bit tearful saying this. Boris was in a daze unable to comprehend what he was hearing. It sounded like the boys suffered repeated rape.

He could not comprehend how such women could engage in forceful sexual acts with boys the age of their children, if not younger. To him, Aimy and Emma had seemed responsible adults and masseuses, not sex maniacs. Yet he considered them lucky that they were now married, otherwise, he would have pursued them to their marital homes to avenge his sons, probably in front of their spouses. He was disgusted and thankful that he never had the desire to marry either of the women. He would have divorced them outright.

Boris felt he had to share this with Bethrow who, like him, had remained a bachelor. He dialled his phone and put Bethrow on loudspeaker for the boys to listen in.

“This is Boris, how have you been, and how is your new station?”

“Aren’t you coming for the weekend, or shall we wait for the assignment to lapse before we see your face again, buddy? But speaking of the devil, where are you?”

“I am with your former women, Aimy and Emma. They say they miss seeing you, Boris. We bumped into each other at a restaurant. They are loaded with cash. We could have a drink on them today. They are still in perfect shape, their spouses must be very good to them,” Bethrow laughed at this, then asked, “Will you join us, or where do we find you, Boris?”

“Good,” replied Boris, suppressing his rage. “I am also in town. Tell the ladies I miss them too. You can bring them to our usual Italian restaurant. I shall be glad to see them too.”

The boys were surprised that their dad should invite the women, who they did not care to meet. They soon understood why.

“I hope we shall be done with our meal before the women get here,” Boris told them. “My appetite to eat is not at its best right now, but I need energy to deal with the betrayal you have shared with me. I want you to hold Aimy and

Emma to account yourselves. I may not be able to answer to any of what happened to you back then, but no sin is too hard to correct if enough light is shed on it. I wonder why you had to keep such evil in the dark for this long. A parent is your shield no matter the magnitude of fear you may have to tell them. A parent often has answers to issues affecting their children. They may not always have the correct answers, but they shall always come to your aid no matter your age, whether you are young or however old you might be. A child never ages in the eyes of the parent. Perhaps you didn't know, but it was a mistake on your part to keep quiet about it. It was my mistake too to assume that everything was OK with you boys when you had to leave home when still so young. You gave no indication whatsoever of any underlying issue, sons."

"Accept our apologies, Dad," said Joel speaking on behalf of his brother. "We now realise it was a failure on our part. We also now understand and feel sorry that we didn't spend enough time with you as we ought to for guidance on some of our issues growing up. What I can promise is that shall be visiting home more often."

Boris requested the hotel attendant to move them to a private room, as they were waiting for some guests. They were assigned a room with a balcony with a beautiful view of the ocean. He instructed the waiter to lock the door from outside when his guests arrived.

The hotel was used to Boris requesting such special arrangements, but this was new to his boys. The request to lock the door from the outside surprised them, leaving them very curious to know what their dad was up to. The room was self-contained with its own bathroom and had a couch. The meal was served, but there was little time to enjoy it. Boris asked the waiter to keep close as they intended to finish quickly and needed the table cleared.

BORIS SHOULD not have bothered to ask the young man attending them to wait. Aimy and Emma arrived in the nick of time to meet the man they said they so missed. They looked middle-aged and much older than the boys could remember. In their minds, they had expected them to still look young and well-groomed.

In the meantime, Boris tried to welcome Aimy and Emma with a smile, but his suppressed anger couldn't let him. Bethrow noticed this and wondered

what was going on. This was not the usual Boris he knew and said little. The women were just happy to see him. To them, he was the hero of the day.

Boris's thoughts wandered to the days when the two women were still young and very attractive. Lustful thoughts clouded his mind visualising it.

He, however, remembered a prude once telling him how reproductive organs must be among the ugliest parts of the body, and how they were given by God to be the most disgusting to look at to discourage their users from abusing them. It was not a coincidence that God had designed them like plumbing to channel waste from the body. Yet God must have cared enough that those same ugly organs played the most exalted role in creating life in the most pleasurable way imaginable. God crowned them with the glory of creating life in a therapeutic and healing physical performance. As this passed through Boris's mind, it reminded him how easy it was for one to lose themselves pursuing the pleasure as he did with the masseuses, just like these two women did with the boys.

"Meet my sons, ladies. It has been a while."

The boys stood up and pleasantly bowed in a show of respect and served the ladies and Bethrow some food and a drink.

"What a surprise Twister and Joel, I did not expect to see you today, how have you been?"

"We have been well Uncle Bethrow, nice to see you" Twister responded as Joel admiringly observed their uncle, who always wore casual, now dressed in a white shirt and neat tie, having just come from the office.

BORIS WAS, however, not about to wait for them to finish eating. He began by expressing his disappointment, before angrily telling them that they had tarnished his name to the people he valued the most, his children. No amount of money or their claim to miss him could heal the damage they had caused his family. So angry was he that he could not recall things he wanted to tell them, words spoken or hurtful acts of betrayal they had also done to him in the past. Still, he intended the ladies to face their ugly past with him.

Aimy was a mother of two girls. All were born before she met Boris. The daughters were now all grown-up women, and one had a baby, making Aimy a grandmother. She was married to the rancher whose uncared-for livestock had reminded Abigail of the rebellious animals in the popular book *Animal Farm*

while on the way to her parents' home. Neither did Abigail approve of Aimy when Joel had told her of what they had gone through at the women's hands. It would make her even more hateful that the woman was married to the farmer, as she must be responsible for allowing the animals to be in such a bad state. This would not have happened had the woman not been a nonsensical person, otherwise she would have looked for a hired farmhand to ensure the animals were well looked after.

Emma was married to a pub owner and had a teenage son. The boy led a neglected life and was left to raise himself as his parents busied themselves in their pub business. When Boris first learnt of this, he hoped the bad nanny history with Joel and Twister did not repeat itself with Emma's son, who did not seem to have changed much.

It took a while for Boris to calm his anger. Then he spoke, trying to keep as calm as possible. "Aimy and Emma," he said, looking directly at them. "I want to hear it from your mouths who abused Joel and who abused Twister."

The women exchanged glances and, as they did so, their appetite disappeared. They never expected their past to follow them. Not this time, however. They sat paralysed, as their pleasant faces turned unpleasant to look at in the panic that gripped them. Emma was the younger of the two and was always quick to point fingers.

"I was introduced to the habit by Aimy," she said. "I only did it once to Twister, and I regretted it a lot. I would like to apologise to him now that we are here." She started to cry as she went on her knees pleading with Twister to forgive her. She knew she had done it with the Twister more than once but hoped that saying she did once might cool the storm she saw coming.

"Shut up your filthy mouth Emma," shouted Aimy. "I found you in the act. You did it without anyone influencing you. You are such a prostitute. Even the husband you have today you stole from our mutual friend Nelly. I wonder when you will learn to carry your cross without persecuting others. I own up to my acts with Joel, and I sincerely apologise for that."

Boris had heard enough of the women's accusations to each other. He stood up removing his belt.

"If these fools thought they could mess with sons I have nurtured this long without a fight, they are mistaken," he said and started lashing them with the belt, unleashing all the anger bottled inside him since the boys' confession earlier that day.

The women were now on the floor writhing with pain from the lashes, with Boris shouting that this was the last time they would touch someone's unripe fruits ever again. His angry shouts sounded like loud roars that drowned the women's screams. The women tried to calm him down and find mercy. Neither could they escape, as the heavy door was locked from the outside.

The boys looked on horrified, as the women tried to plead for leniency as Boris tore into them with the belt but would hear none of their cries for mercy.

Joel felt sorry for them and hoped the women could find a way to escape Boris's wrath. The beating was so severe that they were starting to bleed. Seeing this, Bethrow and Twister held Boris back to stop the beating, as Joel helped Aimy and Emma escape through the balcony.

"I deeply regret that this befell you, my boys," he told them after the women had left. "Accept my apologies again. I never meant any harm, you guys being the special people I gladly gave my youth to raise. I own up that the house was a bit chaotic with all those guests and noise, and I thought you chose to live in the storeroom because you wanted some privacy. I am saddened to have pushed out the people I love, denying them the comforts of a home that was theirs in pursuit of my selfish desires. We all have our ugly sides but confronting the women was like facing my own monsters."

Bethrow had spoken little all this time. "I liked the women, but I had no idea they could be such freaks. They always seemed nice and behaved well around me. I could never have told what was going on behind the scenes."

"It was Bethrow who helped us settle the storeroom," said Twister, "but we never let him know the ladies had abused us. He was more concerned with the effect the disturbing happenings in the house were causing us, such as the noisy drunks."

"Thanks a million, Bethrow, for helping me in parenting these kids. I am just human, and I did not know any better. And to Twister and Joel, I thought leaving you to your games and television was all you needed to be happy, but I was wrong. I was not there for you, and I was not kind, yet kindness is probably the only sure path humans show their love. These women abused my kindness. They may have failed me, but I am determined to right things from today and be the dad I failed to be. I thank Bethrow for filling the gap for me. A lot was playing in my life, including what is called a midlife crisis when sometimes it felt like I was not what everyone thought I was. This left a certain gap. Then Aimy and Emma came along and messed with you guys.

Unfortunately, we cannot reverse that, but I am happy you have gotten over it. I am also ready to pay for my mistakes. How do I pay you, my sons?" Dad Boris to boys.

He hugged the boys feeling a bit emotional and promised never to entertain such guests again in the house. "I hope it is not too late to say sorry, my boys."

Joel spoke first. "Dad, you are a star. We love you very much even with all your shortcomings. You have just proven to us how caring you have always been. We appreciate the sacrifices because me and Twister could have done nothing without you. Our sincere gratitude from the bottom of our souls, Dad. You shall forever be our hero."

"I agree with Joel, Dad. No one can replace you in our hearts. We take this opportunity, too, to thank Bethrow for his support when things went out of hand. We hope the two of you shall find women to marry and give you children now that Joel and I are grown up," Twister said, tickling them.

"Boys," said Bethrow, who was dying to say something. "Let me take this opportunity to also apologise for the evil that happened to you back then. I know you didn't want your dad to know, but you could have mentioned it to me and I am sure we could have stopped the abuse the moment it began. They are such evil women, Aimy and Emma, and such an embarrassment to all of us. I partly blame myself, too, for not being more vigilant. We are late to marry but not ready to marry such beasts. They can go to hell. We are happy with our single status. No woman is guaranteed permanent residence in our house. We are happy to have raised you. Also, parenting is a 24-hour job, we are not very enthusiastic about going through it again at our age now. We have also slowed down our fast life merry making with booze and women. Let us appreciate we have two sons who've made us proud by being top students and, secondly, for trusting us again. Thank you, Joel and Twister."

"We shall only have your wives as the women in our compound in the future. No other girl shall set foot in our house," Boris said, his voice full of hope. But little did he know his sons were gay and did not care for women, including those that filled their dad's merry den.

They all felt good to have gotten done with the issue of the women, which had the most impact on their lives. In this happy mood, their reunion deepened as they ordered a flow of drinks.

It was time well spent, and they hope for such a boys' day out again soon. A lot changed that day and it would be the first night the boys would spend at their father's home in many years.

IT FELT strange for Twister and Joel to wake up in their old bedrooms. Though the rooms felt smaller than they remembered them, they also felt like the warm home they always knew. They were also very happy to reunite with the dog, Bingo. The dog was now old and did not seem interested in anything. It looked as if aware it had served its purpose and was now just wishing its days away as it waited for its creator to claim it. They remembered him gallivanting a lot away from home during the day. He had been bought to keep the boys' company when they were young.

The brothers decided to wake up early and surprise their dad Boris with a full-course breakfast. When Boris woke up to find the laid-out table, he thought it almost unbelievable how time had shaped his boys into responsible men. It filled him with pride, but he could not remember the last time he had both of them at home. One of them was always somewhere working or in school as the other came to visit him.

. Bethrow was also very impressed, mostly because matters to do with the kitchen had been his duty ever since the boys left. Boris hated being in the kitchen but was very happy with the treats it gave. They, however, ate out on most days.

They prepared to drop the boys in the city, as Boris was going to spend that night at Bethrow's new base.

The boys packed the left-over breakfast, which was going to be a welcome meal once they were back in their apartment.

The gardener chanced to be in that day, and they couldn't wait to say hello. The boys offered to help with tidying the house, which was also his job, as they let him do the compound. He was a jolly fellow with a stammer and used to laugh in a loud manner that the boys found hilarious. He felt happy that the boys always made a good laugh from his hilarious stories. The boys' help came in handy, as the house had been cluttered for some time. Now there would be some clean stuff their dad could use for some days. Being young men themselves, they knew men were usually not very keen when it came to

housekeeping, but Boris's boys were pretty hands-on with taking care of themselves.

It was soon time to go and they gave the gardener a lift to drop him a few streets away. The boys had earlier decluttered their bedrooms and gave the gardener items they had outgrown to take to his children.

The drive with their father was great just like when they were children before their home turned into a kind of brothel. They took Boris to their house, which he was visiting for the first time. The first thing he noticed in the sitting room was a portrait of him together with Joel and Twister when they were younger. He was unsure when and where the photograph was taken but found no reason to ask. There was another displayed photo of the boys with the dog, Bingo.

They had a large collection of pictures taken with their dad during visits to other continents. To Boris, this was all a testament to how he had helped shape boys in the many adventures he took them.

The kitchen was small but had all the essential items. He noticed that they shared a bedroom and slept on a massive bed, which was pushed to one side to make space for a study table. That the space was small to take two beds seemed to concern him, though he said nothing. It was beyond him to imagine they could be a couple, that they were content and did not need two beds. He was the first person, other than the boys, to enter the bedroom. No one was welcome to enter it. He was happy that they were better organised than he had expected. The doctors, he was glad to note, were ready to face the next chapter of their lives.

"You can move to one of my apartments so that you have room sons, if you do not mind," Boris told them abruptly. "This house is too small for two grown men. I have a two-bedroom house that will be free next month after a tenant moves out. You could have the house. It has enough space to have guests once in a while."

He reprimanded himself that it had never crossed his mind to offer one of the rental apartments to his sons.

"No, Dad Boris, we are comfortable for now," said Joe. "Those houses are your retirement package. We are almost done with our studies and are unsure where we shall be posted to work. It would be more useful if you grow your savings now that you are ageing. Old age is expensive, Dad. But you are lucky

to have two boys with medical knowledge to ensure you receive the best care and cater for your upkeep, if need be.”

They all smiled and let it slide, knowing that Boris had enough savings and might never need any money from them.

CHAPTER TEN

The Consultant

ABIGAIL TRIED TO IMAGINE how Lierya would look like when she opened the door. It had been a year since she had set her eyes on Lierya. Schoolwork would not allow her to visit her friend, especially because of the busy rounds in hospital wards which now took much of her time. There was always a life-saving emergency to deal with. Social life had to take a back seat.

This was the first free day she had had in a while and decided to dedicate it to visiting Lierya. Lierya had sent Abigail a Google Maps pin to her new home, where she was dropped off by a taxi ten minutes later.

Abigail rang the doorbell and, a moment later, was surprised to see a beautiful heavily pregnant woman open the door. This was an unexpected development.

“When did you change, my darling Lierya?” she asked, unable to hide her astonishment. “I mean, you are a lesbian. How did you get pregnant?”

Lierya had never mentioned she had been dating, let alone being pregnant. She pulled Abigail inside and turned the key to securely lock the door.

Abigail noticed this and asked pointing at the lock, “Have I brought myself to a small prison?”

Lierya did not reply, she just stood there smiling. Abigail then understood that the smile meant her friend was now married, which explained the locking of the door.

Then, appearing pressed, Lierya abruptly dashed to the bathroom.

Abigail was a bit mystified at finding herself suddenly alone but took the opportunity to explore the apartment. It featured beautiful colours and everything about it appeared well thought out, from the seats to the fridge and

other kitchen stuff. She could not avoid noticing the portrait prominently displayed of Lierya and the handsome hunk who she assumed was her husband.

A moment later, as she edged towards the bedrooms, Lierya was back.

"I am hungry for you, Abby," Lierya sensually whispered in her ears. She made Abigail sit on a couch and rested her ballooned stomach on her chest as she panted like she was already in labour. She spread her legs and guided Abigail's fingers under the ballooned stomach. The area felt puffy ready for birth and her fingers could feel all the familiar nether parts engorged with arousal. After a few minutes, Lierya quivered and let out a cry of pleasure as a huge ecstatic squirt splashed out like a fountain of water. Abigail hoped it was not the amniotic bag that had ruptured.

Abigail supported a happy and spent Lierya and walked her to her bed to relax. Abigail, her body now aroused and craving with need, waited for Lierya to recover.

I am tied in this bondage, trapped like a caged tiger with no way out. I am sick, and I guess I am lame. Please, Lord, deliver me, she gave a silent prayer to God. *My girlfriend Lierya is now a married woman with a baby on the way, and I am here to beg for space in her heart. This is a game that never gives up. I need serious intervention to get my mind away from Lierya. We have been pillars to each other for a long time as she struggled with her parents' divorce and me with boarding school after being banished there by my foster parents as punishment for that childhood incident showing the porn movie. provided by that boy Ali and his brother Hassan.*

After Abigail finished her prayer, she picked Lierya's phone to see who the lucky man had been. The blue eyes of the good-looking guy staring at her from a picture on the phone looked surprisingly familiar and took her back ten years. *These look like Ali's eyes, my neighbour who provided the naughty DVD movie when we were children.*

Abigail opened a website on the phone that could reduce the age of a person in a photograph. The image that appeared was of a boy that resembled Ali. The beautiful blue and sexy eyes popped out beautifully even back then. *What a small world,* Abigail thought. *I am surprised how the universe recycles old friendships around one another no matter how lost to each other they may have been.*

Lierya was now awake and already on Abigail. No words were exchanged as they were lost in a kind of heaven. Abigail was quickly done but needed

thirty minutes to recover from the intensity of her ecstatic release. She, however, decided to sleep a bit longer to conserve energy for the long hours that awaited her at the hospital. She woke up to a set table with a nice vegetable salad and a well-done steak with freshly baked bread. Lierya was a good cook.

Before Abigail was halfway through eating, her phone beeped. It was her classmate, Joel. "There is a change of plans," he reported. "The lecturer is not in tomorrow. He has lost an uncle through an accident and has to attend a Muslim burial that has to be done within three days after death. The burial will be on Thursday, then the weekend. The lecturer does not plan to be back to school until the next week. He requires us to be at the school morgue for practicals to dissect a human cadaver."

"I'll be there in thirty minutes, Joe, so that we go to class together."

"See you then Abby, on my way too." Joel hung up, leaving Abigail to finish with her meal as she talked to Lierya.

"Please explain to me Lierya, when your motherly instincts kicked in. The last I knew you were a girl destined for life-long lesbianhood. What happened?"

"Abby, you remember I am the only child of my separated parents. I thought about it and decided to add to the family. I thought that should I fail, the family line would die with me. I met a lost soul too but too handsome to resist. We agreed to explore this journey together and so far, so good, Abby."

"Your mama did not remarry to get more kids. She looked lonely, like someone who longed to be with someone to love, if not her husband. And the poor guy your dad, what is he up to nowadays, Lierya?"

"They are together again, and too tired for anything. That's why I thought of rewarding them with grannies to keep them vibrant," Lierya explained.

"I am truly happy for your parents. It gives me hope that I, too, might reunite with my parents one day. I have a lot to share, too. I need another day with you, Lierya. And who is my competitor, your husband?"

"He is a dentist guy called Ali. Handsome and very easy-going. I can't wait for you to meet him. You shall love him the very instant you set your eyes on him, my darling Abby," she said smiling and sensually touching Abigail's arm to reassure her that she still deeply loved her.

"I think I know your Ali. He is the guy who made me get dumped in boarding school if you remember that porn video incident that also involved my sister Angela that I told you about long ago. I miss the guy so much; I haven't set my eyes on him since they left our hood."

“I hope he is that DVD guy so that we can be both his women. He is Muslim. I am sure he will eventually have three or five wives. You can be his number two, Abigail.” They laughed at this, as Abigail excused herself to leave.

THOUGH SHE hastened to get to school on time, the mortuary lessons with dead human bodies were not Abigail’s cup of tea. She was only attending the lessons because it was a requirement if she was to earn her medical degree. She had long decided that she would be a general practitioner, which did not seem too involving.

To keep her mind off the morgue as she walked to meet Joel, Abigail amused herself by imagining she was already a consultant at her general practitioner’s clinic. She held a humorous imaginary conversation in her mind with an imaginary client giving him good medical advice but warning him of the cost of visiting her clinic if he did not take care of his health.

‘Dr Abigail’ informed the imaginary client that her wish was to collect consultation fees and give people hope to face the next day. What she told her client next would not pass the doctors’ Hippocratic Oath, but it was all for fun. This was what passed through her mind:

“No patient shall come to me on their deathbed; I won’t accept those ones. If I must, I will not burden families with unnecessary bills if their patient is already halfway to his grave. I will prepare them to accept the inevitable to make it as easy for them and their departing hero. I will accept guys beaten by life who are afraid to die, people whose faith has probably failed them and only need an injection or two and some drugs to go and recover at home. I will also consider those wanting sick leave and all they need is a medical cover note so that they may visit their parents out of town or oversee their ongoing projects, including those that have stalled for lack of funds or inability to hire professionals like my sister Angela.

“What a messy world this must be that does not come with a catalogue of answers. You have to be like a lion that, despite failing to catch prey seventy-five per cent of the time, never gives up hunting. Those pictures of the king of the jungle that make our hearts leap are like the selfies of the poor billionaires we see on social media that remind us not to beat ourselves too hard for our failures. Life is more than the big shows we see in movies. Create a beautiful world within your means, and you shall be fine.

“If you come to me with a headache, I check your insurance coverage and if I find you are among the disadvantaged in society, I will prescribe the necessary quick-acting painkillers to give the impression that you are healed from the troubles hanging over your head. If the insurance cover is active and has enough credit, my clinic shall be adequately equipped with the necessary testing facilities to ease your wallet off some of its weight. After all, it is a service, and that is what insurance is for if your need is to be addressed. You will have created that need. which makes it a good client account for me. That is why I am Dr Abigail and not an honourable so-and-so of the politicians, or learned friend of the lawyers, or engineers; neither am I a professor. Those other professionals know how their titles help them. I only talk about my area of expertise.

“If you show up in my clinic with a tummy ache, I shall be kind enough to survive on the consultation fee you paid, which is not less than USD40, and send you home to take a spoon of bicarbonate soda in half a litre mug of water. The alkaline base shall hydrate and dilute the acidity in your tummy. Should you insist on further treatment and your insurance coverage still has enough to pay for it, I will be happy to send you to my classmate’s clinic Joe, for dissection, I mean an operation, followed by the many clinic sessions you shall pay for in cash from your huge salary.

“You better not dare visit my clinic with a limp for treatment. I shall be kind enough to refer you to yoga gurus or refer you to the nearest gym and charge you consultation fees every fortnight when you visit my clinic to assess treatment progress. If you are not happy with the services you will have paid for at the reception desk before entering Dr. Abigail’s examination office, I shall be more than delighted to refer you to the well-equipped physiotherapy clinic run by my classmate Joel’s brother, Dr Twister.

“If you should visit my clinic exhibiting symptoms of high blood pressure, I will be quick to warn you about it and prescribe fasting for two days a week, with fluids only. or prescribe intermittent fasting eating within the recommended period of eight hours each day and drinking water as will be needed for the rest of the day until breakfast the following morning. I will remind you that your meal portions should be moderate, not a whole goat feast or baking to eat from a whole packet of flour. Make veggies your dominant food, which you will supplement with a handful of starch and some protein. This shall help the body remove toxins accumulated in the body, and within a

year or so, your health shall be restored. A spoonful of pomegranate vinegar in a glass of water before you start your day shall be reasonable. Not to worry much, if you are too lazy to change your eating habits, my friend Joel's surgical clinic shall be waiting for you, where his fat bank account shall relieve you of your retirement package to help you keep alive a bit longer before you meet your creator.

“Nature provides all we need for our survival if one is keen. But if you have a sweet tooth your blood sugar goes haywire, and you need a quick fix to continue with your starchy diet I will have no problem giving you treatment once in a while. But the habit of passing by the Baker every evening, like one obliged to pay tithe at the church, has to stop. It shortens life, of which churches, mosques, and temples, are closing doors because of people like you. You need prayers more than a cake or a biscuit. Take your tithe to God, and your issues shall be less severe. If you are lazy-bones, I prescribe you take a long walk and remember to keep hydrated.

“Sweet potatoes and their cousin the arrowroots are always waiting to replace the cake and calm the sugar cravings. Veggies shall cost you an eighth of what you spend on the sugar cravings that keep your health out of balance. Protein is good, be a friend to the butcher next door. Lierya's husband, the dentist Ali, will be waiting to return your lost teeth and restore your smile. You will need a loan to pay for his dental services, which shall be as expensive as the car you will use to visit his clinic. A dentist manufactured smile shall cost you an arm and a leg. You will henceforth be forced to walk and use buses, as your car shall be such luxury with a dentist to visit often before you replace all your teeth.

“If all the above should fail you, I will prescribe pills for you to swallow every day for the next twenty years. Your abuse of alcohol, roasted meats and such shall trigger a mix of ailments – gout and arthritis, diabetes, obesity and clogged arteries, high blood pressure, and much more. You can do your research too. This is a reminder of how commitment to eating healthy might extend your life so that you may live to see your grandchildren before you meet your maker.

“You come to my clinic with haemorrhoids or a tear in the arse and you are in a hell of a lot of pain in the toilet, I will give you a pack of cottonwool and prescribe a quarter glass of warm water with a teaspoon of salt to dip the cottonwool and leave it on the torn tissue for ten minutes. Then I will advise

you to apply some oil – preferably olive oil or coconut oil – to soothe the skin. I advise the exercise to be repeated twice a day, morning and evening. If you should decide your arse is too dirty for your holy hands, that will be no problem. The solution I will have for you will be a tablet to insert if you have the courage to endure the pain. Better still, my classmate Joel will be happy to operate on the area, remove the pimples and seal it up with your property in the bank as a security bond in case you freak out in the gross operation. Either way, your diet must include more veggies and a gallon of water daily.

“There will also be parents in my waiting room with kids running high fever and coughing. You might see the purported sick children busy chasing each other under the desks and seats, despite making the parents miss work. I will advise the parents to cover the children’s heads over a hot bowl emitting steam laced with whatever menthol is available. Some use the leaves of the blue gum tree and cover the head over a steaming bowl, or saturate a room with the steam. Do not forget to give them a lemon ginger and garlic concoction mixed with honey. This routine of steaming and herbal drinks shall eliminate your child’s flu. If you should feel that that is too much work for you, please, I will have a prescription ready that shall knock the little one off and confine him to bed for some days except for a visit to the clinic every two days for an injection. I, too, need to pay rent for my clinic.”

Abigail found her thoughts funny and laughed to herself, making passersby wonder whether she was OK. Had they asked her, she might have replied that she was wondering when it was she became the saint of hope for the hopeless.

JOEL WAS WAITING for her at the classroom doorstep and, studying to be a surgeon, was very excited about using a scalpel blade on a human cadaver for the first time. Dissecting things was in his character since he was a boy at home breaking toys and gadgets apart to know how they work.

As they neared the door to the school morgue, Abigail started feeling nauseous thinking about the messy task of cutting up a cadaver. She stopped momentarily, nearly vomiting all the nice food her girlfriend, Lierya, had served her with so much passion. For some reason, the thought of Lierya and how proudly she bore her pregnancy somehow gave her courage, and thought she could not let her friend down by getting sick with the feeling of wanting to vomit. She took Joel's hand, held it tightly and boldly walked into the morgue.

It was a man's corpse on the demonstration table. It was the first time in her life to see a grown man's naked body. Abigail momentarily forgot her fear of death and walked straight to the cadaver, fascinated to see what she preferred to call the man's balls, which were much bigger than those she had seen of the little boy back in primary school courtesy of Lierya. She was horrified by the size of them, making her stand back and fall behind Joel.

The professor was already in full surgical gear. The students wore a doctor's white coat over their clothes with surgical masks and head caps. Abigail's imagination made her think the professor looked dressed like someone going to the moon. Only an oxygen cylinder is missing to complete the picture. She thought it made him look more competent than in the lecture hall in his everyday attire. With him was a woman in similar surgical attire as his.

"The dissection will start with the lower limbs," the professor explained to the students, "and with me is a podiatrist. Just to remind you, a podiatrist is a medical specialist who helps with problems that affect the feet or lower legs. They can treat injuries as well as complications from ongoing health issues like diabetes."

Abigail had already lost interest and was happy to remain at the back of the students surrounding the surgical table. She let her thoughts wander to the dead man's balls and wondered why they should seem triple the size of those of the boy at school. This consumed her ignorant mind to the end of the lesson as she debated in her mind how to convince Joel to strip for her one day. *I want to see what a live man looks like when fully charged. I got an opportunity to see the body up close. Its lifelessness made me wonder what exactly the purpose of life is. Or is death just another season, some thorn in human flesh to deal with? The unhappy days seem more than happy times with worry about food, worry about shelter, worry about school, worry about hospital bills, worry about parents, worry about children, worry about everything and everyone. I wish life's seasons would be more predictable. Anyway, we have to live our days as they come. This man was once someone's child. He was once someone's boyfriend. Maybe he was someone's dad and maybe someone's husband. Now, all we have is a specimen to keep humanity hopeful that its medical students will learn from it and help keep people healthy. It is such a humbling experience to see a lifeless body. May he rest in peace.*

Abigail's thoughts were interrupted by students pushing her to pave the way as the class had been dismissed, except for those who wanted a question answered.

Joel held her hand and they walked out together.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Sick and Lame

ABIGAIL AND ANGELA had a free day ahead. They were done with their morning chores with no planned activities for the rest of the day.

“Lierya is pregnant and almost to term,” Abigail informed her sister. “I visited her two days ago. I miss her. Angie dear, can we go to see her? I still don’t understand why she changed from our club of lesbians, and I would like to know who the lucky beast is.” The two sisters referred to men as beasts since that day years ago when they viewed what they referred to as their free-to-air tape in which men in the video appeared to rape the women characters. “Lierya mentioned to me his name is Ali,” Abigail continued, “and I suspect it is the Ali who was our neighbour back then, the one of the free-to-air tape.”

“Lierya pregnant?” replied a surprised Angela, adding hopefully, “That must be very encouraging news if she, of all the people, can turn straight. This means there is hope for us too, Abby. I miss seeing her too, it has been a while. Do you know whether it will be a boy or a girl we buy Lierya a gift for the baby when it comes?”

“I didn’t get to ask whether it will be a boy or girl, imagine! I popped in at her apartment only for a few because I had to leave after receiving an urgent call from Joel that we had to attend an impromptu class. I had to dash, so we shall know the baby’s sex today.”

“Who is her husband again?”

“My guess is it is the handsome dude with blue eyes; it can be none other than Ali, our old neighbour at home who had a brother called Hassan. I hinted this to Lierya.”

“It would be exciting to see Ali. He must have grown very handsome. I imagine him with a trim beard with those blue eyes, mwah! I look forward to seeing him after such a long time,” Angela said, clearing the table.

They changed from their bathrobes into lovely sun dresses to enjoy the bright, warm summer. They went shopping for unisex baby items to surprise Lierya.

“OH MY GOD, welcome girls, what a surprise!” exclaimed Lierya upon seeing her guests. “You should have announced that you'd be coming so that I cook for you. How have you been, Angela? You look all pretty. It has been a while since I last saw you.”

“Same here, Lierya. You look like a parachute ready for take-off, congrats my darling. This is new and very interesting. I had to come and witness this pregnancy, Lierya.”

“You can say that again, Angie,” said the expectant mother. “Ali!” she called her husband. “Come and meet my friends.”

The husband emerged from the bedroom and was greeted by the sisters who delightedly shouted almost in unison, “What, Ali the boy, oh my God, how have you been?”

“Abigail and Angela! Oh my God, what a good surprise. You girls don't seem to change. I've missed you. You never left my thoughts even one day,” Ali said, hugging them.

“Looking at you guys now and the accident of being neighbours back then, it feels like the heavens meant our fortunes should always be entwined.”

Calling the sisters masterminds of disaster, Ali explained how the videotape incident led his parents to pack and leave their neighbourhood for fear of reprimand by the angry parents of the children who viewed the video.

“Nobody could tell what the parents could have done,” Ali explained. “But here we are together again. Had we died back then, we would have died condemned kids – all four of us, Angela, Abigail, Hassan, and myself. Today the story is different and now our ageing parents' only worry is that we should be in a hurry to give them grannies.”

“Oh boy, we, too, had our share of issues, Ali. And so nice to see you after such a long time, Mr. handsome!” exclaimed Angela.

“Who made who suffer Angie? All you needed to do was plead guilty and get whatever punishment you were going to get. At least that is what me and my brother, Hassan, did. We pleaded guilty as charged. That is how it happened my parents packed us, and we disappeared to another hood. Then, all the video cassettes were burnt to ashes never again to have such material in that house. That is how we became saints,” Ali explained smiling. “It taught us that what we see or hear, or even find such as in the DVD tapes should be taken with a pinch of salt, otherwise the information could land you in a lot of trouble. We were reminded that under Sharia law things would have turned out very different.” Ali bit his lip and smiled as if to assure the girls it wasn’t so bad.

“Ali, you made us suffer, you and that brother, Hassan. As punishment by our parents, Angie and I got separated. They forcefully enrolled us in different boarding schools. It was some kind of circus in the residential estate. Everyone had a tale to tell after that free-to-air movie. Come here, handsome dude,” said a smiling Abigail to Ali. “You deserve a hug, mwah!”

Lierya listened in with interest as the three long-lost friends had a lot to share and catch up on about their neighbourhood friends back then. They could only remember some of their childhood friends, as others escaped their minds. Some they had met later in different walks of life, as what happened to other friends they could remember remained unknown.

What struck the three friends was how all parents in the neighbourhood in their anger and probably embarrassment, seemed to outdo each other in trying to prove their offspring’s innocence in the matter of the porn video. This was to such a point that even as the three were recalling the incident, some parents in the neighbourhood still didn’t speak to each other. They became lifelong enemies.

“One of our neighbours still can’t say hello to my parents since the incident,” explained Angela. “The neighbour seems to think my parents are devil’s agents and seems to ask how they could have birthed such twisted girls with the cheek to show a dirty film to the entire estate from their mother’s house?” she said to their laughter at how ridiculous it all seemed.

“We were just curious kids, for heaven’s sake,” Abigail said holding her head as if to say that should she get another chance she would completely erase that episode from her life.

“Have you gotten yourselves men to love you yet, my dear girls?” Ali asked and, seeing the sisters hesitate, he went on, “Why are you not like my Lierya?

What are you waiting for, ladies?” He decided that the girls didn’t answer him because they were still students. This led him to say, “Education never ends. You can be in school and still raise a family, Abby. Lierya is still in school for weather forecast, whether her preferred weatherman forecasts rain or sunshine, though he is often wrong forecasting the sun one day but rains a storm, and vice versa.”

“Ali stop being mean to Lierya and evading the free-to-air story,” Angie protested while laughing at how Ali had put it about Lierya’s weather forecaster who she imagined was the TV weatherman.

In the meantime, Lierya was busy in the kitchen and could not hear her husband making a joke on her.

“If someone could have predicted how capable we were to unleash such drama as occurred after the free-to-air and stopped it on time, I am sure we would still be neighbours. My parents sold their house at a throwaway price, just to protect their heirs, my brother and I.”

Abigail looked at Ali and It didn’t feel like they were seeing each other for the first time after so many years. It was just like it always was then so that their meeting again was like picking up their life from where they had left “a century ago, defying silence, space, and time,” Abigail thought to herself as she admired the good-looking and all-grown-up Ali. Their childhood friendship never died.

“What is that you are saying ‘If someone could have predicted, Ali?’” she suddenly asked. “Do you know the damage you caused our young minds?”

“You deserve to be sued all the way to hell and back?” Angela added. “Just so that you know, viewing that porn video led Abigail and me to become lesbians. It was too much for us; the men in it looked to us like beasts that raped women, making us very fearful of men. The noisy moans that sounded like from pain those women were experiencing made us never wish to attempt penetrative sex with any man. The women looked in terrible pain and there was a lot of messy stuff. Anyway, we decided to find solace in ourselves. Now we are a couple. We are lesbians, thanks to your know-it-all self in those days.”

“What, are you girls mad? Who is the man and who is the woman and what is the difference?”

Angela was quick to answer him. “I am what you might call the man, and Abigail is my queen. The difference is the same. To relieve the natural urge now that we vowed to never entertain a man in our beds. Men are mean and rapists, as we witnessed in that video. The images still play in our minds. It was

a dirty devilish act that was uncalled for. And since we manage our urges just fine, we are complete as we are. Life has other ways of fulfilment than that stupid act, sex, that made those women scream.”

“Oh my God,” Ali was shocked at the naivety of these grown-up ladies. “That was not screaming from pain. It was a scream of satisfaction and pleasure. The beast or the man was created by God to calm a woman, to a man or the beast as you ladies refer to us, sex is a need. We need sex to survive. Ladies need sex, too, for enjoyment, also to make babies. How do you propagate life with your fingers, when it is the man who plants the seed? That is not the path to take, ladies. My apology for what I may have done back then. I wish I could redo what you went through. If I could, there would be two options: If viewing the video was like a classroom examination, you would choose to reseal your test paper and pass, or you will forever remain stuck where you are now till death do you part. What nonsense!”

They heard the doorbell ring. It was Hassan, Ali’s brother, who was checking in to see how his expectant sister-in-law Leirya was carrying on. He was happily surprised to find whom he referred to as the sisters in the crime in his brother’s house. He was, however, saddened to learn of the ladies’ ordeal following the free-to-air incident. He would later inform the girls that they were not alone, that he, too, had started on the gay path, except that he got to sleep with his very first woman only a week before.

“It was a one-night stand,” he explained, “but it has changed my whole sex life. Now she is the girlfriend I will die for. Her name is Pally. She was driven by the same curiosity about sex that happened with us back then. She wanted it, and I allowed myself to have sex with her. Now she is my girlfriend. I was surprised that she was a virgin and had no idea about the clit you guys talk about. She was blank on that, but I helped her feel it. She cried for days after the experience, my poor Pally. It felt very awkward for me too, being the first time with a girl. It’s been only a week, and we haven’t managed to do it again.

“Are you sure this resulted from the free-to-air video, or doing it with the opposite sex is ingrained in us since birth?” Angela asked.

“You need to experience sexual intercourse with the opposite sex to appreciate the beauty of doing it with a man, ladies,” Ali responded. “I am so sorry the movie back then did so much damage to my beautiful girls. How can I be of help now that I am a married man?” This sounded funny, making them burst into laughter. “It would help if you went for counselling. My twin Hassan

is a very good counsellor,” he joked, pointing at his brother. “We have many teachers for these sorts of lessons, the ones you picked up as homosexuals, and the ones you might learn as women wanting men. The choice is yours, my dear ladies,” Ali said, standing up to reduce the TV Volume.

“We are contented in each other, Ali,” Abigail replied. “Any suggestions as to how we should go about it is now water under the bridge. What we saw in the free-to-air that day keeps coming back to us. It is still difficult for us to imagine intercourse with a man. We will be happy to adopt a child if need be.”

“Why are you asking them to go for counselling?” Lierya asked entering the sitting room.

“You Hassan and Ali should show up in their house and take the two girls to bed; they need the therapy. You have known each other since childhood and they would trust you more than any other man! You messed them up, now you must undo the damage, guys,” she said, letting out a peal of laughter.

They all were surprised at Lierya’s carefree spirit that she should be so willing to share her man, Ali, with her women friends.

“Are you sure, Lierya, it is them you want to introduce us to what we are missing?” wondered Angela admiringly.

Before Lierya could reply, Abigail jokingly said, “No, Lierya, these are the boys who messed us up. They can't have their cake and eat it. They lost the very day they gave us that free-to-air, uniting us in crime when we showed it to the whole village.” The way she put it made it sound funny making them laugh. “Anyway, we are best friends with Ali and Hassan,” she added. “We did what we knew best then. We owe you a drink, good men,” she offered.

“Hassan takes coffee but I will take a glass of wine,” said his brother. “His Islamic faith does not allow him to taste beer. But when the day for that drink invitation comes, I will bring him along.”

“How years fly,” said Hassan changing the subject. “You have grown into such curvaceous girls, not the kids I left with missing teeth fifteen years ago. Who would have known we would meet again all grown up and laughing about our past? By the way, I am not a counsellor. Ali is joking. I am a dentist. Come for fillings in my clinic. Let your friends know, too. I need the business if I am to marry and sustain my prospective wife. Ali is also a dentist – twins tend to mirror one another.”

“Were it not for Ali's blue eyes, we probably would not have remembered you guys,” said Abigail. “We shall come to your clinic, Hassan. I need a filling in one of my teeth.”

“I will be the one to fix your tooth, Abigail, not Hassan. Come to my clinic, and let Angela visit him. He cannot take the business from my house. He can wait for his turn when Angela gets a tooth cavity. Better still, he can start sending her cake gifts to hurry the tooth decay process,” they laughed at this. “But you're most welcome, Abby,” continued Ali, “and the first appointment at my clinic shall be on me, dear.”

“We too have that thing, Angela,” Hassan said and paused before saying what it was. “Sibling rivalry. Even with work we still compete with each other. My brother Ali is not the one who asked for the business, but I am happy to let him take it. If such is the rivalry with my brother and I, I wonder how the rivalry will be between our sons and daughters when they reach our age.”

“You are referring to your sons and daughters, you and Ali and not Abigail and I. We have no intention to bring forth babies, despite our motherly instincts starting to knock on our doors. Me and my sister are stuck together in a maze. Perhaps a miracle baby by the two of us should it ever happen. I, however, promise to bring Abby for her appointment, Ali. Thanks for the offer, dearest Hassan. Start sending those cakes as suggested by your brother. I am not afraid to deal with a cavity. I love my sweet tooth thing.”

Ali nodded to what Angela had said but spoke to his brother. “Stop saying yes to everything that pleases other people but yes to things that make sense to you, Hassan,” he said. “My brother Hassan, I am referring to your one-night stand with Pally. Getting started with her must have been the hardest part, which both of you conquered. It makes me want to meet that sister-in-law-to-be. All I ask is you don't stop with that one act, do it again and again. It will not only draw you closer but will eventually turn out to be a fun thing between you and Pally. Start today. The sooner you warm up to the act and one another the better.”

Ali paused, then added, now in a more serious tone, “But remember not to mention it to Dad when you will be introducing Pally to him. To his and mom's Muslim ears, they will expect your lady Pally to be a virgin until the day of your wedding. Remember that between the two of us, you are the holier son of the family. So, you are expected to be perfect. Even though my marriage made my

parents very happy, I was always the unruly one and they did not hold me to a high religious standard.”

“Come on, Ali,” said Hassan, “even though you were the unruly one and you still love your pint, which they still don’t like, you will get out of it, by and by. Remember, Dad loved his wine a bit too much, too, had it not been blood pressure that made him quit. It is only now he says it is un-Islamic, but you, too, can say goodbye to your red, red wine.”

“I know, brother, but my concern is not quitting the drink but bringing up this coming baby,” He touched Lierya’s tummy as he said this. “Brought up by a parent who loved his drink, one of us was bound to love it too, and I am the happy culprit.”

The self-criticism made them laugh, except for Lierya who remained quiet thinking of the one thing she loved and would not find easy to quit. She was still madly in love with Abigail, and not even Ali could make her quit her lesbian lover. Ali may have shown her the ecstatic joys of a man in bed, but Lierya didn’t think it compared to Abigail’s magical touch. *What a twisted lifestyle*, she wondered. She felt sad that if cheating on Abigail was a lie, it would never turn true, nor would it if it was wrong become right. In the eyes of God, sin would never be turned good just because more permissive nations and their citizens see nothing wrong with homosexuality. *Fate shall decide for us. For now, me and Abigail must continue with what works for us.*

Lierya’s train of thought was interrupted by Angela addressing her brother-in-law. She remembered she had food cooking in the kitchen and left to check it as she listened to what Angela was saying.

“I am happy for you, Hassan, for deciding to go straight,” she was saying. We shall be watching to see how your second and third acts with Pally go before venturing into it with men ourselves. If not, we shall be happy to keep in our cocoon than embarrass ourselves.”

This elicited some chuckles, especially after Abigail added, “I am sure the counselling sessions you were to give us will help you more than your clients. You are already the converted, my darling Hassan.”

“To remind you again, Abigail,” he responded, “I give voluntary counselling in mosques, and you know religion does not touch such topics.”

“All religions condemn homosexuality,” Ali agreed, “except that sex is a natural call and people enjoy it the best way they know how.”

“Do not take Ali's jokes too seriously. Nourishing my soul is as important as the food I feed my body,” Hassan said, eyeing the food Lierya was placing on the table.

Taking over from Lierya, he served them a starter of oxtail soup with a toasted slice of bread, before moving to the main course of grilled chicken which Lierya brought from the oven. It was served with rice and mixed veggies, which included sliced avocado and tomatoes.

Hassan, always the great host, and knew his way around his sister-in-law's kitchen, finally brought a bottle of wine and made himself a cup of coffee. He poured a glass of juice from a packet for Lierya.

Hassan's girlfriend called and Ali thought the moment he had advised his brother to bed his newfound girlfriend had arrived. He hoped that Pally could be counted on to be Hassan's wife. By now, he knew that his brother was determined to see it through. Lessons are learned every day, and so are corrections where one fails. Nothing in life is perfect, especially a new relationship which must continually be worked at.

“Make sure to bring your queen Pally with you next time so that we meet her,” Ali told his brother. “You keep many secrets from me, Hassan. I say this because you didn't mention to me about Pally earlier. This made me think you only spoke of her in your excitement of finding our sisters, Abigail and Angela, here. But I celebrate you, it will be a very important rite of passage for you to be with her. The party shall continue in your house next time, Hassan.”

“Agreed,” replied Hassan. “I am sure Pally would be very excited to meet my twin brother and his wife. I hope by then I shall be in a position to feel better about this ball game. It was a pleasure meeting you girls after almost two decades. I shall keep you in my prayers every day. You never know what God can do to change your course, Angie and Abby.” He said as he rose to clear the table. This was a habit with him anytime he visited.

“All the best, Hassan. Your woman is waiting for you, brother, and I think we are delaying you,” Ali said standing to help with the utensils. “You shouldn't delay in a place you had not planned to stay for long.”

“In God, we shall trust too,” said Angela. “Life always has answers to our longings. We are happy you and Ali have seen the light.”

“Stop trying to please these two lost souls, Angela and Abby,” Ali said to Hassan. “Instead, do as you promised; pray for them. Prayer has no setbacks. They were happy to blame us back then. Now they can learn from our example.”

“Ladies, thank you for not holding back your truths, views, and opinions. Expressing your true feelings to us after meeting for the very first time after so many years has given me a lot of respect for you. We now know that had we not shown up with our DVD nonsense back then you probably might not have fallen into this trap. We may have manipulated you in a way leading you to seek refuge in one another. In the end, however, it was a choice you made. But you will forgive me and Ali for any wrong we might have committed. The greatest reward you get by hanging around good people is unleashing the best in you.”

“True Hassan,” agreed Lierya, “good people encourage you and show you where to step to avoid pitfalls. A mentor is not just your mom and dad but any person who can guide you to the correct path. Just as you wish the best for them, your life should bend and mimic one another over time. There's power in association, Angela and Abby.

“Everything shall be sorted in God's own time. I look forward to seeing you again soon. Cheers people!” Hassan said at the door as he was about to leave.

“Keep fighting for your cause, Hassan, even as you pray for others,” Ali advised. “Do not waste your energy with worry! These ladies have been with their issues for a long time, and as you know every entry has an exit somewhere. I hope now that you have gotten yourself a woman you will do away with that other evil, *homosexuality*, for good.”

“Once again, thank you, Hassan,” said Abigail. “Every beginning has an end, and every dark cloud has a silver lining. All shall fall in place in due course. Hurry now, your dear Pally is waiting.” She hugged him, then remembered something and said, “Before you disappear, Hassan and Ali, do you remember house number 316 in our old neighbourhood? There was a boy Reo and his two sisters, Diana and Pive, who were always left locked in their compound by their parents every morning they left for work. The boy made his two sisters pregnant. The incest has left their parents wondering whether to make the girls abort or raise the children. That was another ripple effect of the free-to-air. Had they not viewed the video, the parents might not have come to the drastic decision to keep them locked up.”

“Oh my God, that is a disaster, Abigail!” said Hassan, as Ali and Lierya looked on unable to believe it. “Parenting must be difficult. Whatever they will decide about the unborn children, there’ll be no winner. God help us, we are the next parents. Let’s see how we shall navigate this season guys.”

“How on earth could that happen? It cannot only be a result of the free-to-air movie. You mean all incest stories come about because of such a video? I think there is more to it than we can tell. This thing of parents assuming that, when we are teenagers, sex is not part of our journey is very deceiving. I will be a parent in the coming few months, but I can guarantee you that I have no idea how to deal with my teens when the time comes,” Ali predicted, chuckling making it seem like a joke the others also laughed at.

“Ali and Lierya,” said Angela after Hassan had left. “We are not taking back our seats. We have a long day ahead. We had an assignment to do with our boys, Joe and Twister, who you haven’t met yet, but will soon. We are trying to dig at the roots of the adopted boys and this sister of mine.”

“You guys got more family members? I mean, your parents adopted two more kids?” Ali enquired.

“Not them. It is us who have adopted brothers from school,” Abigail explained. “The boys’ dad, Boris, adopted Joel by default. His parents died in Boris’s car during a coup attempt in South Sudan when still a small boy. Boris’s sister, Gladys, also died in the coup. That’s how he came by Twister, who is his nephew, after finding him by chance in the plane he boarded under the care of a kind stranger who handed him the boy. I am Joel’s classmate. He is the one who explained this to me. We are curious to know more and have agreed to meet.”

“Something tells us there could be a link with us,” Angela added. “It is just a gut feeling, and because of the anger our parents showed after the free-to-air movie, my dear sister Abigail has not dared to inquire more about her roots from my parents. We are hoping that together with Joel and Twister we could shed some light.”

“That is news to me, Angela,” said Ali. “How come I had never suspected that you guys are not siblings, despite both your parents being white? I always thought Abby could be a result of genes from black ancestors in your family tree. Let me know should you need some help. Abby is my darling too,” he added.

“She is my darling too, count me in girls,” joined in Lierya. “But I will only be of better use after the baby is born. I get too tired walking around to be of much use now. You will keep me posted. Thank you for the surprise visit. It was very rewarding. You can surprise me again tomorrow.” They laughed as Ali walked them out.

The best of this life is yet to come, thought Lierya to herself as she watched her friends leave the compound.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Memories

IT WAS A WINDY MORNING, and the clouds were gathering. They threatened to grey the blue sky and dim the promise of the warm summer sun. It was a sign the rains may not be too far. This was about 8 am. Bram and his wife Tracy were still in bed on yet another morning they didn't feel like waking up to face the day. It had been like this on many mornings through the years since the disappearance of their children, Joel and Abigail.

Having established their beloved children had survived, the distressed parents had looked everywhere for them, beginning with children's non-governmental organisations to see whether they might be among those rescued. The only person they knew who had information on the children's whereabouts was their neighbour Boris, who had given the family a lift to the airport. But they did not think he survived the mayhem of the South Sudan coup attempt they were driving through. Failing to trace Boris, they had embarked on a social media campaign posting their son and daughter's photos for anyone who might identify them. Nobody ever came back to them.

On this morning, despite the low motivation to get out of bed, Bram felt particularly hopeful and thankful to have his wife by his side. "Tracy, my darling," he softly said to her, "waking up every day with you is the most beautiful thing, but it is also a reminder of what I have, including our children, whose disappearance you and I know is only temporary. Heaven knows how many times we tried to look for them and failed. But I've woken up feeling that we are only a step away from Joel and Abigail. Don't ask me how because I can't explain it. But I feel it."

“Hope is all we have,” she said turning to Bram, “hope and the consolation we give each other. It is this that keeps my flame alive. I do not need to remind you how I long to reunite with Joel and Abigail, because I know we will no matter how many days will come and go. Many of our friends think our hope to find the children a waste of time, some even questioning our sanity openly. They are not in our shoes to know how it hurts.” She did not blame them because they could not have known her desperation that on top of losing Abigail and Joel, she had lost her ability to bear children to ever relive the joys of raising another family. Stray bullets as they drove through the chaos of the coup had hit her damaging her womb. It had also left her husband with one kidney. Tracy looked deeply into her husband’s eyes before kissing him on the forehead. He reciprocated with a peck on her cheek.

Eventually, they had to get out of bed as they had things to do. This was the day the couple had planned to pay their annual visit to children's orphanages. They would accumulate donations from friends and well-wishers over the previous year and pick the children home to visit. This had become their tradition since they lost their children. It gave them comfort that they could put a smile on needy children. As they did every year, they planned to hang out with the kids the whole day to make them feel appreciated and that they had someone to listen to their innermost desires.

Where possible, the couple tried their best to fulfil those desires, such as with, Hannah, a girl from the orphanage they once took out for the day on a bus. Hannah was three years older than Joel was at the age they lost him. She was talkative and seemed to know what she wanted.

“I would like to know my dad and mom,” Hannah had told them. She was bi-racial but didn’t know who between her mother and father was white or black. “Nobody ever tells me the truth about my parents, but I guess it is because no one knows. I was abandoned as a baby. It is a well-wisher who dropped me in this home. I always wonder why I was abandoned, and it leaves me with a lot of questions. I sometimes wonder whether my mom was abandoned by my daddy and felt I would be a burden to her because she was poor, or maybe a drug addict like I see on the streets. Maybe my mom didn’t want the responsibility and left me at my daddy's place, and daddy decided that instead of killing me the way he killed his love for mom, to also abandon me by the roadside for someone to have mercy on me except himself. Maybe they were loving parents, but someone hateful stole their baby and abandoned me

miles away where they could never find me, just to punish them. Or maybe I was abandoned by my grannies who, having brought up their children, did not want the stress of a newborn baby and gave up on me.”

Bram and Tracy thought the girl very intelligent and clear-minded, especially after what Hannah said next.

“I think about all these things, but I am not looking for answers. I already know I have no one I can call family. Pitying myself shall not get me out of the orphanage. My guardians at the orphanage have told me that all that is required of me is to grow up normally and that when I grow up I protect and take care of my children regardless of whether I shall have a husband or not. Every day on TV, I see many divorced parents. This has made me decide that I will always love my children should I ever get them. I see the divorcing parents extending their hatred for each other to their innocent children and I feel sad for them. My guardians have told me to believe in a better tomorrow. My friends in the orphanage tell me the kinds of bad homes they came from compared to this orphanage. I pray to God that I shall be free to make my own decisions one day and be a good parent. Thank you very much for the good things you bring us and for choosing me to accompany you on the bus ride today, beautiful couple. I want to grow up to be like you.”

“It is very nice to hear you say that, Hannah,” said Bram. “I am sure everything shall turn out OK for you. It is true that, where there is a feeling of emptiness because of a lack of parents or parental attention, this can be filled by the love and kindness of well-wishers, including orphanages. Today, you have answered many questions for us. You have reminded us parenting is not abundance or lack. It is a commitment one puts in with unconditional love. We lost our two children in a war-torn country in Africa a while ago. They left with well-wishers to God knows where. We have been looking for them everywhere and we will never stop looking for them. Our children were your age when we lost them, but now they are past teenage. The elder one is a boy called Joel and his sister Abigail. We do not know whether they kept the same names, or whether they were changed by whoever took care of them,” Bram tried to explain it to Hannah as simply as possible and she seemed to understand.

Tracy’s eyes were already becoming wet with emotion as her husband explained these to the girl. “Whoever feeds our children, Joel and Abigail today,” she said suppressing her tears, “whoever holds them today, whoever educates them today, whoever guides them today, those parents are the ones

that shall shape our children's destiny," Tracy paused, hoping Hannah would understand. But she seemed to be speaking more to assure herself than telling it to the girl. "We have missed the opportunity to raise them ourselves. We do not know whether our son broke his voice, I don't know what he looks like, whether he sports a beard like is the fashion these days. He might pass in front of me and I don't recognise him. I do not know whether he is short or tall or whether he is heavily built like the boxer Mike Tyson or is as small as the footballer Lionel Messi. We have no idea."

It was clear Tracy wanted to unburden herself. "My daughter, Abigail, had my looks. If I see her today, I might be able to pick her out in a crowd. I am, however, afraid this might not be the case because girls these days seem too keen to disguise their looks with heavy makeup and very long hair weaves. Some black girls have even bleached their skins to resemble whites and speak like them. It becomes impossible to tell between the whites and the blacks. Others have even padded hips into artificial butts that they elevate with high heels and walk with a swing that leaves me lost for words. It leaves me wondering why they seek such fake perfections, including overly long manicured nails that would be more fitting on a hunting Lion's paws. You wonder whether such a woman can cook for her children should their nanny take leave. Some are permanently in sunglasses even at night. You wonder how they can see where they are stepping. We have a very wanting generation, and there is little we can do about it. We trust God things will turn out well for the youth, including Joel and Abigail who we hope to reunite with one day."

To Tracy, this was a prayer she was giving, including for little Hannah, whom she bent and hugged for some minutes.

"We can only wish you the best, Hannah," said Bram, speaking gently to the girl. "We move around a lot looking for our children to give you the attention you need should we adopt you. But always know you are such a beautiful soul. Our prayer is to meet disadvantaged children like you and give the best we can, including guiding them where possible. We shall be on the lookout for your well-being Hannah, even as we gallivant looking for our children. Know that we have a place for you in our hearts, my dear girl."

"Wow, it must be true, life is not a straight line. I read it in a book, how life curves and twists and is different for everyone, although there are many good and bad parents" observed Hannah excitedly, demonstrating once again to the two parents why the girl seemed so intelligent.

“Yes my girl, Some are throwing their babies away, while others are on a mission to find and reunite with their own like Bram and I. Some are stuck with their children in a love-hate relationship, while some cannot let go even when their children come of age. Some are forced by law to parent while some are forced by their communities. Some are stealing babies to raise as their own, and some are throwing them away by aborting them, killing them, or abandoning them. Some are flowing with their parenting. Some have no idea how they became parents or when they finished with the race of parenting in their deep enjoyment of life.”

Hannah felt like she had gained new parents and addressed them as such. “My new parents Bram and Tracy, anyone who will try to mess with the little ones shall find a spot in hell awaiting them, that one I am sure, because who can forgive such parents who give their children a hellish time by abandoning them, knowingly or otherwise? Only God can answer, and I trust in Him to lead me to a good adulthood.”

Impressed at what she was saying, it led Bram to ask, “You speak very well Hannah. How did you know all this?”

“I read a lot of books for older people like teachers at the library,” replied the girl. “Supporters and well-wishers who donate the books at the orphanage bring all kinds which we sometimes read, just like other children with books in the family library.”

Tracy was listening intently and commented, “Imagine a dad who is a forensic guy and carries data in his laptop or other digital files which he brings with him to the house. Unless the dad is very strict, he has no way to prevent family members, especially the children, from perusing classified or other information. And if there are explicit images, for example, if the parent is a gynaecologist and somehow ends up with the images in the house, the children might get to them and we know how they say that a picture is worth a thousand words, which therefore speaks a lot to impressionable minds. Kids are usually very curious and read all manner of stuff, even those not meant for them.”

“I guess I have become such a curious kid. I don’t know why,” Hannah felt compelled to say.

“No matter how parents try to be vigilant, the children find a way. It has happened to all of us. All we urge is for you to refrain as much as possible from any content that does not suit your age, and always rely on your teachers on what to read and what not to read until you come of age. Try to live in the

present and play with other children more, eat well, and do not miss your Sunday school. Its teachings keep you in check. Ask the adults around you questions about things you are curious about, and not your naïve agemates who are still children and don't know much. Be obedient and always follow the rules set by authorities at the orphanage and elsewhere because not following them means you will have to pay for them. And if things should seem bad for you, always remember nothing is permanent. The bad situation shall always change, my girl," Bram assured Hannah.

"I shall be more vigilant, my good Parents," replied the girl. "It has been a while since I had such a profound conversation with grownups. I had an old grandpa who was very fond of me. He used to see me at least twice a week, and every time he came to visit, we used to talk a lot and he did not judge me because I did not know much. He always told me I resembled his late daughter, who died in an accident at my age. He said the daughter was sweet and very talkative. He never got a chance to father another child. I do not know why; I forgot to ask him. The orphanage matron came to class one day and asked for me. I was told to dress in black to be taken to the morgue to see my good friend, the grandpa, who I was told was peacefully sleeping. He did not look dead to me, but I knew he was gone when I called his name, and he did not answer. He left me all his wealth under his will. I am still a minor, but I requested property managers to channel eighty per cent of revenue from the inherited wealth to our children's home for its upkeep and taking care of the needy kids there. I do not need all that wealth at my age. I shall generate my own; this the old man reminded me over and over. I am determined to impress and echo his beautiful advice when I become of age." Hannah said this with such emotion that she was almost in tears.

"That is so profound, Hannah," said Bram. "I am quite impressed that you are such a caring intelligent girl. Not many people, even ourselves, knew what you know at your age but what I can tell you is that time shall add you more knowledge as you grow older. Keep on the same path, young lady. All shall fall in place over time and remember that success is like climbing a hill. Though you might stumble and fall climbing it, you conquer it one step at a time. All you have to do is remember to pick yourself up each time you fall. We shall always be rooting for you."

BRAM AND Tracy drove Hannah back to the orphanage with a promise to see her again soon. She was delighted to meet the couple who she now referred to as her new parents. Hannah also felt their pain and thought that having lost their children, it must be like her pain never having met her biological parents. As for Bram and Tracy, they were happy to meet Hannah, whose intelligence reminded them they were growing older. But, as much as some may take ageing for granted, they appreciate that growing older is a privilege; that ageing is natural and not something to fight against. Some people dye their hair or go for plastic surgery and anti-ageing drugs to deceive age and look younger. Others find it an abomination to be referred to as grannies by well-meaning strangers. What was important to appreciate was that each age has its season and to accept it as it is. Bram was of the view that each age was like bookkeeping; as one age passed, one needed to reconcile their books before moving to the next age and on to prideful grandparenthood.

This was what was in his mind when he said to his wife as they drove, “Anyway, as you get older, you take things at your pace. You find your style, your voice. You make peace with who you are and who you are not. You are no longer trying to prove a point to anyone. You are the blueprint you have walked over time. Any obstacle is nothing. You have seen it all and heard it all. You dance to the tune life decides to put in play, and hopefully, you become the pillar that the succeeding generation will trust in as their elder. Don’t allow yourself to fall apart along the way, fix all loose ends to sustain the long journey ahead even when fatigue and life’s aches make it difficult to move at the pace you would like.”

Visiting children’s homes was always in honour of the two parents’ lost children, which sometimes left Tracy feeling sad for their son and daughter who she longed for. Therefore, after dropping Hannah, Bram tried to console his wife.

“Take a deep breath,” he urged her, “As you know, this will help release the frustration you feel. No need to keep holding onto the pain. Success is earned, and you and I have always achieved what we want and believe that we shall find our children. It should comfort you that we are doing our bit to help the needy, of whom Hannah and the orphanage are a good example. I’ll just remind you to be proud of yourself because I know you do every time you contribute something good to others.”

Bram knew that she tended to look at other parents with children and couldn't help comparing herself to them. So, he added encouragingly, "Please don't compare yourself with others because, as you also know, you are unique in your way. I believe that you will bounce back stronger and resilient, unstoppable and ready to face this and other uncertain situations. Have faith in your potential, Tracy dear. We have come this far, and it is just one more stride and we shall be with our kids. What we can't do is give up on our search."

"Thank you, Bram, for the encouragement. I know I've become a burden nowadays with all this whining, but I feel trapped. It has been long, but my aim is only to see these kids again and hold them in my arms. I want to promise them that I will always be there for them. I shall keep aiming for that prize, dear. Only you, Bram, and God know this difficult journey and its genesis. I cannot surrender to this fate. For now, you are the only consolation in my life. My instincts tell me the kids shall be found, but when this shall be is what is killing me, Bram." Saying this made Tracy teary.

"A person with big dreams is more powerful than the one who is content with the dull reality around her, my dear Tracy. Though we have not lacked anything and are not poor, these past twenty years without our children have constituted our reality. Our biggest dream is to get them back, and it does not matter that we do not have a place of our own, being permanently on the move looking for them. We shall only rest when we hold our children in our arms. Then together, we shall go to our homeland in Ethiopia, our ancestral land. I hope we find the children before my parents depart this life." Tracy was observing Bram as he spoke and saw that he was not shy to wet his eyelashes at the mention of his parents who he wished would live to see Joel and Abigail before they died.

It was her turn to reassure her husband when she said, "I know how deferred reward makes the heart sick, Bram. But our desire to reunite with Joel and Abigail has been all we have lived for. And I'm sure that when reuniting with our babies shall become a reality, we shall flourish in ways we are yet to know.

"For sure we shall flourish, and I can already see it coming to pass, my Tracy. Finding our children is in The Almighty's hands, and I'm sure He will come through for us. We are not in control, but each day is our day so long as we have life in us, Tracy."

They arrived home late with Tracy feeling emotionally drained and both looked forward to a restful evening after a well-spent day with Hannah and the children at the orphanage.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Transgression

A WEEKEND WITHOUT SEEING each other seemed like a long time between the two classmates, Joel and Abigail. Joel had been away visiting his father, Boris. And after he was back on campus that Monday, the two friends didn't get a chance to meet and catch up. This was because of different schedules for their practical classes in the hospital wards. Their assignment that day was in separate wards, which were overly busy tending difficult cases that included many road accident victims. This was normal for Mondays, which saw all manner of the emergency room – ER – illnesses that weekends usually brought. The first day of the week was therefore the best for students to sharpen their medical skills, of which the two medical students were already excelling. This made for valuable experience. In another year they would be graduating as newbie doctors applying all they had learned.

The day ended without the two intern doctors crossing paths in the hospital corridors. It was just as well because Abigail immediately left for home after her shift was over, too exhausted to even take a phone call. She, however, missed Joel who she found easy to laugh with and wanted to apologise to him for breaking down in front of his dad the last time she and Angela had met Boris.

Seeing Joel's dad somehow made me miss my biological parents, yet I have no idea what they look like. I need to let go of the pain of not knowing them because my tears will make no difference. I can't change anything. May God bless the work of my hands because it is what I can bank on for now. I am sure I'll see Joel tomorrow. It is now too late in the evening to call him.

With these thoughts, Abigail felt overcome with sleep and went straight to bed. Not long after, Angela walked into the house slamming the door, making the basket she was carrying from the supermarket slip from her hands and fall scattering her shopping on the floor. The commotion and clink of a bottle shattering on the floor woke Abigail with a start. Her heart was thumping as she wondered what was happening, only to find it was her sister who was a bit drunk.

The mess on the floor, which included broken eggs, could not wait until morning. The mixture of strong food smells was too overwhelming, and Abigail offered to help clean as Angela sat whining about everything from the lecturers to the students, to herself, to their brothers, Twister and Joel, and Abigail. Life was not easy for her, Angela complained. To Abigail, she appeared to have built a cloud of dissatisfaction in her head, now intensified in her tipsiness. Abigail thought it was best to keep silent as her sister kept on about her troubles. She finished with the cleaning and persuaded a reluctant Angela to go to bed too.

Abigail woke up early the following morning and made oxtail soup for Angela to help her clear her hangover. It was the sweet smell of soup that brought Angela to the table, knowing that it was meant for her.

“My sister Angela,” said Abigail after Angela was settled to eat the soup, “you need to invite your engineer friends to tea one of these fine days. We need to discuss the course you took, and whether you are up to it. I don’t need to remind you that success takes a lot of hard work. You remember how I did your first school for you, and how it took me a whole night to finish. Your term paper results show you have not been putting in that kind of work of late; you are not taking your studies seriously. Remember, I am a medical student and I have a different study schedule. You cannot afford to be hanging out with my brothers and me too often. You need a new circle of friends, dear. Make friends with your fellow engineering students. I want you to be the best. Stay focused. I have to get going now. I have a busy day, my dear,” Abigail finished by saying as she kissed Angela on the forehead.

“I am so sorry about yesterday, Abby. I hope you forgive me. I shall follow your advice; it has been a bit tough for me. I agree I have been neglecting my studies a bit. Thank you for breakfast. Dinner shall be on me. I have it easy today; we have no class. Have a beautiful day.”

Her sister was almost at the door when she remembered something and said, “Oh! Wait, Abby. Let me drop you at school as I collect some books from the college library.”

“That shall be very kind of you, Angie. But be quick if we are to beat the traffic. I shall be starting the car as you dress up.”

They made it on time and Angela decided to leave the car with Abigail, as she did not need it the rest of the day. She walked to the library, collected the books, and walked back home as she thought about the engineer she desired to become.

Abigail met Twister in the hospital corridors. He stopped only for a moment to hug her and complain about how busy he was in the laboratory to even have a minute to catch his breath. Hardly a moment seemed to pass before a specimen from a patient was in his microscope before sending it back to the examining doctor.

Having changed from the orthopaedic course he had initially enrolled to become a laboratory technician, he now seemed to regret it. “It seemed a more straightforward course,” he said. “I thought it would be easy and that I would quickly catch up with the other students, not to mention that it takes five years to finish the course. I am so sick of the endless tests and examinations. If I would drop it, what would I tell my brother Joel is the reason I changed my mind a second time? The first time I thought orthopaedics was not interesting enough. What about this time? I can’t tell him that my eyes are tired of looking at patients’ bacteria all day.” Abigail said nothing, leading Twister to add, “All is fine, however. I have to be content with the course I am taking. It would be disastrous to keep hopping from one course to another. Joel had warned me when I changed course, but I was too stubborn to listen. With my grades, I would have become a chef, where my heart feels at home.”

He wanted to leave but saw Abigail wanted him to linger a bit longer seeming to want to talk.

“I know that feeling, Twister,” she said. “Mondays medical rounds in the hospital wards make me feel like quitting too. There are so many accidents, drug overdoses and infectious ailments. Sometimes I fear I will contract HIV or COVID-19. It is demanding to take care of every need of the patients so sometimes it feels like no amount of money can compensate for the services we offer. And this is not to mention the yelling of anxious relatives of patients who think we are not doing enough to make their loved ones get well.

Sometimes the relatives become physical. A colleague was recently knocked to the ground by such a relative for following a doctor's strict order not to give a kidney patient water to drink before taking an x-ray. The patient had complained of thirst to her relatives, who had misunderstood the doctor's advice and assaulted my colleague.

"In another example, we admitted a bleeding patient from an accident. When Joel tried to bandage the wound to reduce the blood loss, the patient cried with pain, leading his mother who was just behind the curtain to rush in at lightning speed and started hitting Joel with her handbag. She went about it screaming that he was hurting her son. Me and my colleagues had to rescue Joel, only to find that he had managed to calm the woman down. The woman must have been unstable, as a moment later we were also surprised to see her lean on Joel's chest, perhaps for comfort fearing that her only child was almost dying. It seemed that her son's heavy drinking and unruly behaviour had let her down and she didn't know what to do. She was cursing her husband, who had walked away from the family leaving her with the burden of raising the boy alone. She wished the husband had been present in the young man's life to guide him away from drinking as he was growing up. Joe seemed to provide a vent for all her bottled-up emotions. His masculine body was like an umbrella to her, and she wished to be under its warmth for a long time. I wished to tell her she was in the wrong hands, that Joel was gay, and that he was only being the good doctor he was training to be. But it didn't matter; what mattered was that Joel had made her calm down and vent frustrations that must have suffocated her for a long time."

"Joe mentioned the incident to me, Abby. Seeing that we grew up without a mother and our uncaring father, Boris, it made me wonder whether the presence of the father may have made a difference, or whether boys generally don't tend to respect their mothers. I remembered some boys in school who used to say they could never fear lady teachers as an authority over them. They, however, feared male teachers and would do anything they were told to."

"I resonate with the lady's anguish. Anyway, I felt sorry for the lady and her silly son. Maybe it's just a stage he was going through and would snap out of it and become the son the mother wished for. I was disappointed that he did not seem brave enough to withstand the pain. He was screaming like someone in surgery without anaesthesia as his wound was being dressed, yet there was no broken bone on him. I have seen cowardly men, but this son was

on another level. His mother appeared to pamper him more than she ought to. He kept asking for his mom, who had left the room to allow his wound to be dressed. I wondered whether he cared for the pain his mother must go through because of him, or he only cared for the comfort she afforded him. This young man was a nightmare but apparently, the mother did all she could to keep him feeling like a king—a man of twenty five and behaving like a teenage brat. I wonder what shall become of him when he becomes a daddy. He expects his wife to soothe him the way his mom babysat him! A man should be brave. The drama was however soon over, and the young man's wounds were dressed.”

“I know that feeling, but he is lucky to have a mom. Some of us have no idea what a mother’s care feels like. And, by the way, Abby, is it true you nearly betrayed Joel in public that he is gay?”

“I would never do such a thing to my good friend Joel. Besides, who else was there to support my claim had I snitched on him?” This made them laugh.

“I have to leave now,” Twister finally said. “I have been assigned a new lab and have taken an afternoon off to prepare before I start there tomorrow. Have a good day, Abby. My love to Engineer Angie. How is she keeping?”

“You have just missed her; she has just dropped me as she was going to the library. She is sulking, just like you; engineering is proving tough on her. She, however, admits not to have relaxed in her studies, hence the stress.”

“Poor Angie, I hope she gets back her footing. She is a smart girl. All she needs is focus, and everything shall be OK.”

“I haven’t seen Joel since before the weekend,” said Abigail. “What’s up with him, or he is changing departments like you?”

“Joel is in the house with a headache. He didn’t get sleep last night because of it. I gave him a gallon of water to drink. We thought the headache was because of dehydration, but that was before we went to hospital, which is puzzling he could not diagnose it himself yet he is studying to be a doctor. But the headache turned out to be because of some kind of fatigue.”

“Fatigue? We haven’t even spoken on the phone, so I didn’t know,” said Abigail, concerned about her soul mate.

“I suspect it could be severe eye strain. Joel reads a lot at night. He was to see an optician today, at least that was the idea this morning when I left him. I will let you know how he is doing once I get home, Abby.”

“It is OK, no need to bother,” she said. “I shall pass by in the evening to see him. Thank you for the information.” They were about to part when she

said, “Wait a minute, dear, I can go there right away. It is almost lunchtime. You can accompany me if you have the time, I am using Angela’s car today; we’ll be there in a moment. Take the wheel, Twister, as I remove my hospital uniform from the back seat. I do not want to scare your neighbours thinking there is a medical emergency in their hood,” she said giggling.

Twister was a fast driver and, as they sped off, he opened the front windows probably to impress his colleagues with the sleek car. An insect was blown into the speeding car and hit him on the chest before it collapsed on his lap. Twister, who was always very afraid of insects, realised it was not just any insect but a wasp, known for its painful sting.

This got him into a panic, making him pull the car to the side of the road. He wanted to stop and jump out to brush away the unwelcome pest.

But just before he could stop he spotted cops waiting not far ahead of him who would likely have booked him for stopping on the highway. Twister remembered he had not renewed his expired driving license. He accelerated and skidded to a halt further away from them. By then, the wasp had gained consciousness and was trying to flap its wings while on his lap to get away. This meant the first thing it would meet would be Twister’s face. He flew out of the car like one on a hundred-metre dash and swatted away the wasp. Abigail, who took her time changing into her normal clothes, was all this time unaware of Twister’s drama with the wasp.

The wasp however seemed not to want to leave him and returned wanting to land back on Twister as he walked back towards the car. Realising this, he changed direction and sprinted towards a nearby bush seeming to run faster than the Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, the then fastest runner in the world. But the wasp had by then lost interest in him. Back in the car, to Abigail’s surprise, he opened all the windows and doors to flush out any bugs that might have blown in.

Abigail was uncontrollable with laughter to witness how Twister and the wasp parted ways; how Twister sacredly and funnily sprinted and cowered in the thorny thicket seemingly unbothered the thorns might injure him. His sweater was full of holes and his face was scarred with bruises that would take a week, if not longer, to heal.

“What’s up, young man?” she asked, adding. “Are you out of your mind, or are you trying to impress me with your door and window-opening skills?”

We have things to do, and I need to be back to work before everyone notices I have been missing.”

Twister did not seem to hear what she was saying. He just stood by the car door seeming to wonder what the mess was about.

“What a cowardly man!” she said as she retrieved the first-aid box from the car to get Elastoplast to cover her battered hero’s bruises. Twister looked shaken, adding to Abigail’s amused laughter that some men were never afraid of big fights but could be scared to death dealing with an insect.

“Your fear of the wasp has reminded me of a similar incident with a friend of mine. An eagle flying overhead with a snake lost its hold of the prey and dropped it, only to land on the roof of my friend’s car. The snake got into the car through an open window as it looked for a place to hide and bit the guy. He has been admitted to my college hospital for the past three weeks to heal from the venomous bite. I wonder whether he can claim compensation from the government for act of God accidents such as being attacked by the wildlife, or whether it is my friend who should pay for the hospital bill.”

“The government would probably not pay in this case, as the accident was not because of government negligence,” Twister replied, though he seemed unsure.

“I know how your friend must have felt panicking when he saw the snake, and it is not funny. I need to remove my torn jacket; that run left me hot. Phew! I was scared to death. Better a bee sting, it does it once and dies. A wasp can terrorise someone with sting after sting. It wasn’t a very enjoyable experience though the bruises on me right now feel worse than a wasp sting. Thank you for the first aid. I am happy to be in your company. You shall have to explain to Joel that I was not involved in a fight with some human but that it was ‘a treat from a game drive’.” Twister thought this funny and was beside himself with laughter as he said it.

They arrived shortly after at Twister’s neighbourhood parking lot which was almost empty at this hour of the day, people having long left for their offices or college. They got to the house and found Joel dressed ready to go out. Abigail hugged him. Joel was, however, distracted by the surprise of seeing his brother’s swollen face.

“What happened to you my dear brother, you were in an accident or something?” a concerned-looking Joel enquired.

“He was involved in a friendly match with a wasp,” Abigail offered, trying to make light of it. “He decided to hide from it in a nearby bush, only to discover too late the harmless wasp had already given up on him.”

“I am so sorry, Twister. You need to grow up now. I am surprised you are still afraid of insects and not buffaloes. I’ve seen you fight men double your size; what harm would an insect do to you? Would its bite be worse than the injuries you get in your fights when you get drunk? You seem to have taken after Dad Boris. You magnify small things and overlook the big things that could kill you—it’s just my thoughts, brother. Otherwise, I am sorry for what must have been a scary experience for you.”

Twister did not seem bothered at the attempt by his brother to criticise him. “I have managed to change my course in college. We’ll discuss it when you get back in the evening,” he told Joel. And, turning to Abigail, he said with a playful smile as Joel led her out the door to accompany him for his appointment. “Thanks, Abby for inviting me to come with you, though I may not have landed in this mess had it not been for the invitation. But I’m not complaining, and it is hard to change what has already happened. The bruises will heal.”

“Next time I shall keep the windows up for you, my brother,” she replied. “I should be your keeper and protect you from any tiny creatures approaching the car. I shall arrange a day with you so we study insects and how to survive around them. I fear you might one day exterminate them from the ecosystem. Each creature exists for a purpose in the environment it lives in, and is not there to scare you, dear.”

“I hear you, madam; I shall be waiting for the lesson with insects. But now you must hurry before Joel is late for his appointment,” Twister urged them.

Joel, however, took a moment before they left to caution Twister against changing the course he was studying. This was the second time he was changing subjects – first to study become laboratory technician and now to become an optician – but Joel wouldn’t allow it. He decided to take it upon himself to revert Twister to his original orthopaedic course. Joel suspected Twister wanted the optometry course because he had an eye problem. Twister wasn’t happy that Joel was deciding for him, but he obliged not to change his university course so as not to offend his brother. Twister forfeited the afternoon class to nurse his wounds. But it now didn’t matter, as he was

returning to his orthopaedic classes, which were due to start in the next semester.

They found the optician waiting to see Joel. This was a special appointment, as medical students' free time was usually lunch hour, hence the privilege to be attended to whether there was a queue or not. He, however, had to wait for the doctor to finish with the patient he was attending, and within a few minutes was ushered in. Abigail noticed that the receptionist's lips appeared dry like those of one who had not eaten for days. She felt sorry for the receptionist, whose lunch hour had been taken up by happy students who seemed to have no care in the world and were yet to experience the hard knocks of life. With Joel in with the doctor, Abigail decided to dash out to grab a snack for them. They would eat it before heading back to the hospital wards. Joel was done with the optician by the time she was back. Abigail surprised the receptionist with a box of packed lunch she bought for her.

"Thank you, young lady, for your kind gesture," said the receptionist, as she went on to explain that no one had ever shown such kindness to her since she started working at the clinic. More surprising was that it was a student who had shown such kindness and not the rich people who showed up at the clinic in big cars. "May God open doors for you," she told Abigail.

This made Abigail think the receptionist probably didn't have money for lunch that day. Abigail felt like she was an angel sent with the lunch at the right moment. *We are all one big family and caring for one another is our collective responsibility.*

Just then, he saw a stranger approaching her. *I wonder why this dude is approaching me as I am about to eat. I don't have an extra bite to give.* She stared hard at him to back off, but he kept coming. She decided to try the smile trick. *The sweet smile gesture would slow him down if he came for a fight. It has worked well for me in the past.* Then she broke into a broad smile to realise that it was Joel she could not recognise with the flashy and newly fitted glasses on his face. They had completely changed his appearance.

Joel smiled back, thinking it was his new look Abigail was admiring, which indeed she was once she realised it was him.

"Hello, handsome! You look good in those glasses."

“I feel a bit odd wearing them, Abby, but I shall get used to the glasses. The optician insisted I have to wear them daily,” he explained touching the glass frames.

“I am sure they will feel natural wear within no time. Have a bite, my dear Joe before you go back to the house, I shall not drop you back though I am late. I was supposed to be doing my rounds in the hospital wards two hours ago.”

“I am not going back home, Abby. I need to work. I can't fail to clock in my card in the morning and evening to show my presence. I had not asked for permission from our lecturer. At least for the morning, I can say I forgot to clock in and keep myself busy until ten at night before I clock out. By then, I shall have made up for any lost time. And thanks for lunch, dear. Can you believe I had forgotten to have breakfast? I wonder what I was up to the whole morning.”

They arrived at college a short time later and parted ways as each went to their assigned wards. Joel was in the children's ward while Abigail was in charge of the ward catering for elderly patients. There were no new admissions that day, and Abigail's two colleagues didn't seem bothered about her two-hour absence. One was dozing at her desk as the other prepared drugs in time for patients to take their afternoon doses.

Before Abigail knew it, her day's shift was over. She missed watching a movie and passed by a cinema theatre showing a movie she and Angela would like and bought two tickets. She knew Angela had been feeling down that day and needed something to cheer her up. She drove home to pick up her sister and they were in the theatre within thirty minutes. It was a 3D movie and though it was exciting and engaging, Abigail felt too tired to follow. Her senses felt dead, she could hear but not follow the dialogue while her eyes felt heavy and she was soon asleep. Only her mouth seemed alert with the chewing gum in her mouth still releasing some tasty flavour. She was awoken by the theatre floodlights and the commotion of people in their row of seats stepped on her as they filed out of the theatre.

Angela found the movie a good treat. She had enjoyed herself and felt refreshed after spending the whole day in the library. Abigail, in the meantime, could barely keep her eyes open as Angela drove them home where they both went straight to bed.

Abigail was woken up by her phone ringing the following morning. It was Joel.

“Good morning, Abby. My brother Twister is off to meet my dad for the weekend. I told them I would be working late this evening and would have an afternoon shift on Saturday, so I was not able to join them.”

“Sorry, my dear. I wish I had a day shift. I would have offered to stand in for you for your night shift so that you may join your family, but I am on the same shift as you, Joe.”

“That’s not the point I am trying to make. I am at your doorstep to pick you up for work in a borrowed car. It’s almost noon, my dear. Why are you still in bed?”

“Oh my God, I must have overslept. I wonder why Angie left without waking me up. Let me get ready. I shall be out in a bit, dear.”

“In that case, let me release my friend and wait for you.”

It took Abigail only a few moments to get ready and she was out the door with her bag on her shoulder and two apples, one for her and one for Joe.

Joel held her shoulders as they went to “donkey” (work hard) in the wards. They found it already a beehive of activity that extended late into the night.

But, for some reason, it also turned out to be a horny day for Abigail.

The two friends left the hospital at ten in the morning and Joel offered to walk Abigail home. They found Angela already home preparing for her classes. She had made coffee and there were some snacks on the table. She was glad to see her sister and their friend, Joel. Angela, however, had to leave for her classes. Abigail got hold of her apron to make some eggs as Joel offered to fix a bowl of salad. Being together doing things and sharing a meal as friends made for a great time for them.

After they were done eating, Joel took a rest on Abigail's bed as she took a shower before seeing him off. She got back into her bedroom wrapped in a towel. This seemed to turn Joel on and, in another moment, both were panting. It was the first time for Abigail to touch what felt like a pipe on Joel's front. Her hands were trembling with a kind of charged anxiety that seemed to transmit to Joel, whose body also seemed to quiver. She forgot her fear as his grip overtook her senses to a climax she had never experienced before. She wondered why he had never offered to be a “good” boy before. After the act, which felt like a christening of sorts, her body felt buoyant as if about to drift

up into the sky like the flying dragons of Chinese mythology. An intense silence followed as they both drifted into deep sleep:

When Abigail came to and was now wide awake, she fascinatedly gazed at Joel's naked body beside her. It was not like she had always imagined it would feel – her soul felt safe, unlike that time when they were children when she saw the naked brutal men in Ali and his brother Hussein's free-to-air movie. It was then a very scary experience for a little girl to watch porn, not to mention the fear of condemnation by her foster parents and the fear of what sex with a man must be like.

But with Joel, the kissing part was rewarding and the caressing terrific. The hands-down there felt perfect, but beyond that she was blank. It didn't happen.

They slept until evening. It was the happy chirps of birds perched on a fence as they rested before heading to their nests that woke them up. They showered together as they explored each other more. Neither had ever in their lives seen their opposite sex displayed before them as they stood naked exploring each other.

They kissed and reluctantly parted. Joe took the bus to join Twister in his father's house after the Saturday internship assignment that was to keep him away from his family was put off by their professor who wanted them to present a different assignment the following week.

Abigail was left with a very warm feeling. She never imagined a man would ever touch her, let alone that thrillingly. She, however, was not certain she would ever experience male penetration. Whenever she closed her eyes, all she could see and hear was Joel. Though no sexual intercourse was involved, she looked forward to the day it would happen. Joel's magical hands promised more than the foreplay he performed on her. Her body was screaming for more.

It was so difficult to say "I love you" to you Joe, but it has now become my slogan. Come back again Joe and experience all that is bottled up in my soul. Abigail thought of texting these thoughts to him. But her phone was not private. Angela was in the habit of taking the phone to check what she had been posting on social media. Theirs being more than a sisterly relationship and the jealousies that come with it, Abigail also did the same with Angela's phone to see what she had been up to and with whom. *What a shy girl I have become.*

Joel, on the other side, was very happy with what was going to be his secret. He did not want to offend Twister, his love and brother. But the experience with the opposite sex was quite intriguing and interesting. The only part he was not sure about was what he referred to as the love juice released by Abigail at his touch that flooded his hands. He wanted to explore it further to understand it. This was not a question Twister would ever answer for him. It would likely make Twister more curious than him. He might wonder where Joel might have heard such a thing.

Joel would be cornered to reveal where and with whom he had learnt that – with the who part especially not allowed in their rules of engagement. He would also not want to lose his newfound love, Abigail, by being too open to his brother. Life for the two new lovebirds was just starting on that path, and his greatest desire was to let it take its natural course. As for the love juice, which he could still feel in his hands, he would google it to understand what it was all about.

The trials and errors of relationships have left many depressed, as there is no magic formula that works for everyone. Sex is personal and everyone learns it by themselves, including those who choose a life of celibacy because they think it is a sin or for whatever reason. Others never escape their sexual feelings nor satisfy them and are left to always think about sex or talk about sex to an audience that least cares for it – the audience has long come to terms with the act, or outgrown it. Others, looking to live up to sexual expectations, look for all the information they can find. Is there a missing link between the information some people receive and the expectations they have about their sex life? This was the question left in Joel's mind after his Google search, but he knew that if one was determined to know the truth, however elusive it was, they would still find a way to that truth.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Roadmap

AS THE STUDENT'S LAST year of study wore on, the professor sensed a certain lack of enthusiasm in his students. He thought this was due to the long internship hours they spent diagnosing and treating patients, in addition to the exhausting rounds in the hospital wards.

“Good morning class,” he told them one morning in the main lecture hall. “This field is not supposed to be easy and many might have found themselves getting discouraged as the demands of the course you are undertaking have become intense. You must believe you can. If it was easy, anyone would do it, but you are not anyone. You are your parents' investment. Probably not a day passes without them boasting to their friends that they now have a medical doctor in the family. It is a big deal to be what you are training to become. You are among the elite of the sector. Therefore, walk with your head held high.”

The appreciative claps that resounded in the hall after the encouragement assured the professor that he had been right all along and that the words he spoke were the motivation his students needed to face the remaining part of the discipline they were studying.

To Abigail, the words of the professor only served to remind her of the professional responsibility that awaited her. But unlike what the professor had said about parents boasting of their children studying to become doctors, she didn't think her foster parents Jewel and Blaze needed to follow her progress, all they cared about was the graduation day. She sometimes thought her parents didn't seem too keen on her, that it had been a kind of strain for them to be in their custody. Her graduation would therefore be her freedom which would

hence be her decision now to become the successful Dr Abigail she was determined to be.

Her mind soon turned to Joel, having missed each other the previous day in the pressures of their classwork and practicals in the hospital wards that kept them busy. There was a pending invitation that she wanted to convey to him.

“Hi Joe,” Abigail said after they caught up with each other later that day. “Angela and I have, out of curiosity, been planning to revisit our plan with you guys – you and your brother, to compare notes about where we may have come from before our adoption.”

“Yes, we can, Abigail. How is your sister Angela's schedule today? Twister is headed to our usual joint. Ask Angela to join us there after her class.”

Abigail called her sister, as the two new lovebirds walked holding hands towards the joint they would be meeting.

Twister was already there waiting for them. He noticed that they walked in holding hands, but thought nothing of it. But, for some reason, he, too, felt like holding hands with Abigail. This was probably because she always felt like a younger sister to them. Her black features including the skin colour and hair texture made her more interesting to Twister, seeing his brother in her.

As they waited for Angela they discussed how the three of them were adopted, noting that Angela was the only biological child of their parents. An idea came up to share their story with the media.

“What should be the content, Joe?” Abigail asked.

Before Joel could answer, Twister stood up looking pressed. “Excuse me for a minute to visit the gents,” he said, as he rushed not to miss the discussion.

“Should we write I am a lesbian,” she went on, “and you are gay and that we are classmates?” Then, in a conspiratorial tone now that it was just she and him, she added, “And that you are the first guy that helped me see how manhood looks like, and that I touched your ‘fundamentals’ with your permission. My magic fingers will remain resident in that region until the day we decide to explore the penetrative option. Should we also mention you are the first man to demystify the man-beast in my head as you navigate my forbidden fruit with your iron hands that made me have a change of mind in the way I viewed handsome dudes?”

“Are you mad, Abigail? Do you think this is a child play we are trying to do? We have been orphaned all our lives, and the news you want to give is about the pathetic life that we have been condemned. Who will buy our story,

my poor girl? Who would be willing to redeem us with the road we have walked, a route little travelled, a route where many travellers fear the fires of hell promised by religion and tradition?" We are on our own as far as I can see, maybe until we clock eighty years old when our desires shall already be gone. That looks to me like the only time we shall be free to repent and confess our forbidden love vows to each other that till death shall we part. Otherwise, until the society at large comes to terms with gay minority rights, we shall remain in social bad books for our sexual preferences, though it is allowed here in Britain."

"Shhhh! While Twister is still in the gents, I am trying to tell you that it was an awesome experience and should be repeated soon Joe," she whispered sensually. In saying this, however, these thoughts passed through her mind: *Let's clean our dirty linen here even as we should do so in the media so that should we ever discover our parents they should not expect grandchildren from their rotten kids. Who knows, we might even be blood related.*

Joel hugged Abigail and kissed her in the mouth. "Thanks, dear, I have missed you too." Then he quickly wiped off lipstick before Twister returned. "I remember back then I had a sibling but I can't recall whether it was a boy or a girl. I used to play with the baby, and mom punished me multiple times for messing with her baby. But I can't remember what mess it was I did," he said.

"You are lucky, Joe. You can remember you had a sibling. It is OK not to remember whether it was a boy or a girl. I have no idea whether I was ever held by my biological mom or dad. Maybe we shall come to good news and discover all our parents, or at least know what became of them if they're not alive; your parents Joe and Twister's parents and my parents. And I was just thinking a moment ago, who knows, we might even be blood-related, and not just two black kids who have a liking for each other. I mean, who knows, my mother might have been a double dealer like me being in love with you now and still being madly in love with my sister Angie. Or, Mom might have gotten me from a kinky-haired guy, and later she got herself a Boris and that got Twister. These are all speculations, Joe." Abigail said laughing, seeing the puzzled look on Joel's face.

"God forbid, you better turn out to be Twister's sister and not mine, Abby. I love you like a woman, not as my sister. I would be devastated should you turn out to be a blood relative. Should you and Twister turn out to be siblings,

I would still keep him as my boyfriend and you as my girlfriend and life will move on as usual, my dear Abby. I can bear the change of our current circumstances, although the saying is that a change is as good as a rest. Joel moved his hand to touch Abigail's lips, but she did not seem to notice as something that now seemed obvious occurred to her.

“If it has taken us this long as adopted children, either our biological parents are dead or have given up given the many years that have passed. I would, however, rather think that they-or their relatives are still alive and have been slow in looking for their lost ones. If this is the case, I am sure they are looking for us—especially our parents, who would be the most desperate to find us. It is possible that our original identification documents may have gotten lost, and perhaps our names were changed by our foster guardians. Remember Twister is Boris’s nephew. Maybe we should not bother with him much, he is with a close relative, although he is also looking for his parents. The two of us are the ones without anybody to even call a close relative, though our foster parents count as such. If Boris has your documents, it would be a good starting point. Maybe you should find out from him.”

“Thank you, Abby, for the thought, you should also inquire from Angela's parents. Even if they had adopted you from an orphanage, I am sure they would have some information or documents. No one knows where Twister's parents are. Boris has never been clear about it, or whether he has been trying to look for them. The ordeal they went through back in South Sudan seems forgotten. When we visit Boris's parents, they are cautious in the way they relate to Twister and me. They want us to believe we are brothers, and that's it. We should be bold enough to ask the difficult question, now that we are of age.”

“I am back. Have you settled on the way forward, my brother and sister?” Twister asked as he took his seat. He thought that looking at them facing and talking to each other as he had approached their table, it occurred to him that they looked quite similar, and not just because they were both black. He wasn’t sure what it was that made them look so alike, but he kept it to himself.

“Here comes Angie. Let her thoughts be harvested too. Welcome, Madam Engineer,” Twister ushered her to a seat.

She hugged everyone as Abigail excused herself to the bathroom. While in the toilet, she started crying. She didn’t know why she should be sad all of a sudden. Maybe it was because of guilt at the thought of having cheated on her best friend Angela with Joel, whom she so desired. Maybe it was grief at the

thought that her missing parents might have long died, or perhaps forgotten her after all these years. Maybe it was the thought of reuniting with them one day fearful of what they might have gone through in their two decades searching for her. Maybe it was fear of what it meant should Joel turn out to be her sibling. Yet she didn't think these things, all she felt was pain she couldn't define.

Angela joined her in the bathroom, only to find her best friend in a pool of tears. She must have felt her sister's sadness because she too started crying. They remained like this for more than a minute before they suddenly burst into sobs. Neither of them knew what it was they were crying about except that they were so close that each deeply felt the other. They dried their eyes and walked back to the table to the surprise of the boys who couldn't help noticing the girl's puffy eyes.

"Have you guys fought?" Twister asked as Joel, now feeling very protective in his intimacy with Abigail, wondered what might have happened and what he could do about it to comfort her. Like his brother, he also feared the sisters had been in a fight, probably from Angela's discovery of the love between him and Abigail.

"I have no idea why my sister Abby is so sad. I found her crying, and my tears started falling, too. Must we do this exercise, or we shelf it for another day? I think she needs a break, please, boys. Excuse us, guys. I need to take Abby home." Abigail said nothing to contradict her, as they walked out without waiting to be excused by the Boris boys.

Abigail remained quiet even as they arrived home while Angela fixed dinner. Angela sat at the table worried about what was troubling her lover. She wondered what had changed, yet Abigail had sounded so enthusiastic when she called Angela to join them at the meeting. Angela knew better than to bother her when her mood suddenly swung like seemed the case now. They ate in silence until it was time for bed.

At the evidence of tears having been shed, Joel and Twister became tongue-tied and didn't know what to do, or how to soothe Abigail. The best they could do was wish it away.

As to the subject that had been the purpose of the meeting, only Joel had discussed it with Boris and he did not have the courage to ask him. The subject was somehow taboo since Boris never wanted to talk about it. The last thing the two brothers wanted was to make an enemy of Boris since that day they

witnessed him give a beating to the two women Aimy and Emma, whom he had previously so loved. It was a side they had never seen of him and feared to cross him by pushing to press him on something he had made clear he didn't want to discuss. They feared losing him, just like the two women did. They ordered a beer to calm themselves after being left by the sisters so suddenly and drunk for the better part of the night.

After arriving home by taxi, neither of the brothers could find sleep and it happened that both were thinking about what could have happened to Abigail. They briefly discussed it trying to understand what it was that made her come back from the bathroom looking so beaten. They wondered what painful dramas in her life might have been awakened to leave her so tearful.

Unable to find an answer, fatigue overtook them making them very sleepy. It had to do with the calming silence in their apartment, unlike the previous two nights over that weekend when they—like other young residents who populated their residential estate—had a lot of moving around drinking, going out for dinner or doing their house chores at night.

They slept soundly. They were woken up the following morning by a knock at the door. It was Abigail.

“Hi guys, before we provoke our parents with questions about where we came from, let us see whether we can find out by ourselves. We are from Africa, right? Twister's dad's origin is Eritrea, according to Dad Boris. Joel and I have no clue of our origin yet,” Abigail observed. “And, as we shall be going about it, I have identified a place worth visiting, Lamu Island in Kenya. We can do our holiday there next month. It is not an expensive holiday destination. We shall meet our relatives and have an idea of what we missed in our youth Joel. I desire to go to Lamu Island, guys. I have this fantasy it might have been my hometown in another life.” She meant it a joke and laughed, and while the boys didn't laugh with her, they were relieved that she looked happy after the things that had made her cry the previous day.

The boys were already familiar with Africa including Kenya, having travelled there with their Dad Boris on hunting trips when they were younger. They narrated to the girls how they could never forget running after an antelope somewhere in the Kenyan jungle on horseback. Now that they were older, they realised how dangerous it was. But it was their father's way of giving them a thrill as children. Boris knew the best places to take them around the

world. The boys explained at length how they enjoyed themselves during those holiday trips with their dad.

Abigail told them just enough about Lamu to entice them to what would be awaiting them. Along with mentioning that the charming island on the shores of the Indian Ocean was established in the 12th Century and was among the longest inhabited settlements of the Swahili-speaking people, she explained that one of its outstanding features today was that it had banned cars so that the only traffic comprised only donkeys which as the only form of transport on the narrow, winding streets of Lamu's Old Town. They couldn't believe that in this day and age, a town could ban the use of cars. This greatly interested her listeners who vowed Lamu was a must-see.

The three doctor students, Abigail, Twister, and Joel had a three-week break from school which they were going to utilise with the holiday, while the Engineer Angela had two more weeks.

They took Ethiopian Airlines and while on a stopover in Addis Ababa, the country, 's capital city, the passengers were informed that the plane would be delayed for some hours to address a technical issue that had arisen. Those who wished were offered a chance to tour the city which the four students jumped at. Though Abigail didn't know it, they passed by a now dilapidated building that once housed her grandmother, Aida's bakery, and where her biological mother Tracy grew up.

On one side of the wall of the building could be seen a now faded drawing of a muffin that Abigail thought looked very like her favourite muffin which she usually bought at Size Chef Bakers near where they lived in London. This intrigued her and they stopped to take a photo. She wanted to taste the muffin to see how similar or different but was informed by the young shopkeepers around that it had been decades since the bakery had been closed since it had not been there since they were born. She was informed there was no other place such a muffin was sold and the family that used to make them seemed to have disappeared with the baking recipe.

The four moved on and came by a school. Upon taking sight of it, Joel looked like one seeming to recall the location of the school as the teacher's residential area. But he could not quite capture the memory, which immediately faded from his mind. Again, they took photos. They passed through the bank to change money to local currency to do some shopping before their time for

departure arrived. The bank, which was housed in an ancient building that seemed to have a rich history. It also happened to be Joel's dad Bram's last working station before his young family left for the Promised Land in South Sudan where they instead would lose their children.

They took a lot of selfies, of which Abigail was fascinated by the diversity of the country's cultures and how some of the people addressed her and Joel in local languages as one of their own because of their physical features which looked Ethiopian. The local attention they were receiving made the two black Londoners vaguely wonder whether this was their biological parents' country of origin. They bought themselves *gabbi*, the unique traditional Ethiopian cotton-woven clothes and headed to the airport to proceed with their journey.

They arrived in Lamu hungry and greatly enjoyed some of the popular Swahili dishes that featured the meaty pilau rice that they were informed was spiced with traditional herbs and was served with a rich stew. They tried all the local delicacies they could manage during their stay. Twister, who liked cooking, was interested to learn about chapatti, a popular flatbread of Indian origin similar to roti. Other cuisines included *mbaazi*, a legume of the pea family cooked in coconut milk and various spices. It also fascinated him to watch the deep-frying of a kind of bread called mandazi or *mahamri*. He took all the information he could, determined to take with him all the Swahili recipes he could find to try out once they were back home.

While, at it, they made sure to send their parents selfies of themselves touring Old Town on donkey back in the narrow alleys winding through the ancient and charming old Swahili buildings.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Exodus

LIFE WAS BEREFT OF MEANING without her children. Had it not been for her husband Bram who consoled and encouraged her to remain optimistic, Tracy might have lost hope of finding them a long time ago. Bram tried anything he could to keep her hopes high. What made it worse for Tracy was that she was left barren during the South Sudan ordeal that also deprived her of her children. Not being able to bear Bram another child made her loss feel more difficult to bear despite her husband's consolations.

Bram, on the other hand, kept a jolly outlook and didn't seem to care one bit that his remaining kidney was failing slowly for reasons doctors said were due to stress from overworking the single kidney. Both he and Tracy also had to endure body aches here and there as they aged. His hopeful outlook towards life and the support he gave his wife helped her face her difficult days.

One day, however, Tracy had a change of mind. She wanted them to pack and go back to Ethiopia and lead a quiet life for the rest of their remaining days. She planned to tell Bram this during their usual walk to the beach where they found some relaxation.

"Bram dear," she began, "We have spent most of our productive years with no clear leads to where or how, or even whether we shall ever find the children. Our efforts have all been in vain. We had very high hopes, but all we had to show for it was wrinkles with no hope of anyone ever calling us grandpa and grandma, let alone anyone to call us dad and mum. I wish to hold my little girl Abigail again and pinch the ears of that boy, Joel. How can life be this unkind? I still picture them with their milk teeth although I know my girl Abigail must be a woman now and Joel a man with a deep manly voice. It would have been

fun to see them outgrow their favourite clothes as they grew taller and older. To this day when we pass by a school I look inside the compounds hoping to see their familiar faces. I still feel a strong urge to buy them school uniforms whenever I see parents shopping when schools open. It has been like this all these years.”

Her husband said nothing, knowing that it was always best to let her vent her frustrations. They had not walked far when a cold breeze from the sea started blowing. He dashed back to the house and got himself a jacket and a sweater for Tracy. He thought that instead of a walk to the beach, he would be more excited to take his wife out to lift her spirits. As he looked for the keys, he reached into his pocket and found some bank notes he normally kept for emergencies such as this one. This being a Thursday, he drove her to an inn that played good jazz.

It was then that Bram spoke, having kept silent all this time except to tell Tracy he was taking her out for a treat. “Nothing happened to us by accident Tracy,” he said, “and none of our efforts shall go to waste. You’re exactly where you ought to be. We did what we could, we did what was within our ability. But I believe that God is still returning the missing beads – our children – back on their string to make our necklace complete again. For now, let’s be grateful that we have each other, Tracy. I don’t need to remind you that appreciating what we already have helps us cope during our difficult times. We just need to be patient for a little longer, Tracy.”

Tracy, on her part, thought this the moment she told Bram what she really wanted to say before they had started on the walk to the beach. “I think it is best to pack and go back to Addis Ababa. We have each other, Bram, and that is good enough for now. We cannot continue here indefinitely. My darling Bram, we shall exhaust all our savings chasing the wind.”

“Your peace is very precious, Tracy, but it will not be found in our ancestral home. It is found within you. Time is like a river; you cannot touch the same water twice. Once it has passed, it is gone forever. The pain we have passed through is like water in the river: once the pain has flowed by, it never returns to torment us twice. Nothing shall be more joyous than when we reunite with our kids. If we give up now and go back home things can only get worse as it might keep us further away from them. Sometimes you need to take a deep breath, relax and let everything take its course. It will work itself out. We have

done our best and although it might appear in vain, we have gotten closer to our target.”

They were seated in a corner with a full view of the large band. This gave them a feeling that the band was playing only for them.

Tracy's phone rang, but the landline number did not look familiar. It was Gladys, with whom they first met at the hospital after injuries from the South Sudan coup attempt, and had since been referring to each other as sisters in pain.

“How have you been, my sister Tracy?”

“Now where to begin, my dear Gladys,” she replied with a tired sigh. “My limbs are giving up on me each day that goes by, and I want to pack and go back to Addis Ababa. I am sick and tired of waiting to find my children. Maybe they are already gone to be with their maker, and here I am traipsing everywhere looking for them. Yet even if I should find them today, it likely shall make no difference. They are all grown up and probably moved on with life. My chance to parent them is over now, Gladys dear. I still can't believe we haven't been there to see Joel and Abigail and Twister pass through the stages kids go through growing up. We didn't experience their baby talk, nor were we there to see them lose their milk teeth, or been there to guide them as they grew up, taking them to a nursery school and being there for their first graduation in kindergarten. These little things we missed to witness, including seeing them through the teenage, or my girl her first menstrual cycle, we missed seeing them find their feet as young adults. Gladys, we have no babies now. They belong to themselves now. They are adults. What am I talking about now? What if they may not have made it this far?” Tracy wondered, almost sobbing.

“Rise and shine again, my dear sister, Tracy. You are an ordained parent, and our obligation to look for them is not over until it is over. You should not give up. You will always be a parent to them, whether young or when they become parents themselves. Stay focused, Tracy,” Gladys paused, then said remembering something. “I had misplaced your phone number; I had to look everywhere; my house is now like a bomb blast site from searching the diary I had saved this number. And I am glad I called to remind you to bounce back and thrive in this uncertain situation you find yourself. Be resilient. You are unstoppable and have what it takes. Again, it is not over until it is over, keep soldiering on.”

"I am thoroughly done, Gladys. I am done!" the friend said with finality as tears sprung to her eyes again.

"I can hear tears in your voice. Have faith that it will work out," continued Gladys. "Celebrate yourself more and keep to the goal of finding the kids. Only Bram knows what it has taken you to be you today. You have to bloom and flourish for both yourself and for him every now and then. I feel for you imagining how hard it has been for me without my child or husband. I have been alone since my son and husband disappeared on me. And I seem to have abandoned my parents in my anguished soul to find my child, Twister, they too may not even remember that I exist. But you and me have made it this far, and should not give up until we unite with our children. Find yourself a hobby to keep your mind away from thinking about it too much and be like Bram and me. I am saying this because I know how staying home as a housewife with no family can be exhausting."

"That is true, Gladys. I have been dormant for too long and my mind has focused on this one thing for far too long. I need to appreciate the good things that have happened in my life despite my loss and use that as a foundation to begin a new chapter. Life is about many things that play to make us complete. I now realize it cannot just be finding our children that will make us feel complete. We can still be complete in ourselves, Gladys, so that when we find them we shall still be strong for them. I shall hold my head high and summon the power within to accomplish my dream to touch the rainbow, my children."

"Now you are speaking my language, Tracy. Sorrow has not added anything to our empty nests. Emotion has just been wearing you out. Try to keep busy. Occupying your mind with something worthwhile could brighten your world and bring out new things. But what I called to say was that I miss you a lot, good people. How is my darling Bram?"

"Find out for yourself and say hi to him. He is seated right next to me." Tracy handed the phone to her husband.

"Hello Gladys, how have you been? I thought you left the city for good. I haven't heard from you for such a long time. You have been too quiet, Gladys. Thanks for encouraging my poor Tracy. I had forgotten how idle she had been. I seem to only enjoy her taking care of me and forgot she needs to have a life too."

"Yes, I did leave London, Bram. I've been away in the land of my husband, Eritrea. It was a three-year work contract, but the contract will be ending in

two years' time. If you will accept me, I am planning to come back in days and stay for a bit with you guys. I plan to go home and apologise to Mom and Dad about their son Boris. I am sure the old lady is very sad to have lost Boris and me. I had vowed never to go to her empty-handed. It has to be either with Boris or my son. So far, I have failed miserably. Reconciling my soul with her and the rest of my family members shall ease my burden. After all, that is the only family I have now. I had cut ties with anybody who might have snitched on me with them, but now I just have to show up back in their lives. I have been falling behind in the search for our children. I guess it is because I have been walking beside you two pursuing these kids. You have been soul mates to me, Bram and Tracy. A part of me must have healed for me to find the urge to see my family again, especially Mom and Dad."

"You are most welcome dear. We shall be delighted to host you as you work towards gaining back your roots with your family. All shall be well. Fear such as you had not wanting to visit them without Twister and Boris accompanying you is only in your mind. Our God knows better and wants the best for us. Your mom has not condemned you for anything and I am sure she must miss you a lot. I bet you have only added to her misery by keeping away. I had no idea you had kept away from your family this long because of losing your brother and son. Had I known I would have personally dragged you back to your parents' house. I am optimistic something will happen soon. I can almost see our kids pop up before our eyes one of these days, Gladys."

"That is my exact feeling Bram. I already see our uniting with the kids being so effortless that I tremble with anticipation to imagine it. I know it was unfair to keep away from my family. I guess it was part of my grieving process, which I told myself was personal and not for others. It has been my ugly secret. But that is me. As for you, Bram, keep my darling Tracy strong. I shall see you soon, my good friends. We love her for who she is, and this journey can only strengthen our bond," Gladys said and hung up.

GLADYS NEEDED to do her laundry. She had a guest coming shortly to assess her household items and the house before buying them. She was selling them off because she did not intend to return to Eritrea after her work contract was over.

As she put clothes into the washing machine, her doorbell rang. She was certain it was her workmate, the guest she was waiting for. To her surprise, it was her sister-in-law Meci, with whom they had not spoken for a while. She had just decided to pop by and inform Gladys she had been transferred to Eritrea. She hoped Gladys would host her for a while before she got a place of her own.

“You are very lucky, Meci. You came through that door just in time. There is this guy I am expecting who was to buy this house and everything in it. In this case, I now do not have to sell it to him. You can inherit the house and everything if you wish. I had paid a deposit on the house, which the guy was to refund. All we need to do now is clear the remaining fifty per cent and the house will be yours, Meci.

“I shall gladly pay for that, Gladys and would like to suggest we co-own it. It is in such a prime location. I wonder how you managed to buy it at that price, my dear. Being a co-owner will be a good enough reason for you to come back. I’ll keep your room intact and use the other two bedrooms; one will be mine and the other for guests.”

“It was a colleague of mine who was to buy it. He was in a hurry to buy and move in immediately. I thank God we now won’t have to give it away. I had no idea you came back from the US. I did not want to burden your mom and dad with it, as they are now retired. My only worry was that I had no one to help manage it for me. It shall serve you well, Meci, Let me give you a tour. It is a three-bedroom house with a servant’s quarter. I had furnished all the rooms in the hope of leaving the house to my son, Twister, one day. I always expect to see him walk through the door. I wonder when that shall come to pass,” Gladys said and, overcome with the sadness of losing her son, she started to sob.

“I am so sorry Gladys. I see that happening sooner than you think. Are you planning to say farewell to Mom and Dad? They are waiting for you today,” Meci said. She had left her parents’ home three days before, lying to them she was off to bring Gladys to them that very day she left. There was no need to tell Gladys this.

“Oh my God, I forgot about all that. Let me call the guy who was to take the house. His name is Booby, but the handsome dude is already taken. I would have introduced him to you, Meci. I need to let him know of the change of

circumstances so that he doesn't bank on buying the house. 'Then we will head home to see my late husband's parents.'

"It would have been interesting to feed my eyes on Booby's beauty if he shows up, after all, there isn't any male that has only one female in this life," the ladies knowingly chuckled at this.

"Booby is also a snob, it is almost an hour now since he was to show up and is not picking up my call. Kindly serve yourself some breakfast that I had prepared for two people, but the guest doesn't seem like he will show up. Neither am I in the mood to serve him anymore. What do you suggest I buy for Amma (mom) and Dad as a farewell gift?"

"Older people are not that choosy. They will appreciate any gift. Maybe you buy them a duvet for their bed and a set of cups. Coffee and bed are their major activities at this age," they both laughed in agreement.

After Meci was done with breakfast she took the car keys to be the chauffeur. The car however belonged to Gladys's employer, and the policy did not allow anyone other than an authorised employee to drive the vehicle. As they entered the supermarket, they saw the said Booby, who had taken his whole family shopping at the supermarket.

"Hi Booby, I tried calling you earlier. Meet my sister-in-law Meci. She was transferred to this town, and she is taking over my house for now. I wanted to notify you the sale will not be taking place anymore, my dear. I am so sorry for the inconvenience, my dear Booby," she said releasing his hand. The wife and children had already moved ahead not concerned who the two ladies were.

"I am so glad that happened already, Gladys. I have been fighting with my wife the whole night because she has been transferred to the USA, and she wants me to quit my job and join her. I was of the idea of settling here for good. I suggested being left with the kids, but she is not ready for that. Nice to meet you Meci, you are such a pretty girl, I am jealous of the man who has won your heart." They laughed at the teasing, as Booby went on. "I was finishing with the shopping before coming to apologise about not being able to go through with the sale. Take this shopping, it was actually for you. I can see my wife walking towards the car with the children. Let me join them. It was a pleasure meeting you, Gladys and Meci. Organise we have a cup of coffee together, both you and your sister-in-law before you go back to Europe," Booby suggested with a wink and left to join his family.

“I do not understand why people shy away from telling someone they broke the deal. Booby could have been courteous enough to tell it to me on the phone rather than prepare a ceremony to deliver the decline. Thank God you showed up just on time, Meci. It could have been such a mess not knowing what to do with the house. Anyway, he left all this shopping for an apology, which will now go to Mom and Dad. We can now shop for the cups as you recommended and the duvet.”

“I have already picked them, Gladys. You like the colours? By the way, do not worry that that Booby guy was not courteous. Wives are the lawmakers of their homes. One has to comply with what the wife says, which I support. If she makes the mistake of leaving that Booby guy here, she might be replaced soon. I will be the first in the line to claim him,” Meci declared, impressing Gladys with her knowledge of what happens in marriages, yet she was still single.

“Men must have some loose wire somewhere,” said Gladys. “For him to want to be left behind there must be a slay queen somewhere and is not ready to quit her. He and the wife look good together, though. No wonder the wife needed to tie all the loose ends.” Changing the subject, she said approvingly, “Your choice of the items to buy shows you have a better taste than me, Meci. They will love them, I am sure. Thanks a million for making me shine. It has been a while since I visited that home. Without you, all your mom and dad have is an empty nest, just like this one of mine. The only difference is that they have each other and I am on my own, all alone, Meci.”

“Yes, it has been a long time. They miss you a lot. But they understand you are a lonely amma, hoping to reunite with your son. They see their son Yonas in you. Paying them a visit will really make them happy, Gladys. Life is about sharing love with others. You kept yourself locked away in this lonely prison for too long. You should be out there dating again. Your late husband is gone forever, and you need to fill that vacuum. No one will be mad at you if you decide to move on and have another man and get another baby as you wait for Twister. It has now been twenty years and I imagine menopause must almost be kicking in, my dear. Don’t be too hard on yourself. Life is like an echo; it gives back what you throw at it. Show it a desire to marry and it shall give you a husband, Gladys.”

“If that is the case, why is my son, Twister, on my mind every day? Why hasn’t life given him back to me, eh, Meci?”

“You have your son on your mind every time not only in your desire to have him back but out of fear of losing him. The state of your soul has a conflicting message. When you lock yourself up, you lock out the good you desire as well. You open the back door to let in all the worries and unwanted stuff. Once you warm up to life, all manner of possibilities come your way when you least expect them. I promise you, Gladys, just try redirecting your energy to other areas you have been ignoring. Leave Twister alone. He shall find you as well.” Meci held Gladys's hand to comfort her.

“I hear you, my dear sister Meci. I have been a mess for long enough. I need to have my life back, forget the past and look forward. Nothing has been making sense to me ever since I lost my son and my husband. I only seem to find solace when making everyone happy but myself. I am rated the best worker in the office, and everyone in your family finds me the best sister-in-law ever. It is so easy to pass through life for so long without noticing. I had no idea it is now over twenty years since I lost my poor boy. Every day looks the same. I wake up hoping to hold him in my arms. I find it funny to lie with the expectation that the day Twister shall come back everything else shall fall in place as if by magic.”

“To some extent, it is true, Gladys. Whatever we believe is the truth about us. Life can turn out as you visualise it in your mind. Twister might just show up and other things, including a husband, might show up too. It is a possibility, dear. Hang in there.”

“I can’t wait to get it all tied up, Meci—my son, a husband, and a new life. Yet I wake up every day with the expectation to see my son, only for my hope of seeing him seeming wasted. It is so torturous that I lack the language to explain it to you, my dear.”

“You do not have to explain anything to me, Gladys. I can read it all in the lines on your face. You need a new life to remove those wrinkles, one by one. It is only love that can do that magic. I wish I were a man. I’d replace my dead brother Yonas. Not to worry, though. I am sure God has a husband in store for you.”

They were soon in the car headed to Meci’s parents’ home at Dek’emhare, a town forty kilometres south of Asmara, the capital city. They found them seated outside their house enjoying the sun. Seeing this as they approached the parents reminded Gladys she would soon be headed to England where the sun was not as abundant as in this land of her husband.

“Gladys, we are so happy you came to salute us before leaving for the UK. How have you been, dear, and where did you find my lost daughter Meci?” Her mother-in-law hugged her

“Hello Amma, hello dad,” Meci greeted. “I was hoping to come back with a husband and children but the heavens haven’t allowed it yet,” she joked, referring to the three days she had been away which made the parents laugh. “At least I have brought you your daughter-in-law as I promised.” She then left them to visit the bathroom as they discussed Gladys’s pain.

“I have missed you, but I see you have kept well Amma and Dad,” said Gladys. “I had to come and say goodbye. There was no way I was going back without stepping foot here, though I would have to leave my late husband behind. What a shame, mama!” she said with sadness.

“There’s no shame in that, Gladys. It is part of life. Good and bad walk hand in hand. Some days we have something to smile about, and some days we have something to be sad about. Today we can smile that we have met again after such a long time. We can smile that we are still alive to see tomorrow. We can smile we are all healthy and can put a meal on the table. We can smile there is peace now in this country after that dreadful war with Ethiopia, which was no different from the one that took your husband away in South Sudan and left us without a son. We, however, can smile because we hope Yonas’s son is still somewhere waiting to find us. We have a lot to smile about, Gladys.”

“I agree with you, Amma. Fear and uncertainty overshadow everything good. Whatever I thought I could not do, now I believe I can. One of the things I wanted to do was to go back to Europe to look for my son and apologise to my ailing parents for making them lose their son Boris in the South Sudan mayhem. I shall reflect on what I expect from others, I shall be a better daughter-in-law as we advance. I, however, promise to visit you often. This way I shall be in touch with the two families that matter the most to me. I am tired of locking myself in the endless pain of losing my Twister and his dad, Yonas.”

“Before you promise others heaven, Gladys, paying more attention to detail shall be your perfect healing process. You should allocate more time to groom, love, taste, receive, nurture, honour, protect your soul, and appreciate yourself. You are a beautiful girl who has locked herself from the rest of the world. Yonas was taken by his creator and he opened the door for you to love again

the very day his body parted with his soul. Time for grieving is over my dear, live your life again.”

Meci was soon back at the table and was surprised to see they had not started eating. “You, people, need to serve food we eat as we catch up with each other,” she suggested and went on to serve her dad as her mom tried to serve Gladys, who declined.

“I feel a bit full,” Gladys said. “I shall eat a bit later.” She said. She felt somehow deflated after seeing her late husband’s parents, especially his dad who looked an older version of Yonas.

“Today I feel relief in my soul. For a long time, I was filled with emptiness and felt like I had no purpose in life. The urge I have today is completely new to me, an urge to be a new being. Thank you for reminding me to live again. You are the best family ever. Dad, you have been quiet. Are you OK?”

“Yes, I am OK, my girl, and very glad you will now be able to overcome your sadness and live again. No more tears, my dear daughter Gladys. Now focus on your emotional vibe that has long taken a back seat. Fear had taken you over, almost killing the good in you waking up to emptiness each day. You have our blessings. Time waits for no one, even for the king.”

He paused a bit to let her digest what he had said. “I know that thing, Gladys,” he continued, “that all of us at some point come to that bridge of sadness. The bridge is for crossing, not hanging on to it. You have been lost in the bridge for too long, my girl. Cross over and explore what you can grab from the other side of life. We are all waiting to celebrate with you, my girl. No one is immortal, one day, we shall all join my son Yonas, but we need to celebrate your new life before then. You have our blessings, and I know you have Yonas' blessings, too, Gladys.”

They all paid attention to what Yonas's dad was saying, knowing his wisdom always had something to give. He went on, “Life is of the essence my poor girl and every day counts, and doesn’t return to be counted again after it is gone. The season for your mourning has come to an end. Mourning is not cast in stone that it shall remain forever. You must let it pass. The choice is yours, and I am happy you chose a new beginning. I am sure your new life shall be as rewarding to you as it shall be to all of us. The celebration you now feel is mutual. We had waited for this moment for a long time. Keep alive and well, my girl.”

“One time my grandmother reminded me that I came into this world alone,” Gladys said in a dreamy tone. “I remember her saying that whatever I do, I should not measure myself with other people, but myself. She also reminded me that during my old age, I might find myself living alone without a husband or son, but it seems to have happened sooner than my grandmother thought. Only through love and friendship can we create the happy illusion that we are not alone, even if for a short time as it is now for me. Life, however, is about moving from stage to stage, from when I was under my parent's care, to when school took custody of me before employment thereafter. Then I got married and my spouse took over managing my life before got my hands full when Twister blessed us—me and my Yonas. Now I am all alone again. Even at death, you go alone; Yonas went alone. We do not choose who is next to the grave. We leave it all to God and trust that everyone we love shall be blessed with ripe old age, from our grandparents to our grandchildren.” Her eyes were wet as she finished saying this.

“Healing is reconciliation,” said Yonas's dad, perhaps referring to Gladys's reconciliation with herself. With this parental wisdom ringing in their ears, Gladys and Meci filled their plates to enjoy more of the traditional food that added to their feeling of home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Entrepreneur

TRACY AND BRAM'S SAVINGS were fast getting drained because Tracy had long quit her job, while Bram's employment contract had expired. However, Bram had another job offer, which he decided to accept. They needed the money, after all, if they were to continue with the expensive mission to find their children, Joel and Abigail. It was a well-paying two-year contract in the United States. The job, however, did not much interest Tracy; she was not about to follow her husband to his new employment destination this time around. All she knew was that she was on a mission to find her children. She wanted to remain in Europe, and if there were any jobs coming they had to come from there, especially for her. She remembered her entrepreneurial skills and the yummy muffins she used to sell for her mom, Aida, in Addis Ababa when she was a girl.

"I do not think I will be joining you in the USA," she informed her husband. "I want to start an eatery. Do you remember my mom and I were once bakers, Bram?"

"Yes, of course. You have talked about it so many times, dear Tracy."

"Talents never die, my dear. That shall be my focus going forward, Bram. It will be a great way for me to re-engage with life again. I've grown weary of these travels moving from continent to continent. Let me be for a while. You can go ahead and build our fund to finance our cause looking for Abigail and Joel. I feel betrayed by life. Even though you have afforded us a comfortable life, I would look ungrateful to only focus on our missing children. There is more to life than to allow just one thing to consume me for more than fifteen years now. Where there is a will, there is a way. I shall keep myself busy as I wait for you to finish your two-year contract in the States."

"God's time is the right time. Our irritation and anxiety not finding our children has not changed anything. Things will change in their own time, my Tracy."

Tracy, however, had other things on her mind and didn't hear what Bram had said. What she knew she must do came to her in a flash as her husband

was speaking. Her mind was suddenly consumed with a desire to rekindle her baking skills and do something with them.

“The only reason I quit baking was age, Bram,” she told her surprised husband. “I was too young to inherit my Mom’s baking legacy; it was not that the business was not rewarding. When I look at the types of muffins on offer in the market, they taste the same and are done the same way. My baking shall be traditional and as addictive as Mom’s was in Addis Ababa. Anyone who tastes them will always come back for more. We also do not have Ethiopian cuisine nearby. I’ll put all my savings into the business I have in mind, darling Bram.”

“If that will keep you busy and happy, my love, I will be happy to take the new job and leave you behind for a while. Two years is not a long time. I’ll soon be back to support your business, Tracy.”

“You are the best, my dear Bram. I shall not disappoint you; if anything, my magic in the kitchen will surprise you.”

“I have no doubt of your magic, dear Tracy. You are the best cook I have ever come across. This bakery is long overdue. Get started my girl, Mwah!” Bram kissed her on the forehead.

They prepared Bram's departure bag, and he left two days later for the United States.

Tracy had no time to waste. She started trying out the best of her mom’s muffin recipes so that she may be ready when started making them for the market. It took Tracy two days to refine the recipes to the desired taste. As for the Ethiopian meals for the restaurant she had in mind, she was already well-practised having often cooked for guests at her house, and already had a reliable supplier of the raw materials in her neighbourhood. After acquiring all the necessary approvals and licences, she turned her home into a boutique hotel that she named Size Chef and Pastries. She bought more furniture and moved to a studio apartment just big enough for her. It had a tiny kitchen, a tiny bathroom, and a tiny sitting area. Tracy didn’t think she would spend a lot of time in her tiny house, as she would spend most of her time at the hotel. This would keep her busy to keep her mind off her loss.

She put up an advertisement in the newspapers for a chef with experience in Ethiopian cuisine. Before the date she had set to conduct interviews had arrived, a middle-aged man showed up at her door. He was tall and sexy and,

after explaining he had seen the advert, delivered what Tracy thought was a superb elevator pitch even before he was let into the house.

“Hello, Madam. My name is Davit. I saw your advert for a chef and got very excited about it. I could not wait to prove my skills. That is why I am here to try out a few of them with you. If you will be impressed, give me the job. If I am useless, do not spare me either, Madam.”

Davit was hard to ignore by a woman whose husband was away on work sojourn in the US. The man was super polite with gestures that could turn the coldest woman on, Tracy’s face brightened at the sight of him and showed a happy grin for the first time in a long time. *He emits a good vibe*, she thought. Whether the guy turned out to be a good chef or just an amateur, she decided he would be a friend to keep her sane before her husband came back, or before the damn children showed up from wherever they had been lost.

“Come in, my dear Davit. Let’s see what you can offer.”

Davit looked the same age as Tracy, and she thought he was such a handsome fellow. He looked like a European-African half-cast and had long hair tied with a ribbon from behind into a ponytail. He was well-groomed, too, and with hairy skin that completed his good looks.

“Even before you ask, I am a dad of two girls. I hope to do a good job, for I have three mouths to feed. I will not only be working for the money, but I love the kitchen, too,” Davit explained and felt his anxiety ease. He had not expected the prospective employer he was coming to meet would be a woman.

Tracy was, however, keen to see his baking ability and gave him a practical assignment, which he completed a short time later.

“The result of my first recipe is ready for you can taste, as I do some muffins,” Davit announced after he was done. “Thank you for the teff dough you prepared earlier, Madam Tracy, for the injera. It made my work easier. The muffins I am about to do are a family speciality. It is an Ethiopian recipe handed down through generations in my family,” Davit explained, adding, “I will do just a few. I wish you had enough people to try them.”

For every dish Davit prepared using his recipes, he was keen to see Tracy’s reaction to their taste.

He is so adorable. Davit reminds me of someone I know, but I cannot pin down who this person is.

“No worries, my dear Davit,” Tracy replied after that thought about the person she couldn’t remember. “I will do all the tasting. Once I confirm the recipes are good, we shall invite people for a bite.”

To her surprise, Davit was better than she had expected. The muffins he had done exactly matched the ones she had prepared earlier.

When she commended this recipe, he clapped in such a delighted manner as to forget he was a professional and Tracy his boss. He even gave her a peck on the cheek sending a thrill of excitement through Tracy. Though she liked it, she looked at him disapprovingly, just to remind him who was the boss. This seemed to worry Davit and it showed on his face, but it was only for a minute.

“By the way, before you made the muffins, I had already done some that I would like you to try,” said Tracy removing them from the cupboard.

“How come you know how to make muffins that taste exactly like my mom’s?” Davit asked surprised. “I have not tasted this kind of muffin anywhere else, Tracy, not even in Ethiopia. You are the first I’ve seen with a similar recipe as my family,” he explained. Before she could reply, he asked,

“Madam Tracy, why must we do Ethiopian food? Why can't we concentrate on baking?

The recipes you gave me are enough to make this a one-stop shop and a household name for a unique range of quick breads. Pastries don’t keep long, and if enough customers don’t show up it would all go to waste. Bread has a longer shelf-life, up to five days without refrigeration. But if the hotel must offer full meals, we can introduce them after the breads have picked momentum. That is if you agree with the suggestion. These muffins are too good to be ignored in a country where bread is a must on the table. What do you think, madam?”

“Who is your mother, Davit?” Tracy asked as if she hadn’t heard his suggestion.

“My mother’s name is Mona. She was married to an Ethiopian but left her husband when we were young. He joined her the other day after a series of illnesses. His name is Amadi. He owned a bakery, which is how my mom got these recipes,” Davit responded without hesitation though he was surprised at the question.

It took Tracy a minute to recognise the name he had mentioned and nearly kicked this Davit guy in revenge for his dad Amadi's roughness when she first met him as a girl. This was not something Davit would have known. He also

wouldn't have known that his new boss Tracy was the reason his mom Mona had divorced Amadi. Mona was not the kind of person to enjoy another woman's sweat and watch the child suffer. She could not stomach Amadi for not seeming to care, so she decided to pack up and leave. She relocated to Europe with her family. only later would she invite her ailing husband, Amadi.

"Is it possible for you to introduce your mom to me, dear Davit? I am also from Ethiopia, and we might share a bit with her. By the way, the job is yours. I like your recipes a lot." she said standing up to pick another injera.

"Yes, I can bring her tomorrow if that is fine with you, madam. Thank you very much for the job. I shall not let you down. I will owe you forever. This is an opportunity I have been waiting for my entire life. See you tomorrow, Tracy."

Tracy liked the idea that Davit could think outside the box. It reminded her of her ideas as a girl who helped her mother's business to grow. She found it interesting that a son of Amadi was coming up with ideas that would create wealth his father took away from her.

Davit was early the following day, reporting to work first before he could fetch his parents to meet Tracy. He and Tracy catered to the curious new customers who came in to try the hotel. It was while the guests were enjoying their meal that Davit dashed to get his parents.

Tracy could not hold her tears when she saw Amadi. He looked the same but an older version of the youthful man she knew. He had lost a bit of weight and was now grey-haired.

Of all the people I would have expected to meet again in this life, it was not this beat-up guy. I remember him as very mean and seeing him now makes me think this a good time to take my revenge. Unfortunately, he is not the same energetic guy I knew. Instead, he reminds me to always be kind to others when the season is good. It also reminds me that if one is not kind, life might hand you back in kind everything bad you threw at it, and that this would happen when you least expect it. He looks so needy in this foreign land, especially now that roles have changed in that the one who will be providing his bread and butter is the same girl he had trashed those many years ago and took all her wealth.

He has such beautiful grey eyes, Tracy thought to herself. But her own eyes were wet, which made him wonder whether she was feeling sorry for him. "Why are you crying madam?" asked Amadi after they were seated at a free table. "I look much better than when I relocated to Europe. I was almost gone,

had it not been for the merciful Grace of my Creator. Thank you for your concern, madam lady. My wife and these children have done a good job getting me back on my feet. Thank you for giving my son a job. He is a good chef, just like his mother. Luck has not been on his side; he has long struggled to get a stable job. Ethiopian cuisine has been his speciality. Unfortunately, in this country, hotels that offer Ethiopian dishes are few, and the owners of those that do Ethiopian are not consistent. I love your hotel, no other meal spot with Ethiopian dishes near here.”

Tracy's mind raced back to that morning when she met this guy Amadi when he grabbed a packet of muffins from her hands and opened it. He had then taken one muffin from the packet and ate it as she stood there helplessly. She did not know how she would handle this intimidating grown-up should he refuse to pay for the muffins. And now, many years later, they had crossed paths again. She looked at Amadi and felt sad to see him this beaten. It was clear he could not manage by himself without his family, perhaps even to run his business. He looked like he had only managed to live by accident and not by the good choices he made despite his looks. He looked like one who needed to be saved from himself, and this could only be done by love to awaken the giant in the man.

Tracy thought Amadi still had much to offer and that she could utilise his skills in some way. She could not allow his great mind to follow him to the grave; it would be a waste not benefiting anyone. It was not that Tracy was any better; she was a potential loser too in the anxiety of her lost children that consumed her. That's why the Size Chef's Pastries Hotel was important to calm her soul a bit. As she tried to heal Amadi, she should be working on herself too.

“I am sorry, Amadi, about your illness. I am Tracy. You might remember me. I was the little girl who gave you your first taste of this Ethiopian Muffin many years ago in Addis. Then you had bought the first twelve packets from Mom Aida to sell in the market,” she tried to jog his memory as she handed him a muffin.

“Oh my God, you are Aida's daughter? I owe you an apology. I am the cause of all your misfortunes. I heard from the village that you lost your children. Did you ever unite with them?”

Why must I explain myself to someone like Amadi? He has been spying on me and my whereabouts even after all the evil he did to me?

“Not yet, Amadi,” she replied. “I have not found my children. Some people have tried to discourage me, adding salt to my loss, but this has not stopped us from looking for our kids. Getting my Joe and Abby dominates my every thought, and I can assure you the thought of seeing them here shall manifest one day. We are optimistic we shall find them.”

Mona had been silent all this time and was nearly on her knees pleading with Tracy not to deny her son Davit the opportunity to work in her hotel only because of her past disappointments with Amadi. Davit couldn't help noticing and, upon seeing his mother's pained look as she addressed Tracy, he rushed immediately to be by their side. He noticed his dad appeared scared and was shaking like one fearing for his life.

Davit listened in as Mona tried to give Tracy a picture of what happened. “Imagine a situation where a Good Samaritan gives you a mango,” she explained. “You enjoy the rich tropical flavour of the mango juice to the last drop. Then you throw away the seed somewhere in a field because you have no need for it. The seed lands on fertile ground and finds an owner who nurtures the sapling until one day it starts to yield tasty mangoes. By then, you who threw away the seed without a care, have since moved on. One day you walk to the farm where the tree grew to buy mangoes. The owner will be happy to sell you the mangoes. It won't matter whether the seed once belonged to you. The seed that became the tree shall go on giving. That is the beauty of life; I may not have taken you with me, but that was because my hands were full with caring for my children, and neither was I certain where I was going. But I prayed to God to watch over you, Tracy. Amadi was unreasonable back then, which made me sad, and I had to leave. I could not stand your suffering when your mom had been so kind to us. Amadi had been heartless. But he paid for his sins with his business going under and lost everything. We have no intention to take your business away from you, but we would like to be part of the venture you are undertaking which we believe will be successful. Let my son Davit work with you. He is a good chef, and he loves muffins a lot. The rest of us shall bring customers to enjoy the muffins and, where we can bring the orders for you to supply. This I promise you, my girl, Tracy. Have mercy on us,” Mona pleaded as she wiped her tears with the sleeve of her dress.”

“My beef with Amadi has nothing to do with Davit, Mom,” Tracy explained. “Both your son and I are united by pain and betrayal. We have to do things differently going forward. I shall give you ten per cent of my company to support your parents, Davit. Let your dad appreciate what synergy between two people can do. No one lives on an island; we need one another to thrive and survive. Had your dad, Amadi, not been greedy back then, we probably could have made a bakery like the one we have now and even better. I hope he lives long enough to assist us with his marketing skills before he takes them to the grave with him.”

“I am more than willing to pay for my sins and clear my name with you, Tracy,” assured Amadi, his voice breaking with emotion. “Thank you for not making my son Davit pay for what I may have done to you. Mona was always very sad about you, and I hope her prayers kept you safe. We also pray that you unite with your children soon,”

“In God, we trust that we shall one day find them. If you can excuse me, I need to attend to customers. We have a full house today.”

Tracy's emotions were so stirred up that she wanted time alone. She left without another word and went straight to bed. She left Davit in charge of the hotel crew. He was not only part owner, but now knew they had a very close relationship with Tracy because of the past his parents and Tracy shared.

His parents soon left the hotel carrying two packs of muffins Tracy had gifted them before she left. After serving the last few customers who had lingered longer than he had expected, Davit closed the pastry shop, which served coffee and tea, and went to Tracy's house to drop the keys. She was in bed feeling very alone with her husband Bram away, and the children still at large. This was in addition to Amadi having awakened the pain from her childhood. She felt at her lowest.

The door was not locked, so Davit opened it and called Tracy to update her on the day's business in the sitting room. All that did not matter to her for now. She was like a hungry beast looking for any form of relief, not the sales for the day or the grand opening of the restaurant. She pulled Davit to the bedroom. She undressed him, groaning with want like a dying woman.

Davit, for some reason, was equally hungry for her. Maybe it was from gratitude in her kindness in not denying him a job despite discovering he was a son of her old enemy, Amadi. Maybe it was out of sympathy, trying to fill the void his dad left in her deserting her when she needed support the most when

she was a girl. Maybe they had been in love in her childhood encounters that faded before she was old enough to appreciate each other. Or maybe it was just an opportunity that popped up at the right time.

It was one of the best moments Tracy had had in a very long time. She needed great sex badly and had no apologies for the good time she enjoyed. Davit was a skilled *sinner* who knew just what to do between their spiritual and bodily needs. His desires had found pasture in what he thought was the green of her want.”

“Oh boy, you are so good in this game, thank you,” she said contentedly. “It was just what I needed to snap out all the stuff running through my head. There are many ways to do that, but this was the best. We have had our own show. What we have just shared is the unity of the business that is just beginning to take root. We will let the business work out without interfering with the choice in our personal lives together. Whoever shall be concerned should let us be, for now, dear Davit. I hope I have not offended you, handsome!” asked the now seemingly untroubled boss.

“Not in any way. I was dying to have you as well, Tracy. By the way, I have no problem with this act either, though some people might consider it an evil thing to do outside marriage, I take sex as one of God's most rewarding gifts to humankind. We do not have to show everyone we are in love at our age. It had to be because we were both hungry for each other.”

“Thank you, Davit, for understanding. It was the best experience I’ve had in a while. I look forward to more, dear.”

“You never left my thoughts since we met yesterday. After the discussion with my parents, I remembered we used to play together at the bakery as our parents worked. We also did deliveries together, and we loved each other very much. We were separated by fate. Leave pretenders out of this, Tracy. We loved each other from back then.”

“I didn’t know you still remember all that part Davit. You were the first boy to touch inside my pants, lighting the fire that left me hoping to meet you again. You did not disappoint me, sweet boy. Nothing can separate you from me again. But we need to be careful now that we are both married. But I am all yours for these two years my husband is away. When he is about to come back, I shall change my residence. It would help if you got going before your wife comes looking for you. We are free to make a different choice at any time

in life depending on the demands of the moment. At least that's my take Davit."

"Thanks, a mil Tracy, it is not in my place to say what others plan to do. I can only attest to myself. I am in love with you, and that is all that matters to me for now. In hindsight, our sales today superseded the expected target. Dad also went hawking for accounts, and we have more than double what we sold today at the restaurant. He used the two packs you gifted them as samples to persuade hotels and shops to become regular customers. Mom was by his side all day. I need to be early to oversee the day's preparations and cooking tomorrow. All these orders need to be out early."

"That is the best way for Amadi to pay me back. I am sure this will help him heal faster, for it will make him more vibrant and hopeful. What commission should we give him?"

"No commission. Let him pay for his sins," he replied.

"The best way for him to pay for his sins," Tracy said, gently disagreeing, "is lighting in him the fire of motivation that a financial inducement or commission gives, which will in turn return his pride putting food on the table for his family. Providing for a family is every man's desire. Give him five per cent of every sale he makes. Let him enjoy his old age. After all, he is the only father we know. He is also very good at sales, which is something we cannot ignore. I am sure he shall be excited to put food on the table for his woman, who has for a long time been the family's breadwinner."

"That is so kind of you. I had no intention to do so, Tracy. I took after my mum. I am never greedy for what is not mine. But I am hungry for you even if you belong to another man. It is the only sin I am willing to pursue." Davit winked at her as he said so, she shyly reciprocated the wink with a hug.

"Good night handsome. See you tomorrow. I shall come early to help."

"No need, I have prepared everything. Just a little work remains to finish. You can start with the sales team at 8 am."

TRACY WAS thoughtful in the morning because of the previous night with Davit. It dawned on her that she missed being with Davit, despite him being her business partner and her enemy's son. Davit, on the other hand, kept his morning very busy, keeping him away from Tracy until later that evening as they closed shop.

The sales had skyrocketed from the day before, as more curious customers streamed in and hung around as they sent to their friends the Google location pin to the Size Chef Pastries Hotel, inviting them to come and try out what they were missing. The restaurant gave a tantalising experience with its tasteful cuisines that left customers glued to the place. Though it made it a balancing act handling so many customers, it was a great success. They prepared enough dough for the following day expecting even more customers. Before the last customers had finished, Amadi drove into a parking space in a sleek van with two other occupants.

“Meet Tracy, the owner of Size Chef Pastries.” He was introducing the two distributors he had brought with him.

“Hello, Madam Tracy. My name is Junea, and this is my business partner Neo. We had a taste of your muffins and felt this was our future. We want to sign a contract with you as distributors in the UK. We also would like to introduce the same to the USA, if you can give us a franchise,” Junea explained, unable to contain his excitement.

“One thing at a time Junea. We first sign you as a distributor, then we see how it goes with our partnership if that’s OK with you. Nice to meet you, Junea.” Tracy was being careful in the words she used not to scare away the newfound Customer.

“That is in order, Tracy. We are ready to immediately make an order of five vans a day starting tomorrow. I hope you have the capacity to give us such an order. My van can hold one hundred and twenty crates of a dozen muffins each.” Junea said this looking straight into Tracy’s eyes.

“We will have to work on some logistical issues by tonight to deliver such stock, Junea, and still serve our regular orders.”

“We are already in a position to deliver the full order by tomorrow, Tracy,” Davit interjected. “We have some we can spare today. You can supply your client the ones we have to register presence, if that is OK with you Junea.”

Tracy was struggling to hide her excitement. She was happily surprised that Davit could appear so capable under pressure in the way he assured the new client that they could deliver.

“That is in order, Mr. Man. By the way what’s your name?” Junea enquired.

“My name is Davit, Junea. I know you; we schooled together.”

“Oh my God, when did you get this tall? Back in the day, you were a short shy boy. Nice to meet you again Davit,” he said hugging him. “Kindly give us

the company bank account so we transfer a deposit,” Junea said after the hug. “We shall be paying upfront so as not to get excuses that you cannot deliver on time due to payments,” he joked. Then he added, turning serious, “This is a good business opportunity for us, and we want a watertight distribution channel for all public schools. We have the accounts already and are not limited to the pastries we supply. These muffins are a good size and tasty too. The margins are also very attractive.”

“That is brilliant, Junea. I have no excuse not to deliver then. I am here for sales, not to joke. Have a sit I get you the contract to sign as our new distributor. In the meantime, have a taste of our other pastries,” Davit invited Junea and Neo and asked a waiter to bring the three gentlemen an assortment of pastries for them to try.

They were excited that besides the muffins they had tasted, the other varieties they sampled were equally as unique and tasty. They signed the contract and packed the available stock in their first deal. “The UK is a twenty-four-hour economy, and by morning the van shall be empty, as there are parties everywhere at night,” Junea explained.

Tracy and Davit were left on cloud nine. The business contract they had entered was such a breakthrough. Thanks to the talents in the Amadi's family, especially the father who brought the business and the son who helped close the deal. She is more than content with what the hotel had achieved that day. Tracy had already patented her recipes both in Ethiopia and the UK. No one would mess with her again. She didn't expect they would ever dare it again, having already been on their knees before her after Amadi's business had long failed. She now saw the family as her followers, or junior partners as it was clear they could not sustain a business by themselves. They were happy with the shares she had transferred to Davit, for which they showed gratitude.

“Davit, we have payment from these Junea distributors. I need to give a cheque to you and your dad. We do not have to wait for the end month. The business had broken even sooner than we had anticipated.”

“That shall be so kind of you, Tracy. It has been such a dry spell for my family. The bills had really piled up. Before joining you, all my energy working to keep my backyard from burning down came to nothing. Now that I'm here, focus is everything, I guess, Tracy.”

“Here you go, dear. Everything good or bad has its season. You should not focus too much on lack but forge forward for the results you desire. We shall

get there soon, my darling Davit. Give your dad his cheque on your way home. I don't remember seeing him leave; I was too busy with the clients. Today I shall drop on my bed like a log. I shall start the day early with you to go shopping for more ovens. If we don't prepare, the orders might be overwhelming." Tracy yawned stretching her hands up as Davit saw the opportunity to be naughty and grabbed her bottom pulling her to him.

He softly kissed her lips and said, "I've already ordered for the ovens. I did so as soon as I saw your email to my department about the orders. They are being delivered tonight. I am waiting for them. I have three more chefs from my previous job, and all the cooking should be through by 6 a.m. tomorrow, Tracy."

Davit's voice broke with the urgent need he felt for her, and soon after the lights in the room were put off for ten minutes. It was an abrupt and powerful urge that left both of them panting.

My heart seems to pound too fast whenever I look at Davit. I am not myself anymore. I have lost it to my desires. My whole body now seems only focused on this lover boy I met four decades ago. Love never ages, nor does it fade. It feels the same, and nothing can stop me now. The season is ripe, with the only life I have got. It is upon me to be a better manager of myself. Stop having great expectations of other people but for myself. I am complete without anyone. Not with the children, not with a husband, and not with the family and not with friends. I just need to awaken my ability to contain myself, so that I will be happy within myself. Moaning about my loss weakens me every day. It does not bring what I desire the most any close. I should appreciate my life each day.

After these thoughts had passed through her mind, she came back to the matter at hand and said, "In that case, I need to inform Junea to pick up his supplies for the day in the morning. I had negotiated for an extra day not knowing you had planned for everything. I was afraid we would not meet the order on time, Davit." she said putting her clothes back on.

"No way we could have failed to meet that order. We are hungry for work, for love, and for everything else that will bring our vibrant selves back, Tracy. Making sure to deliver on time is the only way to guarantee we remain consistent. This is Europe, not Africa. If we fail to deliver, we shall be sued. We can sue Junea, too, if they fail to take the daily orders already committed on the contract."

“I am so impressed with your work, dear; you are more intelligent than I thought. I need to match your dedication, Davit. You are a trailblazer, just like your dad. I shall transfer your shares tomorrow. Have one of your reliable guys as our manager because we shall be out the whole morning. Oh my God, I have missed three calls from my husband. Let me return the calls, Davit.” He left Tracy’s office to finish with stuff for the day.

“Hello, Bram. I am so sorry I missed your calls, dear,” her heart skipped a beat as she explained this to her husband, this being the first conversation they had had since she got herself new love.

“Out of sight, out of mind, Tracy. Only a few weeks away and you have already replaced me, my dear?” he joked.

“Not at all, Bram, how is that even possible.” *I am as guilty as charged.* A shiver went down her spine as this thought of guilt passed through her mind. “I wish you had not taken up for that Job. My Size Chef Pastries have become such a hit. We have already reached our sales target for the year in just three weeks and more business is coming in by the day,” she explained, her body calming down a bit in her guilt.

“How did you manage to do that, Tracy?”

“I managed it through perfect synergy with a surprise business partner, Amadi, the guy who took everything from me. He and the son Davit, are the engines behind it.”

“Where did you find them, and why them with all the pain they caused you back then, or it is payback time? Has God gathered them for you like Joseph’s brothers in the Bible?”

“Better than that. The son, Davit, saw my advert on the web and was the first to come asking for an interview. To my surprise, he used recipes to make muffins very similar to my mom’s. Everything followed after he told me who he was and I connected the dots. I had no idea they relocated to the UK. But things had not been going well for them. This business has given them a footing. I had no time for grudges. I gave Davit ten per cent of Size Chef Pastries. There is so much for me to gain in the partnership, but with a lot of caution.”

“That is excellent and unexpected news. I hope you can cope. I also hope it will help ease the pain about everything, dear. But forgive me if I am slow to understand. I have my reservations about your generosity in giving out shares for the company. Anyone can provide the same services as Davit for far little

as an employee. Business is winner take all. Why include the Amadi family in your life again?"

"Relax, my darling Bram. You're just overthinking it. Everything is OK. Nobody is superior to you, and nobody is inferior to you. Nobody is good, and nobody is terrible when you look at the gains you stand to make. Nobody is equal either. People are simply unique in what they offer. You're you, I am I, and the Amadis are them. Do your part without caring about who is watching and what others are doing. One day, it will be your turn, and when it's your turn, your position on the queue won't matter, like the way we have waited for our kids forever."

"I am lost Tracy, what are you getting at?"

"My talent shall give forth all that we have lost, Bram. I have skipped life for so long and have not had fun, or laughed and lived a normal life. I have wasted myself with negative energy that sucked from me every little joy that tried to gladden my heart. I have discovered that life has more to offer than pain when we choose love. I am not about to open those painful boxes again, Bram. Focusing on Amadi's evil is so heartbreaking. But when I focus on what he has made me achieve, I love him with all my heart. Every successful story has its grey shade even as it has some beautiful shades to crown it. I want to enjoy everything each day brings going forward, my dear Bram. Nothing waits for the perfect season to happen. I now realise it is our mindset that determines whether we will be happy or not. If I choose to live the sorrowful days I have always lived, nothing will shine for me. Going forward, I need to wake up determined to have fun and embrace all that will make my days memorable."

"I am still of the opinion we look for new energy than recycle the Amadis, Tracy."

"I have a history with Amadi, more than you imagine or know, Bram. The good luck that has found me was created in our misunderstanding those many years before. There are some people who gain respect for their past, not because it was pleasant but because it was symbolic. I have gained a lot having Amadi, who I now realise is the devil I know. He will help me make millions rather than speculate with angels I do not know. My business has yielded dividends because of Amadi. Kindly give me a break on this one dear, So far, so good. I am a bit consumed by my new adventure; I love baking."

"I rest my case dear, how is life in general?"

“I also got a very committed distributor, courtesy of Amadi. His name is Junea. He wants us to open a branch in the USA. Maybe I should accompany them at some point to explore the US market. The dilapidated building in Addis where my mom's bakery was situated is still available. Through Amadi, I was able to reach the owner, and he has sold it to me. It shall soon be under renovation as I look to revive my mom's bakery. These are again breaking news to you. I finished the process yesterday. Architectural designs for refurbishment of the place will be out the day after tomorrow. I have been busy as a bee, my darling Bram.”

“About the Amadis, they appear to me to be intelligent people seeking to fulfil their selfish needs, Tracy. But I respect your decision. Ethiopia Bakery is an awesome idea. I look forward to making a visit there with you when I am back. Where did all this energy come from? Or what is this that had stopped your mind from performing, eehh? By the time I am done with these two years, nothing shall stop you from anything. You will be all the way up, my darling, but with all my blessings because I am going to invest every coin of my sweat in the USA in your Size Chef Pastries. Remember I am not an entrepreneur like you, but a good employee. I should be applying for my next job with Size Chef Pastries. You better grow big to afford me, Tracy,” Bram warned with amused laughter.

“That I guarantee you, Bram. Employing you even for a day shall give me enough pleasure. You are my soul mate. Mwah! The business extension to the USA can only happen after six months when I am sure the systems here will run without my supervision. Davit is as good as his dad, Amadi. He is very committed. I am very pleased with the staff he brought on board, too. They are great chefs, but only him has the secret recipe to make our products. It has been a perfect partnership.”

“I am happy you are busy Tracy. No time to grieve. I hope to come back as soon as I am done with the contract, trusting by then the babies shall be back with you, my love.”

“I hope so Bram. We keep trusting that a good day will come.”

Despite what she had told herself earlier that she did not need anybody to be happy, the mention of the children brought back to her some unhappiness. She knew she could not escape this with any mention of family, relationship, school fees, or a tasty meal, which brought back memories of her family. She decided it was best to concentrate on her business to avoid much stress. Stress

about family should take a backseat for now. Life was lived by the ones who appreciated they were alive to enjoy what came. She stopped chasing the wind and waited for the wind to deliver to her what was meant to come back to her. If the family was not meant for her, so be it. If it was meant to be, then her children would show up one day. When that time came there would only be joy. What she was now enjoying with Davit will be secondary. She will have to make a choice about what will be important to her. For now, the choice was to love Davit, at least to shield her from reality.

“Trust me, girl, I hold you in my heart like the day I said goodbye heading to this job in the States. I still do so, loving you like a first-time lover insecure in his fear of losing his love,” Bram assured Tracy.

“Oh boy, I am speechless. Hang in there. I shall be waiting for you,” Tracy felt he needed to assure him as well, though her body felt otherwise.

Love is one thing, but desire is a different ballgame. I do not want to glorify the act, but denial of it is doing no good to my aching body. I just need to be for now. Just like other people indulge in alcohol, prayer, dance, and reading—I just feel my desire, for now, is enjoying good sex with Davit, with whom I do not have to hide my feelings or introduce to my husband my side of ecstasy he is not used to, and which he may judge me for. With Davit we shall explore everything missed of each other all these years we have been fighting for our families.

Bram trying to keep things afloat as I die to have my children back. If all these can take a back seat for once, life might reveal chapters we might have skipped, It is not too late to get back and enjoy them. But I feel like I need to be persuaded that I am not taking the wrong path and that many others like myself have similar concerns. Ooh but this middle-aged man is good; I wish this could last forever. Life starts at forty.

These thoughts went through Tracy’s mind while her husband was still on the phone. She looked at the phone as if to check whether her Bram was reading her mind.

Maybe Bram had his untold story too. He too was human and needed relief for his desires during those two years he would be away. It was not in Tracy’s place to say what her husband decided to do in her absence. As for herself, she was doing what she thought she should do,

Why does one fall in love with the past? While Tracy had been overwhelmed by everything around her before, her heart now had room to love. She was not

alone. Many have been victims of similar situations as hers, too. Cultures hide things about sex as if it were not a God-ordained thing.

Many people learn about sex the hard way. Religion and culture advise youth not to think about sex or talk about it publicly. They question human biology in their teenage when sexual feelings flare leaving them confused. Sex is forbidden for anyone outside marriage. The same religions and cultures do not advise what one should do with sexual feelings when they come knocking. No masturbation, no gays no lesbians, no touching your private parts, yet it is a natural urge. It is in the nature of people to be curious and seek that which they are denied. What you are told not to think about instead brings multiple thoughts about it. Everything has its season. Do not bang your head when you indulge in sex when you need to; it is the biology of the body. When you are eighty years old, you shall be talking about sex not indulging in it.

AMADI NEVER failed to fascinate Tracy. He was soon back with another possible client called Payten, who owned a chain of restaurants and wanted Size Chef muffins on the breakfast menu of his hotels. He put down a deposit for a five-year order to be supplied with the muffins over that period. He directed that no other restaurant should receive direct supplies from Size Chef Pastries unless he failed to collect his standing quota, in which case he would give prior notice. This was new to Tracy. There are people in the world with lots of money to buy whatever they want. *Have a good idea and these people will put money in your pocket.* Absurdities aside, this had become a business beyond Tracy. It now had its own life. Tracy applauded Amadi and told him he reminded her of the quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln that said, "Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle."

"I hope you have not quoted it out of context, or is it that you really mean it, my dear Tracy?" Amadi had joked.

"I mean it Amadi, from way back then. Your marketing skills always amazed me. Hence the reason I could not resist working with you when fate made us meet again".

"Tracy you are the first person to make me feel good about myself in a long time. I have lived in such deceit. Life does not offer only one way to solve our issues. I chose to follow my heart all the time with no care about hurting others. It ended up hurting me. I lost the family I cherished and I denied you what was

rightfully yours. It is so interesting that after so long the idea of your mama's bakery remained in your heart, Tracy, only for us to meet again to make it flower"

"Do good, and all the good shall follow, Amadi."

"I have witnessed that in the short time I have worked with you," he replied.

"The branches our bakery will open will benefit many youths. It will give them experience in the departments they will work in. In helping the youth, the business will not only help me fill the void of my missing babies and become a mother of many, but I will do what I never did for my children. It will be my gift to society as well. Our next horizon should be making housewives our suppliers from their small villages. We need to make many of them traders to financially empower them to meet their basic needs. My plan is to have investors and well-wishers come on board to give small loans to these women. Helping a woman is the same as helping a village. They will make Size Chef Pastries more widely known and, who knows, we might bump into my children. What's your take Amadi?"

"That is not a complex problem to solve, Tracy. The longer you take sharpening the axe, the less time you take to cut down the tree. People who improve others' well-being often gain in the end after everything has taken root. How you arrive at the desired results is vital. Everyone's contribution shall eventually benefit all of us. I am an example of your goodwill, Tracy. I no longer feel irrelevant. The amount of interest from people who will want to do what we are doing will be mind-boggling. We shall soon take a back seat to enjoy our investment as others do the donkey work to make this business a success. Thank you, Tracy, for not sitting on this brilliant idea. You are a good business owner. Let your money be busy working for you, my dear girl Tracy. We will have broken the need ceiling just by giving people the opportunity to do what they can." Amadi gave Tracy a high five.

"You haven't changed much, Amadi. You are the same vibrant guy you were back then. By the way, I allocated a house for your wife, Mina in my estate. Take this card to my lawyer's office to transfer to her name. You need to save the rent. Your son Davit is doing well already; he can buy himself a house. I am so proud of him."

Amadi bowed, tears of gratitude welling in his eyes. He least expected such a gift from Tracy. His promise to do everything he could to bring back Aida's

glory greatly moved her daughter, Tracy. “Souls are connected even with those in the afterlife. I am sure Aida watches us from heaven, as I make her daughter Tracy proud,” he said as he wiped a tear and flashed a broad ivory-toothed smile. The smile was contagious, which Tracy could not help but reciprocate.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Echo

IT WAS A WHILE since Ali and Abigail had met. They were seated at a bistro having a snack during lunch break. They saw a stray cat walk by and Ali threw it a small piece of meat.

“Sometimes I wonder why humans love the cat so much” observed Abigail. “Yet one might think the cow more useful supplying meat, milk and hide to meet some of our most important physical needs. Instead, the cat wakes up loudly complaining about its hunger in endless meows that would make one lose their mind. Its immediate demand is you refill its milk bowl, then its water container and food bowl. After that, it will demand to be stroked. You would be lucky if such a cat would keep rats out of the house. It might seem that in many modern homes, the rat and the cat co-exist, not unlike in the Tom and Jerry cartoon. In addition to cat food, you have to spend more on poison to permanently burnish Jerry the rat, because Tom the cat is more a pet than a rat catcher.”

This reminded Abigail of a hilarious joke they had witnessed in a *matatu*, one of Kenya’s popular public transport vehicles, during their tour of Lamu Island. She paused in the story she had begun to narrate about the cat and cow to tell Ali about a hawker who had entered the *matatu* selling pesticides. The hawker had asked a woman, who was sitting next to the tourists, to buy the pesticide, which the vendor assured her would kill all cockroaches in her house.

“I don’t have to,” the woman had replied. “At our place, cockroaches are part of the menu,”

“What about this poison for rats?” the hawker inquired.

“No!” the woman shouted back. “Rats cannot be killed by that; they are the ones that eat the cats. Cats have no business in our house anymore.”

Passengers in the vehicle were beside themselves with laughter at the way she had put it in her reply. Ali was not spared either, he had a reason to crack his bones.

“What a joke Abby! I wish I am able to pull such a joke for my dental clients to smile a bit as I do procedures to them.”

Abigail continued with the cat and the cow: “A pedigree cow gives birth to a pedigree calf that costs like a bomb, especially if it is a female. The cow’s rich and plentiful milk also sells for a lot and the sales takings are deposited in a bank account which the farmer can use to secure a loan to expand his business or something like that. Meanwhile, as the cow is fed like a pig to produce milk, it leaves the ground full of manure, which the farmer uses on his farm. Any surplus manure is sold to the neighbours. The cash-cow may decide not to produce enough milk, probably complaining that it is tired of sacrificing its calf’s food”, the milk, for humans and his cat’s kittens after its calf has been sold. And since the cow remains a cash cow, its life is not spared by its master if its milk dries up, it is sold to the butcher and everyone will pray to God to bless the cow that produced the tasty meat on the dinner table. In the meantime, the butcher sells the cowhide to the tannery to be processed for leather jackets and shoes, the same ones we shall buy on the high street in fashionable shops.”

“Don’t forget the hooves and the horns,” Ali said adding to the joke, “They are not thrown away. The jewellery guy is there to make ornaments for women. I would guess the earrings on you are fashioned from a cow’s horn.”

“Correct. My earrings are made from the cow’s horns. Picture this, suppose that cow was to lean on a wall of the farmer’s house to keep away from the rain to protect its skin, what would the farmer do?

“I can see him come out of the house with an umbrella to shield him from the rain as he leads that cow to tie it somewhere away from his house because its bulky weight might bring down his wall, Abby.”

“What if this cow decides the farmer forgot to shut the door and can join the cat which was probably watching a TV programme about a bear climbing a mountain, that the cow wants to see what the cat is seeing, Ali?” Abby wondered.

"I am sure that would be the cow's last day on earth if it ever tried to enter the house, Abby. I pray hard never to one day reincarnate as a cow. No one in the UK would be ready to pamper the cow that much, allowing it in the house. Its bulky and messy!"

"That feels like me with my foster parents Jewel and Blaze. The cat is my sister, Angie. Not much is expected of her at home with chores, but because of her love for me, we ended up sharing chores all the time. I feel sorry for people's children under the care of merciless custodians, be it the nanny, the gardener, the family driver or an adopted parent, I am sure some are not lucky to have an Angela on their side. Some of them would kill should their offspring be asked to help with the chores set aside for the worker, the adopted child. I am not pointing fingers, though."

"Are you trying to justify such masters by saying you don't point fingers? You would be lucky to be served a cup of tea for your niceness. Servants are nothing other than slaves to such employers, and care givers, Abby."

"That's up to the mean master, Ali," replied Abigail, "I have nothing to do with his workers. That was only a passing thought. I should mind my own business next time. But not before I finish my story, though. I am the cow here. I am reminded that all the money spent on me should benefit my sponsors, Jewel and Blaze, my foster parents. 'Get the best grades, get a well-paying job, and then pay back our money,' they seem to say. The only difference is that, unlike the cow, I will never be sacrificed. I am given the best care by Angie's parents. I guess it has to do with my love for Angie, which has been priceless, and which the parents have reciprocated by taking care of my bills. I am certain what I will pay them back may never be enough, but my love for their daughter Angela covers all that. My gratitude to my foster parents is priceless too."

"Abigail, I don't have a foster parent, so do not expect me to have much to say about your predicament. But I have employees and one of them is a receptionist who wastes me with her beauty. She is also very provocative; I wish she could be putting on a bit longer dresses."

"Ali, I am not here to discuss who shall put what dress, it is a free world. We are free to dress how we please. Why do you allow your hungry eyes to follow her? Even if she should put on a long dress, her beauty will still be in your mind and will still remain astonishing. After a while, you will be longing

to have her wear the dress shorter again, or you will lift it with those filthy hands?" They laughed at this.

"If she should show up in a long dress in that office, I swear, Abby, she will go back home and change it. Men's eyes are meant to feast on such beautiful prey. I have no desire for her, but she keeps me on a high. Why lie?" This added to their laughter, with Ali showing humour Abigail didn't think he had.

"I am not a man, Ali. I have nothing to say to that. But I would dare you to share such thoughts with your wife Leirya. If you remain married after that, then I will know you are truly a man."

"Abby, I cannot dare my wife Lierya. She has become so jealous, it is unbelievable. I keep such info to myself and only share it with my circle of male friends. Life is about many things, and a good number of them spice it. Those that spice it are the baits that keep us functional. The cow is a wife, and the cat to a man is like the slay queen. Like the cat, the slay queen demands a man's attention, who will pay for her pedicure because her beautiful nails excite his skin. The man would rather pamper the slay queen than pay for our wives' nails and makeup. After all, wives dig into our skin with those nails when mad."

"You mean to say that when these wives do the nails themselves, it doesn't hurt when they dig into your skin, Ali?"

"I would rather have her nails dig into so long as I have not used my own money to manure her sharp nails. Wives, however, change when they get babies. They treat a husband like one of their babies. They forget we are equal partners and when we reciprocate their nagging at us with a slap we end up in police cells."

"Thanks, Dr Ali, for the cup of coffee. We can finish this conversation next time. I had missed hearing your nonsense and I have heard enough. Buy me some takeaway muffins. This Ethiopian bakery keeps me supplied. I love their muffins."

"Maybe it is because it is run by the 'kinkies' – blacks – who bake the muffins you like much. Abby. I doubt if they were from Ali's land, Iran, you would have loved the muffins with such passion."

"Maybe that is true Ali, I do not know why, but I love the muffins with all my soul. Have a good one, darling boy. I am off to prepare for class tomorrow—my love to Lierya. I shall come over the weekend to see her."

Before Ali could reply to her goodbye after paying for the muffins, Abigail was long gone, her mind already racing with thoughts about how to win over her parents.

I have a perfect idea to win my foster parents. I have so far been lucky. I am not yet at the butcher's door, unlike that poor cow. I will have to learn to be humble to them and accept everything they will demand of me to win their favour; I will become indispensable to them. I should always show my gratitude to this couple who cared enough to give me a chance to reach where I have reached and afforded me a good life. That is all that matters to me. At least for now.

Abigail soon arrived at their apartment but found Angela not home. She made dinner for her and went to bed early.

"You were late for class, Abby dear," noted Joel the next morning. "Did you not see the circular in the mail last night? The class was starting at 8 am. But you are not alone. The notice was too abrupt. We were only three in the class. The lecturer said he will have to retake his lesson when everyone is in class."

"Oh no! Good morning, Joe. I went to have lunch with Ali, then headed home too tied to check mail. Come, I serve you these muffins with a cup of tea. I am so disappointed with myself. I should be more vigilant like you with classwork. This will be the last time I surprise you with my absence, Joel."

"Thank you, dear, but we have no time for tea, Abby. We have already been assigned the wards for our practicals. We need to go to the notice board to find out which wards we have been allocated. But no worries I shall take the Muffins with you later. We are five minutes late already. Come, let's go."

It turned out to be a long day with no breaks. They were busy attending patients back-to-back. The restful sleep the previous night helped Abigail manage it. She had been allocated the same ward as Joel. But he was a fast worker and was done with his duties before Abigail. He sat on a desk to read, as his patients rested. It was a habit Abigail wished to adopt.

"ANGIE DARLING, now that you have planned a busy weekend out to see the grand opening of the new railway station, I guess I shall be heading home to see our parents," Abigail shouted to her sister from her bedroom.

"Lucky for you. I wonder why I chose to be an engineer, Abigail. It is hell. What have I to do with this railway, whether it will be built or not, life

continues. All I need are the damn papers. After all this, I should become a lecturer and only go to class with students to teach them theory. Whether this theory will be useful or not, it is not me who will be their employer. They will learn in their workplaces that the theory only accounts for ten per cent of their work output. They will find business owners with no idea what these engineers were doing in class. A businessman shall present to my students a photo from who knows where and tell them he wants such a building in a week. Where these investors will have found the sketches for the building, I have no idea. But my students will have to deliver if they have to put food on their families' table. It is such a challenging course, that includes architectural structures we are expected to sketch."

"That's so funny Angie, but true," she agreed laughing. "For me, I imagine that the first day in my clinic will be a nightmare. For patients to take me as a qualified doctor, I have to work in a government hospital. I will siphon clients from the hospital and hope to direct enough referrals from them to my clinic. Not easy to be an entrepreneur or self-employed. That is why people stick to their salaries before they burn out or become unproductive and have to be pushed out by force in retirement."

Abigail was interrupted by her phone ringing. It was her classmate Joel calling. She suspected it had to do with the fact that they both had a free weekend.

"Hello Abby, I am just relaxing in the house with my brother Twister, but he has an internship attachment today out of town. Would you mind hanging out with me?"

"You are not lucky dear. I am on my way to see my parents. It has been a while visiting with them, and they are fading away by the day. Any love that trickles their way is welcome. I have to go without Angie, as our school schedules hardly match these days to visit them together."

"Oh no. Though I was really hoping to hang out with you, visiting your parents seems more urgent, Abby. These two days off are rare. I am sure they shall be in heaven having you for two straight days. Have yourself the best trip and stay, What's up with Angela?"

"She is required to be on-site at the new railway being constructed across the fence. All civil engineering students must attend. After that, they will attend a party that will allow no invitees apart from the engineers. That is how my

journey to see my parents became possible without too much fight about whether I should accompany her to the party.”

“Excuse me, Abigail, when do I fight you? Stop tarnishing my good name to my darling Joe.”

“I am just kidding him. Joel, say hi to Angela.” Abigail handed her the phone.

Angela put the phone on speaker and she and Joel conversed for quite a while with Twister and Abigail listening in, though speaking little. They stopped talking only at the bus station to hand the phone back to Abigail.

Abigail decided to take a nap on bus during the one-hour journey home. She, however, overslept and passed her bus stop. She disembarked at the shopping centre some distance away. This was a good thing, as she had not been in the town for a while. The hometown had grown a bit with the new commercial developments that had come up. There were a few new faces, some who had come to try their luck in business. She particularly noticed one vendor at a stall selling Ethiopian Muffins, the type she liked. She bought a pack for her parents. A queue was starting to build, and she realized she was not the only one addicted to the muffins. She took her pack and thanked the man, who replied with more words than she might have expected.

“You are welcome, young lady. You liked our Muffins. This is a promotion we are holding, hoping to get a distributor here. Would you like to be a supplier? My name is Amadi. Sorry for not introducing myself.”

“Nice to meet you, Amadi. I am a fan of your muffins, but I am a student and I live away from here. This is my hometown. I can help you scout for a supplier. I shall give you a list of the groceries that have a loyal clientele.”

Abigail made a list and handed it to Amadi. In return, she was given another pack of muffins.

“I wish you all the best, Amadi. I hope to find these muffins in this town any time I come home.” Abigail shook his hand and left.

Amadi soon left the stall under his sales assistant and went to find distributors to recruit. Abigail reminded him of someone he knew but it was too late Abigail was long gone.

Abigail sat across the road to take in the sites and enjoy some quiet time before she walked home, which was not very far. There is no hurry, after all, to get home. She sat facing the stall where she had just bought the muffins. A sleek car branded Size Chef pulled up to it, and a couple of similar age to her

and Angela's parents entered the stall. The lady looked particularly excited and seemed to be admiring the stall's setup. Abigail admired her and thought she must be the proud owner of the muffin product. She toyed with the idea of approaching the couple and tell them how she loved the muffins and how she had drawn up a list of likely distributors to that middle-aged man, Amadi, who sold her the muffins.

She dismissed the idea to say hello, which would have been to Bram and Tracy. She told herself that sales were not her thing; she was a proud medical student, and the sick and lame would always be her concern. She, however, reminded herself that there was always time for what one desired to be in life. Abigail's dream was to become a chef, not a medic or a salesperson. She told herself that she would have accepted an offer to be baker but that was not what Amadi needed. His concern was sales. She wiped her hands and started to walk home.

She met with two of her primary school friends on the way to her parents' house. They chitchatted for a while trying to catch up with each other. It had been many years since she had met them. She let them know that she had joined university and would soon be a practising medical doctor. One of them, Doris, informed her she had given up on books and now owned a shop in the neighbouring town. The twist was that she sold books, whose buyers were usually not early risers, hence the lateness in heading to work to open her store.

The other friend, Cherry, was now married and a housewife. She was off to town for some shopping. Though they invited her to join them, Abigail was too tired to walk back with them. She also missed her parents and didn't want to waste more time touring her village shopping centre. The three friends could see each other next time. After all, she was not interested in nonstarters who seemed happy to be in the village all their lives. Doris and Cherry were also too mouthy, and they knew everyone and everything about their small town. The whole place would soon know Abigail was home. She was now at her parent's doorstep. The door was not locked, and there was no one in the sitting room.

She called. "Anyone home? Dr Abigail is home."

"Hi Abigail," Mom Jewel said, as she came running to hug the adopted daughter. "How have you been, my girl? We have missed you so much. You have become so thin. Are you not eating enough? Your sister Angela has been taking the bigger portion of food. Has she added some more grams by taking your portion dear?"

“Food cannot reach my stomach, mom. The marathon we do in the wards is longer than that of a marathon runner. Nice to see you, Mom. Where is your boyfriend Blaze today?”

“Come and meet him. He is in the backyard basking.” Jewel held Abigail’s hand leading her as the daughter admired everything about her. Jewel felt proud they had raised Abigail to be such a beautiful young woman.

“Blaze, Abigail is home. She has grown taller, look at her. Or it is me who has lost a few inches.” Mum Jewel was smiling.

“Hi Dad, why is one leg on the poof?” Abigail checked with him.

“Come here, beautiful.” He gave Abigail a peck on the cheek.

Missing from home is a good thing you are missed, and the favourite daughter missing in action has made me the only baby home to be loved today, Abigail thought

“My leg has been numb for some strange reason. I have to keep it lifted, Abby. I took a walk yesterday to stretch it but with no luck in bringing it back to normal. I guess age is catching up pretty fast, my dear girl, Abby.”

“The doctor is here. We can treat it to some massage, Dad, not to worry. Give me a minute. I pick a few items from my room. My bathroom has all the manicure gadgets we could use on that leg.”

“The scaliness that attacks my legs is a sign that they were meant for walking barefoot in the jungle. I am a descendant of the animal kingdom.” They laughed at this.

After changing into a jumpsuit, Abigail took her manicure kit from the bathroom. She warmed some water and mixed it with bathing salts. She dipped her dad’s feet in the water to soften as she enjoyed the cup of tea mom Jewel had served, which she took with some breakfast leftovers. They had cooked more than they needed, some of it for storage in the fridge. Abigail, however, could not take the bread served for breakfast as she was feeling full from the muffin she had taken on the way home. The parents, however, helped themselves to the muffins she had brought with her.

She gave her dad a good scrub and a massage that left her mom jealous. She had to scrub her mom’s scaly soles as well, so that Mom may not feel left out. As her mom’s feet soaked in a basin, her phone rang. It was Twister. He had no idea his practical class would happen in Abigail’s hometown of Lewes. He had just finished work at the local hospital and decided to call Abigail in case she was returning to London so that they could go back together. Only she knew Twister had changed her course in college and had not informed his

brother Joel who was against him changing study subject. Twister was now studying to be a chiropractor.

“Hello, Twister. What's up?”

“Hello Abby, I am in your hometown. I just met this lady selling your muffins. I remembered you.”

“I actually passed by there, Twister, and bought some. I was so happy the bakery opened a branch in my village. I am home now with my dad, who is in a bit of pain. His foot is misbehaving. Can I drop you a pin you take a look at it, dear, as you enjoy the muffins?”

“I wouldn't mind. We are done for the day. There are some preparations that the hospital needs to put in place before we come here again. I shall be there shortly.”

Abigail dropped a Google pin location for Twister to find their home. Twister decided to walk to her house. It was less than a kilometre away. He enjoyed the leafy neighbourhood with its clean air free of pollution. Within no time, he was at the gate.

“It is good that you came, Twister. Dad's leg is numb. I have given him some first aid, but I am not sure I have done the right thing.”

“Hello Dad and Mom, my name is Twister. I school with your daughter Dr. Abigail. I am so sorry about your foot, Dad.”

“Welcome son. My daughter Abby is so mannerless to give you work even before introduction and a glass of juice, or better still, a meal. Jewel jokingly complained to Twister in her sweet voice. Besides Jewel had never heard anyone else call her mom, beside her two daughter, Abigail and Angela. It was such an honour for the title by a stranger.

“Twister, I am as guilty as charged. Meet my mom and dad, Blaze and Jewel. This is Twister, he is a chiropractor. I used to confuse a chiropractor with an orthopaedist. Twister made me understand that chiropractors rely solely on non-surgical tools to treat while an orthopaedic doctor is a surgeon trained to diagnose and treat injuries and diseases of the muscles and skeletons, including bones, joints, tendons, ligaments, and muscles. So Twister deals with the physical, and if surgery is required, he refers you to an orthopaedic. Not to worry Dad and Mom, now you have a doctor in your house. You do not need to remember the biological terms. I shall take care of that when you are unwell.” This made them all Laugh.

“Let me serve you something to eat, my dear, as you discuss with Dad how he is feeling.”

“Enjoy the muffin, son, as Abigail comes back with a glass of juice.” Jewel gave Twister a piece as Abigail disappeared to the kitchen.

I am sure Twister is hungry. Students, especially men, are prone to hunger more because the kitchen is not their favourite.

The house still had enough leftovers. All Abigail needed to do was arrange the food nicely on a platter to make it look appetising. She opened drawers trying to find a matching tray. She told herself that her mom must have become lazy not to place her utensils where they could easily be found, unlike when she and Angela used to be at home. Things seemed in such disarray. She would complain to her mom that the utensils arrangement order was wanting in her kitchen. She decided she would do her complaints after Twister was fed, and her mom's legs scrubbed.

In the meantime, Twister was put to task answering questions by the girl's parents.

Who are your parents?

What does your dad do?

Where is your mother?

How many are you in the family? The grilling was too much.

Twister almost lost his appetite and had considered fleeing before Abigail returned with the promised food. He wondered whether Angela's parents mistook him for their daughter's future husband.

Abigail found the questioning in progress as she served him. *Twister is gay, for your information. Quit grilling him. He has no interest in your daughter.*

Abigail was on time to save Twister's skin. His beautiful blue eyes had turned purple by the grilling. He grabbed the tray and started to enjoy the food without waiting for Jewel and Blaze to say Grace, as was their tradition. Nothing they said was welcome to Twister anymore. He was thoroughly done with them.

Were it not for the therapy Twister had volunteered to give to the girl's dad, Blaze, he would have long been at the door with an excuse that would never see him back to these parents' police station – so it seemed because of their grilling.

“How do you find my dad's leg, Twister?” Abigail smiled at her friend, assuring him all was well despite her foster parent's curiosity. This triggered a

thought in his mind about how Abby told her she almost snitched on Joe and that he was gay to a stubborn lady who had a sick son Joel was treating. Twister remembered she nearly told the lady not to trust his brother Joe with her feelings because he was gay. He imagined Abigail telling her parents that he, Twister, was gay. He smiled slyly, making her parents suspect the two might be in love.

“You have done a good job Abby, but I need to do a full therapy on both legs and the hip to give him better relief. My bag has all the gadgets I need, but a hot water bottle to warm the ligaments is required. I hope you have one. His feet are too stiff. Also, I need to ease the pressure on his hip, Abby.”

“Thanks a million, dear, for the favour. I’ll heat the water immediately, then fill the bottles.”

“No need Abby, give me a boiling kettle and the hot water bottle. I will heat it as I will need it. He also needs to be on a bed. Dad needs to be well relaxed because he likely will be asleep by the time I am done with the therapy.”

“I miss good sleep Trystan; I haven’t slept well lately. My body aches everywhere. It makes me wonder why all the punishment and I am not a granny yet. These beautiful girls have not yet given me a grandchild,” Dad Blaze complained.

“He is not Trystan, Dad, his name is Twister.” They all laughed at the name correction.

“You will see your grannies soon, Dad. Many grandchildren will flood this compound. We shall get twins and triplets. Just one more year, and we are out to propagate life.”

The statement Abigail made gave her goosebumps, for she had no idea how such a miracle baby could come of lesbians yet, despite being a doctor.

“That’s the spirit, my girl, we need to replace your absence with some noise in this house. You guys can work as we raise the grannies for you. We are too idle already. I am sorry, my son, for the misspelling. My ears are letting me down already, Twister.” Dad Blaze apologised.

“Not to worry Dad, the names are similar either way. All I care about now is your wellness.”

“We shall do the therapy in Angela’s bedroom, Dad. It is vacant for today. Let me tidy up a bit as you finish your juice Twister.”

“I can go with you Abby to help set up the room the way I would like it to ensure dad’s comfort,” Twister explained, but he wanted to prevent

interruption from the unending talking that Jewel and Dad Blaze seemed to want. When in the bedroom, he would silence Dad Blaze in the pretence that therapy requires someone to relax and be quiet. That way, he would be soothed to sleep through the massage session and Twister would leave the room without another word. After all, men did not seem as curious as women. The number of words he uses in a day would be exhausted in 30 minutes responding to his parrot of a wife.

Abigail was almost done with scrubbing Mom Jewel as she tried to answer a stream of questions about Twister from her mom. She tried to be as discreet as possible with her answers. She did not want to sound like she knew too much about the boys.

But of course, I don't know much along the lines Mom wants information about.

"Who is Twister's mother, where does she leave, Abby?"

"I don't know, mom. Twister is an orphan."

"Do you know their home, maybe?"

"Not yet, Mom, We met in school, that's it." *Eeeishh!* Abigail was getting exhausted with all the grilling, which Jewel noticed.

He is such a handsome man and very kind and lovely. I love the way he likes to call her Abby, and he shall give my daughter beautiful babies that will be half-cast. I shall be a proud grandmother, at least from my kinky-haired daughter that I brought up as a family member.

As these thoughts passed through her mom's mind, Abigail was thinking: *If only she knew her two daughters were lesbians and grandchildren would only happen in her other life, Mom Jewel would slow down about her obsession with little grannies.*

Abigail invited her mother to sit with her in the kitchen to show her where she would like her dishes and cutlery to be placed in the cupboards and kitchen drawers for easy access. Mom Jewel was happy that her daughter should help her with this as she made lunch for the guest and her husband. She was quickly done with the meal, as she chatted with Abigail, even as her hands and fingers seemed on autopilot putting the final touches on the food.

The result of the proud mother's work could be seen on the table, which was full of colour with the inviting food as Abigail finished tidying up in the kitchen. The men were done with the treatment that was going on in the bedroom. Twister had decided to wait for Dad Blaze to wake up; he wanted to avoid Blaze's wife's unceasing chattering. Dad was already in the sitting room

looking livelier than he had been for a while and fully recharged for a glass of beer. Mom was silent cooling off from kitchen heat and exhaustion.

They ate with a lot of laughter at the table as the parents praised the two young people, telling them how they were a perfect match. Soon, it was four o'clock and a neighbour, Betty, called Abigail's phone. She had heard from Doris and Cherry, the friends Abigail had met on the road, that she was in the neighbourhood. She wanted Abigail to join her for a gig on Fifth Street. It had been a long time since they had hung out together. It was an invitation Abigail could not refuse. She requested Twister to postpone going back to school that day so that they could hang out with Betty.

The parents were for the idea of Twister sleeping over. "Angela's bedroom is free for you to use," Jewel explained enthusiastically.

Seeing the enthusiasm with which her parents had welcomed Twister spending the night, Abigail wondered whether they were the same parents who seemed only too happy to bid her goodbye the moment she mentioned it was time for her to go back to school after a weekend at home. Things appeared to have changed. She was now the good daughter who would be in the money soon as a doctor. The parents, after all, were about to retire and needed to reap from the investments they had brought up - she and her sister Angela. *People love you for what you offer them, be it service or finances.*

Mom Jewel went to get a set of keys the two young people would use to open the house when they got back late at night. She saw a son she never had in Twister and having him at the dining table in the morning would be very rewarding for her. She also wanted Twister the next morning for another reason: To confirm to her that her husband would be OK before the two students left for the city. She offered to drop them at the pub to also take the opportunity to spoil herself with a glass of wine before going back.

"Darling Blaze, I shall be a call away in case of anything," she told her husband.

"That is OK, ma'am, you have been locked in here with me for too long. Spread your wings a bit today, Jewel. Get dressed. I need a good rest. It is very hard to get a nap when your mouthpiece is in the house." They laughed at her, as she kissed him to wish him good luck in getting his nap.

Mom Jewel disappeared to the bathroom as Abigail joined her to freshen up and dress like a lady. They looked beautiful as they left the patient to nurse himself. Twister proved the perfect companion, accompanying the girls to

shake a leg. The adventurous mom did not stay long on the dance floor, but she had her share of fun. Abigail greatly enjoyed the night with her mom, as Jewel showed sides of her the daughter had never known about her mother.

If it were not hard to adopt a child, everyone would get such a child from the street. It is the sacrifices a foster parent makes that make it great. I now have great respect for my parents, which they deserve from me and more. They have been truer to me than I would have thought. To have raised me until I finished school and stood on my two feet was such a sacrifice. I take back the cursing I have been throwing at them in my mind. May God of Abundance remember to shower Dad Blaze and Mom Jewel with earthly and heavenly gifts.

Abigail thought that her mom and dad must have somewhat influenced Twister because the way he seemed to cling to her on the dance floor was not normal. He was leaning and pressing his body too close to hers in a way that made her uncomfortable. She was not used to dancing with men. His masculinity felt so strong to Abigail that she felt that she had no choice but to flow with his movement. She looked into Twister's blue eyes blazing in the disco lights and her mind was lost in how amazing this boy looked. He had a tendency to jiggle his body as he closely held her on the dancing floor. The experience was new and gave her a very good feeling. He also had a wet mouth when they kissed, his tongue soft and probing. He kissed smoothly and caressingly with no sense of urgency and, suddenly thinking of him in a work environment during their internship, it made Abigail wonder how he managed to keep such a calm posture given the demands of a busy hospital.

It was almost morning, and the two were still on the floor. Abigail's girlfriend Betty had to attend to something that had come up. She therefore did not show up for the live concert. It was Abigail's night alone with Twister. He, too, had never gotten a chance to be so near a girl, let alone one he knew so well, and this seemed to overwhelm him. They are drunk enough to stagger home, but the cops won't let them walk. They hopped into a taxi and were soon locked in an embrace kissing even before they arrived at Abigail's parents' compound. The taxi driver had to push them apart to pay their fare. They were delaying him and he had a busy schedule before dawn, yet, according to him, the taxi ride had only earned him peanuts. The gig venue was only four streets away from home. Twister did not care whether he was giving a hundred-pound note. All he cared about was to keep his hands around Abigail's small frame and her tongue in his mouth.

They finally disembarked from the taxi and, after a little problem trying to open the door to the house, they went straight to Angela's bed. Abigail was woken up by the birds welcoming the new day. She quickly left the bed, leaving Twister asleep, and tiptoed to her room. She hoped her mom did not check in on her looking for her help with breakfast. She could hear frying pans in the kitchen as she covered herself with blankets. She was surprised to find her bed unmade as if it was a baby who had slept in it not to leave it made. It left her wondering whether her mom had given birth to a baby who had never grown up to seem so unbothered with little things like making their own bed. Mom Jewel was never in a hurry to clean after her and Angela. Leave your bedroom in a mess and you will find the mess as you left it.

I can be careless sometimes. I need to mind how I leave things after I've used them. I must have left my bed with a blanket unfolded and the pillow wrapped in the bed sheets lying haphazardly on the bed.

Next time, I will thank them for giving me a good night's sleep and place them neatly on the bed. I need to dust my wardrobe and fold the clothes. I need to get my manicure kit from the garden where I left it after cleaning my parents' legs and put it back in my bathroom. I need to remove my old toys from my room and store them, or give them away to neighbourhood kids. I, after all, shall never become a mother. I am a rotten species. I am on a path that does not warrant heirs.

Sometimes we take for granted the people in our lives and the things that make our life comfortable. When things are not right, complaining becomes natural. If we look at our life's journey, a huge chunk of it comprises smooth sailing. But we tend to highlight the problems and challenges, rarely acknowledging our more successful milestones.

My behaviour is so wanting, that I don't even understand myself. I am now in love with two brothers. Twister is ready to kill his brother Joel for me after caressing the whole night. They are lovers and brothers, and now I have become the witch between them. I feel them both deep to my core. I am not about to give up on either of them.

I have no time to stay in bed forever, for we have a trip back to the city with Twister.

Abigail's mind was racing like that of a madwoman. She could not keep calm. She entered the bathroom and took a long shower, but it did not ease her anxiety. She felt filthy. *I am dating my sister and two brothers. Who else does that? Who shall I give up, and who do I keep?*

In the meantime, as Abigail dilly-dallied in the bedroom, Twister checked on Dad Blaze, had a quick breakfast then disappeared. He was too

embarrassed to stay in the girl's mother's house any longer. He told Jewel and Blaze he had a work shift later that day and had no one to fill in for him.

His absence gave Abigail time alone away from the two “beasts” Joel and Twister and her sister Angela. She wanted to enjoy her time alone and switched off her phone. She did not go back to London on the same day as Twister. She left the following morning, a Monday, and still made it to class on time. Angela had tried reaching her the previous evening through her mom's phone to check whether she was still home. Abigail almost hid her mother's phone to prevent her from giving Angela stories about her boyfriend.

When Angela finally reached Abigail, she finished with her and hung up without giving Mom Jewel a chance to talk to her other daughter. Abigail feared a bad day ahead but she kept her cool as if nothing had happened that past weekend. She told herself that it was up to her to live her life as she pleased and avoided meeting Joel in the hospital corridors the whole of that day.

Life does not guarantee that issues always find solution. Sometimes we make good decisions even as we make bad decisions in others. No matter how overwhelming the day seemed, Abigail told herself that all she had to do was keep herself busy in the face of her disappointments that weekend.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hangovers

JOEL KEPT BUSY as usual at the hospital wards. After his shift had ended, he waited for Abigail. He had told her he wanted to have a word. That had left her afraid that he wanted to question her about meeting with Twister, a topic she was not ready to have. It sunk her heart to imagine Joel was disappointed with her. But she had no choice but to meet him.

They went to a nearby pub, and he invited Twister and Angela. Abigail knew she was dead meat should any of them know that she had had a very intimate moment with all three.

Joel had not told her what this was about, so she waited, almost shaking with fear. Things, however, looked calm enough as they sat for what turned out to be a feast. The food tasted good. Abigail, however, was not sure whether it was the food that was appetising, or she had been too hungry to be choosy. In her fear, it probably didn't matter. She had expected to be bombarded with her sins that weekend. But Joel looked calm and was all smiles, which somehow assured Abigail all might be well.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have invited you to break some important news."

At the mention of breaking news, Abigail closed her eyes with shame, then waited for a slap from Angela, who would be the angriest to learn she was a double-dealer. Abigail was almost crossing the unspoken line crossing from being a lesbian to a normal woman in a normal relationship.

"I have a sister," Joel dropped the bombshell, 'and I did not know all this time who she was. I have been searching for her, to be precise, I did not know whether my sibling was a sister or a brother, but I vividly remember a baby I used to play with as mom cooked, but disappeared the same day my parents

disappeared on me never to be seen and never to be heard from. I had all along thought that baby died alongside my parents.”

“Where is she?” his three listeners in unison, caught by surprise.

But what Abigail felt was a relief, happy that the news was not about her weekend. Lost in the silent jubilation that she had been spared; she didn’t notice Twister glance in her direction. He wanted to pass her a signal, but in the suspense of waiting to hear the surprise news, everyone’s attention was on Joel.

Joel, who appeared deeply moved, looked towards Abigail with watery eyes, then slowly pointed at her and said, “Abby, the sister I never knew I had, yet I always knew I had.”

Abigail wasn’t sure she had heard him correctly. But a strange thrill passed through her body as their eyes met, paralyzing her.

She started wailing. She could not imagine Joel being her big brother. *Why must I be his sister, of all the girls in the world?*

Abigail’s reaction surprised her sister Angela, who asked, “Are you not excited by the good news, my darling Abigail?”

“Angela dear, I have told you many times there is a big difference between good news and unexpected news!” Abigail replied, sobbing. Joel, too, was sobbing for the same reasons as his newfound sister.

I have been fooling around sexually with my biological brother. This was the shocking part for both of the siblings.

Anyone else but my brother, his brother Twister, my sister Angela, Lierya, or sex toys, but not the only sibling I have. Why is life so unfair? I am not giving the devil a break on this one. I am so mad at this devil and his agents of doom. If I meet him in hell or on the corridors of hell, he must tell me why he picked me to be a victim of his mischief.

She was devastated, and all she wanted was to go and bury herself in her bed and be alone. She stormed out of the hotel and hopped into a taxi. He instructed the driver to drop her at their apartment with Angela.

After Abigail had left, there followed a long silence.

“How did you learn you two are siblings, Joe?” Angela asked finally.

“Dad Boris told me yesterday. He had come over to meet Abigail and me, but she was at your parents, as you know. That was how Dad broke the news to me. He explained that had been trying to trace her, my sister, since he landed back in Europe with me and Twister from South Sudan. He explained that

though he had both of us – my sister and me – when he was taking the flight from South Sudan, regulations did not allow a foreigner who was not a biological parent to leave the country with more than one child not related to them. He requested a couple in the queue he was in to hold the girl for him, but to hand her back once they got onto the plane.

“He had previously explained to me and Twister that he had given our parents a lift, but that stray bullets from the coup militants had shot his car, killing our parents. However, after boarding the plane, he could not find the couple with the girl. Boris waited at Heathrow Airport in London, but they never showed up. He had ever since been looking for the girl or something about her to appear at some registry but in vain. He had given up over time, but the moment he saw Abigail in our company and asked her name, he knew it must be her. He, however, could not have a conversation with her to inquire further after something happened to her and she broke down leaving us with Dad Boris that day. It was after he had gone to check in the registry that he found her name, which was recorded under her foster parents’ names, Jewel and Blaze. By this time, he could clearly remember my biological mom’s name was Tracy and Abigail, the name of the girl he gave to a stranger to hold for him. The mother and daughter’s documents were attached to the registry report. They were the documents Dad Boris had given to Angela’s parents to allow them to check in and board the plane with the baby.”

“Oh my God. That must have been very sad for Dad Boris. Thank God he still had enough details to connect the dots.”

The three soon left the hotel and Angela started her car to find her sister Abigail, who she knew must have gone home.

Twister's phone rang. It was the girl's mother, Jewel.

“I hope you arrived well, my dear, son.”

“Yes, I did, Mom. Sorry, I forgot to call as promised.”

“Not to worry, my dear. I am sure you had a busy day. I have a special request for you. We shall be in the city with my husband Blaze tomorrow, and we request to meet you. Alone. Kindly keep Abigail out of it. It shall be brief, my dear. We shall direct you to the hotel we’ll be waiting for you.”

“That is OK, mom. I look forward to meeting you. How is Dad faring?”

“Oh my God, we even forgot he was ever unwell. He is supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.”

"I know that word, Mom, and I am surprised you know it, too," Twister laughed.

"Pass my love to Dad Blaze. I will see you tomorrow." Twister hung up and escorted his drunk brother to a taxi and took him straight to bed.

Joel could not sleep. It was his tossing and turning on the bed that woke up Twister.

"What do we do now," Twister asked his brother after he was fully awake. "What's your plan, Joel?"

"I don't know Twister. I guess Abigail needs to come to terms with the news before we make any move."

"I agree, Joe. Try to catch some sleep. She'll be fine; I am sure of that." Twister was very confused, too.

The relationship Joel and Abigail had was deeply intimate. Joel felt quite involved with her, unlike a brother and sister ever should. He even contemplated disclosing his love for Abigail to Twister. He hoped his brother might understand. One reason was because he was never sure whether he and Twister were attracted to each other because they are siblings, or whether they had something deeper going between them. Perhaps bringing Abigail in the picture might clear things up. But Joel said nothing and decided to stay calm and weather the storm. He feared admitting a love triangle might compromise the relationship between the four sibling friends that included him and his brother Twister, and Abigail and her sister Angela.

Twister, in the meantime, was wondering: *Maybe the opportunity that presented itself at Abby's home was a godsend, probably to break the relationship with my brother before they became a romantic couple. They were getting closer to each other by the day and Joe seemed to jealously protect her.*

When Blaze and Jewel got to London to meet with Twister, they seemed to lose their bearing, having not visited the city in a while. Some roads had been made one-way, which led them to take wrong turns to the hotel where they had booked their room. They didn't seem to know how to use Google Maps to navigate their way. So they kept asking for directions to the hotel. Their stopping abruptly upon realising they had taken yet another wrong turn caused a lot of hooting by other road users.

"I now understand why people hire a driver when they age, Blaze. Let us use a taxi to this crazy town next time."

“I hope Twister shall show up as promised,” said Jewel hopefully. They finally managed to manoeuvre their way to the hotel and sat to have a cup of coffee as they waited for the young man. “We need to meet Boris soonest possible to clear the air about our daughter Abigail. We trust God that this Boris we have been told about knows these kids' origin, and what happened. Otherwise, I'll be very disappointed darling, Blaze, if he turns out to be the wrong guy.”

When Twister had casually mentioned his brother had kinky hair like Abigail when they grilled him about his family, they knew that Boris was likely the man who left the baby girl in their arms. They felt thankful that Abigail had not been too curious to find out how she was adopted. After the incident back then of viewing the untold stories, she feared ever finding herself caught up in a provocative topic with her foster parents, Blaze and Jewel.

Twister kept time. “Hello, Mom and Dad. How are you feeling, Dad Blaze? Has your leg released you from the pain?”

“Hello son, thanks for checking. But not to worry. I even forgot that my legs had an issue. My life is back to normal, Twister. You did a good job. You are not in your medical class in vain. I am keen to see what our daughter Angela shall turn out to be as a civil engineer after university. I wish I had a building construction going to engage her.”

“Angela's profession is very hands-on and is always busy with fieldwork. We rarely get to see her these days. But I bet it will surprise you how brilliant she is in her thing. You brought the girls up well, Dad Blaze and Mom Jewel.”

“Thank you for the compliment, son. We thank God. Raising children is a hard job. We thank God for Abigail. She helped Angela to be a responsible girl. They were like twins from day one. You cannot separate them. When young, we sent Abigail to boarding school after they started becoming naughty. The separation caused Angela to get into a depression. We vowed never to interfere with them again. It has since been smooth raising them.” explained Jewel.

“Kids being naughty is normal. I am sure Dad Boris had it very rough with me and my brother Joel. We were not the easiest. We broke everything that came our way. The transition from our mothers' care, who were more hands-on than Dad Boris, meant that we must have been quite a handful for him when he adopted us. Though we obviously must have missed our parents, Boris was a wonderful dad, nonetheless. We enjoyed ourselves under his care.

But we feel sorry for him. I now know he often got overwhelmed raising us. The interesting thing is that he had chosen to remain a bachelor, and it doesn't look like he plans to mingle to find a lifelong mate.”

“That is so sad,” observed Jewel. “It is good he has you and Joel as his children. But now that you are almost out of the nest, I would think he needs somebody – a woman keeps a man company, especially as we age.”

Blaze finally began on the subject of the meeting. “We needed to meet you, Twister, regarding our daughter Abigail,” he explained. “We were then working in South Sudan for an oil drilling company. Then came a violent coup attempt and everyone was running for their dear lives. While in the queue to board the plane out of the country, there came an announcement that couples or individuals would not be allowed to board with more than one child that was not their own. It was then Boris requested we hold for him a baby girl he had rescued after her parents had been shot on their way to the airport. He also had a boy with him. Boris handed us the girl along with her documents which indicated her name was Abigail. He boarded the plane with the girl's brother hoping to re-unite with her on the plane. As fate would have it, we were diverted to a different plane, and there was nothing we could have done about it. We did not panic, being sure to meet Boris at Heathrow Airport in London. But our plane was scheduled to land at an airbase, which we only realised as the plane was descending to land. We had lost our phones in the chaos. Even if we hadn't lost them, they would have been useless once we landed in Europe because our mobile networks are not interoperable with those in South Sudan. That is how we missed each other with Boris, and did not know how to find him no matter how we tried. And that is how we became Abigail's parents.”

“That was very kind of you, Dad Blaze, and Mom Jewel. Did you ever mention this to the girls?”

“Not really, Twister,” explained Blaze. “Abigail has been keeping her distance since we fought and had to take her to boarding school. Her for us was to keep herself detached from us, not saying much. The first time to see her freely talk to us, was when she invited you home. You two looked very close, and we thought you could help us get to her to help break the ice, so to speak. We are yet to tell her about Boris. We would like to meet him first to confirm that he is the young man who handed us the girl at the airport. If it turns out as we hope, Abigail will find her long-lost brother, the boy you called Joel.”

A look came over Jewel's face, after suddenly remembering something. It seemed she might know this Boris, and distinctly seemed to remember seeing him at Blaze's company. She remembered him being a very handsome guy. It was only that she was married to Blaze, otherwise she might have approached him. The temptation was still there to be more than close to him and was fascinated to see how he looked like after two decades.

Twister did not want to mention to them that Joel had already been informed by Boris that Abigail was his sister. He wanted Jewel and Blaze to meet his dad Boris alone first.

"I'll call Dad Boris right away, Mom. I hope all will be well with my brother Joel and my friend Abigail."

"Good morning, Dad. How are you keeping? Do you remember Abigail and Angela, the girlfriends we once introduced to you with Joel?"

"Hello Twister, yes, I do, son. What about them?"

"I am with their parents, Jewel and Blaze. They would like to meet you regarding their daughter Abigail."

"That is OK. You can bring them home."

"I have a class, Dad; I will direct them there. It should be easy to find. I will be coming over the weekend. My love to Bethrow, is he back from his new base?"

"Not yet. He will be back next week. tell the guests that they are very welcome. I'll be waiting for them."

"It must have been a very lonely spell; stay strong, Dad. See you over the weekend," Twister promised and hung up.

"Dad says you are most welcome, and he'll be happy to receive you. It was such a pleasure sharing a cup of coffee with you. Take him these muffins. They are Abigail's favourite; I am now used to buying them. I find them very tasty."

"I am not surprised," replied Jewel. "Abigail bakes the muffins for us, Only the other day she bought them from a bakery for us. I imagine it might have something to do with her roots. The bakery muffins tasted like the ones she often bakes. She is such a good chef. I hope she surprises you with good meals often, Twister," she winked at Twister. He smiled and said nothing.

"Now that Boris is expecting us, we have to get going," said Blaze standing up from his seat. "We are not good drivers at night, and therefore, would like to conclude our visit on time before driving back."

Boris had left the gate open. His guests he had once gifted a bundle of joy in baby Abigail found him in the garden doing a barbeque to welcome them. He could not help showing his excitement to see them and congratulate the couple for taking good care of the baby girl. They discovered that they already knew the way and could have arrived there with eyes closed, as the house they were directed to once belonged to Blaze's dad and had been bought by Boris not long after Blaze's dad had passed on. His wife, Blaze's mother, had found the house too big and felt too lonely to live alone. She bought a home closer to her son Blaze so that she would be seeing Blaze the only child in Europe and her grandchildren more often.

"Hello Boris, I see you are the lucky owner of my dad's old home. How come I have never thought of coming back since it was sold out? Family is entirely something else. I remember every corner of this house. You have kept it in great shape. I can see you retained some of the old furniture. This is awesome!"

"Most welcome, beautiful couple Blaze and Jewel. Who knew that this was your parent's house, Blaze? Why haven't you returned to burn that bridge? We would have known you had my Abigail ages ago. I have been in this house with my boys here for more than fifteen years. I bought it immediately I became their dad."

"It is such a shame, Boris. That was an oversight on my part, buddy."

"Blaze and Jewel, your names ring a bell every day. I remember my poor girl, Abigail. I once met her in the company of my sons Twister and Joel. I was afraid Joel might date his sister, so I disclosed to Joel last weekend that they are siblings. I found the names at the registrar a fortnight ago. I was almost giving up on the girl. You did a good job. She has grown up to be so pretty and she looks so happy. We adopted great brains; they are both medical students. I am already talking too much. Please feel welcome good people."

Boris went to the wall in the house on which a portrait of him and the boys and removed it to show to the couple. "I finally left the plane with two sons. My sister Gladys died in the mayhem, too. A stranger was left with her son Twister, the same way I had been with Joel and Abigail. I took the boy Twister from the stranger and thanked God that I did not leave the mayhem empty-handed. My nephew was saved. My sister and her boyfriend Yonas died in the mayhem. We have not heard from her or Yonas ever since," Boris said, sounding distant with the memory of his sister, Gladys.

“I know Gladys, she worked with me in the same department in Human resources. I helped her recruit her younger brother to the Engineering department. I did not get a chance to meet the brother personally. I seem to remember that Gladys was with my wife Jewel the day he reported to work and was shown around by them.”

“Really? That was you, Jewel?” Boris asked impressed. “It is a small world we live in.”

“Yes, I met you, Boris, with Gladys, but the day of mayhem, you looked ten years older. These two babies must have gotten on your nerves. Thank God we disappeared with one. Otherwise, you would have been in the ‘next life’ by now with three mouths to feed.” This made the laugh, as Jewel continued looking sad, “I am so sorry about Gladys; she was such a sweet lady.”

“I was a bit worried about raising the baby girl, but I knew I had to, having known the children’s parents, who were my neighbours. Joel and Abigail were regular guests in my house for sweets and ice cream. I never bothered to know the parents until I met them at the parking lot. Seeing my two little friends in the parking lot with their parents, I had no choice but to invite them to my car as we fled to the airport. The bullets found them as we sped along the road to the airport and robbed the two beautiful souls of their parents,” Boris explained, his eyes seeming wet.

“We are so sorry, Boris,” said Blaze, noticing the wet eyes. “But thank you for blessing us with the baby girl. She has been such help, including being a close companion to our girl Angela. Angela behaves as Abigail’s keeper. You cannot touch or talk ill of Abigail in her presence. Thank God Abigail knows her place and was never a provocative child. It has been an easy ride with her, especially now that they have a lot in common. We are happy Joel and Abigail already have a clue that they might be siblings. It will make it easier to discuss it when we meet both of them together.” They were very happy to meet Boris again after almost two decades. The three saw the piling years on their ageing faces and laughed about each other’s creases of age and the grey that was beginning to set on their hair. They agreed to meet the children at Angela’s mother’s that coming weekend so as not to interrupt their studies. They parted thoroughly happy with each other, with Jewel promising to reciprocate the great hosting.

“Thank you for sharing your happiness with us Boris. We almost forgot to say thank you for the hearty meal. I see cooking for the boys has made you a

perfect chef.” They laughed at the joke as Boris told them that Tracy and Bram’s children visits to his house back in South Sudan might have been a rehearsal of his raising a family as a single parent.

“Not at all Jewel. Happiness is contagious. I got my share too. Have a safe journey back,” Boris said, following the couple’s car with his eyes until they disappeared.

He locked the gate and took his seat in the garden. He marvelled at how life sometimes finds a way to unfold mysteries that once seemed impossible.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The North Pole

PEOPLE ALWAYS TALK of things going south and they seemed to have done so for Abigail. *This is a catastrophe. How will I face this tragedy, more so my now blood-brother Joel?*

Abigail prayed that Joel was wrong, that he must have misheard Boris that they descended from the same parents. Joel must have been hallucinating to imagine them being siblings. *If this turns out to be true, then my affection for Joel must be the most abominable. It is not something that should ever get out. It should die with both of us.*

“Hello Ali, where are you, my dear? I need to see you urgently; it is not something we can discuss on the phone, boy.”

“Are you burning Abby, What’s up?”

“Yes dear, I am burning up; something very tragic happened to me.”

“Meet me at our usual place...ah!”

“No, let’s meet at the park. Out there with nature will be more calming, my head is bursting. Come with some wine. I need to calm my mind. Red wine does the magic for me, Ali.”

“There is no need to come with the fire brigade Abby,” replied Ali trying to make light of it. “I have an inbuilt brigade, the most beautiful you will ever know! You don’t have to worry. All I need is for our eyes to meet and I’ll be charged to the full. Nothing in life is ever so serious to stop the beat: your life marches on.”

Ali was saying this in a joking manner, but the thought on his mind was that porn video they had watched together as children. It was the most serious childhood crime they had ever committed, but it was also the one that had

forever bound them together – she, Ali and his brother Hussein, and Angela. Whatever was worrying her could not match that.

“Stop your nonsense,” replied Abigail, playing along. “I am already on my way to the park. Don't keep me waiting, Ali, the most handsome dude there has ever been.” Despite the shock of her new brother's news, she still had some humour left.

“You can say that again, Darling Abby. I plan to enjoy this body of mine before the aches of ageing start kicking in. My dad is now limping. And just the other day, we could not run three steps from him when he threatened to punish us with a whip. See you shortly, love.”

Abigail walked into the park, her distressed thoughts seeming like a fire that could consume her. She felt very sad that her incestuous relationship with her brother meant that they would never get descendants to continue their family line. It would perish with them, more so because they had chosen a hopeless life of being gay and lesbian. A miracle baby was likely possible given advancements in technology, but how could they make a baby? As far as they knew, according to Dad Boris, their parents were dead and so would be their lineage if they did not act. They were not the only compromised family. Twister was the only surviving family member of his dead mother and father. And should his mother be still alive somewhere, it was possible she may have got other babies. This realisation was a wake-up call for Twister too.

As for Abigail, she remembered the strong hint that her foster parents, especially Jewel, showed about wanting grandchildren when she suggested that she and Twister were more than friends. This meant that they expected grannies from Angela, as well.

Abigail concluded that the next phase of their lives would be full of rough patches, but she thought that it all would be worth it. She found tears rolling down her cheek. A moment later, Ali tapped her shoulder and gave her a peck on the cheek. She turned and gave him a shivery hug in a pool of tears.

“Ali, my life sucks. I feel like I am not close to myself anymore. I feel like I have detached myself from my reality. I am far away from myself; I am someone else.”

“Why is that, baby girl?” Ali asked tenderly holding her closer as they sat on one of the park benches. They sat facing a water sanctuary that seemed to entertain the noisy birds happily playing about and chasing one another.

"I have messed up so much. I do not know how to recover from it. I look at my life and wonder who will intercede on behalf of this desperate soul, Ali?"

"I remember the last time we met, you were madly in love with your sister Angela and nothing could come between you. You were two lesbians destined for hell in the name of human rights, your right to do whatever you pleased with your bodies," Ali said with a soft smile.

"It was not as watertight as you might have thought, Ali. I think our bond started loosening the moment I set my eyes on my classmate Joel and the affection between me and him that grew between us. His strokes felt very different from a lady's hands, and I have not been able to quit it. So I am bisexual in two different relationships. As much as this lesbian thing is condemned, it is the only place that I visit often and get healed and rejuvenated. My relationship with the woman I love, my sister Angela, has also helped my grades improve, and also helped me bear it during the period I was unhappy with my foster parents."

"Oh my, my, my, why was I never the lucky guy to stroke you, given the way we have come a long way together with the free-to-air clip? Ali asked holding his head faking disappointment.

"Hold that thought right there, Ali. Before you get all naughty, I went out with Joel's brother Twister, only three days ago."

"I know Twister well Abby. What conspired?"

"One thing led to another. We danced all night and ended up at my mother's house. He was in my hometown on an internship attachment, and I was home to visit my parents. Dad had a foot that was bothering him. So I invited Twister to help him with therapy and was invited to sleep over. That is how we ended up together in Angela's bedroom after the night out, where his strokes left me breathless. It was a different and unique experience that I am yet to recover from. Every single breath I took in the act was his. I was utterly consumed with ecstasy."

"What! I'd be most happy to show you how capable I am of making you enjoy such ecstasy, Abby. Not tomorrow and not the day after, here and now. I should be counted in these ecstatic adventures, my darling. Condemnation in hell does not discriminate. If you have brought me a confession, Abby, so that I may spare you, you are wasting your time. You are beyond salvation. Sin is sin, which I would gladly enjoy with the woman I so desire."

Ali said, beside himself with laughter, as he added, "I wouldn't mind banging the last nail on your coffin, darling girl!" She joined in the laughter, seeing the joke in it, also because it was only Ali she could confess her evils to.

"Ali, you are so unbelievably annoying. Are you the evil brother to the serpent that tricked Adam and Eve?"

"Maybe I am his reincarnation in the form of a man, Abby. But, oh my God, why do you say you will never forget Twister, yet you have not tasted my strokes to compare, madam generous? You have trusted all these beasts except me, Abby. Let's cut to this chase." Then, turning serious to find out what was bothering his friend, he said, "Anyway, why did you so much want to see me, my darling Abby?"

"Joel and I are siblings, Ali," she replied without hesitation and broke into heavy sobs.

"Oh my God! What?! You mean it was incest all along?!" said a shocked Ali before adding accusatively, "You guys are surely going straight to hell because of it. There will be two slots waiting for you. These are not transgressions that are easily forgiven on earth, let alone in heaven. When you reach the gates of heaven, it will not be a case of 'you did not know' it shall be a unpardonable sin when you reach the judgment desk. You will know that ignorance is no defence, Abby."

It seemed that Ali did not realise he was being mean to Abigail as he wondered how this mess could befall his friend Abigail. What it showed, however, is how young people even cousins unacquainted with each other's roots may find themselves in incestuous relationships such as this one.

After appearing mean to Abigail, Ali tried to make a joke that went over her head as she pondered her next move now that she had confessed her sins to this man.

Ali was saying: "We need a grand summary, Madam Generous. You have to count me in the equation. For me, it shall be a penetration, despite your two brothers Twister and Joe. You shall never forget it. But if you all you want is foreplay, it is not me you want but my brother Hassan. His hands have not lost their magic touch. I have a wife now, so I have a pocket to empty my balls. I do not need a hand job anymore, Abby."

Abigail thought with disgust: *Men are all the same at the hint of an opportunity to extend their antennae.*

“You are the worst person to consult, Ali. It was such a mistake to have come to you, but thank you for your bat ears. We will meet in hell when the day comes. For now, I have a lot to settle.”

“Come here, beautiful. You deserve a hug to start the healing process. That was a candid and healthy discussion, my dear Abby. You will be OK; it was therapy for me too. I have done worse stuff than you. I have even opened trouser zips trying to find what works for me. Thanks to Lierya for pampering me with her lovemaking. Otherwise, I would be very busy opening men's zips to date. I now regret it. I now find it terrifying, but it was part of my life. We have done stuff that we can never redo, my darling Abby. The future we make will always cleanse us all. God redeems even the most evil.”

“Excuse me, Ali. You have without knowing sparked something in my head. It is now clear to me what must be done. You are a star boy. *Mwah!*” she blew him a kiss.

“Glad to hear that I’ve helped. What is important is not to allow worry to keep you down, my darling. It is your path, and the battle is yours to win, sweet mama!” He said this hoping that Abigail would reveal to him what she had just thought should be done, as she stood up to leave.

“See you, boy, my love to the beautiful angel and her mother Lierya. Do not give her my suck. I shall do that firsthand with her one day,” she said cryptically.

“That is why I am from jihad land. We talk less but act more. You shall only understand that when you let your guard down with me, Abby.”

“It shall not be that one day I will take you to bed Ali, I have learned the hard way. Mine is a life of shame. I have confessed my sins before a man, I am now going to my heavenly Father to repent. He forgives us all our sins no matter how bad they are, but you have to pray the rosary like twenty times for super cleansing. So that all the dark and toxic emotions from our past pains are cleared away, released, and cleansed, and purified forever.”

“Inshallah, in God we all trust, Abby. See you, *twah!*”

“Let’s have a bite, Ali, before we part ways. I am starving. You are such a scumbag, but you keep me sane with your meanness.”

“Abby the bill is on me for being a bad boy from back in the day. Nothing fancy, just KFC chicken with chips.”

In the café, Abigail also took a glass of wine.

“Make sure not to die, Abby. If you die, I shall kill you,” said Ali tenderly as they ate.

“I have heard that one before, Ali, which is similar to the one saying that ‘I killed a dead lion dead.’ I am already rotten, dear. I wonder what you shall come to destroy,” She said as they parted with Abigail leaving to deal with her demons and he to be with his wife, Lierya.

“Abby, do not curse the day before it is over. Make the most out of it,” Ali shouted. He, however, was not sure Abigail heard him.

Abigail decided to skip class that day telling herself she had no apology to make for it. She had more important things to attend to after Joel’s shocking news. She went straight to their apartment with Angela. She had a clearer head after that conversation with Ali. She was going to be more rational in the decisions she was going to make, though she didn’t yet have an answer to the predicament they faced. The one thing she was certain about was that something needed to shift. She had no idea what or how that shift would be, but they had to try something somehow. Relationships, however, now always seemed to occupy her mind and the thought of having sex with a man still freaked her out. In her mind were always what she referred to as “near-death expressions” she saw in the eyes of the porn women in the free-to-air video long ago. She viewed the pain they seemed to go through as warranting fear of being caught in their situation.

It was autumn and, as she walked home, the little warmth from the sun there was and the beautiful rays it radiated appeared to be swallowed by the cold weather. It was also threatening a pour. She could hear a distant rumble of thunder, which made her hasten her steps not to be caught in the threatening storm. She didn’t want to get wet, especially because their apartment air conditioner was not functioning at its best. It needed to be looked into. She was soon at their doorstep.

The door is not locked. She walked into the seating room—no sign of life. *Was the house broken into or did Angela forget to lock the door before she left?*

The bedroom door was slightly open. Abigail entered the corridor. She heard a creaking sound coming from the bedroom. She retreated back to the kitchen carried a frying pan in her hand and returned to the sound in the bedroom, ready to let it go at the intruder before she fled out of the house screaming for help. She pushed the door open using the pan. She came eye to

eye with familiar faces –Angela’s and Joel’s, his newfound brother. Both were curled in her sister Angela’s bed fondling. But no sex seemed to have happened between them.

In the surprise of being caught, they sat upright trying to cover their nakedness. It seemed Joel had come to check how his new sister Abigail was faring but found an opportunity waiting to exploit his sister’s sister.

“This is all I can say to you today, my brother Joel and my sister Angela,” she said looking surprisingly calm, not angry. “You deserve it, and I want you guys to start making babies beginning today. Consider your previous relationships to be your honeymoon, and that they are coming to an end. We have a more serious business at hand,” she said. Then, looking at Angela, she said to her, “I want to introduce my brother Joel to you, Sister Angela. Your motherly instincts better kick in now, or our generation shall go down the drain if we don’t do our part, people. We need to right things. We were given life by our parents; but we can propagate life, too, guys. Spread these legs, Angela. Mount her Joel. I will calm her as you get it done, it’s time to make babies.”

Abigail held Angela's head on her lap as Joel, already aroused, prepared for penetration. Angela was screaming, as Joel’s thrusting increased in intensity. The pain was intense for Angela, as Joel broke her virginity. It was her very first sexual encounter with a man. It came as a surprise she did not seem to like it or enjoy the strokes.

“As you scream,” Abigail told her sister, “know that Mama back home is screaming as well to hold your child, Angela. This is the same sacrifice Mom Jewel made for you to exist with the hope that one day you would give her grannies to grow the family. Be of good courage, my love, it shall be over in a few, and hopefully, you might be expecting to be a mother soon, my love. Relax, my darling, and feel every stroke and allow yourself to reach the other side of ecstasy.”

“Oh my God! it is so painful, Abiiiee!; I can't take it anymore. When did you decide for me who my sperm donor will be, Abby? Have mercy on me, Abby! I'll never mess with you again, sweetie. Please stop Joel! You are killing me!”

“Forget about those promises, Angie. This is the real-life, the real fun. I promise you won't die. This furnace of friction gives way forward, Angie. You have to cross over, you are not lesbian, make all of us proud sweet mama! You have every possible love around you, darling. To give up is to birth regret, so

do not give up. That is why this pain is inevitable. It is the only way to create another being. I did not choose Joel for you. I found you in bed with him. Besides he is my brother. You will get a baby from my bloodline, me who you have loved since were young. See me in Joel, my love, come on, girl."

"We promised each other that this should not happen to us, Abby. We have sustained it this long. Why are you doing this to me, my love?"

"For our family continuity's sake, Angela; that is why. Women's childbearing lives are dated, and, in a few years, we may not be able to create life. Let's stand up and be counted, Sweetie. We have to start somewhere, starting now, Angela. Life is not always about sure bets, but acting differently shall eventually yield a difference in the way we perceive life, my darling."

"Ooh, ooh! I am coming." Joel shouted. "What do you mean you are coming, coming where when you are there already, you bastard! Get off me! I will kill you, Joe," Angela screamed. "Oh my God, he means he has poured children into you. Your body decides how many sperms to give life, Angela, one, two, or three kids."

"Oh my God, I can't believe this is happening to me as you watch, Abby. You betrayed me, mama! I hate you, Abigail, and I hate you, Joe," Angela shouted, shocked that the bedsheets were stained with what others might call bloody love juice.

"I am proud of you, Angela; This ritual shall be repeated in a few hours. She kissed her head, and Joel sensually stuck his tongue in Angela's mouth to stop the cursing. She responded sensually, and Abigail thought that the fight was over. Then cursing started.

"Over my dead body Abby. You are a serpent. I don't know how I trusted you this long, Abigail."

"Don't worry my poor sister. You will thank me one day when the little one touches those nipples," said Abigail as Joel carried Angela to the bathroom.

Then another intruder showed up, just before the two agreed whether to shower or rest a bit. It was Twister.

And things were about to get more interesting.

"Come here, Twister," Abigail called him to her sensually, urgently. "It is our turn now," she told a puzzled Twister, as the other wondered what was going on.

Abigail undressed him and lay her hungry body on the bed. Angela was thrilled to take revenge. She has even forgotten her pain, and now here she was caressing Abigail's boobs for Twister to have it easier down there.

"Peirce that thing Twister," Angela urged Twister. "I want her to understand the hell I've just been through." She could not have known that Twister was waiting for this day to taste the ecstasy Abigail denied him a few nights before after a night of caressing and kissing.

Twister had always longed to have her since he set his eyes on this kinky-haired female, Abby, who resembled his brother Joel, and who he loved very much. His want for her was unstoppable except that all of Abigail's senses were dead because of the pain she was experiencing doing it. The only difference was that unlike her sister Angela who was also in the act, she did not scream.

This concerned all of them, and Angela rushed to the kitchen and came back with a glass of water. Brother Joel was sponging her sister with some warm water, as Twister went about the business of making babies while tenderly embracing Abigail quietly assuring her all would be well.

After it was all over, Abigail felt that they had honoured their parents the best they could, which was to bring forth a new generation. A new dream was born, and they had started on a rewarding path in a physical love that had now united them. They hoped it should be forever, which is all that mattered for now. No more sticky hand jobs, as the hands would be occupied with raising young ones. *What a day!*

Joel changed Angela's bedding and led her to the bathroom as they waited for Abigail to recover. After they were done with the shower, it was Twister's turn to carry Abigail to the bathroom as Joel made the beds afresh.

So relaxed were they that they spent the next three hours asleep after the extended and strange exercise they had just engaged. For Abigail, it was like a heavy burden had been lifted off her shoulders. The experience was priceless to her, which she tried to communicate and expressed in four little words, "I love you, Twister."

"I love you more, Abby. I had longed for this moment; you do not know how special you are to me, girl. I can't believe now you are mine to keep." He wrapped his arms around her.

"And for the first time in my life, I now know I have someone special to look up to," Abigail responded.

Someone watching them together like this could not have failed to see how interesting it was that they had decided to put all their eggs in one basket and clean their dirty linen together.

They had a kind of exchange program that would leave their parents surprised. They had also pursued careers that would see them earn a good living along hospital corridors, even as Angela settled for the classroom to be a lecturer. They were also from different ethnic groups but had decided there could be no barrier big enough to prevent them from reaching the unlimited possibilities that awaited them.

For now, they were exhausted and had no energy for any more lovemaking. there would be time enough for that.

Angela was the first to get up. She made a meal for everyone and they soon were all seated at the dining table to get back their energy. But in their new bond, no one had the experience to guide the other. It was going to be trial and error going forward.

As I went to meet Ali for advice at the park, I was looking for hope in my hopelessness. Though our discussion did not solve my issues, it was nonetheless welcome for I did not want anyone to judge me about my past. Speaking with Ali left me determined to have a life experience that would change my life as Lierya changed his life. The emotions I am experiencing now feel like a new breath of life not only for me but for my entire crew in crime: my new family members, Twister, Joel, and Angela.

"I hope you guys have appreciated the small deed today."

"It was better than anything I would have imagined, Abby" Angela replied.

Twister decided to change the subject as there remained something that still needed to be resolved.

"I met your parents today Angela and Abby."

"Where? Had you gone back to my village town again Twister?" Abigail asked surprised, which made the others look up.

"Excuse me, guys, you were in my village town together? How come you never told me, Abigail?" It was Angela's turn to look surprised

"Yes, we were Angela, Dad was unwell, and Twister happened to be in the neighbourhood. I invited him to attend to Dad's aching leg." *I wonder why I should explain this to Joel and Angela. They should know that Twister and I are already a couple. The sooner it sticks in their heads the better.*

“Oh my God, how come Mama never even called me to let me know Dad was unwell?”

“She expected me to have informed you, but I have been so consumed in these unfolding dramas.” *I was being careful not to open a Pandora’s Box. I suspect Mom knew I spent the night with Twister, and she did not want to snitch on me. Women are all the same. They choose which secret to keep and which to open up to the family.*

“Do you remember the grilling they gave me, Abigail?” Twister asked.

“Yes, I do, dear husband. I almost told my Mom Jewel off in disgust at the way she pestered you.

“Why? Must I be married?” Abigail asked comically.

“Aha! They all laughed. You now have a husband, Abigail?”

“Yes, I do, Angela. No other man shall screw me but Twister. He is my one-stop shop. Joel, you better take dowry from Twister now that we are siblings with no parents.”

“Stop being mean, Abigail. My parents are your parents, and Boris is the dad to these boys. My parents shall be waiting to receive your dowry from Twister. Mine, too, from this kinky-haired son of your mother. Boris is in trouble. The two sons are getting married simultaneously.” Angela observed.

“You also got a husband, Angie?” Abigail laughed.

The boys’ eyes were fixed on their women almost not believing they had broken their gay vows to each other. I guess for them, they are of the thought of another round of live fiction. Even as the poor girls screamed for relief, it was too good for the boys.

“Excuse me, guys. I have an important message to report.” Twister demanded attention.

“It seems my discussion with Jewel and Blaze when I visited your home seemed to remind them of something. When we met today, they told me of a European guy by the name of Boris, who had left them with a baby girl that they were to hand over him on a plane.” Twister explained about the coup attempt in South Sudan, the violence and what happened at the airport, and how Blaze and Jewel could never find Boris after. “They believe Dad might know the parents of this girl they brought up, Abigail. I saw them off to meet with Dad today.” Twister reported.

“Things are falling in place one by one. We now know I am a sibling to Abby. Knowing this gave me a leeway to love her sister Angela, and she got my brother Twister,” Joel observed.

“All that remains now is to know where our spouses really came from in Africa, Twister,” Angela said hopefully.

“After that, we can go to Africa and visit their country of origin, Twister suggested.

After the boys had gone, the girls were left discussing what life now meant for them, and whether they would be dating each other before their married lives took them over. They agreed to see how it would go. They shared the same bed that night as they looked forward to a busy day ahead with a workload worth two days to complete, both having missed their classes with the excuse of attending to a family emergency.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A star of hope

THERE HAD BEEN HEAVY downpours lately and, as thunders heralding coming rain engulfed the cold morning, Abigail put the warm rain jacket she had been gifted by her brother Joel in her bag. On her mind, as had been on most days lately, was that she was still alive and kicking after her sexual experience with a man, which she had previously dreaded ever since watching the free-to-air video. Appreciating the experience, therefore, came as important to her as she imagined how her parents must have gone through it, including the sacrifices that come with it, to beget her and Joel. On the sacrifices their parents made to carry forward their genes, she imagined the huge risk her mom made to carry her in her womb for nine months, and the bravery it must have taken to overcome labour pains before the triumph of baby Abigail's first cry immediately after birth announcing that she had safely arrived ready to face the world.

Yet, if she was to celebrate her birth, it was by a mother she had never known. Her only consolation was her foster mother: *At least I have Mom Jewel.*

The only thing that bothered her was that while she and her sister were viewed alike with assignments such as house chores, when she and their biological daughter Angela made the mistake of showing the free-to-air video at home, it was Abigail who was made to shoulder the blame and was thrown into boarding school. She felt victimised and likened her welcome in the family to a bed of roses in that her foster parents chose to blame her because of just that one thorn, that of sharing the free-to-air video which she wasn't the only one who was guilty. Because of this she felt lonely and saw herself like an

unwanted weed or wildflower that nonetheless had to survive out in the open without judging others.

As Abigail grew older, however, she appreciated that she was an important part of her family and was grateful for her foster parents' assistance and guidance – perhaps not in the way she may have liked, but in how it worked for them. Knowing her place in the family saved her unnecessary confrontation with her foster parents, and left any battles with them to her sister Angela who had been very protective.

Things, however, seemed to have changed overnight, and now Abigail had a blood brother whom she wanted to have a candid discussion with that cold morning the rain threatened to come pouring down.

“Joel dear, how was your night?” Abigail tenderly inquired on the phone after calling him.

“It couldn’t have been any better, Abby. You?”

“I need to meet you, Joe. Can we do so on our way to class and meet at the field near the park where we normally take our break? Bring me some coffee, please dear brother.” She coughed as if choked at the thought of Joel being her brother.

“I shall, my lovely sister. See you shortly. That is very thoughtful of you, dear Abby. We have not had a moment together since we discovered we are siblings.”

“Most welcome Joe. I shall be waiting.”

As he walked to meet her, Joel wondered whether to apologise to Abigail for loving her despite being siblings, or whether to thank her for letting him love Angela, her sister. He had not decided which was which by the time he met Abigail, who showed her gladness of seeing him with a broad welcoming smile.

“Hello, Joe. It was on a day like today two months ago that we discovered we are siblings. Life is about positive contributions to nature, my dear brother. When we do, nature rewards more to us than it takes from us.”

Abigail had not mentioned it, but she had also come to plant some tree seedlings and brought one for Joel to plant as well. She did this every year without fail on the same date on the twenty-fifth of March. She did not understand why, but it happened to be the date they were separated from their biological parents. Now that she has a brother, she thought to start inviting him.

“True Abby, it is the same date we chose to overcome our personal challenges and now we are couples, your sister Angie and I, and my brother Twister and you, my dear sister, ready for the next phase of life.”

“That is true Joe. It was the hardest thing to do, but we were bold enough to make vows to each other. Your tenderness and kindness has been my pillar. I needed a powerful mind to keep me grounded on my path to becoming a doctor. I did not expect you to take a break to clean after me when I almost quit, but you did. With you, I will be better able to fight my battles.”

“Abby, we are both on the battlefield armed with a good mind as our shield. Thanks to our biological parents, whoever or wherever they might be.”

“Words you once said to me keep echoing in my mind: ‘If you desire freedom, stop expecting others to fix your life. You are well able, Abigail.’ Still, I do not really know how to address you anymore, Joe. I have been regretting our previous relationship every time I think of it. But then I am consoled by the thought that we could not have known we were siblings. God has been guiding my path ever since, hence the radical decision I made to make you have my sister Angela so that you will forever be close to me, Joe.”

“I have come to appreciate happiness is not constant, my dear sister Abigail. Losing the previous you is an example of happiness cut short. But it also makes one realize that to be happy, one has to appreciate that what comes our way might also need to be celebrated, be it sorrow, grief, or heartache – they are all welcome guests in our lives. We need to feel the pain of losing each other and gaining one another at the same time. Also, appreciate the lessons that we have learned from our days as gay and lesbian. We have left many sisters and brothers there, but we now understand it is not an easy decision to make. It is a matter of life and death, so we need to respect them and let them be. It is God who liberated us, and it is the same God that shall set them free or let them be. I guess sexuality is more deeply ingrained in some genes than in others.”

“Those who never had the experience of being gay or lesbian think they can wake up tomorrow and ditch the relationship. One needs to grow in the ups and learn in the downs of it as we did Joe. This has been our lowest brother, Joel. We have done our best, and we have emerged together on the other side. Let's keep growing, my brother. I grow trees every year to remind me of the growth I experience every year away from my biological family. In my

hometown, you will see trees I planted when I was ten years old and the ones in my twenties.”

“Thank you for allowing me to join in the planting, Abby, although it has been a nightmare of a revelation to discover we are siblings. We now have each other. Being gay and lesbian are ugly scars that will haunt us for life, and because of that I’ll forever love and protect you, dear sister. A whole world can fit in a heart, but two wives cannot, hence why God revealed to us that we are siblings so that I can have Angela as my wife and you as a sister. That way, I have held beautiful sisters in my heart, each in her uniqueness. It was a double portion for me and for you too. I have you, my sister and as my beloved brother Twisters’ wife. This way, we shall forever be together, living together as one big family. The secret of positive change is to focus our energy on building new habits, not fighting the old habits. This will lead to awesome changes in our lives, Abigail.”

I am so proud of us that, despite our goof, we are determined to be the change we aspire to be.”

They hugged and cried it out, ready to face the next phase of their lives.

“Excuse me, Abby, I need to collect my homework in the library,” Joel said after they had calmed down. “There are some copies I forgot on the printer desk. I hope no one has messed them up. I am coming back, dear.”

“Hurry and come back; you have this tree to plant brother,” Abigail called as he stood up to leave. “I do this every year at a time like this one. I’ll be waiting.”

She now felt more relaxed. She then thought of Ali.

I need to call Ali and give him a thank you.

She called his phone, and it rang for a long time. Then a deep beautiful voice suddenly came on. “Hello.”

“I am calling to wish you a happy day for making people smile, Ali.” Then, contrasting the happy reason she had called before telling him about it, she made reference to the pain his work was known for. “Are you sure that dentures are about smiling, Ali? By the time we land to see you in that clinic, the whole-body system is usually screaming for help. I wonder why nerves connect our bodies to this greedy mouth. People don’t come to see you because of pleasure, they come because their tooth pain forces them to fast. We love eating, my dear friend. But that is now why I am calling. Something

extraordinary happened. I did not die after having a man. You can now rejoice. You do not have to kill the dead lion dead. I have started to embrace the new path. I shall share more when I meet you in person.”

“Hi, Abby, Congrats! I can’t talk. I have a patient in front of me. I’ll call you later, dear.”

It was unlike Ali. Men are a double-edged sword. One edge is professional and holy. The other side is naughty and evil. I am happy that he is busy. I am not in a mood for his naughty side.

Joel came back panting. He planted the seedling Abigail handed him as fast as he could. It was not usually his thing to plant things. His mind was racing to get to class and present his assignment before going for his shift in the hospital wards. Before he could leave, Abigail asked a passerby to take a picture of them and gave him her phone. He also recorded a good video of them. A photo together would one day remind Joel of the tree they had planted that day.

A moment later, Joel received a call from his Dad Boris, to whom he mentioned he was with his sister Abigail planting trees. As he spoke, Boris remembered that this was the same date they lost their parents, which came as a surprise to Joel that Boris could remember this after so many years. Maybe the date had stuck to Boris’s mind, as it was the same day he became a father to Joel and Twister.

“How did you know this was the date we were separated from our parents, Abby?” Joe enquired after taking the call.

“I had no idea. I guess it was my instincts that made me plant trees on this date, Joe. I usually plant four seedlings.”

“One for you, for me, and two more for Dad and Mom?” Joel asked.

“I also had no idea we were four. I only discovered last week, and I have planted four trees every year since I was ten years old. Maybe my parents whisper to my subconscious mind or maybe I’ve been planting for my sister Angie, Dad Blaze and Mom Jewel. It is just an ingrained habit, Joe.”

“Well, done, Abby. You haven’t taken the coffee I bought you?”

Joel picked up the cup, only to find it empty. He threw it in the bin as he sprinted to class. But remembering something, he stopped and shouted to his sister, “By the way Abby, our dad’s name is Bram and our mom is Tracy! Dad Boris told me their names. We will discuss it later. I have to go.”

Abigail walked to the hospital wards for her shift, too surprised to know what to make of the new revelation. *Bram and Tracy. Beautiful names. Where are our parents today or their relatives? What will give us something to remember them by, besides their names?*

Abigail believed she would be remembered for her kindness. She left her compassion on everything she touched. She was a darling to many. In the wards, patients preferred her attending to them. Unlike some of her classmates, she treated patients the same, only seeing the beauty in them. She always gave a smile and hope to them. Her compassion flowed to the sick patients' relatives, who often sent her gifts.

My day may be taxing but it is worth it from the appreciation I get from the patients.

Just before she entered the wards to report to work, Ali returned her call. He was keen to hear what transpired.

"Hello, Abby tell me the drama that unfolded after we parted. How could a client land at my desk as breaking news was happening? I am all ears."

"Ali, I look at you, and I wonder how I have not blocked your number by now. What sin did I ever commit to you that you cannot hold a healthy conversation with me. Talk to me politely as you did this morning when you had a client at your desk."

"Abby, you cannot be able to block or delete, ignore or forget my number simply because I like you. I am your healer, at least for now, to laugh, dream, live, love, just to be happy anytime you need me, girl."

"That is true, Ali. People are like books. Some deceive you with their cover, while others surprise you with their content."

"And where do you place me in that, Abby?"

"You deceive me with your looks. Otherwise, your content is filthy to the core. You fail me every time. I wonder how I came to trust you are the only warrior to battle my issues. I need to unlearn this now that we will soon be parents. You have to stop seeing me as a girl to flirt with. You need to treat me with dignity going forward. That is not rocket science to do, Ali. We can do it... I am serious, Ali!"

"Who is not...? I am damned serious in my 'content', Abby."

"Ali, you have been such a pillar in my life though, not because you offer the smartest ideas to the solutions I want, but because you get the best out of me, period! But your meanness and disconnect are unimaginable. I love you,

though. Can I finish for you the tail of this before you open that filthy mouth? Why can't you be the good boy who picked up the phone with a client at his desk?" She challenged him before they broke into laughter.

"I am waiting to hear what happened between siblings. Come on, Abby. I am all ears, spare your lecture for later."

"I took a very drastic decision, Ali. For some reason, Angela and my brother were in bed that day, which is how I found them after I left you. But they were just fondling. That is when I surprised them by forcing them into actual penetration. Angela felt like it was a rape, she screamed, but I would hear none of it. I think I was at the same time mad and happy for them. So her screams fell on deaf ears; she deserved the pain for cheating on me, while at the same time, I knew my brother needed a wife to continue our family line."

"That was such a milestone, my dear Abby. The experience was just for them. But was it only Angie who messed you up or both of them? Womeeen... you only see the fault in other women, not men."

"True Ali, just like the guys who blamed the woman found in bed with a man, but only she was taken before Jesus and accused of committing adultery."

"Go on Abby, I will check whether that story is in the Quran... Jesus is in our religion too as Al-masih."

"I know Ali, look for Al-masih in the Quran, you might find the story of the adulterous woman told there too. But it was not just Angie. I also forced Twister to do it with me after he came in from hell knows where. I grabbed him, and the experience was hell for me too. Angela had to pin me down with Joe. It had not sunk to us that we are siblings to avoid each other in such acts, but we now cannot look at each other's bodies after our acts that day. This was the type of thing you always told me would be memorable. I can't say that up to now had a good experience with sex. I am yet to understand it. Maybe it is because we are both – Twister and I – beginners. As for Angela, she never comes near me now, and I do not want to see Joel, my brother near me. I am struggling with Twister too. What we did, however, had to be done. I hope you understand, I told them."

"We do, madam prefect" was Angela's rude reply as she leaned on Joel, who only seemed interested in his newfound love."

"You make me horny, Abigail, to imagine all that lovemaking," said Ali with a smile.

“Thank God it was not you; I would have fought with Lierya forever. One gets very attached to their first love; I now understand why religion wants people to marry.”

“You could not have fought with Lierya. We Muslims are allowed to marry many wives. You would be my number two, but first lady. Ha! Ha!”

“Do I look second-best to you? Not that it matters; the place you have for me in your heart is good enough for me, Ali. Therefore, marry all you want, but that is not a place I shall give my Twister. He may flirt all he likes, but I will be the only wife. I love Twister so much after the experience that day. He is the kind of guy who remembers to wish someone a good morning, to have an awesome day, blesses you with ‘God be with you,’ and a ‘remember me in your sweet dreams.’ He makes me feel at home with him. I appreciate myself more than before now that there is a man who sees my value and encourages me to be whatever I feel I should be. We laugh together, and explore life adventure together.”

“Abby, you are a born beauty; I do not understand how you are not my wife. In the next life, I shall search for that soul of yours and will stop being naughty to you, gorgeous. In a race between relationship and friendship, there is no winner, for friendship always compromises, while a relationship always sacrifices, Abby. Love Twister with all your might, he is a good man.”

“Most appreciated, at least for this season of ballooning with pregnancy, my tolerance is zero to your toxic talks, Ali. As for Lierya, she did not accept any excuses from you. That is why she is your wife today. The same for me with Twister. I am OK with the content in my story Ali, and what matters to me is that content going forward as a wife. But I will still need your ear as I navigate this marriage jungle.”

“Life is full of mistakes, Abby, and you cannot condemn yourself for mistakes that happened as you tried to find yourself or make ends meet.”

“That makes me imagine a woman who is forced to give sexual favours to feed her children. But isn’t that how many married women survive? The only difference is that society has given her the title ‘wife,’ but her husband’s needs are the same as any paying man’s. While sex remains a need for the single woman as for the wife, the unmarried woman’s title is prostitute, or a slay queen, as I hear them being called these days. Though religion and societies can not be challenged insisting on sex after marriage, they should realize that even single women need sex, too.”

"I am not an authority in this area Abby. My certificate only authorises me to make anyone who visits my dental clinic fear when my name is mentioned, for teeth and nerves have similar pain. Let me leave that sexual urge to human beings and human doing. How they sort out their urges, that is their concern."

"They know their journey better, just as gays and lesbians do." Abigail agreed.

"I am sure this guy Twister is in heaven to have boxed you in. He is the human doing while I will hang in there as the human being in your life, Abby. By the way, what I am saying to you is not toxic; it is sexy," Ali said and hastily hung up before Abigail could blast him.

I have talked so much but Ali only heard what he wanted to hear, which was his imagined competition with Twister, how Twister is blessed to have won me. Ali is married, for heaven's sake; we have just been friends since childhood. I wonder who else is in such a relationship as the one I have with Ali. He shall never congratulate you on your victory or sympathise in your loss, but seems he shall always be there with his dirty thoughts. Lierya says she doesn't know that side of Ali. To her, he is a responsible husband who always showers her with sweet, tender words. I am yet to be persuaded on that one.

Her phone rang and, speaking of the devil, it was Lierya. "Hello girlfriend I have missed you... would you pass by after work?"

"How have you been, girlfriend? Not really, I got myself a soon-to-be husband and he is always at my workplace waiting to take me home after work. I am also pregnant, my dear...shhhh! A story for another day."

"Oh my God, I am so happy for you. I hope Angie is not jealous that you have moved on without her?"

"We moved on together. Angela now is my Brother Joel's fiancé."

"What? Joel is now your brother, Abby? Since when did this happen? Wonders never cease with you, sweet mama?"

"It has been two months now. So much has happened. I need a date with you, girlfriend. See you in the evening, though I will show up with my man."

"No worries. Gossip will be a good serving for dinner tonight." They laughed and hung up.

Time went by faster than Abigail had thought. She clocked out and went to see Lierya.

Twister was still tied up at work but promised to pick Abigail up after class.

She knocked on Lierya's door, and it was her tummy that emerged first. She was expecting her second born. "Yes, my dear Abigail, welcome to my club of motherhood."

"Oh my God, I thought I had walked away from people like Lierya and Angie who seem to deliberately drag me back to a love life I thought I had left behind. I now have a man to take care of all that and a baby on the way. I don't need thoughts that undermine my peace of mind, like having once romantically loved my brother."

"All you need to walk away from now my dear Abby is judgmental people. They have no idea the struggles you have faced to cross over from the hell of being a lesbian. It is time for you to walk away from the fear and guilt you are experiencing from accusing fingers that have been pointing in your direction."

"Such things as turning away from lesbianism are part of my rite of passage. They are not my fate. I need a healthy soul and this for sure shall only happen when I stop rubbing my wound further thinking too much about my past, Lierya."

"Life is a journey, Abby, not an occasion. I have even stopped keeping clothes for special occasions. Being alive today is a special occasion with all the Covid variants now behind us. I shall celebrate my life every day, my dear Abby."

Lierya went on to advise her friend about motherhood as she explained that for her now she had quit the girl thing and was happy with Ali to cater for all her womanly needs. She would be a mother of two in a few months and wanted to be there for them to guide them as they grew up. She expressed her empathy with her friend Abby for unknowingly being romantically involved with her brother.

Abigail's phone rang. It was Joel. "Where are you, Abby? Sorry, I wasted your morning. Come over we enjoy the sunset together."

"On my way dear brother. See you shortly." She said and hung up before she turned to her host as she had to leave. "See you Lierya. It was a pleasure seeing you. I'll come to see you another day before you give birth, dear."

"That is too soon, but I will excuse you; family comes first. Tell your brother I am keen to meet him as a brother soon. My love to Angie and your new love Twister."

JOEL HAD delayed a bit finalising with patients in the wards. Abigail waited for him near the park where they had planted tree seedlings that morning. He soon joined her to enjoy the sunset. She asked him to sit next to her.

“The sunset is amazing,” Joel said to soothe his anxiety, this being the first time he sat this near to Abigail as a sister and not as a girlfriend. They followed the sun until it sunk behind the distant hills. Abby imagined how blessed and privileged she was to be alive enjoying nature and its gifts like the setting sun, rain drops on his skin, whistles from the wind, and the love of those around her.

“Abby, I have decided that I will live for me, not for our parents. Not for my brother Twister, or my fiancé Angela. I will make the best out of everything I believe in. I wonder what it is I am waiting for that has not already arrived yet.”

The dying sun radiated a soft gold colour from behind the hills that reflected on the clouds like a bright goodnight kiss. Looking at these clouds, it felt like the same farewell to the romantic love Abigail previously had for Joel.

I guess for me the feeling shall only go when we meet Bram and Tracy, our parents, or see their graves. Thinking this, she leaned to rest her head on Joel saying their names softly.

“Since the moment Dad Boris gave me their names during a phone call this morning, my mind has been wandering, searching for them, Abby.”

They suddenly found themselves in tears, but they were not sure why. They walked slowly back home.

They found Angela having already made dinner, as Twister also walked in with a packet of Abigail’s muffins in his hands. He bought from a bakery whose chief chef expressed pride for what he said were muffins he had made from the original recipe.

“The Chef looked more Egyptian than an Ethiopian, handsome as he could be. Beautiful smile and all masculine,” explained Twister. “I admired him a lot. But I wondered why he should be so interested in other people’s cultures than his own. That is the irony of being employed, I guess.”

“Excuse me, Twister, your gayness seems to linger in that mind of yours. Why would you admire another man like that?” Abigail asked her husband-to-be seeming a bit irritated.

“I did not mean it that way, sweetheart. I admired the commitment he seemed to show in his product. I suspected he was the owner of the business. Why are you taking me back to where I’ve already closed doors behind me, Abby? Any gender with good things to admire in them should be admired. Despite being a medic Abigail, sales will be my future stunt. I love running a business a lot. Not that I have ever been involved in one, but I guess it will be fun.” Twister responded.

“Sorry dear, I am being oversensitive. I missed my month already, and I think I am already pregnant. The thought scares me. Thank you for the muffins. It shall make exciting breakfast in the morning.”

“Abby, I am so happy for you. I was afraid to share my news in case you had missed the pregnancy boat. But I am pregnant, too. My first bout of morning sickness happened this morning. I found it very annoying,” Angela explained making a face.

“Congrats Angela, morning sickness is great. It cleanses the baby from toxins after the body has cleansed itself during the night. Just a few months and that drama shall be over, dear. That’s the best news. We will compare our experiences as we progress,” Abigail suggested as she peeled an apple.

“That is the best news I have heard this year; that my brother and I will soon be daddies. Bravo ladies. We are happy fathers in waiting.”

Before Joel was done with his jubilation, Abigail was on his case.

“Does the news supersede our being siblings, Joe? Do you think it has been straightforward for me not knowing I had a brother in this world? I lost my parents. I lost you, I have lost Angela to you, I have a guy who doesn’t know himself. He is out there admiring other men. No one celebrates me. It is such a deceiving life. Sometimes I wonder why I was born and for what purpose. I feel so lonely and empty.” It surprised everyone to hear her say this, but what was clear was that Abigail was suddenly in such a lousy mood and only God knew why. She began whimpering, as if in pain.

Twister stood up from his seat and held her on his lap. She placed her head on his broad chest.

Joel, thinking he was to blame, knelt in front of her apologising. “I did not mean to hurt you, dear sister. You and I are siblings and shall forever be siblings. I was so happy and grateful to God that this is how it has turned out to be. Angela and I shall bring life to this world soon. This is a different set of joy for me as it shall be for you and Twister. It shall no longer be about you

and me, the only children of our parents Tracy and Bram whom we never came to know. We have set up this new family. I hope you understand now. No one is taking anything from you. Angela remains your sister for life.”

“Dinner is ready,” Angela announced, happy to display her cooking to her future husband. “Come, Abigail, it is not an easy journey to be pregnant. Emotions swing in all directions. You will be OK. Come we feed the young fellows in our tummies. I promise to pinch him or her when he or she is born for making my sister cry over everything good, bad, petty, or mind-boggling. I mean, my sister is just a cry-baby these days.” Angela kissed her forehead and smiled at her.

Abigail returned the kiss and ate with Twister from the same plate. Though he didn’t show it, he was confused to realise that pregnancy came with its dramas and was determined to go through with it supporting his wife-to-be. It turned out to be a great evening with all of them together. They would spend the night there. They were one big family.

“I hope you guys remember we were invited to Mom Jewel and Dad Blaze’s home to discuss where Abby and Joe may have originated from?” Twister asked the next morning. “Joe and I will be left behind to tidy up the house as you guys proceed home to help Mom Jewel and Dad Blaze,” said Twister setting things in motion. “Keep the event simple now that you are both pregnant. We shall do the dishes later after the meals and any other hard work that might be there, dear ladies. Dad Boris shall pick Joel and me up at his usual restaurant.” “That is better, Twister. I did not want him to come to our house. It has been a pig stay. The week has been too busy to tidy up, and you know how Dad gets offended by untidiness. Tomorrow we are freer; we will clean up then. Do we have any shopping to be done?” Joe asked as he picked up his pen to do the list of things to get from the supermarket.

“Nope! Don’t bring anything,” replied Angela. “My parents are on a funny diet. Anything you buy might go to waste. In any case, Abby and I will do the necessary shopping. We would have loved to host you, good men, for another day. This would have been such a great opportunity. But we will spend the night with our parents after the meeting.”

The girls arrived at their parents’ home early to help them clean up and cook for the expected guests. They did a good job aiming to impress the men, especially Boris, just in case he thought they were not well-mannered women fit for his boys. This, however, was not a day to expose the truth. The girls did

not think the parents should know just yet that their kids were dating one another, and that they were already couples. They were soon done helping their parents with the necessary preparations and sat down to wait for the boys and their father, Boris, to arrive.

Not long after, the guests drove into the compound, all dressed to kill. For the first time, Joel and Twister were not dressed like teenagers. They were in navy blue suits while Dad Boris had on a black suit. The boys also spotted a new haircut that made them look more mature than their age. Their look made their visit look more serious or something of an official meeting than the girls had thought it would be. Jewel and Blaze came out quite well dressed, too, while the girls brightened the event with beautiful sun dresses they had never worn before.

The host family walked to Dad Boris's car to usher him and the boys into the house. Jewel held Boris's hand as the rest of them chit-chatted with one another. The youngsters did not want to raise suspicion that they were all in love and had spent the night together. Abigail was holding her brother's hand as Twister walked with Blaze. Angela led them into the house and ushered everyone to their seats.

There was a jovial mood around the table as they happily chatted with one another. And it seemed they were either all hungry, or the food had been too good in what seemed like a very short time enjoying it. Now full and contented, they continued their happy chit-chats.

In the meantime, Abigail was imagining how other meals with guests didn't always go as smoothly as this one. Preparing the food and cooking in the hot kitchen struck her as priceless, and while guests complimented the food as the day's guests did, it was not always perfect as some might ask to add more salt. It ran through her mind how it sometimes went at the table:

I needed more soup in my stew; that food was too dry.

My tomatoes should not be cooked; they should be served in a separate bowl.

That rice should be put back to warm; it's a bit cold.

Why were you late for the event?

You get to an event, and an extra coin must be spent on you.

Warm this in a microwave.

Remove these veggies from my plate.

I don't want the meat removed.

Get camel milk for my tea. My doctor said no black tea for me and no cow milk.

I get heartburn when I eat boiled meat. Go deep fry these chicken pieces for me, they look like the oil and onions didn't reach them. I like them crispy.

Excuse me. This is not a restaurant. You could have sent your menu before the event. For now, be content with what is on the menu. What nonsense!

It was Boris's uncomfortable scratch on his crouch that brought Abigail away from her thoughts about the little table dramas. A safari ant had decided to get a lift into the house inside Boris's trousers. Blaze quickly whisked him to the bedroom, leaving the table in laughter. The two foster fathers removed three giant ants just in time before they could get hold of Boris's "fundamentals", otherwise the entire visit would have been postponed by a fortnight. But they were soon back looking more relaxed but found the table still in laughter.

They all went to the garden where drinks were served, as Boris prepared to take them through what had happened in South Sudan during the attempted coup and how they had ended up where they were.

In the meantime, Abigail and the rest were still being tickled by the tale about the ants and were laughing uncontrollably. Boris, who was an easy-going guy and rarely took offence, joined in and was beside himself with laughter. He liked poking fun at himself, especially with such tales where his friends were involved.

However, Blaze finally spoke, signalling that the fun was over.

"Thank you, Boris, for honouring this visit and gracing it with your two sons Joel and Twister," Blaze began. "Sorry about the ants for so rudely welcoming you into our compound. Twister, we have met before, like on three occasions now. The only new face is Joel. He looks so much like Abby, only that he is a little darker, but I can still pick out some similarities. Before we give you our side of the story, we are curious to know how you guys met, Joel and Abigail."

Joel was quick to answer. "Despite the age gap between my sister and I, we got admitted to the same class at the medical school. The reason we were admitted the same year was because my brother Twister and I had decided not to burden our dad Boris with university tuition fees and upkeep, so we had worked to save up before joining college. We, therefore, lost a few semesters

finding us in the same year with Abigail.” Even before Joel had finished, Boris was already up in arms.

“Oh my God, you boys must be such liars. I wish I had a woman in my life to detect this for me. I was not that poor to educate you, men. I stopped my life for you and gave you the best. I am embarrassed that all this happened. I sincerely was not aware,” Boris said with pain written all over his face.

“It must have been a choice they made, Boris,” interjected Jewel, “and I am proud of the boys. Let’s cultivate an attitude of gratitude for people, situations, and things that play in our favour. A beautiful life is not always possible with the circumstances we have faced in our lives. These are life lessons that come the hard way, and which must have made Twister and Joel into responsible men. Otherwise, they could have wasted themselves like many youthful men with drugs and the like. They have done well. There’s no need to be disappointed when there’s a lot to thank God for. Not just for the milestones that favoured them, but to be grateful even for setbacks they may have faced to reach this stage. Well done, my boys.”

“We are sorry about that, Dad,” Joel apologised, as Twister nodded his head in agreement with his brother. “Thank you, Mom Jewel. Yes, we are men, and men should learn early to hunt and feed themselves. You also left your mom’s house when you were a teenager, Dad Boris. You often told us this while explaining it is what gave you the resilience to bring up two toddlers single-handedly. We took after you, Dad,” Twister explained to everyone’s applause.

“I am tongue-tied but well done,” accepted Boris, “I had no idea how I hurt my mom back then by walking out on her and Dad even after she pleaded with me to wait a bit longer. Continue with what you were saying, Joel.”

“On the day we reported to our class, Abigail came and sat next to me. I guess she was attracted to me because I was the only other kinky-haired person in the entire class. We immediately became close friends. I introduced her to my brother Twister and me to her sister Angie. Since then, the four of us have been best of friends,” he explained amid nods from the friends around the table.

“I hope you guys never dated in the confusion and fell for each other,” Blaze wondered. “

“We were this close,” Joel showed with his right thumb and index finger almost touching. “Thank God we were busted before we had reached that

point.” Everyone laughed at this, seeing how he demonstrated it, though a bit sad at the same time.

“It happens a lot when separated siblings who don’t know one another meet under similar circumstances you two met, so do not worry. It was your blood relationship attracting one another. If it had gone further than that, shed the feeling very fast and love one another as a brother and sister,” Blaze advised.

“We have since moved on and shed enough tears after discovering we were siblings,” Joel explained as Abigail struggled not to cry. “We have come to terms with our new reality.”

“It would also be good to put you in the picture of who Twister is,” said Boris. “He is a son to my sister Gladys. I saw a crying baby on the plane whose voice sounded familiar. I approached the man who had the baby. He said the mother was shot and had been left in a pool of blood. He decided to save the baby. By then, Twister was on my lap endlessly calling me uncle, having immediately recognised me. In the way he kept hiding his face from the stranger who had saved him had assured the guy that I was family to the boy. I never could find out whether my sister had survived. By the time I went back again, the organisation that had taken us to Africa had long folded up, both in Africa and here. I also had no idea who the parents of Joel and Abigail were. I had just offered them a lift as a good neighbour to help them escape the coup violence. I went to the neighbourhood to check, too, but found new residents. They didn’t know who Tracy and Bram were, and I could never trace them. But from the documents I had, both Tracy and Bram were Ethiopians who had come to work in South Sudan. We could use the document to follow up on their roots using government records. You never know, we might be lucky to find their extended family.”

“Wow, you must be so kind,” observed Jewel. “You didn’t know Abigail and Joel’s parents, but you still gave them a lift but ended up a parent to one of them, and us parents to the other one, our darling Abigail.”

“Yes, Jewel, life dynamics are difficult to understand. I have already made copies of the parents’ identity cards. These are for Bram and these for Tracy.” Boris said, sharing the copies with everyone. “Have a look and see whether something looks familiar. Maybe Joel can remember a thing or two.”

In the meantime, Angela had opened a WhatsApp group and included everyone, then shared all the photos they took in Ethiopia. She also came

across photos they took during their trip to Kenya when toured Lamu Island and the Tsavo National Park. She remembered a moment during their tour as they walked to the eatery when she saw a mesmerising butterfly that was fluttering alongside their tour vehicle. Its beauty had brought to her mind that day as a girl when Lierya lied to a young schoolboy about a butterfly in his pants so that they could see his genitals. It was the first time for her and Abigail to see it. That is how they learned that God created two different beings, a man and a woman, to complement each other. As she browsed through the photos on her she came across the school that Joel had appeared to linger around, as if it reminded him of something.

Seeing the photos Angela had shared on the WhatsApp group, Joel took it as a pleasant surprise to remember their visit to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. Upon seeing the particular photo of the school, he remembered how he had stood for a long time trying to remember why it looked so familiar. He now knew why, now that they had learnt they hailed from Ethiopia. There was also the dilapidated bakery that had faded muffin drawings that looked similar to the one Twister had identified as an Egyptian bakery where he had bought some muffins. *Maybe the muffin originated in Egypt*, Twister had explained.

They narrated to their surprised foster parents about the places they had visited while showing the photos. This led Abigail to narrate about the muffin bakery she had discovered in her hometown; “It reminds me that I also saw a black couple in our hometown driving in a van with a logo that read ‘Size Chef’, and it had stopped at a bakery the guy I talked to had said he was looking for distributors for their muffins. I don’t know why, but if I didn’t know better, it now makes me wonder whether I should not have looked closer at the black couple who looked Ethiopian. This muffin bakery and the vehicle may have nothing to do with us, but I am wondering whether it may not give us a clue?”

Have I forgotten Twister engaged a conversation with an Egyptian guy at Size chef?

“Let’s leave out the Size Chef clue. I have my reservations about it,” said Abigail giving Twister a look that left him trembling.

No one seemed to notice the interruption as Boris continued. “All I remember is that you guys were heading to Lamu in Kenya,” observed Boris. “At what point did you detour to Ethiopia and come back with such details that you never shared?”

“My point exactly,” Blaze agreed.

“Not really,” Jewel came to their rescue, “they are grown up to decide what do or what information to give but they could not have known we were all these years struggling to find where they came from. I guess it was also a mistake on our side to have been quiet this long about this matter, especially to our girl, Abigail.”

Twister picked the conversation. “It happened that our connecting flight got late and we were delayed in Addis Ababa. The hotel decided to give us a tour of the city. This is how we went through the city’s neighbourhoods that so mesmerized Joel and Abigail. I am sure with what we know now, Joel might be more keen to see what he might remember should he visit the city again.”

Things moved quickly after that. “I have a friend called Mike whose hometown is Addis Ababa. He might probably help find Tracy and Bram’s relatives,” Boris suggested. “He lives in London, but Addis is his hometown. I’ll approach him to see if he would agree to help. I think he would. I will offer to sponsor his trip there. Let’s give ourselves a two-month timeline. I am hoping that by then this guy Mike shall have some answers. Then from there, we can plan our next move.”

Abigail was happy: *It was a good discussion, and we hope soon we shall know the fate of our parents, and maybe meet our grannies if they are still alive.*

Angela started fondling Abigail’s fingers in a seductive way that made her want her husband-to-be Twister. *I guess Angela is bored with this grown-up talk and is trying to kill the boredom by awakening her evil.*

Abigail turned to see how Twister was coping. He seemed asleep, while her brother Joel didn’t seem to show much interest in what was going on. She faked a cough, which made everyone pay attention. She excused herself to get a glass of water. She wrote them a WhatsApp message: “Pay attention guys! It is being mannerless to ignore your elders. Remember you Joel, Twister, and Angie will be parents, too, and you will grow old. You better be attentive.” She confirmed with the blue ticks that they had read the message, and when she got back they seemed to be paying attention.

Boris was saying: “Though we have not been able to find your origins, it doesn’t mean we have not been trying. We must guard against not giving up, and we never give up. But where we may have failed to look for your roots, we tried to make up for it by raising you guys the best we could. But the thing to remember is that we didn’t have much information to go on, but all of us put

in a lot of hard work looking for your parents. But we guess the time was not ripe.”

“What you are sharing with them, Boris,” said Blaze, “explains why the many approaches we tried could not give us the desired outcome.”

“You are right Blaze. Our children, Abby, Joe, and Twister, including Angela, remember that nothing shifts, increases, or changes direction with a push. Remember also that this is more of your journey than ours. We expect your involvement in this in the best way possible. You will need a mindset that shall help you be resilient when you get disappointed at not finding your parents or your roots. Reinforce a winning desire to succeed in the end, whatever the outcome looking for them shall be. It is good that you have already been to Ethiopia. Once this guy Mike comes back, it will hopefully give us a lead on where to look. Be ready, therefore, for another trip back to Abigail and Joel's ancestral land.”

“It was all God’s plan for them to land in Ethiopia, Boris,” said Jewel. “Joel and Abigail turned out just fine, and this is the least they can accomplish by themselves with the help of Twister and Angela. I echo your statement, Boris.”

The four children looked at each other and wondered whether they were as fine as they were being painted to be. They hoped they would soon be, as this seemed like some kind of trial their foster parents were putting them through. After all, they were still not fully adults.

“I fail to understand why life should take us around in circles,” said Angela almost disjointed, like one trying to feel her thoughts. *You are born, separated from your parents, lead a happy or miserable life than when you were with your parents and then, years later, you are united with your devastated parents either in this life or the afterlife. Before you have recovered from the shock of this, we read you in the obituaries. What is it about this life anyway?*

“We are time travellers and should not be too hard on ourselves whether things are working out fine or not. Share a cup of water with fellow travellers because once we are gone there may be no time to reconcile with them or with ourselves. Thank you, dear parents, for taking care of me and my sister Abby.” Joel bowed with respect and gratitude, followed by Abigail who did the same. It was as if he read her mind.

The sky promised uncertain weather. There would be sunshine one moment before becoming overcast and gloomily turning ice cold the next

minute. It also threatened to pour any minute. The two families decided to avoid its tricky games before the unpredictable weather left some of them with a cold. They moved inside to enjoy their drinks and agreed to spend the night at Jewel and Blaze's home. Joel and Twister would share one bedroom with their dad, and Abby and Angela would share the other. That gave everyone the freedom to enjoy themselves without worrying about time.

The youngster separated from the parents and went to sit in the home's roomy library. The parents were happy to excuse them.

"I need help from my brothers and sister here. I have an urgent issue that needs addressing before it gets out of hand," explained Abigail after they had settled down. "Guys, I hate this scum of a lecturer, Doctor Willy, my supervisor. He calls me on the phone, and it sounds as if he is doing it on himself to the point of reaching climax. He says that the thought of having me gives him the kicks and that hearing voice does wonders for him. I am sick and tired of him, yet I can't refuse to pick up his calls. He is my supervisor, which means my passing or failure is in his hands. I have months to go before I graduate and get rid of him. I don't know what to do. His head seems to be led by his balls and shows it every time he sees or calls me. He is so annoying. Why can't he find himself a partner and declare himself gay?"

"Why did you keep this from us Abby?" asked Angela surprised to learn this for the first time. "And I mean us because this is not our parents' battle to fight. We are here to help each other as siblings."

"We can help you tame this selfish beast, Abby," said a now angry and protective husband-to-be Twister. "We shall storm in his office, and I will make it clear that I am your husband." He said pointing proudly at himself. "I will let him know that calls after class are not welcome in my house. He jeopardizes our marriage and should stop the calls if he wants to keep his head attached to the neck. Abby was on speaker last night, and I heard him. I hope I look scary enough, guys." They all laughed and emphasised that he was the guy to fight for his wife.

"Abigail," Joel began, "if you keep paying too much attention to every little obstacle you come across, you are going to lose it. Some issues toned you to strongly hit back and the dude will snap back to reality. This teacher knows he is abusing you. And if you don't beat him personally, a slap or two from your brother and future husband, Twister should set him straight. I can bet he will never attempt pestering an innocent student again. We shall threaten him on

the audio recording you have saved of your conversation with him. He should be made to understand that we will report him to the dean if a slap or two won't do." He said making faces of anger as Twister tried to suppress his rage.

"That should scare him, and make him stop his cheap advances. Men hate to be busted with such behaviours Abby," Angela suggested.

"I can see you imagining how you might tackle the devil, Twister. I can see the lecturer being scared to death when confronted," said Joe laughing as Twister rubbed his hair to appear rough and tough.

"Thank you for agreeing to accompany me, Joe. After all, it is my woman involved here.

Boxing can be entertaining; it has been a while since I punched anything... We will stop this hell of a doctor first thing tomorrow morning. I am sure when he sees you, he will feel intimidated, especially because he is your lecturer too. Confronting him will be our first assignment for the day."

"People have a lot of issues. I never thought Willy could be such a guy. He looks normal and happy with his life. I suspect that when I confront him, he will give me and Abigail a straight pass on our assignments to keep us quiet about this ugly part of his life," Joel explained hopefully.

Abigail's phone rang. It was Ali. She excused herself and went to take the call in the bedroom.

"Remember, I am always your friend in crime, darling girl," Ali said to her on the phone. "You went quiet on me. I don't know what must have transpired with your newfound brother, or love circle."

"You have always been my pillar, Ali. You have levelled my path for me so many times. Thanks for being my friend."

"I was hoping you would show me mercy and be generous. Are you still in this city? I haven't seen you on the hospital corridors of late."

"I am pregnant already. Thanks to your baggy mouth, Twister discovered his way to the forbidden fruit and now we have a baby on the way."

"When and how did it happen, especially by two sick heads that were destined to hell, who are now all holy and parents to be? I am so proud of you, my darling Abby."

"If you don't find me in heaven, Ali, know you are in the wrong place. I told you that in our church there is repentance and forgiveness. Once life's trials harden your heart, all you have to do is return to the Cross of Jesus Christ and all your transgressions are forgiven. You and I are two souls destined for

heaven. My determination to lead a good life made me holy, Ali. I've been telling you everything, but you only hear what you want to hear. That is how you missed out on our road map to familyhood together with my sister Angela and my brothers."

"I am impressed, Abby. Why lie? You are an impossible chic, but you deserve the best. I have enough to consult about with my creator, Abigail. If he has forgiven your transgressions, no one will go to hell if they repent. Abby, remember the day I told you that you do not need an army when God is on your side? He will be fighting on your side. Do what you must and leave the rest to Him. While you are busy complaining about life, remember that you have already won many battles. You were once a sperm and an egg among millions, and you won. You won when you pushed yourself through an impossible carnal during your birth and you continue to thrive on this hell on earth. Your parents almost smothered you with towels, diapers, and rompers, heavy hoods to protect you from cold. You never knew the freedom of moving your limbs until after three-plus months. You survived that period they call the terrible two, when at the age of two years, everything was a playing thing whether it was water or fire. You then conquered teenage. You have passed all the don'ts, sex, alcohol, forbidden late-night dancing, sneaking from home and school, stealing, using vulgar language and taking weed. I am not sure about you, but I did all the above with Joel and Twister. Abby, today you are a challenged grown-up with many triumphs. The battles ahead will be much easier. Keep walking, my darling friend," Ali said while thinking of Abigail's great curves that her outfits usually brought out as on a photo she had recently shared on social media.

"Now that you are home with family," he went on, "we should plan to meet when you are back in the city, my girl. My love to all. Lierya is asleep already together with the little princess. I will send you a photo of them in slumber."

"It will be fun to bust her with it when I next meet her. I can see you have already sent it. Ooh my God, you are such a sick head, Ali. Why now, when Lierya's and the baby's mouths are snoring wide open."

"Just for you to appreciate why I am still awake, fearing they will swallow me alive, these two," Ali joked. "What plans do you have on the horizon?"

"I am of the idea to take you to a psychiatrist to tighten your loose wires, Ali. I shall offer to take you and pay the bill," she replied laughing.

“Let it be tomorrow as I test how big that pregnancy is. By the way, we cannot work on your remaining tooth until you give birth, dear. Avoid sugars to save your smile. Green veggies should replace your favourite cake. It worked for Lierya. She is pregnant again.”

“I visited her the other day, Ali. So I already know she is pregnant. You are such a bull. You couldn’t even wait for your firstborn to hit the five-year mark. About meals, I have no choice. I shall be a goat and eat all greens for the next four months, darling boy. Cheers!”

“You better be a goat even in the head so that when you shall take me to see the psychiatrist I would as well taste the forbidden fruits. Cheers, too, Abby.” He did not wait for her reply as usual.

“*Aliiii...*” Abigail laughed at this.

After she was back with the rest, she asked, “What do you guys think about the discussion today? When do we go back to Ethiopia? Must we wait for this guy’s feedback, or we embark on that trip this holiday?”

“See who is talking here,” said Joel accusatively. “Not now Abby and Angie, not as long as you are expecting mothers. How can you venture into a land where we have no idea what food they serve, whether there will be a comfortable place to rest as me and Twister do the searching? Worse still, why would we want to risk losing our babies from the stress and anxiety they might suffer should there not be a good hospital facility nearby? Going to Ethiopia will require that we go there with relaxed minds. We cannot leave you alone for now. Although it will be in your interest Abigail to do the pilgrimage, let’s be patient. We have been without our Ethiopian relatives all this time. One more year to allow time to bear our babies will not change much.”

“I agree with Joe,” said Angela. “We need to be a bit careful now that we are parents-to-be. Bills will be piling up soon, too. We need to have saved before we break the news to our parents that they will soon be grannies.”

After waiting this long to spring a surprise, Abigail said with a sly smile, “Twister has news to share with you.”

“We are expecting a girl and a boy, but we are already fighting about it because I want to name the girl after my lost and late mom while Abigail wants the same for her mom. We had wanted to keep the genders a secret, but this fight had become intense, and we need arbitration,” he explained while holding Abigail’s hand.

“Wow, congrats guys! Give her both the names and name her Gladys Tracy,” Angela advised. “Names have meaning for the one who names the child. You will see your mom, Gladys, in the baby, and Abby likewise her mom, Tracy. And the boy, have you decided or that is another fight?”

“That is a brilliant idea, Angie. That is exactly what we will do. Isn’t it Twister?”

“It is a very brilliant idea, Abigail. I wonder why it never occurred to me. After all, the child is ours even without a name. She can be Gladys Tracy, but because we still have to name the boy, let the girl be Tracy and we name the boy after my dad, Yona. Every child has two parents, and I will look for the guy one day.” He kissed Abigail’s tummy, looking at it like he expected the infants growing inside to respond with a clap. Abigail was happy with the suggestion.

“We should share our gender, too,” Joel announced grinning, not to be outdone. “Ours will be a girl and her name will be Jewel, Angie’s Mom. After all, Tracy has been brought back to life by Abby.” They were interrupted by breaking glasses outside the door. Jewel was just about to walk in to serve them coffee and couldn’t help eavesdropping. As they rushed to help; they found her with tears of joy.

“Why did you guys not mention all this to us? You are of age now, and no one would have fought with you about such good news.”

Hearing the commotion, Blaze and Boris also rushed to help and they, too, became in the know. Then there followed the questions, but the parents could not believe that the three households were now one family. Whatever boundaries there might have been, they had now been breached by the children they had brought up.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

One More Night

TO VISUALISE THE BEAUTY in the dream I have in mind, I do not need the normal kind of dream where I sleep and wait for my subconscious mind to dictate what fiction to see, whether good or bad. Achieving this sweet dream will require a lot of effort, the kind of effort in which the dream and its aim will become one.

Abigail had her departed parents in mind in this thought about the dream she desired. According to Boris, her parents had passed on after being hit by bullets that flew all over the place. That was when he took her and Joel and ran to safety with them.

I know that death is often self-evident sometimes even before we declare people dead – but wait a minute: Who declared my parents dead? Where are their death certificates? Knowledge is power and I learn every day to get better at it. But are these the right questions to ask? I do not even have their birth certificates. At least I have their identification documents now. When I saw their photos on their identity cards, I did not need to read between the lines but read the lines themselves. I now have an idea how my parents looked like, and I know I must have loved them, even as I know that all the ones I love today will eventually leave the world someday. We, too, at some point, death shall come knocking on our door whether we like it or not. It is the only bridge to be with our departed friends and families in the afterlife. For now, it will be up to Joel and me to rise and continue our departed parents' genes and those of our forefathers in the children we both are expecting.

As the reality of the death of her parents took hold of her, she decided to explore the idea of death, not as a trained doctor, but as a layman would likely see it when people die:

There must be something that leaves our body when we die. One such thing must be the energy that gives us breath and keeps the heart pumping and our brain alive. The energy generates heat in our bodies to keep us warm and flexible.

The other energy is the one that gives us buoyancy. The energy that helps one carry their own weight. For example, if one weighs a hundred kilos or fifty, one does not feel that weight as they move around. But when one dies, people find it difficult to lift those hundred or fifty kilos than when the person was alive. This is because the energy has left the body and taken with it its buoyancy, and not because the weight increased that the body feels much heavier to lift.

The energy that protects one from rotting offers an interesting dimension. One can fast for forty days without rotting, but three days after the person dies the body starts to decompose unless preserved.

In defence of the layman and his understanding of death, her train of thought changed to the way she imagined he would justify himself:

We are OK with our beliefs. They serve us fine as yours serve you. All we need is to exist together and have respect for one another. The need to learn more beyond what one knows is to appreciate that we are not all the same. Some dimensions of awareness are more suited for some people than others. It is possible to tap knowledge that is not available to other people. We need to appreciate we are different and not be pulled down by people who do not understand who we are.

I remember my brother Joel telling me our late classmate Byason was not his friend but an enemy he respected. Though he was not my brother's friend for me to care that he had died, his death nevertheless touched me. It reminded me how much I missed my parents. However sick and lame they might be from the bullets of the coup militias, and whether they will be dead or alive, I want to witness their presence or absence.

She shared these thoughts with Joel when she caught up with him as they headed to the hospital wards.

“Sometimes such impossible thoughts cross my mind, too, Abby. Just this morning I wanted to take my kids on a road trip. Then I remembered I was not married yet. I also wanted to build a house, but I had no land nor the money to build it. I wanted to take my wife out for Valentine's, but I remembered I had not even proposed to her, yet she was expecting my baby. To accept that we can't avoid such small personal mistakes is to appreciate we have the ability to learn, unlearn, relearn, and change ourselves. Appreciate this

more often, my dear. And don't look so troubled. I hate to see your beautiful head resting on your hands."

TWISTER DUG into his pocket and removed a ring. "Will you marry me, Abigail?" he proposed.

So inexperienced was he that he had no idea that one knelt when asking his bride-to-be for her hand. He was not alone. Abigail just grabbed the ring and fitted it on her finger, only to realise it was slightly bigger on her finger. The next moment they were hand in hand to the jewellery shop to change the ring. They met Angela on the way, and then with Joel who was shopping for something on Fourth Street.

Abigail explained to them what she and Twister were out to do. Joel dragged his brother Twister away and they disappeared someplace leaving the stranded girls to head home.

"I wish we had no memory of the time so that we find ourselves with no past, present, or future. I would not be overthinking what happened to my parents, or their death and dreamless state, or overthink what moved their minds or made their bodies as emotional as mine. These thoughts make my education wanting, Angie."

"Believing in a high power is easier than combining intelligence and memories that you may never recall about your roots, Abby."

"Nothing else has been occupying my mind lately. I hope we get to the bottom of it soon."

"I am so jealous that you are happy without me, but also grateful that you have found your purpose, my darling Abby."

I had almost forgotten that I was in love with somebody else. Some old habits are hard to die, although they are fading away. I fear that I may be hurting my sister Angie's feelings, especially now that she knows that Twister has proposed to me. I am miles away in wonderland, while what she feels is desertion from me despite having her Joel."

"As we get older, Angie, we begin to zero down on our options. There's a certain pruning that begins to happen. Most of the things we have been doing together we now have to let go. We are now close family members to other entities, our husbands. It is something I also have to keep reminding myself. We are not as hyper as we were just a few months ago. Pregnancy is quite

something, Angie.” Abigail did not want to dwell on their lesbian relationship. They crossed that bridge and now had other things like the families they were making to consider, and there was no turning back.

Abigail took a moment to appreciate the quiet beauty of the blue sky. It did not care whether that people were wowed by it or not. It just happened to be there for those who cared to admire it. *How many times do I dress for others to appreciate? How many times do I show up for others to appreciate my presence? How often do I cook the favourite food of others as I sleep hungry? How many times do I support other people’s projects? How many times do I burn the midnight oil to make others comfortable? When shall I ever stand up for myself? I am a servant to others. I am not ready to soothe any evil in my sister’s mind. Let her deal with her pregnancy and her newfound love, Joel. The girl thing is long buried, and the only death I am unearthing is that of my parents. Period!*

“May you find favour with God, Angie, as you find solace in our new reality,” Abigail said to assure her sister. “Some obstacles are meant to lead us in a different direction, not necessarily to hurt you, Angie. You are now a mother-to-be and a lovely wife to Joel.”

“Thank you, Abby, for reminding me. I feel like I own you. I hate to see anyone near you, but I need to let go now that you are my sister-in-law”

“You can say that again dear sister. Come here. I’ll give you a hug. We need to get home to make dinner. The men will be back soon. I hope the shopping I see you carrying you remembered cooking oil,” Abigail asked as she helped with the bag.

“I did. My memory has not completely faded yet, Abby!” This was a new joke between them now that their pregnancy had left them a bit forgetful.

“May I disappear for a while to see Lierya? I want to inform her that we have crossed the border singlehood as well, Angela.”

“I will go with you. I don’t want to be left in this house alone. I won’t be able to find sleep waiting for you guys, dear.” The real reason she wanted to accompany her sister was because she was also afraid Abigail was struggling with her lesbian feelings. Angela suspected it was the reason she wanted to go to see Lierya.

“No problem, dear, it shall be fun to hang around each other after a while being away from our friend.”

They found Lierya's house flooded with guests. Ali was home and his brother Hassan was there along with his girlfriend, Pally.

The food was more than the guests could ever finish.

"Welcome, girlfriends. It has been a while; you have missed in action a lot. My baby Sussy can tell you guys including Hassan lady Pally are strangers here."
"

"Guilty as charged. We have really been missing in action, Lierya. My name is Abigail, and this is my sister-in-law Angela."

"Come again, what do you mean sister-in-law?" asked surprised.

"Yes, Hassan, this is my sister-in-law Angela. She is now the wife of my brother Joel."

"Dr Joel is your blood brother? When did all this happen? Oh my God."

"A lot has happened," replied Abigail as she explained in detail how everything unfolded after Boris remembered her as the baby he had lost at the South Sudan airport, but who happened to have been with Angela's parents.

"That is how I became Angie's sister. Things have since moved on, and now we are soon-to-be-married couples, Joel to Angela, me to Twister. Also to let you know that our parents are soon going to be called grannies."

"Where have I been when all this has been happening in your lives, girls?" Leirya asked pretending she was hurt as she hugged the girls for the second time since they had walked in. This was just as their men Twister and Joel were entering the door to join the party at Ali's house.

The girls were not aware that it was Leirya, her husband and Joel who had organised the party. It was meant to be a happy surprise in which Joel and Twister would make a marriage proposal to them.

Joel was the one to start.

"Angie, I know you have been brave to say goodbye to your sister Abby's love. That is why life has reciprocated with a reward for you... a boyfriend who is requesting your hand in marriage. Will you marry me, beautiful?"

Angela did not answer immediately and was overcome with tears of joy and slight disappointment to see Twister and Joe dressed to kill for the event while their ladies were simply dressed for what they had thought would be a quiet evening with their friend Lierya.

"Yes," Angela replied between the tears. "I love you Joe, and, yes, I will marry you."

This was followed by a round of applause, as the guests looked towards Twister for more of the same.

But Twister did not seem sure what to tell Abigail. He however was determined to shine as well. He knelt before Abby, who was recovering from the emotional hug he had given the newly committed couple Joe and Angela.

“My darling Abby, if the door closes, quit banging on it. Whatever is left behind it was not meant for you. You are worth so much more than was on your sister and family’s side. I want you to be mine to hold and cherish forever. I promise you that my love shall never age, it shall be with us forever.”

“Nothing is permanent in this world Twister, and we are not immortal either, but your promises are real and very attractive. I will marry you, my handsome dude.”

There was another round of applause as music was turned on to spice the evening. Leirya led the two ladies to her bedroom where they were dolled up for the party. She had earlier that day shopped for clothes that she knew they would love.

The party proved a hit for their university classmates and lecturers who had been invited—every one of their classmates, that is, except Willy.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Zippy Boris

WE ARE SOMETIMES ADVISED not to regret what has already passed, or regret what we failed to accomplish yesterday. But today is a hard day for me and can't forget what I did not do yesterday. My professor expects my assignment, and all I seem to think about is Abigail and taking her to bed. My day is screwed. I may have to copy-paste someone's assignment and make a few changes so as not to be accused of plagiarism.

It was still early in the day when these thoughts were passing through Twister's mind. He told Abigail of his predicament, and she quickly did the wifely thing. He then managed to get hold of his classmate Zippy to assist with the paper. She was usually very thorough with her work. By the time their professor was finishing with his class, Twister had a piece ready to present.

"Thanks for being my saviour today, Zippy. You are the reason I believe there are good people in this universe," Twister said patting her shoulder.'

"Don't be sarcastic, Twister. I have become a good girl for conniving with you, eeeh?" Yet Zippy believed Twister and appreciated the compliment, which made her day. She showed this with the smile she gave him. She, too, needed someone to pour her issues to, and that day she saw in Twister a friend she could share her dark secrets. Twister would not have minded becoming such a friend. He believed that a kind gesture reached deep and could heal wounds that life brought.

"Twister, I would like to buy you a drink after class if you do not mind as payback for agreeing to be involved in your mess this morning," she humorously offered, making them chuckle.

Twister accepted the invitation as Abigail and her brother Joel were to join Boris in a meeting that day with the Ethiopian friend, Mike, whom Boris had

talked about who was to follow up on their parents' extended family in Ethiopia.

"The drink is welcome, Zippy. Where should we hook up? What time?"

"I would suggest a place in my neighbourhood. It is secluded and quite relaxing for a drink. We can hang out there if you don't mind, Twister. It is also an eatery, so you shan't go hungry, dear." This suited Twister just fine. A day away from his wife-to-be Abigail was welcome, though he would never mention being on such a date to her. He knew that was Abigail to find out that he was out with another girl, she would ditch him faster than he knew regardless of whether they were classmates or had just met. This was, however, not going to stop Twister. He was curious to know what Zippy, who appeared lonely, wanted to share with him. She was bookish and was always alone. Twister didn't seem to have ever seen her in the company of someone except her books. And that they spoke to each other it was because they had chanced to sit close to each other in the lecture hall since the first day.

He agreed to her invitation to her neighbourhood joint. It was going to be a welcome distraction from the new things now occupying his life, beginning with the fact that he was a soon-to-be dad and fitting in with his prospective in-laws not to mention the stresses he endured of his lost parents who he hoped would be found.

The gentleman in him persuaded him to show up with a bunch of flowers. He was careful not to carry red roses and send the wrong signal, though he doubted Zippy knew much about flowers. Despite her great brain, it was evident in her manner that she was socially clumsy. Her dress code was off and didn't seem to have an eye for good designs. Twister had also noticed that the clip that held her hair was the same one she used since her first day in college when they began sitting next to each other. Her nails were also unkempt. Twister thought she needed a partner who could improve her self-grooming skills. *Either get a boyfriend, which I hope she does not see a prospect of one in me or join a circle of trendy college girls who will force her to improve her dress code.*

He found her neighbourhood more beautiful than he had expected. He had thought that, just like Zippy, it would lack in style. But it was a nice suburb that he now thought looked better than the neighbourhood he resided with Joel.

He spotted an unoccupied table in the middle of the restaurant he had been directed to and took a seat. He scanned the restaurant to see whether Zippy

had already arrived, but she hadn't. His phone rang. It was Zippy. *Has she changed the venue, or why the call?*

"I saw you walk in," she said on the phone. "I'm seated to your right. I am dressed in yellow." She waved her hand with a broad smile on her face.

Their eyes met. The lady in yellow waving her hand looked dressed to kill. *Am I mistaken? Zippy looking so radiant away from the rags I am used to? What has changed?* Zippy liked her life of simplicity, but the prospect of meeting Twister triggered something in her that, together with the dress, made her radiant in a way he could tell she was not faking it. She had transformed overnight like one suddenly ready to free herself from the limited and bookish life she led.

"You look great Zippy. When did you transform yourself into this magnificent lady, complete with full makeup?" Twister asked as he presented her with the flowers.

"Thank you for the flowers. I had ordered myself a bottle of red wine. What would you like to have?"

"I'll share the wine with you. I am recovering from a night out yesterday. Even a bottle of water would be enough for me."

"This place has great meals," she explained. "They do a very nice beef platter. I would like you to have a bite. They spice it a bit, which should help with your hangover." She called a nearby waiter before she went on to inform Twister of a side of her he had never known. "Twister, I believe that sometimes we limit ourselves not because of our weaknesses but out of fear to discover our potential. I lost my only parent, my mom Waizer, just a few months before joining college. A well-wisher paid my school fees as I waited to register my mother's death so that I could access her wealth, which she left me. My Mom was as reserved as I am. Maybe that is why I do not relate too well socially. It is an area I need to improve. Now I have access to the money, but I need a partner to enable me to withdraw a bigger amount than I am allowed for my normal out-of-pocket expenses. I do not trust my uncles and aunts. I find them greedy and seem determined to leave me in poverty. It is just a polite request, Twister, whether you can fill this gap for me. There will be no strings attached, except as my classmate and friend in crime today."

What a request! This was unexpected, but I am a man. I am expected to do as she requests.

“No worries, dear Zippy. We can do it tomorrow after class. You should not get desperate when I am here. I am also a product of a single mom. Though she had a man, my biological father, he was not well-known to our family. That is why I am not mentioning him, but my foster father told me his name was Yonas. I would think that even in your case there must be a man, a father, involved somewhere. No one was born to a single parent. It is only that one parent does not take responsibility or is denied an opportunity to be part of the child’s upbringing.”

“Thank you, Twister,” she said not caring about her absent dad. “He can go to hell. I am all grown up now,” she thought to herself, then said, changing the subject, “Our class was pushed to noon tomorrow. If it is OK with you, we can be at the bank during the morning hours.”

“Morning sounds good. But I don’t seem to remember hearing the announcement about class at noon. But I guess it is because it wasn’t a good day for me. Speaking of which, Zippy, I am sorry for taking so much of your time with my irresponsibility in working on my assignment today. I appreciated it and it somehow reminded me never to get stuck, stale, or static with stuff. I’ll be there for you. It is a new beginning for you, but we shall do our best to make your transition as smooth as possible,” he assured her.

“I believe so, Twister. Thank you so much for being there for me. Where hard work won’t work, talent will fill the gap. All my life, my strength, and my faith were in my late Mom’s hands. She left me unprepared to survive on my own without her. I think it is for this reason I am a loner. But, Twister, I want to move away from my normal lonely routine.”

“I can relate, Zippy. Everything will fall in place, but it will be up to you to decide where they will fall. Your late mother did what she could because each parent can only offer their offspring what they can. Your mother gave you her best. But if she had to leave, she did not plan her death. It was God’s doing, and you cannot reach either her or God to ask why. Start on your new chapters of life in the remaining part of your journey. You are well able Zippy.”

Even as Twister was giving this advice to Zippy, it occurred to him that her life was much easier than the one he went through with his brother, Joel. Her parents left her a fortune. But that didn’t matter. He would do what he could to help her.

“See you tomorrow, Twister. You will find me waiting for you right here. I hope you enjoyed the meal, despite my bombarding with my troubles.”

“It was great, and I actually look forward to another dinner right here. Enjoy your drink. I couldn’t enjoy it much.”

“No worries, I’ll buy you a bottle tomorrow after the bank. See you Twister.” She hugged him and watched him walk down the well-lit street. She felt comfortable around Twister. She didn’t know why.

Twister was on time to meet her the following morning. He had to pretend he was leaving for an early class to avoid grilling from his brother Joel who might have wondered what Twister was up to. He wanted to update Twister on the outcome of his meeting with Boris and Abigail, which he only did briefly.

“The guy seems to know where our parents came from in Ethiopia,” Joe explained. “He seems to know our grandparents by name, only that he is unsure who Bram is. But he knew there were two sons in that homestead. He would need our parents’ documents to proceed to Ethiopia, which Dad Boris was going to deliver to him. We spent the afternoon discussing our roots with Boris, especially in view of what Mike had explained about our roots. But he did not have the detailed information about the family.” Joel was not yet finished with the update but Twister was already gone.

He found Zippy ready and eagerly waiting for him. He offered to take the wheel as he was the better driver. By noon, they had all they needed to help Zippy access the bank account.

“Dilemma now solved!” exclaimed Zippy, happy that the burden was now off her shoulders. She was now free to be.

“It is hard to find someone telling you that you are complete in your life. Everyone sees something to change in you. I thank you, Twister, for making me believe in myself despite all the weaknesses that kept me afraid to find a solution with my bank. I am so grateful, not just for helping me lift this burden off my shoulders but for the freedom and blossoming that has come with it. The faith you had in me and the sunshine that followed, I will treasure forever. May our God keep an eye on you, my brother.” Zippy appreciatively hugged Twister.

“You are most welcome. Spread your wings now and create the world you desire, Zippy.”

They liked each other’s company so much that they missed the class they were to take at noon. Each texted their excuse to their professor for missing the class, with Zippy writing that she was unwell, and Twister had a running

tummy. Then they sat to have a meal as they joked about the lame excuses they had given.

“I remember one time my three friends lied that they had been involved in an accident on the day they were to take a creative writing exam,” narrated Twister. “They regret their lie to this day. After giving their excuse, they were informed that they could still take the exam but would have to do a different paper to avoid collusion from their classmates who had already completed the exam. Each of the three was allocated a separate room and instructed to answer the following questions in their piece: Who was at the wheel at the time of the accident?

What was the model and colour of the car? Where did the accident happen?

This was an important paper as it was going to be heavily reflected in their final grades. The problem with a lie is that even if you plan it as a team, you may not all share the same understanding of it and would reflect on the paper you present. Because of this, they all failed.”

“Oh my God,” said an alarmed Zippy. “I wouldn’t have known what to write. And I hope this doesn’t happen with us unless the professor expects us to have doctored and nursed our fake illnesses in the same room.”

Their professor never asked them to explain themselves, but they couldn’t avoid the mockery from their classmates who wondered at the coincidence that it happened at the same time for the only permanent desk mates in their class.

ZIPPY’S UNCLES and aunts were surprised to learn that she had decided to administrate her mother’s wealth without including them. She didn’t trust them and knew too much of her relatives’ storms, and the challenges and promises they never kept. They wanted a piece of the wealth her mom had left behind. The only problem was that Zippy did not know the extent of the properties her mom had left her, yet the relatives insisted they wanted her to promise them even what she did not know was part of her inheritance. She decided to ignore them. After a while, some of her relatives tried to curry favour with her and started informing her about things her mother might have owned. This was how she was able to trace all of her mom’s savings and properties.

She finally got to the lawyer appointed to execute Her mom’s will, only to discover that he had already started to transfer some of her mother’s properties to himself.

Twister again saved the day and helped her get another lawyer to claim back the transferred properties and dismiss the crooked lawyer. Chris, the new lawyer, worked with one of the best law firms and happened to have been Twister's classmate in high school. He was quite a handsome young man who nearly made Zippy lose her step in the attraction she felt.

We only live once, and I have every right to enjoy what my mother left behind. It will help turn a new leaf in my life. I want to leave all my disappointment behind and be strong to face the beasts I will encounter in life. I must be very ruthless with them. I will fight and win these battles for Mom and me, come rain or sunshine. Zippy had vowed this to herself one evening alone in her house as she sipped wine preparing for bed.

ONE OF THE ZIPPY'S maternal aunts, Aunt Purity, invited her for a drink one day. The aunt informed her that she had a father and that it would be good if she got to know him because the challenges she faced needed someone she could trust by her side to lend her a hand. Her father's name was Boris. The aunt informed her of a DNA test her mother, Waizer, had done and requested Aunt Purity to keep the results. This was just before the accident that took Waizer's life. Aunt Purity was to look for Boris in case anything happened to Waizer to let him know he had a daughter.

"Now that your mother is gone, you should accompany me to meet your dad," Aunt Purity told her niece. "Your mom's desire was for you to find your dad and establish a father-and-daughter relationship. It might seem she had a premonition of her death and wanted you to have someone trustworthy to look after you."

The sudden knowledge that she had a father she had never known about had left Zippy shocked. "Where has this dad been all my life?" she asked in disbelief. "Could it be that he was never allowed to be part of his family, as Twister had once hinted, or he was a deadbeat dad? Why did mom keep him a secret? Where is this dad?"

"Your mom wasn't sure he was your father until they met years later, and she saw the opportunity to take a few strands of his hair for DNA testing. The tragic accident that took her life happened before she could tell you or your father Boris of the results. Fortunately, she had left me with the result in case of anything."

“We cannot wait for tomorrow, Aunt Purity. Just call this dad Boris guy now. I need to meet him to understand why he has been away for this long.”

“He is at his home and ready to receive us, Zippy. It is forty minutes’ drive there.”

They got into Aunt Purity’s car and, being a very fast driver, they arrived in a shorter time. They entered the seating room where they found the man relaxing alone by the fireplace with a glass of whisky in his hand.

Boris pleasantly stood up to hug them. They were already acquaintances with Purity and were happy to see each other after a while. He used to frequent Zippy’s grandma’s house to visit Waizer. Purity was still a young girl then, but the closest sister Waizer had.

When Zippy had a problem with her aunts and uncles over her mother’s property, Purity had been out of the country for two years. She had just come back not many days before the meeting that day.

“Hello beautiful ladies? What is the burning issue that should force you to visit at this hour? Not to worry, I am happy to have you. Something to drink?” Boris asked pointing at a variety of expensive brands.

Zippy made a quick introduction only giving her first name and seemed eager to explore the large sitting room as Aunt Purity explained to Boris why the night visit, even as they caught up with each other about where each had been all those years. By looking around, Zippy wanted to see the portraits on the wall that might include Boris’s family members. It was then she noticed a photo of him with two boys. One of the boys was Twister. Is this the Dad Boris Twister had told me about? And *does it mean I am Twister’s sister?*

Aunt Purity delivered the news to a shocked Boris that Waizer had died in a road accident.

“Oh my God, when did it happen? And why didn’t anybody inform me so that I could pay my final respects to my old love, Purity?” He remembered the good time he had had with the late Waizer. They had met at his former place of work twenty years before where Boris was a panellist conducting interviews for an employment position she had applied for. He liked the way she had expressed herself and fell in love with her. But he wanted to recruit her into the department he headed, not because she was the best candidate but because of a small unrelated incident. As he was welcoming her into the interview room, she tripped at the door and fell into him, forcing him to briefly hold her. This left Boris with a feeling he could not shake of wanting her. He ended up

recommending her for the position and befriended her in the process. They became happy lovers and partied together all the time. They were known to both their families, such that everyone had been expecting the announcement of their wedding at any moment. But the wedding never came. He paused in his recollection to repeat, "I don't understand why nobody informed me about her passing."

"That is not why I am here – I am not here to explain why you were not invited to bury your love. I am here to tell you that you had a daughter together. This girl Zippy is your daughter Boris. Here is the DNA report Waizer left with me to share with you. The last time you guys met she took a sample to do the DNA test."

As he read the DNA results, he became emotional to realise that he had a child of his own. He felt like his selfless bringing up of his two sons Joel and Twister had rewarded him with a daughter.

"This was unexpected and truly very good news," he said letting a tear of joy roll down his cheek. He always suspected he had them but didn't know of any child he had sired. But he had also feared that it was his unfertile fate to shoot blanks with all the women he had been with. Hearing about Zippy was therefore special.

Resuming in his recollection, he remembered that his love for Waizer was interrupted when he moved to Africa and lied to her that he got married because she had refused to move there with him.

This left Walzer feeling betrayed and was never able to have the deep feelings of love she previously had for Boris. She may not have realised it, but she was already pregnant by then, even she immediately decided to move on with another lover on the rebound. But neither did this last and though she had suspected Boris may be responsible for the pregnancy, she was OK with being a single parent.

In the meantime, Boris was hesitant to have a woman in his life, which had a lot to do with his lifestyle as a serial womaniser, in addition to his joy and satisfaction adopting and raising his two boys.

Each moment has its value. Might this have been what Boris was thinking in the house where he was relaxing with a glass of whisky by the fireplace? What was certain was that afternoon came, and he had his lunch knowing that it would be a day well spent. What he did not know was how it would end because

by that evening he had been pronounced the deserving father of the beautiful Zippy.

“Come here beautiful and officially meet your dad. My name is Boris. Not that I am an irresponsible dad. If anything, I have single-handedly brought up two boys. If I had known I was a dad already, I would have long come for you to beautify this den. I am so sorry to have missed the beautiful opportunity of seeing my girl grow up. I hope you shall forgive me for not insisting on keeping your mum by my side. She never once mentioned we had a daughter together. I am sorry again she has now left us. I have no one to pick this fight with but to take over from where she has left. You so much resemble your mom Waizer. I see in you the young her. I now regret that I did not value my relationship with her enough, nor shared moments I had with Waizer. And now she has become a memory, but one with a beautiful legacy in the daughter she has left behind. I wish she had not kept this secret away from me. I wish I had followed up on my relationship with her, especially because I sometimes felt overwhelmed bringing by my two boys.”

Boris may have been adventure-seeking that nothing, including a traditional family with a wife, could come between him and exploring the world but little did he know that sometimes that which one feared most was usually the same thing one attracted. He didn’t get the wife he now wished he had in Waizer, but he was now dad to three grownups, Joel, Twister, and Zippy.

“Thanks, Dad. I have always missed a male figure in my life, especially now when I feel so vulnerable following up on the inheritance mom left behind. There are just too many wolves salivating at the wealth she left me. It would have been difficult dealing with it had it not for Twister, who until now I thought a friend,” she paused and pointing to the portrait on the wall, added, “I am surprised to see him in that family portrait. The last thing I would have expected was that he was a brother. He is my classmate and the guy helping me with stuff out there. When Aunt Purity told me about you, I insisted on coming to meet you though it was late at night.”

“You are welcome, dear. Nothing should overwhelm you anymore. You now have your dad to fight your battles for you, probably until a husband comes along to replace him.” This sounded funny, making them chuckle. “Twister is your first cousin; his late mom Gladys and I are blood siblings. Meeting a sibling you never expected as you with Twister happens all the time. Maybe you had a third eye to guide you to your cousin Twister. I don’t know.

He is now engaged to my other son Joel's sister, Abigail. Joel is the other one on the portrait you were pointing at. Twister and his wife are expecting twins soon. His wife Abigail is a medical doctor. And, now, with you in the picture, we have three families with a shared history. So, if you had an eye on Twister, you would have to search for another suitor, my darling girl. His brother Joel is taken too.”

Old people tend to keep information. If you wish to know secrets about your ex or current love, just visit the grannies of the family and you might leave them suffering with high blood pressure, and probably holding divorce papers to serve. The grannies might disclose to you all the people your lover had befriended throughout their lifetime and who they thought would have married them. They do not give a damn whether the topic was too sensitive to hurt your feelings or whether it sends you packing. To the aged, things about their past is the gold they like to remember as they live their diminishing future one day at a time.

“Wow!” Zippy exclaimed after the thought about grannies’ knowledge of such things passed through her mind. “I am so excited to learn that Twister is my cousin. Thank God we did not meet a bit earlier, or we would have engaged in all manner of relationships. I am pleased to have a dad ready to protect me. I have brought with me all the documents I had about Mom. Her death has been devastating. I already feel relieved being with you, Dad.”

“No one will dare touch you while I am still alive, dear. Put any sense of insecurity you might have behind you. I shall protect everything Waizer left you. It is all yours. I am not a poor man, dear. If anything I shall add you more, my girl,” Boris bragged.

Zippy heard none of what Boris said as she recovered from the information her dad gave to her about Twister. *Despite being a cousin, he was in a stable relationship and a dad soon! Men shall always be men,* she concluded.

BETHROW, BORIS’S LONG-TIME FRIEND with whom they lived together, returned to the house with takeaway food they had ordered earlier. Boris had forgotten to call him to buy more food on his way. But that didn’t matter now. Boris found it exciting that this was the first meal he was sharing with his daughter, Zippy.

“My sons are away. I kindly request you to spend a night with us. This is my friend Bethrow. We reside together. Life has been very lonely without the boys.”

Purity was a bit hesitant to spend the night, but Zippy was determined to spend the night under her father’s roof for the first time. Purity reluctantly decided not to let down her niece, and it turned out to be one of their happiest nights. Boris did not want Zippy to ever leave his side and insisted she live with him alongside Purity.

Aunt Purity had no child of her own, making Zippy the baby of the home, as the boys already had their homes. As time passed, Boris would deliver on his promise and fight the crooks and crooked relatives who tried to mess with his daughter. Thanks to her cousin Twister and Aunt Purity, life was looking good for Zippy once again.

“HELLO TWISTER. Guess whose daughter I am?” Zippy surprised him at school the next morning after the first night at her father's house. It was still very early and they had some time to spare before class. Zippy removed the photos they took together with Boris and displayed them for Twister to view. “I am your Dad Boris's daughter,” she reported giving him a brotherly hug.

“What are you talking about, Zippy? How could this be, how does he know?”

“Yes, he does know. I spent the night in your house and saw the family portrait. That is how I also came to know that you are engaged to a lady called Abigail and you are already expecting twins. He was quick to mention we are first cousins, in case I had thoughts on you. Your late mom Gladys and Boris are siblings.” Zippy insisted on telling him everything she had learnt.

“All this drama we find ourselves in was started by your mom Gladys when invited my Dad Boris to Africa. He wanted to take my mom Waizer with him there, but Mom was not keen to go with him, and they drifted apart after the quarrel that ensued. He finally made it to Africa, where he was received by his sister Gladys, your mom. She immediately hooked him up with her male colleague, who helped Boris settle down. My mom argued her house was clouded with a baby in the picture, but she had a man already, the man she loved. She did not want to expose him to family circles, for there was an unfolding drama with his family wanting him to marry from his village. She did

not think the relationship had a bright future. It was a meaningful relationship to the couple but not meaningful at all to the traditional parents who had better ideas for their son. Why am I telling you stories about your late mom, Twister?

"I know the story about my mom. Don't you worry Zippy. What surprises me is that we are cousins. I can tell you that, until now, I was very determined to taste the forbidden. Why has this revelation come just when you were about to reward me for the good work I have done so far, my cousin Zippy?" Twister asked smiling.

"Thank God this has happened before we could mess up. I loved you a lot, too. I can also tell you that I, too, was thinking about the forbidden and will confess that I was thinking a one-night stand would have been a good start. That we are related is a matter of chance, not of choice, Twister. My parents, Boris and Waizer, never lived together. I was destined never to share a roof with both my parents living together. The only sad thing is that mom is no longer here to see me unite with my dad."

"This, however, must be very good news for Boris. I always prayed that he gets a family of his own for being kind to me and my brother Joel. At least he will not age feeling alone because I know you will always be there for him, Zippy."

"I think that has already been taken care of. He now has a wife - my maternal Aunt Purity, who was the one who informed me of him as my dad. It was she who took me to his house, where we spent the night. I am happy to report that she does not plan to leave our bachelor dad's side, which he heartily agrees with."

"And all this happened last night, Zippy?"

"Neither can I believe it. I am as surprised as you are."

"I have to get my brother we head home to see what is happening for ourselves. Dad Boris must have changed a lot since the last time we met him. Women were never on his radar; he was too busy with us. Maybe we were always the stumbling block for him to get a wife. Marriage must now be possible, not to mention that your Aunt Purity is an old friend from back then."

Twister was careful not to mention ugly things about his Dad Boris's life now that he was in love again.

"I'll be the one to cook you dinner next time. And it will be in our dad's house. I took over your bedroom, which I understand you guys gave up to sleep in the stores when you were teenagers," she laughed.

“It is true, Zippy. But that is behind us now and I am sure Joel's bedroom has been taken over by Bethrow.’

“And who is this Bethrow guy?”

“He is a family member now. He has been hanging around Dad for ages. His butt needs to be kicked to make him get a life or get back his home if nothing else. I don’t think he will have a future in that house, now that your Aunt Purity is the new woman of the house.’

“I would think so, too. But he is a very handsome guy. I wish he was younger. I would happily inherit him. At his age now he can only be a liability to me. I am kidding; do not take this home.”

“Bethrow is not just handsome but is also a beautiful soul. He has been our second dad all we’ve known him. I wish he had a family of his own as well, poor guy. His is a sad story, which I have to narrate from the very beginning:

He once mentioned having had a family - a wife and two daughters. The family was happy and the wife worked with a car dealer company. She was a mechanical engineer. They met at her company where he had gone to buy his first car, a black Ford. The lady Tinea was so hands-on with the cars that he looked for every excuse with the car so that he could see Tinea. Bethrow finally won her and wasted no time to wed her. When their first baby came it became a hassle for Tinea to work at her company and at the same time manage chores at home. Bethrow became the breadwinner as Tinea took care of the baby. Two years later, another baby followed. By then, Bethrow's dad had decided to share his wealth and allocated Bethrow land with a beautiful forest. He decided to surprise his family with a state-of-the-art home. He took a loan and added it to his savings to build the home. He invited his family and friends and intended it as a surprise for his wife.

But when he sent a driver to bring her and their two daughters after the guests had arrived and waiting for them, he found Tinea not ready. She had decided to take her time, not knowing that this was a surprise party. She wanted the children to first enjoy their afternoon nap before starting the journey to the party so that the children would not be too cranky to enjoy it when they arrived. All she knew was that it was her husband's office party. She, therefore, had expected everyone would be busy mingling, including her husband. She thought it would be a technical appearance for her before she headed back home.

Finally, the kids were awake and ready to go. Her first daughter insisted on the front seat with the driver. After a long fight, the mother and driver buckled up the girl in the front seat to save time, as it was an hour's drive to the farm.

Bethrow, in the meantime, could not wait any longer as he had to show the guests around. He was, therefore, all smiles moving through his large home which featured an extension wing for young ones and had five ensuite bedrooms. The kitchen opened to the dining room and was so elegant that any woman would have died to own it.

This was except that, as fate would have it, Bethrow's wife died before she could see all that. The accident happened just a few kilometres from her house. The daughter who had insisted on sitting at the front decided that she now wanted to move back seat and sit with her mother and was very hysterical about it. This forced the driver to try and unbuckle her so that she could hop into the back seat. Distracted, the driver didn't see an oncoming truck that had lost control and heading straight at their vehicle. The mother and daughters, perished in an instant. It was the driver who narrated this to Bethrow, before he died from injuries of the accident the following day.

Bethrow was never the same and never set foot back to the beautiful home he was boastfully showing to his guests.

"That is a very sad story, Twister. Nobody can tell that Bethrow has been such a heartbroken man for so long. I wonder how he managed to be a second father to you guys after his family tragedy. Would that not have constantly reminded him what he missed of his dead daughters? May God rest his family in peace," Zippy tearfully prayed for Bethrow.

"I know. Bethrow always remembers the birthdays of his wife and children and one of the daughter's birthday coincides with mine. Anyway, welcome to the family, Zippy. Now you are more equal than I am at Boris's house. I have a surprise for you. The lawyer guy, Chris, is in love with you. He wants you to visit him one of these fine days. I hope you'll be dressed to kill like that night we had dinner together. Yes, I am engaged to Abigail, and I have no intention to replace her, although, as a man, I was very determined to have you as my sideshow. Thank God we discovered in time that you are a family member."

"I love you a lot, too, Twister. We shall forever be family. Come with the whole clan. I shall cook for you. Tell the lawyer I look forward to meeting him

though he has lost my account to Dad Boris's lawyer," Zippy said, excusing herself to prepare for class.

ABIGAIL IN THE MEANTIME was having something of a mental breakdown at the turn of events:

"My day is now completely disarranged with the unfolding drama after receiving a call from Twister about Dad Boris's sudden arrangement to host dinner with his new family members. Nothing seems to go my way. These dictators who have just popped up in my life are just too many to handle at once. The only person I cared to run my life has been my sister Angie. With my brother Joe now in the picture, she is no longer there for me.

"Twister is no better. I now have to report every slight movement I make to him. He is the boss of my life under the pretext of protecting his wife.

"Dad Boris has become something else. When he misses his boys and wants them, I am the one to track them down for him.

"Mom Jewel and Dad Blaze, ever since their daughter Angela got pregnant, I have to give them a daily progress report. I wonder why they cannot directly call her number.

"I know now that her pregnancy and the emotional imbalance it sometimes brings probably don't allow her to stand our parents' nagging, even if it was them who gave her life. Nothing is normal for her. She is too overwhelmed, and the easiest target to vent on is her parents, Jewel and Blaze.

"When Angie experiences any slight discomfort, it falls on me to explain why as her doctor on call 24/7. 'You are the family doctor whether you like it or not and whether you have graduated or not,' she argues.

"But she needs to toe the line. Joe is her new boss. He is a man. He cannot play the role of the woman I played in her life. No matter how Angie may twist what she feels because of pregnancy, my brother Joe is no pushover. Everything in his life, including Angie, must align in a certain order. Joel tells Angela that the moment she chooses indiscipline, she should say goodbye to success. He emphasises that success is anchored on hard work and good planning. It doesn't matter whether Angie is pregnant. Her schoolwork must be finished on time. He sits with her in bed, on the floor, on the table, and in the car to make sure she completes what she has to do. Life has been hell for her. Her life is better structured now. I admire her. Because Twister does not

seem as keen with me as his brother with his wife. Twister's motto seems to be 'Die with your work or quit... life shall turn out just fine.'"

The weather suddenly changed. Abigail wanted to first beat the cold with a hot cup of ginger tea. She served herself and filled another cup which she handed her sister Angela in a show of her love for her. She was happy to sit and drink the tea with two muffins, as was the tradition in her house. The babies growing in their stomachs craved the muffins, too. Even when it was cloudy, they knew the sun would always find its way to shine, knowing also that their moms would be great mothers.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Light After Dawn

“MY DEAR PURITY,” said Boris just after she and Zippy had moved in with him. “I have to dash out for something I need to do. My daughter seems quite excited and has already invited family guests even before she has settled down. Could you assist her with the arrangements as she organises food for the guests? She has sent me to bring some items. I’ll be right back to treat you guys to lunch. Thanks for the breakfast. Your skills in the kitchen are top-notch. I am happy to be with you, Purity.”

“Thanks, Boris. I hope I’ll make you a good companion,” she replied shyly as she gave him a tender peck on the forehead to see him off.

The peck seemed to tickle Boris. Such little gestures of gratitude and intimacy had not happened to him in a long time.

As for Purity, she had always fantasised about Boris being her husband. He was the first guy she ever admired since she was a child. At that young age, she always wondered why he should choose her mean sister Waizer. She knew her sister was a double dealer who two-timed him with another guy, who eventually ditched her. The guy died shortly after and was still single as far as Purity knew. She remembered this even now so many years later and imagined Waizer, after the accident that took her life, being in a hurry to join the guy in the afterlife before she lost him to another soul up there in heaven.

But imaginations aside, Boris was Purity’s dream come true. They had a big age gap between them but they complemented each other very well. She was contented and he was happy with his newfound love. The real catch, however, was his daughter. Zippy knew her Aunt Purity would henceforth shield him from the women who often tried their luck with the sexy Boris. Though Purity had her influence on him, Boris credited his daughter’s warm presence with much of the vibrancy his life had re-acquired. This seemed to chase away his ageing self, making him feel young again.

As he drove, Boris gave his phone voice prompts to call his friend Mike to find out when they should hook up so that he may hand him Tracy and Bram's documents. He could have sent him the copies, but he wanted to discuss with

him what he needed for his flight and stay in Addis Ababa, also in Tracy and Bram village as he traced their roots.

"I am already waiting for you Boris. I am in the restaurant at your favourite Italian joint."

The mention of the restaurant reminded Boris of the unpleasant incident there when he physically beat up the two naughty women who had messed with his boys those many years before.

"I shall be joining you in a few, Mike."

"Not to worry, I am in another meeting, Boris. You might arrive before I am done. You're most welcome."

Boris decided to first pass by the supermarket to buy the items Zippy had sent him for the dishes she was preparing for the family guests – her newfound brothers and their wives. Thinking about this as he parked the car, he felt that life had rewarded him when he had least expected it. What might have been an empty nest now had a daughter who was already making his boys come to visit him. His appetite had previously been low, but Purity and Zippy's home-cooked meals had brought it back.

Boris bought his daughter a pink giant teddy bear and new bedding together with the things she had sent him. As he was paying, he remembered he now had a woman in the house and had not bought her anything. He, however, could not think of a fitting gift with which to impress his bride.

"Excuse me a minute, Madam Cashier. I have a woman in the house, oh my God. What can I buy her? I haven't done this for a very long time. She is my newfound love."

"It is not too busy at this time, Sir. I can help you pick an item for her. Do you know her size we do a ring, Sir?"

"I have been with her only a few days now. I can't even remember whether her nails have colour or not. What a mess." They both laughed.

The young lady was tickled by this, and also by the age at which this man was dating again. Had Boris known what she was thinking, he might have told her that age is sometimes just a number. She may be young and able to date, but this old man had just found himself a soul mate in Purity. As for the young lady, she had not been lucky with men. The two she had dated had deserted her and got married to other women. The current one she was dating was such a liability that she was almost giving up.

“Not to worry, Sir, let's pick a bouquet of flowers. Buy her fresh bedding; women appreciate such gifts. Get her a fancy nightgown and a cologne. This goes well with women. It is seductive. You can try it, Sir. When I look at the photo, you have shown me, she is a lady of good taste. You will be a happy man.”

“I hope so, young lady. Women nowadays are so hard to please. Perfect gifts, young lady. You are a genius. You have settled the deal for me. Pick something for yourself as well. It will be my gift to you.”

“Thank you, Sir, a cologne shall do. Let's get back to the till.”

HE FINALLY went to meet his friend Mike.

“Hi Boris, I want to request a favour from you, brother,” said Mike even before they had finished with the greetings. “I will be receiving a guest from my country just before my departure tomorrow. He is not conversant with this place, and he is here for just a short time. I wanted you to be there with me when I receive him so that you drive him to our office to meet with my boss. He is on an exchange program for a government project. He will be staying at my house, where you will take him after his meeting. My wife will be expecting him. She is expectant. That is why I did not ask her to help with this. I hope that will not be too much for you, Boris.”

“Anything for you, Mike. What you are doing for me will take more sacrifice than this small errand with your guest. I'll do that for you. What time should we be at the airport?”

“11 a.m. should be good. My departure is at 2 pm. I will leave you with him and check in. I hate this idea of international flights keeping us for almost two hours before departure.”

“It is annoying, but the procedure has to be followed, Mike. See you tomorrow. My love to the family.”

“See you, Boris. About the expenses, you can put the amount in my account. Here are the details.”

“I'll transfer the money immediately. But, sorry, Mike, I should have already told you. I have found myself a wife and a daughter, and because of this, my head is ticking home. I had a daughter with Waizer that I never knew I had. I hope you remember Waizer. She had never mentioned the girl to me. She showed up a few days ago with the aunt, Waizer's sister. The sad news is that

Walzer died in a road accident. Her sister, Purity, whom I knew as a little girl is now a grown-up woman. I persuaded her to be my wife, and the feeling was mutual. I am just from the supermarket shopping for gifts for the two. My two sons are also coming for dinner to see their new mom.”

“Sorry to hear about Waizer. But on the bright side, it has come with very good news, Senior Bachelor Boris. You will now understand why we always keep a woman by our side. It is not because they are the easiest to be with, but because they are everything in a home.”

“It has already begun to show. In the few days they have been there the transformation in that home has been amazing, I must have foregone much of life without a wife, but I have no regrets. I lived the best I knew how. Once again, thank you for filling this gap for me, Mike. I’ll forever be grateful.

BY THE TIME he returned home, he found that Zippy had already brought her things, which surprised Boris with their colourfulness in the room they had been placed. He had not seen such warm and feminine colourfulness in a long time. His boys usually wore blue, grey, or brown. Now all the rainbow colours radiated in the house. It was a good thing the lady at the supermarket had persuaded him to change the colours he had picked for Zippy and Purity’s bedding. The one he had picked for his daughter was a boring blue duvet. But how could he have known, he was just a man, an old one at that.

“I need to pass by my house to dress up Boris,” Putity informed him later that day. “I have no clothes here. My house must have missed me. I haven’t slept out in a long time.”

“I’ll take you to collect your things, dear Purity. We agreed to spend the rest of our lives together, now that I missed out on your sister Waizer. May her soul rest in peace.”

“Zippy, how do you like your dad taking in Aunt Purity's hand in marriage?”

“That shall be so wonderful, Dad. You need a companion. After all, I shall be here but for a while. You never know, I might get a job away from here after my graduation. So will the boys. Having Aunt Purity shall give you a life companion. You have done a good job raising two men and are now shaping your daughter's life. We love you so much, Dad, and you deserve the best. Purity is as pure as her name. You will be blessed to have her in your life.”

“I was expecting you to be offended Zippy,” said Aunt Purity. “So, thanks a million.”

“Why would I be angry Auntie? It is not in my space to decide who my dad should love or marry. With you, I shall have an auntie and a mom rolled into one. I like that idea a lot.”

“I hope you guys will give me this week before I move in as a new member of the Boris household,” Purity requested. “I need to clean my house as I finish with an office assignment in the next two days, then pack my stuff. This will allow you two a bit of privacy to know each other better, my darlings.”

“That’s in order, Aunt Purity. I hope you don’t keep Dad waiting for too long. It is you he needs more time with, not me. I have a free week after tomorrow and would like Dad to assist me in following up on Mom’s affairs.”

“I like that. I am also very determined. I love Boris very much. It is unfortunate I hadn’t met him sooner, but all is well. Boris, you have your daughter all by yourself after lunch. I’ll be a call away in case I am needed.”

“Thank you, Purity. I am pleased to hear that you cared. I never thought I would love again after leading a bachelor’s life for so long. But remember my family is coming for dinner and it will be great to meet you guys. A day’s delay for you, dear Purity, will not make your house scream at you that you have neglected it. I want you to meet my sons and their women if you do not mind. I like the colours on my bed, Purity. You don’t want me to be on that bed alone, yet the bedding was meant for you, darling Purity?”

“Oh my God, I had forgotten they were mine, Boris. I’ll certainly sleep in that bed tonight with you, dear.” Purity hugged him as Zippy joined in embracing both of them.

They cooked all the tasty dishes each could think of to impress the boys. They had already made a few changes in the dining room setup: the dining table was now arranged facing the gardens. To Boris, this was an example of how a woman made all the difference in a nest she meant to keep. It was going to make for a warm welcome for the sons and their mates.

When the guests arrived, Zippy, for a second, felt intimidated at the sight of the angels accompanying the boys. The girls, Abigail and Angela, looked a million bucks. They deserved respect and were dressed to kill. They looked like two very beautiful dolls. They were also careful with their words and were good at paying compliments to other women. They hugged the women, before

taking their time to know the ladies, first their names and then how it felt to live with Dad Boris.

“Has it been tough out there in the wilderness without Mom Waizer or Dad Boris?”

“How is school life? Is Twister a good student or a joke?”

“Now that Aunt Purity is the new mom, what are her plans to support Boris.”

“How do you feel now that you belong to a crowded home with three other families, the Twisters, the Joels, and the Borises?”

They struck the two new family members as sweet girls. They took their time to make sure Zippy was comfortable around them. Joel was also such a gentleman. He had a character of his own and looked so unbelievably in charge. He made Aunt Purity feel welcome as he showed her around while laughing about the small things now in the family that should have happened ages ago but had occurred only two days before. He told Aunt Purity he was offended that she was so late in entering Boris's life, but that she was more than welcome. He accepted that he had no business who did what with whom or what remained to be accomplished. He was soon busy setting up the table and joking with Dad Boris who, for a moment, was by himself as Bethrow helped with the final touches on the table. He – Twister – believed that the purpose of life is to live it, taste and experience it to the utmost while embracing newer and richer experiences. Finally, they sat for dinner as Dad Boris narrated his experience of being a dad to the two orphaned boys. No tears rolled that day, as the boys had now found refuge in their beautiful wives.

Twister in the meantime thought that Zippy was lagging and ought to be serious with Chris, the lawyer. Life never did wait for anyone. Opportunities should be grabbed as they come.

The girls cleared the tables, and the boys served drinks. Bethrow had freshened up the store the boys used to live in when they were teenagers. All the men, except Boris, would be sleeping there that night. The two girls, Abigail and Angela, would sleep in Joel's room. Aunt Purity has already added colour to the room.

Zippy surprised them with a huge breakfast the next morning. She had already arranged the table and crafted a five-star breakfast from Boris's shopping. She had not told her dad what the shopping list was about, but its results left everyone happy. Abigail and Angela were quick to congratulate

Zippy for the tasty dishes, which they promised to reciprocate one day soon. Time was not on their side. It is a school day for all the young people, including Zippy. They left together, promising to visit again over the weekend.

Purity to follow up with her office as she had said. All the cleaning up was left for the family chef, who was called over when there was the need for him, such as that morning. Boris headed to the airport to meet up with Mike before his departure to Ethiopia. He dropped Purity at her home on his way but took a moment to see the inside of her house. He was curious to find out whether there were another man's items lying about in the house. After being let in, he ransacked the drawers and wardrobes. Purity stood speechless as she followed him around watching him mess with her stuff. He dropped everything on the floor, not caring about Purity's feelings.

"I want you busy doing nothing else today, Purity, but packing all this stuff. I am coming back to pick you up. I will pick you up in the evening; I won't take any excuse that you have stuff to do. You are now my wife. Other formalities shall follow," Boris told a startled Purity and drove off to the airport. He was very pleased that there was no sign of competition for his love Purity.

He met Mike, and they both went to receive his guest. Had Purity been there, she would have observed how men appear easy with each other. Unlike many women, there was nothing to admire to score points about each other. It was always a quick glance at each other and they went straight to the business of the day. The guest was a shy slim guy in his forties. They exchanged high-fives with Mike, as Boris watched the introductions.

"Meet my friend Boris. He will show you around. You will be fine with him, but I have to check in now for my flight."

"My name is Akim. Nice to meet you, Boris."

"Nice to meet you too Akim."

"Boris will show you around," Mike explained ready to leave, "You will be fine with him, but I have to check in now for my flight."

"Welcome to Britain," said Boris. "I hope it was not a very tiring trip. Let me help with the bags," Boris offered taking the trolley.

But he suddenly stopped disbelieving what he had just seen at the corner of his eye. It looked like the familiar beautiful face of a person he knew well. Mike, who was about to leave, stopped in his tracks.

“Oh! Oh my God,” Boris called, almost in a shout. “Is that Gladys, I am seeing?!”

Boris let go of the trolley, leaving a startled Mike and Akim as he sprinted to meet the unconcerned lady walking towards him pushing a travelling box. Akim was, in the meantime, sprinting to catch the trolley which was rolling down a service incline with his bags.

“Gladys, is that you? You mean you have been alive all this time?” Boris asked her, again almost shouting as he spoke. “Boris, you have been alive all this time,” he asked in similar disbelief, “and the way I had all these years believed that I lost you during that South Sudan unrest,” Gladys screamed as she dropped the box to tightly embrace her sobbing brother. “I had no courage to face my parents after I lost you, Boris, my mum’s son. You remember my son, Twister, I lost him, too, and his dad Yonas died on that very day. It has been hell for me, Boris.”

“Come on Gladys. Let’s sit in the restaurant.” They held hands as Mike picked up Gladys’s box and placed it on Akim’s trolley, very confused about what was happening with Boris and the woman in tears. The two clearly looked like they needed time alone.

“I have no time, Akim,” Mike said urgently looking at the time. “I need to check in immediately. Kindly sit in the hotel not far from them. Here is Boris’s phone number. You are expected at the office three hours from now. If they take too long, he can help you get a cab. There will be someone to receive you at the office and at my house once you are done. I have to check in now. I do not want to interrupt them. They look absorbed in something serious.”

“Have a safe trip, Mike; Ethiopia is cold this season. Take my coat; it could shield you from the cold as you move around. Call me when you get home. I shall hang in here and wait for Boris. Maybe the lady is his lost love. Let them catch up. I will hold the lady’s bag. I have to wait for them either way.”

“All the best Akim. Everything should go smoothly. Have a good stay and thank you for the coat. I had forgotten to pack one.”

Akim followed Mike with his eyes until he disappeared into the check-in lobby. He went into the hotel and took a seat next to Gladys and Boris’s table. They were too engrossed in their discussion to notice him. He tried to eavesdrop. He got himself a cup of tea to calm his anxiety, not knowing whether Boris would be available to him at all.

“HOW DID you survive, Gladys? I accidentally came across your son Twister on the plane and took him from the stranger taking care of him. It was the man who informed me he rescued the boy after finding his mother dead!”

“Wait a minute! You mean my son is alive and living with you, Boris?! Oh my God! And the way I have suffered looking for him everywhere all these years. I have never stopped looking for Twister.” Gladys was crying freely at the happy discovery. “Tell me more, Boris!”

“I made it to the airport, but I had given a lift to a black couple that lost their lives from flying bullets as we approached the airport. I escaped with their two children, Joel and Abigail. Though I initially lost Abigail, we reunited a few months ago after twenty years.”

“Wait a minute. Who were the parents to the children Boris?”

“They were my neighbours, and from the documents I retrieved their names were Tracy and Bram.”

Upon hearing the names, Gladys started loudly screaming like one who had lost her mind. Everyone in the hotel thought something awful had happened to her.

Boris was confused. He didn’t know what had suddenly happened to his sister Gladys.

In the meantime, Tracy and Bram were seated at a corner in the same hotel where Gladys was to find them. They had watched her enter the hotel with a man with whom she seemed engaged in a serious conversation. They decided to let her finish with him before alerting her where to find them. And now what sounded like an anguished scream. They thought that the man had probably broken tragic news about her family. They left their tea and rushed to comfort their friend, Gladys. Tracy's phone started ringing. It was Gladys. She held back her husband, Bram, not to rush in until she had heard what Gladys was saying.

“Hello Tracy, I have the best news for you. I am with my lost brother Boris, your former neighbour back then in Juba. He has all our kids, now all grown-up,” she reported half crying and and half laughing with joy.

Tracy thought she was not hearing her right or she was hearing what she wanted to hear. She passed the phone to her husband, Bram, and remained speechless.

After a moment of listening to Gladys, he started shouting his joy with tears running down his face. His trousers whose belt was not securely sagged, nearly exposed him. He was like David in the Bible when he danced for the Lord after one of his major victories. The couple ran to where Gladys was standing, as Boris sat unable to make sense of what was happening.

“These are Tracy and Bram, the parents of the two babies you rescued,” introduced Gladys excitedly after the couple reached them. “They did not die. Their lives were saved by the Red Cross at the airport. Meet my brother Boris good couple. He has all our children. I do not know how but I am surprised at how life can keep us in the wilderness as our children are right under our noses.”

Boris stood up, surprise written all over his face. “Hello Bram and Tracy, I had no idea Joel and Abigail's parents made it. I have struggled with guilt all these years beating myself that had it not been the lift I gave you you may not have died. Gracious God! This is a moment I never thought I'd ever witness.” He removed a handkerchief to wipe his wet eyes.

Tracy didn't know what to say. She was in a daze, her mind crowded with a series of thoughts that ran one after another:

That girl Hannah whom we met at the orphanage we visited looking for our children, gave us her sad story about how her mother abandoned her. I remember how Hannah promised that she would pray for us so that we reunite with our children: Amadi's family whom I helped find their feet in this foreign land by forgiving him for what he had done to me when I was a girl, and gave him and his son a job; My late mother and grandma interceding from heaven. Who could have known how difficult yet so easy it would turn out to be to reunite with our children!

Even as the parents had tears streaming down their faces, Boris seemed to cry more than them. None of the parents showed any regret because Boris believed that if it had been bad for them, it was an experience, and if life was good it would be a reward as was now the case with the joyful parents.

Akim had now gotten the gist of what was happening and called Mike to inform him not to board the plane because Abigail and Joel's parents stood right before him with Boris. “The lady she went with to the restaurant is his sister Gladys, who apparently was together with the children's parents. Kindly come back now.”

Mike found Akim waiting for him outside the hotel, joyful as if it had been his children that had been found. It was a lesson to him how hopelessness like the parents had lived with only required patience before ending in victory.

The unfolding event paralysed business at the restaurant as groups started forming to share in the joy and support the two families as their stories poured out. Bram had moved to the front of the hotel and was given a microphone with which he announced the miraculous finding of their children, with whom they would be reunited shortly. People offered to contribute some money and the next twenty minutes were taken by donations being put in a bag given by a volunteer. The amount collected was enough to sustain Bram and Gladys's families for a long time. Some of the people who witnessed the jubilation requested to join the parents at Boris's house for the celebrations. A jazz band that was playing in the hotel offered to entertain at the celebrations.

Word somehow got to the media, who followed the unfolding event people followed live as it happened. Mike and his colleague Akim weren't left behind and had to inform their boss to excuse them as they felt obliged to honour Boris and share in his joy. Mike offered to drive Bram's car and joined the convoy together with his guest, Akim.

"Nice to meet you, Bram, and your wife, Tracy," Mike had said introducing himself. "I have just cancelled a trip to Ethiopia that Boris had sponsored to trace your children's roots. My home is a kilometre away from your home. Unfortunately, my parents are deceased. No family member is home at the moment, just workers. Our parents used to live there." Turning to Twister's mother he said, "I am so happy for you Gladys, too. It was initially tough for the single young man, Boris, to bring up two needy infants. But they are all grown up now. We had no idea you survived; the kids will be very excited to see you."

"Thank you very much, Mike, for your kindness in volunteering to dig into the children's history. I think I know you," replied Bram. "I went to school with your elder brother back in the day. We have no way to pay for your kindness. May God fulfil all your dreams. We are so happy that Joel and Abigail made it through mayhem alive. We thank God that Good Samaritans took care of them and nothing bad happened to them. So far, we know nothing about them. The emotions we poured at the hotel attracted so many people that it was difficult to ask Boris to tell us more about them, But we certainly will know

more once we get home.” Bram said this holding his dazed wife close to his chest.

ZIPPY RECEIVED THE CALL from her Dad Boris and alerted the aunt about the guests. They rushed home to receive them. Purity was quite an organised person so when the crowd arrived every group was directed to sit under a tent she had arranged as the family was ushered into the house. Fortunately, the chef was in and Bethrow was on hand to help. Things were running smoothly.

Boris had already called Joel. “Kindly get your brother and your sisters to my house now,” he instructed him. “This is urgent. You must come right away. No questions; just come.”

Joel could not recall his father ever summoning him home in this manner. This made him imagine the worst must have happened. *Everything was okay this morning. What could have happened so suddenly?*

Joel called Angela to go pick him up from college together with Twister and Abigail. But it was Abigail with the car that day, which was a relief as they would now leave immediately. Angela would take a cab. Joel took the wheel as Twister sat with his wife at the back to comfort her as none of them knew what this was all about. She was now very heavy with pregnancy and Twister didn’t think surprises were good for her.

Angela's parents happened to be in the city, and they too were asked to head to Boris’s home. As the three children approached the gate, so was Angela being dropped by the cab. She got in their car and they entered the compound together. They didn’t know what to expect. It therefore shocked them to find a buzzing crowd.

“Why all these people in the compound?” Joel asked speaking to himself, as none of them knew.

Confused and not seeing anybody they could ask, they headed straight for the house to look for their dad who had summoned them. But the door to the house was locked. They rang the bell.

As they waited for someone to come to the door, Abigail was thinking: *When Dad Boris called for an emergency meeting, I became a little anxious wondering what this was about this time. We have been discovering things about ourselves every now and then, which has heightened our anticipation of something unexpected happening. So*

much has been revealed so far. We now know Joel and I are siblings. We had parents once upon a time named Bram and Tracy. And now there is Zippy and Aunt Purity. In the meantime, Joel and I were separated for the better part of our lives, with the added coincidence that we both turned out gay and are now straight and expecting to be parents. We don't need any more surprises. Our hands are a bit full at the moment.

Angela's thoughts seemed to echo Abigail as she, too, wondered: What is it this time? We don't need any more surprises. New stuff will add to the clatter in our current space. This is how my mind feels now. It is not easy to be a grown-up. You think about everything in much more detail than when you were a child when grownups thought for you.

No one came to the door. Abigail and Angela's thoughts were interrupted when Joel rang the doorbell again but left his finger on the button so that it rang continuously as if to alert anyone inside that there was an emergency outside that needed attention. It felt like an eternity before Dad Boris finally came to the door, which he opened with a big smile. They gave a collective sigh of relief to see Boris looking so happy.

"What's going on?" they asked almost in unison.

"Hi guys!" said a very cheerful Boris. "Follow me," he told them without explaining why to heighten their anticipation with uncertainty. *Uncertainty is a bomb. It is a pain the heart doesn't appreciate, whether good or bad.*

The four children looked at one another confused and silently followed him, their hearts thumping and their legs heavy, despite Boris's reassuring smile.

They found guests in the sitting room who added to their confusion. The two new faces that so interestedly scrutinised them looked oddly familiar. The middle-aged man was a replica of Joel, and the lady an older version of Abigail. They both felt an immediate attraction to one another.

Even as Dad Boris was introducing them, Abigail was already walking towards the couple. It was hard to keep calm as an odd kind of excitement rose through her.

Meeting these strangers, these parents whom they had hardly known all their lives, was a surprise they would have least expected. For Abigail, it was a surprise she didn't mind clattering her space.

"Twister, meet your mum, Gladys."

"Joel and Abigail, meet your parents, Bram and Tracy."

By this time, the crowd outside had sensed that these were the kids the parents were coming to meet. Faces from the crowd appeared all over the windows to witness the unfolding drama inside. Media cameras pushed for space to record the event.

Gladys was all over her son with embraces and cries of joy. But Twister was so confused that all he could do was stare at his mother like she was a ghost. The mother took his hand and led him to one of the bedrooms. She was the dotting mother who wanted to quickly nurse her son out of his confused daze so that they could get re-acquainted.

“It is a pleasure meeting you, my mom Gladys,” he finally said, regaining his composure. “Where has all this beauty been for twenty years? Who has been seeing you every day in my absence Mom? Tell me more about my dad, who he is, why it was him and where he is?”

“Oh my God! You speak exactly like your dad, Yonas. He always made me smile. I am getting a bit confused about whether you are his reincarnation. He is now deceased.”

“What happened? You mean I do not have a dad anymore, Mom? That is very sad.”

“I don’t know whether you can remember what happened that day we got separated?” the mother asked.

“I could remember, I now know the story,” he replied.

“We – your father and I, suffered bullet wounds during the mayhem, and your father didn’t make it. Both of us were working there at the time, but we met here in the UK before relocating to South Sudan to take up a new appointment, and I had to follow him. I got a job and I invited my brother, Boris. Not long after, all hell broke loose with the attempted coup. And that is how, as we tried to reach the airport, I lost Yonas in the unrest, and lost you, too. I vowed never to visit my family until I found you or Boris. Now it seems I have been the lost one all along. Everyone else found each other except me. That is why I am this late, Twister,” she explained tearfully

“We all thought you died, Mom,” he said, then with a sympathetic voice, he added, “but by saying you had to find us it was like you were playing God in your supreme belief you had to find us, or else. I wonder why you chose to punish yourself, dear mum. Thanks be to God, you have found us. I would have loved to see Dad; I can’t remember what he looked like. Do you have a

photo of him? Did you ever meet his family, because I just heard you mention me and Boris as the reason you never contacted yours?”

“When we got into this relationship with your father, his people did not want him to marry a European girl. But after he passed on, they have been following up with me, especially because of you, his son. They now seem to love me a lot and even let me inherit your dad. My house here is your Dad Yonas’ property. I am sure his people would very much like to see you, their blood link to their departed son, Yonas. You are a replica of him, except for your skin which is much lighter. Here, this is his passport photograph which never leaves my wallet.”

“I miss the guy already. Are you sure this is not my photo, Mom? I resemble him this much!”

“That’s your Dad Yonas. I lost him when he was not much older than your current age. I am getting so confused to look at you. I feel like I am with him as we were then. Your voice, your body, and your speech, that is Yonas exactly. Only that he was not a medic, but an IT guy.”

“It is him, Yonas in me, Mom. You will never be alone again.”

“Come closer. You speak to your grannies, Yonas’ parents. I usually connect with them on WhatsApp.”

“Hello Mom and Dad. Meet Twister, your grandson, Yonas’ son! I found him!”

“Hello Twister! Are you sure that it is not Yonas Gladys? The boy is a replica, and we only see Yonas in him. Kindly pack him immediately and send him here. We want to meet him.”

“Hello Grandma and Grandpa, I am keen to meet you, too. We shall be taking the next available plane to meet you. I am, for sure, the immortal Yonas. Can’t you see I have not aged like my wife Gladys, look at our faces. What do you think?”

“Oh my God, he is as jovial as the dad. He likes to make fun of everything. I can’t wait to meet this Yonas Junior. Thank you, God, for bringing my son back.” The grandma was very excited to see and hear Twister. It took her mind to the days Yonas was alive. There was a poor connection, so they agreed to talk later.

“I got myself a wife, Mom, and she is expectant.”

“What! Where is she? I need to meet her.”

“She is right here in this house.”

“Quick! Show me the queen. I miss a granny already.”

In the meantime, Joel and Abigail were kneeling with their faces on the laps of their parents. They were all in a pool of tears. The parents trembled with pride seeing how magnificent their babies of two decades before had grown up to be. Joel's face was on his dad's lap, as his mom tenderly felt Abigail's face.

“When did you both grow up? Where were we as all this was happening?” Tracy was tearfully and joyously asking, not expecting an answer.

She looked deep into Abigail's eyes and scrutinised her body from the head to her hands, nails and her feet. She saw herself in Abigail right down to her physical features, including facial structure and skin tone. She turned towards Joel and did the same. There was no doubt that these children were her perfection itself, her flesh and blood. They were the babies she had spent years looking for. Children, she believed, belonged more to a woman than to a man. Dad Bram had little idea whether they had any marks. Having mostly been out of the house when they were still children, it was almost like he was seeing them for the first time and appeared more surprised than the children were. Tracy realised that her daughter was pregnant. She helped her up as Boris whisked them to Zippy's bedroom to finish their mother-daughter talk there.

“WE ARE very sorry for missing in your lives this long,” Bram was telling his children. “But we kept praying all these years for this day to come.”

“How did you find us?” Joel asked.

“We have been living in the UK for some time now, and today we were at the airport to pick up Twister's mother, Gladys, who was arriving from Eritrea to stay with us,” Tracy explained. “Eritrea is Twister's homeland and is the last station his mother worked. As we waited for her at the hotel we had agreed to meet her, we saw her enter with a man who turned out to be her brother Boris. It always haunted her that Boris had died during that coup attempt in South Sudan, which I believe you must be now aware of. That is how we got to know about you and Twister, and now here we are. Had we known we probably would have found you a long time ago. But it was probably because Gladys believed her brother and her son were merely lost and had been insistent she didn't want to face her parents without them, especially Boris. We do not blame her. She wanted the best for her parents. She truly reflects what we would like to see in others. But, unfortunately, her love, honesty, and respect for families

kept all of us apart, leaving us suffering. Gladys's mother must have missed her, looking all over for her, as Boris lost his opportunity to marry as he raised you boys."

"This has turned out to be a very beautiful day for all four families," Bram observed.

"I now believe you, Bram," said Tracy, "that good things do not always come by sitting comfortably waiting. In my deep frustration at one time, I almost packed my things and went back to my village and gave up looking for you Joel and Abigail. But your dad persuaded me to persevere and do the right thing. Now I can attest all the pain and frustration I went through was worth it. Seeing two all-grown-up children is very satisfying."

"We could not have known that you were alive, Mom and Dad," Joel said as Abigail was still coming to terms with this new happy meeting. "Boris had believed you were dead when he took us with him. And though he was the one who brought me up, and Abigail by the Blaze family, it was, as the saying goes, a case of 'If it is not yours, it never belonged to you'. We are grateful to our foster families, otherwise, we probably would be in the afterlife by now. But we never belonged to them. And here you are to claim what belongs to you. God is the one who gives, as he did us to you planting seedlings that sprouted and flourished elsewhere with other families. You gave birth to us, but God chose who to raise and nurture us. God had his own reasons why things happened the way they did, but today it is your pleasure to meet Dr. Joel and Dr. Abigail. It is now for me and my sister to cater to your every need, sweet parents. We missed you a lot. We are happy that Boris was wrong, but how did you come back to life?"

Bram cleared his throat. "Fear can destroy one, Joel. Your Mom Tracy has been weak of late and was losing hope of ever finding you. We do not blame Boris for believing us dead. But we were unconscious and only found ourselves in hospital. Your mom was shot in the womb, losing it and could not bear another child, and a bullet ruptured one of my kidneys. I've had one ever since. We thank God for our lives, even though we regret not to have been there to guide and see you grow up. But you turned out fine," Bram said hugging his wife, who was still emotional remembering the pain they had gone through.

"I love the positive vibe, Dad and Mom," said Abigail. "This was very unexpected for all of us and is a very rewarding day. Seeing you, my parents, is one of my most profound experiences and I am sure for Joel as well. It is as if

you have resurrected. Now we can speak of a family tree. At first, it was me alone, then the two of us – my brother and me – when I discovered him, and now you Mom and Dad. I first met my brother a few years ago in college where we shared the same class. Thanks to his Dad Boris who once saw me in the company of Joel leading him to wonder whether I was his lost daughter, as he referred to me. His investigations led to the discovery of my documents at the foster parents' registry, and the identities of my adoptive parents. They brought me up alongside their daughter – my sister Angela, and they have all through my life been such angels unconditionally taking care of me. My life and Angela's revolve around one another. And, thank God, Joel is now engaged to her and is expecting a baby, too. You may not have been there to guide us, as Dad is regretting, but we have grown up learning how to fight our own battles. You are now speaking to self-made warriors, Drs Joel and Abigail.”

Tracy was eager to make up for the lost time being away from her kids all those years, but she didn't know where to start.

“When we realised that we had lost the two of you, it became a sad adventure of first deciding where to start looking before turning up empty every time. When somebody tells you of the most difficult parts of their lives, it's not just the story of that life, it is the honour of living it. It is a piece of their heart. Listen to them and never be quick to judge; be the pillar they sometimes need when telling their story. Treasure the gift you're being given of learning from their experience, and of the trust they had accorded you to give them emotional support. We are the only people Gladys trusted with the knowledge of Twister's disappearance. We have walked this journey painfully together, hoping an angel of favour would remember us and direct us to you, kids. Today it has come to pass.”

“I can't imagine how painful it must have been, not for a month, not for a year but for two decades,” said Joel sympathetically, forgetting his own pains. “Thank you for hanging in there.”

Abigail had two muffins in her bag. She cut them into four, a piece for Mom, Dad, and Joel. She started on her piece without waiting for a “thank you” from either of them. She, however, didn't expect it from Joel, who felt entitled to the muffins ever since he discovered they were siblings. Their mother, Tracy, however, seemed to take her time admiring the piece while knowingly looking at her husband, Bram. Abigail imagined that, in the way they

looked at each other, they must have thought that it was her motherly instincts beginning to show by sharing the muffin now that she was expectant.

“Where did you buy these muffins, dear?” Tracy asked her.

“From Size Chef Pastries. Why do you ask, Mom?”

“Size Chef is the name for my bakeries, Abigail,” Tracy replied to her very surprised daughter.

“What? How come I have never once met you there, and I buy all my bread and pastries for breakfast there?” After a moment, she added after remembering something, “Ah, now I remember to have seen you, and it was at my hometown where my foster parents live. I met this elderly, but lovely guy on the bakery, and again later on the streets marketing the muffins. I recommended to him possible distributors in the town. Then, while enjoying the scenery by the side of the road, I saw a vehicle with Size Chef logo drive up to the muffins stall and nearly came to meet who appeared the founders of the bakery making the muffins I so much love. But I had a change of mind, thinking it not important as I had already spoken to the elderly gentleman.”

“That is very interesting. It was Bram and me you must have seen,” Tracy explained, biting into the muffin. “How I wish you had come to say hello. Maybe it was not yet time to meet you, my dear. What is amazing is that your preference for these muffins seems almost genetically passed down to you. Bakeries have different recipes, but your taste seems inherited from your grandma, who was the originator fifty years ago of these very same muffins you so love. Unfortunately, she left to be with the Lord a long time ago, leaving me an orphan. What a revealing discussion we are having on our first day, dear!”

“This is very interesting,” replied Abigail. “We must be a family of bakers, and, no wonder one of my favourite pastimes is baking, which I do at my foster parents' home. They crave my pastries and are similar in taste and texture to those I buy at Size Chef. But finish the story about my grandma.”

They were suddenly interrupted by Gladys and Twister as they rushed into the room, before stopping in front of the Bram family.

“Meet Abigail, my beautiful wife, and expectant mother of our Twins,” introduced Twister as he helped Abigail to stand up. This was also news to the surprised parents of the expectant Abigail. But before they could say anything, Twister said, somewhat apologetically, “It will be a boy and girl, and I hope I

was not hasty to name the boy after my late dad Yonas before naming the coming girl after you Mom,” he said caressing Abigail's huge tummy.

“Come here, pretty,” said an emotional Gladys going to hug Abigail. “I cannot believe that after all this suffering Tracy and I are now family because of you.” She didn’t care about the naming of the children. What was important was the bonus that the twins would both be her grandchildren, a symbol of hope.

“Pardon my manners Bram and Tracy, my parents-in-law,” Twister knelt to greet them, which he had not yet done. “It has been a very overwhelming day for me to meet my mom for the first time. We had a lot to catch up on. I am honoured to meet you too, being my brother Joe and my wife Abigail's parents.”

“Nice to meet you Twister – I mean my son-in-law. But your name never left Gladys’ lips looking for you. I was hesitant to ask Abigail whose pregnancy was visible, and I did not want to rub her on the wrong side on such a glorious day of celebration.” Tracy explained and stood up to embrace him.

“Is this a fiction movie?” Bram, surprised as his wife was at the sudden news, couldn’t help asking. “How and when did all this happen? We are now one big family Gladys.”

“Dad Bram,” Joel spoke up to further surprise them. “It is much deeper than that. I am an expectant dad, too, with Angela, Abigail's sister – the daughter of Abigail's foster parents. We are becoming one huge family. Everyone had something to give to someone. God has been putting all the beads in their place. Come on, guys, meet my wife and her family.”

Joel held his mom's hand as he led them back to the sitting room. Boris was patiently waiting with Angela and her parent. Food was already laid out on the dining table, courtesy of his wife Purity and daughter Zippy. The guests who had accompanied them to witness the reunion were being served from the garden. A huge party was unfolding.

“Let me hug the parents who brought up my poor girl Abigail,” said Tracy as she walked to Angela's Mom Jewel eager to hug and cry together. “I have no words to thank you, beautiful couple Blaze and Jewel for bearing my burden and shouldering it as your own. Abigail is more your daughter than mine. What you have done for her is priceless. I have no words to say thank you, Jewel and Blaze. My husband Bram and I found ourselves where we ought not to have been because of that dreadful violence that day in Africa. But now that we are

here with you, we have to celebrate our children together. With all humility and respect, kindly accept our gratitude from the bottom of our hearts.”

For the first time, Jewel felt that the work of raising Abigail was God-sent, and was placed upon her with the intention to bless her. Doing good to humanity is God’s encouragement urging to “Never tire to touch someone’s heart with kindness as you inspire and encourage the soul you help raise.” It initially felt like such a hassle to bring Abigail up, but thanks to Angela refusing to let go of Abigail’s hand, it forced Mom Jewel and Dad Blaze to treat them equally until it became normal to them and fully accepted Abigail as their daughter. And now all the credit belonged to them.

“It has been our pleasure to raise a super girl, who is now a mother-to-be. We have come this far by the Grace of God. No one owes anyone anything. God provided enough for our family and your girl Abigail. The two girls gave us a reason to get out of bed every day. Not one day, did we stop dreaming of finding out where our child, Abigail, originated from. We believed we would find out where she came from and never gave up on parenting Abigail, despite our shortcomings. Today we are honoured by the show of love and the gratitude we have received from you and Bram. There is always room for improvement, even for the best parent. This lesson helped us become better parents. Now you are taking from us both the girls we raised, plus the three babies on the way. In the bargain, I also got myself two sons, Joel and Twister, that I did not have, They balanced my home. The girls had no one to protect them, and now that they have great men to do that. Thanks to Boris, the single dad who brought them up.” Jewel’s eyes were wet as she finished saying this.

“Amen to that,” Bram and Tracy applauded, as Tracy went on to say. “We are ready to take care of them going forward. It is just an exchange program; all the credit is to Jewel and Blaze for raising these two wonderful daughters, Angie and Abby, and Boris for being the perfect dad to Joel and Twister. You have moulded them into what we see today. Our work is not needed now; that you accomplished for us. You saw on our behalf all of our babies’ imperfections, weaknesses, eccentricities - all the bizarre and magical ways in which kids grow up. That is what parenting is all about. We hope our grandchildren shall make up for what we missed out on parenting Joel and Abby. I can’t wait for them to arrive, which I am sure is the same for you, Jewel.”

“That is true, Tracy; I can’t wait,” agreed Jewel. “But you have also talked about parenting and I must say it takes grace to raise someone else’s kid. In this case, it was not out of choice; it was God who placed the child in our hands. I will admit that we were very disappointed and confused at first when we couldn’t find Boris, whose child she was. We debated whether to take her to a children’s home, but a powerful urge in the name of our daughter, Angela, who had grown calmer and happier with Abigail forced us to consider adopting her. Angela was not clingy anymore, and she liked being Abigail’s protector. When Abby was sad, Angela was five times sadder. It automatically became our duty to keep Abigail happy to appease Angela. Eventually, we were comfortable being parents to the two girls. The experience was as you have said it, not only with her but our daughter, too. This made the ride quite enjoyable. You are yet to know your daughter’s parents’ home. It is already late, but we shall insist that you be our guests tomorrow.”

“Sure, we will be honoured to visit your home, Jewel and Blaze. You walked miles on our behalf. As my wife Tracy has said, Abby is more your daughter than ours. You are the ones who taught her the first letters of the alphabet, showed her the way to prayer, how to respect and how to win her battles. Today she is all grown up, and we have little to add. We give thanks for your being part of her life. Your home is our home too; where our daughter belongs, we belong.”

Angela coughed as if calling for attention. “I am Angela, sister to Abby and wife to Joe.” her voice broke off, as she was feeling a bit shy at the unexpectedness of suddenly finding herself with parents-in-law nobody expected to be alive. Still, all she could think of was how this was a special day for her, as she dearly loved both Joel and Abigail. It was like they were a family from another life. She felt as if it was her own parents that had resurrected.

“Come here, beautiful princess,” said Tracy standing to go to her. “What a blessing you are to wipe away our grief. I am so happy to have you as my daughter, Angela.” By the manner Angela responded widely opening her arms to hug Tracy, this was a mother-in-law she was going to dearly love. Tracy felt the same way about Angela as she felt about her daughter Abigail, especially after learning how Angela was protective of her daughter in her father’s house. Tracy was going to fight for Angela to her dying day. She had a golden space in her heart. ‘Your Mom. Jewel did all the donkey work to raise you girls. Let

me raise the grandchildren now. God is so faithful. I never saw this day coming, Angela.”

“You are most welcome, Mom. We are ready to pamper you as you pamper your grannies. You gave birth to wonderful people. Abigail's presence in my life made me the woman I am today. I love her very much. Her brother Joel is the greatest gift I ever got. He commands respect and is caring. I am no longer my mama crybaby. He has made me woman up. Thanks to you Mom Tracy and Dad Bram for enriching the world with such beautiful souls.”

“Thank you, beautiful daughter, Angela,” said Bram. “The thought of having our children back never left our mind even for a day. It was the thought we woke up to and continued with each day without rest. We are very happy to have you back, Abigail and Joel. We are grateful to all who played a role in seeing you through life. Twister, you have been our prayer piece since the day Gladys lost you. Now you are my son-in-law. Your marriage is the best gift to unite me and Gladys after our suffering.” She hugged Twister again.

“Thank you for keeping Mom hopeful,” said Twister with a smile. “She must have been very lonely after losing my Dad Yonas. At least you had Dad Bram, who has all along been by your side.”

This day was symbolic to Bram, Tracy, and Gladys of their children's independence. It was the three missing children who found each other long before their parents discovered them. It was a great day all around.

NOBODY NOTICED Boris leave to disperse unwanted guests and the media people who seemed to linger too long. He gave them a date for the following day when the family would be ready for them, but they to hear none of it. This was a slow day for the media and this was a captivating human interest story that could not wait. He gave in and called everyone out to give the media a photo opportunity and some interviews. Boris was never a fan of the media, they only seemed interested when people were tripping, crying or cursing to get a good story than show empathy.

The parents would never know how the children were deeply involved with each other, that the sisters were lesbians and the brothers gay. These were not things the children were going to confess. They had a Catholic priest who helped them confess their sins, which were forgiven. Everybody else, including the media and the parents, was going to have to wait and hear their version of

the sins during Judgment Day in the afterlife. The, media especially angered Boris, who saw its work as always to twist things in favour of their narrative without facts. In this particular case, though the story was about long-lost children reuniting with their parents into a huge, happy family ever after, the next day's headline read:

“Lovers Resurrected from Hell...”

“I mean,” Boris wondered, “where did a parent-child relationship become love? The news became total speculation and seemed to dwell too much on the feasting. Anyway, the families are united and happy. These media reporters can go to hell. Their headlines should at least have read: **‘Orphaned Doctors Miraculously Unite with their Parents after a Twenty-year Separation.’**”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Triostar

GLADYS EXCUSED HERSELF to visit the washroom. She left the room like one who knew where she was going, only to suddenly realise she didn't know where toilet was. As she returned to ask, she bumped into a man in a chef's uniform. She greeted him and asked to be shown where the washrooms were. He did not answer immediately, as he tried to recall where he had seen that face before. The voice also sounded familiar.

"Do I ring a bell, beautiful," Bethrow whispered to Gladys as he pushed her into Joel's bedroom, which was now his since the boys moved out. "Why did you disappear on me that day long ago in Manchester without a goodbye? Am I that ugly, Gladys?"

"Oh my God, what are you doing here? You followed me with the rest of the crowd, Bethrow? I missed you every day but had no idea where to trace you after I had to leave urgently. When I went back to the hotel looking for your telephone number, I found that they didn't seem to know who I was enquiring for. I only had one name Bethrow, and was probably not the name they had registered you. However, that was two years later, and all the staff had left. Let me feel those lips, boy, oooh! Feels like back then, are you taken yet?"

"That's a good surprise, Gladys. I missed you, too. I was afraid you forgot me the moment you left the room."

In the next moment, the two were breathless for some minutes as they passionately held their bodies close and explored each other. "I wish you had mentioned to me your child name Gladys at the time. I met your son Twister the same year you were looking for him. I didn't know where to look for you to see whether it was your baby."

“Bram and Tracy wanted us to be discreet about it. Now I know it is OK to let people know of your loss after I saw how even total strangers were happy to witness your reunion with the kids and celebrate with us.”

“It is true Gladys, sometimes answers are on the same wall you plan to bring down. I was afraid to mention to overwhelmed Boris about the lady I had met who had lost her child, and that I had no idea where to find her. I have missed you a lot, Gladys. I am not taken; I have been a lonely soul since losing my family. I hoped to find solace in you, but you broke my heart, dear.”

“I am so sorry, Bethrow. When one is hurting, it is so easy to share the pain with those close to them. I know the feeling because a parent is one of those amazing and beautiful things where life changes and one become absorbed with ensuring their family's wellbeing. When you are a beginner at anything, you start with little knowledge in the subject until one day, like in my case, I woke up to find that I had lost everything I had worked so hard to keep, and what I had lost was Twister and his dad Yonas. I guess I was grieving Bethrow and had to find a way to vent my frustrations.”

“My dear Gladys, there is something like emotional intelligence, which if frustrations become too overwhelming, may lead one to fear to engage with people or things we want to achieve for fear of failure. You are not alone in this. I also feared engaging in relationships after you rejected me. I joined Boris bachelor-like lifestyle. That was when his adopted sons were still very young and I started helping to raise them. I have seen your son Twister grow up to the man he is now. If you had agreed to be my woman back then, you would have found your son much earlier. Not to worry, this was the God-ordained time for you to find him, dear Gladys.”

“Now that we are in each other's life again, I plan to take the next plane to Eritrea, the land of my late husband, to take Twister to meet his father's family. I plan this to be soon although we may not take his wife, Abigail, with us. It might be too tiring for her. She has also just reunited with her parents and may want some time with them.”

“Yonas parents longed to see me date again. I am sure they will be pleased to see another man in my life. If you will accept, I'll want you to accompany me and Twister to meet them.”

“Wow, what a pleasant surprise! I am already betrothed even before I propose! Should I buy you an engagement ring before the pre-nuptial visits, Gladys?”

She did not want to look like the one driving her affair with Bethrow, but the ring would be a good start.

“We need to join the others in the sitting room,”

The two reunited lovebirds kissed and, after she was done with straightening her clothes and gaining her composure, they entered the sitting room.

Twister was saying: “One more thing to report before we depart; there is this place I have identified. The houses are a masterpiece. They are called Triostar. I guess I loved them because they sound like my name. They are well laid out and spacious. I thought they would make good retirement homes for our parents. They are three of them. One for Mum Gladys, mum Tracy, and dad Bram, and one for mum Jewel and dad Blaze. With our savings and the salaries we expect, we can take a mortgage and settle you down together so that we come visiting, we shall be meeting all of you in the same compound.”

“My dear son, Twister, I am not about to change my base. I am a veteran and I just got myself a wife, Purity. I just got myself a daughter, Zippy. Will you forgive me also because I won’t be able to accompany you, my son, to your Dad Yonas’ homeland? I guess that is why you forgot to mention me in the houses you suggest your parents retire,” Boris said, his arm around his daughter Zippy.

“I was not about to mention you, Dad; you already have a lot of love surrounding you to even think of moving. Besides, you are so attached to this home, so is Joel and me. By the way, we are very proud of you, Dad, for the newfound members of your family, Purity, and beautiful cousin Zippy. Say hello to family, Zippy. You, too, are a star, but you were upstaged by other stars in the family today. But it was also our day in that we found our parents. Now we shall leave your father Boris to you alone; he will never receive another call from us calling him daddy, now that we have our parents to bother.”

“Thank you, Twister,” began Zippy. “Hello everyone, I am so grateful to see so much love among us all, starting with me. I just met my dad a few days ago, and my aunt who brought me to meet dad got herself a husband. Aunt Purity, kindly wave at our guests. I am very happy that you my brothers Joel and Twister are now reunited with your parents. I am also proud of their wives Angela and Abigail; they are the sweetest girls I have ever come across. They received me at Boris like one of their long-lost sisters. It was also a pleasure to

meet Blaze and Jewel. It was a happy surprise to learn that bit of them sharing children with dad Boris. I love you all and you're most welcome."

"Thank you, Zippy and Aunt Purity," said Twister, picking up from where he had stopped. "Feel welcome in the big family. Back to Trioster: Mom Jewel and Dad Blaze, will you accept to move to Triostar? I would like you to."

"Thank you for the offer, son," replied Blaze, "but we are happy where we are too, Twister. We have become too used to our neighbourhood having been there for more years than we can count. Moving back to the city will be a tall order. Retirement is already knocking on our door and we've gotten attached to the place we kept warm all these years making a home for the girls. Thank you for the offer, though."

Gladys envied them as she stood up to speak: *Even as they sit, Angela's parents, Blaze and Jewel, look like doves paired together in the cage of life. They look the epitome of love.*

"Twister darling, I am retiring in my husband Yonas' house. I have kept the home for many years, and this is the time I plan to return for good. I have already given my tenant notice to find an alternative home, and I am not sure I want another tenant now that I have found you, son. That is where I would like to settle down. I just finished executing my late husband's will and I would wish, as you have suggested, that we all retire in one big compound and compensate for the time we have been away. But life is never static, we all must move on with our lives and give you space to lead your lives". Gladys paused as if looking for the right words. "And, with all due respect, may I inherit this Bethrow guy. Have you been taken yet, Mr. handsome, or you can be mine to keep? To have been within Boris's family all these years, it either means you are a good man or can be tolerated." This made everyone laugh. But she was careful not to mention the circumstances they met.

"Gladys dear, I am more than willing to commingle, please—I mean, more than willing to be owned by such a beauty. My pleasure to meet you again, Bram and Tracy. I don't know whether you remember, but we met fifteen years ago in the small town you went looking for your lost children in a missionary home. I fell in love with Gladys then, but she chose to disappear from me. Because of this, I lost hope in women, only to meet my lost love again today. We immediately jumped into each other's arms."

Everyone cheered at them as they hanged in tears. Bethrow is a beautiful lost soul. He has no guts to take the knee and woo a woman. Now that he is given an opportunity, his manhood is revived, and happy to get such a beauty on his side.

“Oh my God, Gladys,” said Tracy, “You must have been blind, but who knows how these things happen that you were so close to finding these children so many times and never knew it.”

“I know Tracy, it is unbelievable; I had two close shaves with finding the children. I followed the longer route. I am so disappointed in myself. Still, I congratulate myself because here we are now.”

“I remember you now, Bethrow. It’s my pleasure to meet you again, brother, in this happy circumstance now with my two children Joe and Abby, and as father-in-law and an uncle to Twister and Angela. I remember the day we met at that hotel; we did not get time to say goodbye or share with you our ordeal despite meeting twice that day. I was disappointed that Gladys had to leave so suddenly because we wanted her company, but I had it in my mind to talk with you about our problem.”

“Gladys has already confessed to me that she was running away from love. Her pain was still too deep after having lost her husband and son. That is how we missed each other that day, as she was gone before I was awake. Thank you, everyone, for giving me a chance to be part of this family. I lost all my family – my wife and two beautiful girls – in a road accident as I waited to surprise them with the beautiful castle I had built for them in the village where I met you that time. The driver perished alongside them—I am not sure whether he took my wife to become his wife, which I will know when I join them in the afterlife. Just in case he did, I will be by Gladys's side before she disappears on me to join Yonas. Ever since Gladys rejected me, I have been a lonely soul wandering in this wilderness hoping an angel would descend on me, which she did in the name of Gladys. Twister and Abigail, I hope to be a good father to you.”

This provoked a laugh, but there was a sense of relief that Bethrow would no longer be alone, now that they knew something about him. He, too, needed a place of comfort, now that his friend Boris’s home would be crowded with a new wife and newfound daughter, Zippy.

“Good for you Bethrow,” said Boris. “Marrying my sister is a great idea. I love you a lot, and my love for you has tripled now that you are my brother-

in-law. I am very happy for both of you. Two honeymoons under one roof – your son Twister’s and his mother – will be great fun. We watch the love overflow its cup as we also keep our fire going. These will be four marriages in one month. All my family members are all married now one after the other, Bethrow, Joe, Twister and myself. I hope my Zippy shall wait until next year so that we get a break.”

Zippy caused laughter assuring his dad she would wait out the year before she could consider any husband to the place of her dad.

“I am happy to have a brand-new dad,” said Twister. “Welcome to the family, Bethrow. I was so worried for Mom, now that she has found that the son she looked for for so long has now been taken. Even though I will be there for her, she is still with an empty nest, which Bethrow will help fill. I am her overgrown boy to be baby-sat. Having a companion is the best thing that can happen to her. It will be a bonus that Bethrow has been a second dad to me and Joel, and I am proud to officially own him as my dad till death do us part.” There followed an amused applause. Twister then tapped the prospective couples by name: “I will name them the beautiful couples of the year: Twister and Abigail; Joel and Angela; Boris and Aunt Purity. Zippy, our eyes shall be on you. All the best dear cousin,” he winked at her and she winked back, knowing that it was about their secret about lawyer Chris. “Not forgetting the newest couple in the house, Bethrow, and Gladys. Give them a round of applause!”

A joyful applause ensued before Tracy surprised them with information none of them were aware.

“Thank you, Twister, for mentioning Triostar,” she said. “Triostar is actually our property, Twister, and we have plans for it now that our children are back. It is our golden place to host my two children and ourselves so that we can see our grannies grow up. Our dream was to always have our children close to us. It will give us the opportunity to catch up with one another, and it will be more satisfying because we shall have the four of you. It will make us feel honoured to have you guys. I almost gave up on the magnificent building we named Triostar, which was meant for the family which I nonetheless still had faith would be whole again. Triostar, in case you are wondering, symbolises many things and for us it signifies an unplanned pilgrimage in the wilderness, which Bram and I found ourselves searching for our children. We are very happy we found Joel and Abigail and it adds to our great happiness that both

are expecting children and, by extension, Gladys, Blaze, and Jewel's children, Twister and Angela. Not forgetting Boris shall be a granny too. It would be my pleasure to house the two families, your family Twister and Joe's family. Twister, waking up every day to grandkids shall be a fantastic adventure for me and my husband Bram. Being part of bringing them up will take Bram and me back right where we stopped after we lost Abigail and Joel. After all, your Mom Gladys's hands are already full with the love in the air and Blaze and Jewel needs to retire after the torture from these two girls, Angela and Abigail."

"We all support your decision, Tracy," Jewel applauded her. "You need their love the most, and the grannies shall be honoured to find a hungry grandma to spoil them in place of her now grown-up kids she never had the joy of raising herself. In their turn, the grandkids will be their new bundle of joy. Triostar will cushion the two young couples with all the necessary support as they start employment and having more children. We are sure you and Bram will be excited to take care of the young ones as these guys do their work to bring forth more. You will be happy grandparents. This is turning out to be interesting. Thank you Bram and Tracy for your patience, which has brought us so many blessings despite the two painful decades of searching you had to endure.

"Triostar is a street away from here. And, by the way, it has been our home as of yesterday. I had put the houses on sale after I despaired of ever having these reunions, but Bram discouraged me from it when he flew back last month from the US. That is how Twister must have come across the sale sign. Let's walk there to appreciate your children's new homes. Sorry, Boris, your daughter has to be left out of the married circle."

"Do not worry about my Zippy," replied Boris sounding protective and amused at the same time. "I have the perfect idea for her. I need to spoil her too. She has been out of my life just like your Joe and Abby. That's a story for another day, good people. Today is a day for the superb three who were once lost but now are found." He said this with a certain sense of freedom and loss, as the children he raised as his own had now been claimed by their real parents, while he had gotten himself a new one.

They walked to Triostar and were amazed at its magnificence. Everything about **it** was very well thought out.

"Who designed the houses for you, Mom Tracy?" Angela, the engineer in the family, was impressed and wanted to know.

It was Tracy who designed them,” replied Bram. “She is the one who oversees our properties and has a passion for architecture despite being a baker, dear Angela. Among her attributes are a creative mind and an eye for beauty, and that is why the finishing is so magnificent, not to mention the beauty of the sculpted and manicured gardens.”

Tracy felt tickled but was quick to thank her husband Bram with a kiss on his forehead.

“You now have someone in the name of engineer Angela to help you in that,” observed Blaze.

“That is true enough,” agreed Angela, “and lucky me to have Tracy as my mother-in-law. She will guide me on how to become an entrepreneur. I was aspiring to furthering my education and become a lecturer after graduation. But I am now motivated to try something else that could be more rewarding. The construction sector shall remain my space, however. Mom Tracy, you remind me of your daughter Abigail. In our first year of college, she did all my homework. The teachers wondered whether I was a second-year student. I still wonder why she did not take engineering, yet she seems so talented in the field. Your son Joel, on the other hand, has been my tutor. No homework is left undone in our house.”

“I am all yours, Angela,” said Tracy, “And I thank God my children have been hard workers despite being in the wilderness. All my profit from Size Chef Bakery goes into real estate. Triostar is our fourth property. There will be enough work for you to do, my dear girl Angela. Welcome and see the inside. At the gate is Joel's house, and at the far end is Abigail's. Finally, Twister has a house exactly where he wanted it. He has been a secret admirer of what already belonged to him.”

“You mean the Size Chef chain of bakeries belong to you Tracy and Bram?” Jewel was greatly surprised to know. “We love the muffins. No wonder they taste like Abigail's pastries. She is actually the one who introduced us to Size Chef. What a small world.”

Tracy let them in on the secret: “Actually, the muffins have a history going back fifty years, Jewel. What I still can't believe is that my daughter should make them to taste like the original muffins without growing up with us. What I can say is that she loved the muffins even as a toddler, and the taste may have been ingrained in her mind.”

“That is amazing to think, Tracy,” Jewel said. “I thank God for giving me and Blaze the opportunity to raise your daughter Abby. Now our daughter Angela has the best in-laws she would have ever imagined.”

A moment later, Twister helped Abigail to see the house at the far end of the building where he had been shown his home would be. Bethrow and his newfound love Gladys followed their son Twister and Abigail to their house. They were excited that their son would not struggle with looking for rent.

Angela’s parents, Blaze and Jewel, in their turn followed Joel and their daughter at the immediate house after the gate. They agreed that she was an exceptional woman of great talent and taste. The houses were fully furnished, and each had a different theme.

Tracy and Bram strategically placed their home in the middle so that their children would always see them first as they crisscrossed their compounds to see each other or when they went to collect their children at their grannies.

“Blaze dear, when you do good, it comes back to you. I thank God we brought up Abby. Now we not only have a medical doctor for a son-in-law but affluent in-laws. Abby has been a great girl too. She had never been a problematic daughter as many of her peers in our residential estate. We think it was because of our girl Angela’s love for her sister and vice versa. Angela was a visionary sister, maybe.” The way she said it made them laugh.

ABIGAIL WAS very excited about her new home. She forgot she was expectant and spread herself on the queen size bed. The stretching gave her something that felt like a painful pinch that made her scream. Twister ran to her aid and was tempted to embrace him on the bed for more than a kiss. Gladys was standing at the door looking at them with her newfound love Bethrow. Looking at them, Bethrow admired the power of youth. The children looked beautiful together. And all Gladys could see was Yonas dating a different woman. She thought of Yonas’s parents, Twister’s grandparents. Their grandson had brought back the glory in their lives that had been their son Yonas. Having left a son behind, all was not lost. Gladys felt very proud of her son and now felt ready to meet her mother, now that she was found by Twister and Boris. She also wanted to introduce her love, Bethrow.

“We are spending our first night here at Triostar, Abigail,” Twister said as he ran his hand over Abigail’s bulged tummy. He was unaware that his Mother Gladys was standing at the door watching.

“Yes, we are dear husband,” Abigail replied, “not just today but forever.”

“Thanks to your parents Abby. Our going missing must have allowed them time to mass all this fortune for you guys.”

“I hope we will be able to compensate them for it, Twister, if only with our love for not being present in their lives for so long. I hope that when our children come, they will give my parents, and your mom Gladys the opportunity to see us grow old all over again through their grandkids.”

“Bethrow, too. He raised Joel and me. We somehow filled the gap his family left after they perished.” Twister said nothing more; he was too hungry for Abby’s inviting lips. He gave her a long passionate kiss.

Tracy and Bram went to their house to make snacks for guests who arrived unexpectedly. Davit, their chief chef, was already at hand to help and had come with a kitchen team. Everything was laid out to perfection. Davit’s dad, Amadi, and mom, Mona, were also in the house to celebrate Tracy’s reunion with her kids. She was like a daughter to the Amadis, their relationship having started since she was a girl including now they were in business together.

Everyone was soon gathered in Bram’s house to eat something before dusk, which made the parents impatient to leave. The four kids were already feeling at home. They were all excited to see the familiar faces of the Size Chef staff who were serving them. It surprised Tracy that all the four children already knew the Size Chef, having been regular customers at bakeries before the family reunion.

Amadi hoped Abigail would remember him. He could never forget the young woman who gave him a list of likely distributors of muffins in her hometown. He had thought there was something familiar about her, but he had not gotten her name. Looking at her now, he now knew why she had looked familiar. It was clear she was Tracy’s daughter; they looked so alike. Abigail remembered him and this made Amadi very happy. He proudly let her know that her suggestions for distributors paid off very well.

Angela and Angela were happy to see their parents off so that they could remain and warm their new home. Twister moved in with Gladys and Bethrow same night in their guest wing. She refused to be housed by Tracy who was

now her in law. They all agreed to visit Jewel and Blaze in the morning for breakfast the following day.

Gladys was torn between two things. She had been looking forward to be with her son a bit longer, but so did she also wanted to be with her lover Bethrow. Twister promised to make time to be with her later after his planned visit to Angela's parents. After all, she and the newfound love would be staying at Twister's house until her house was vacant for their occupation. They would see one another as much as she wanted.

SCHOOL TOOK a back seat that week. There was not much going on and everyone was rehearsing for the graduation ceremony. Bram, Tracy, and Gladys were extremely happy they would be there to witness their children graduate.

"There has been a change of plan to visit our in laws, Jewel and Blaze," Gladys explained to Bram over the phone. "I may not be able to join your family today for the important event. I have booked a flight to Eritrea tomorrow for Twister to meet his grandparents in honour of his late dad. We will not be able to take Abigail with us this time because of her condition. She is too heavy with pregnancy to manage it. We will be gone for a week. My apologies for the abrupt announcement. I also want to break the news to them that I've now been taken by another hungry dude to replace their son."

"No worries, Gladys, and feel no blame," said Bram, "We are all hungry for our children. Nothing should delay your plans. Yonas's parents have been waiting for this moment for too long, just like us. Let them meet their son Yonas in their grandson. Twister is all they have of their departed son's legacy. And, who knows, seeing him might help them live longer. Twister symbolises the promise that their son will live forever through in generations to come. It will be a very rewarding experience for Twister, too. This time, it will not be an empty trip but a double portion for them."

"Thank you, guys, for understanding," said Gladys, then turning to Twister's wife she said, "My Beautiful Abigail, we shall be back to tag you along when we visit my mum here in the UK. She is waiting to skin me alive for disappearing on her all this time. First, enjoy your time with your mom and dad. We'll catch up when we are back." She hugged Abigail.

As Tracy listened to this, the thought that she would not enjoy time with her daughter for longer than she would have liked because Abigail was getting married saddened her. She would have liked at least a year with her daughter. And now she would soon be taken by her husband almost felt like the day they lost the children.

Bethrow called Gladys on the side. "Our flight to Eritrea is in the evening," he observed. "Why can't you, me and Boris make a quick dash to your Parents before we fly out to your in-laws?"

They called Boris and planned an early morning drive to their parents, as Twister joined the others to visit the girls' parents, Jewel and Blaze.

AFTER TWENTY YEARS without seeing her, Gladys found her mother no longer the stout woman she remembered. She had grown frail as her age had advanced. The mom was beside herself with happiness to see her daughter and son Boris and let tears of joy freely flow.

"Have renewed confidence today my daughter," the mother said even as her excitement calmed down, "God has fulfilled your dream and our family's dream that one day you would show up whole and hearty. I never allowed our family to lose hope of ever seeing you after you disappeared. I knew you were out there somewhere. I have been proved right and very glad to see you while I am still alive."

She hugged Gladys eager to feel and scrutinise the lines on her forehead threatening to age her daughter's beautiful face. She wondered when the years piled on her daughter, who looked older than the mother remembered.

After fussing with great happiness over Boris, who was her favourite child, she turned to Bethrow with an outpouring of her love and appreciation for helping his son Boris raise Joel and Twister. The two boys were already her frequent visitors and did not seem to fuss too much over them. Her main interest was Gladys, who she wanted to catch up with and hold to account for disappearing on the family all those years.

"I prayed to God to keep me going, that I should not die before seeing you, Gladys, or find your body in case you had died. Your dad gave up and died. You need to pay homage to him. He rested five years ago. Why did you condemn us to such extreme anxiety not knowing whether you were alive or

dead, Gladys? Am I such a monster that you should go into hiding? Or was it the bitter exchange we had for taking my baby Boris with you?"

There was a brief silence as the mother waited for the daughter to say something. But the daughter was tongue-tied and didn't know what to say.

"You and Boris matter to me a lot, Gladys" the mother continued, "yet there was nothing I could do to find you. We missed Twister, too, he enriched our lives. He was such a loving and brilliant boy who was not a bother, either to me or his grandfather who adored him. Your Dad and I were worried for Twister, and wondered whether he knew about my fight with you over Boris. But neither could Boris hear my pleas not to join you in Africa. Yet, he turns out to be a blessing for rescuing my grandson Twister from the strangers. I now realise it was all for good that Boris had to join you in South Sudan." The mother embraced the daughter, holding tightly as if she would never let go.

"I cannot stop crying, Mom, for making you sad and finding dad already dead before I could see him. I was so confused after losing my baby Twister and his dad dying in front of me. I also didn't know where to look for Boris and couldn't face you without him. I was utterly broken by all these losses of our loved ones. I decided to return only after I had found either your son Boris, or my Twister. And I had just found them and kept the promise I gave myself for your sake. I may be late not coming to visit you earlier, but I hope you will forgive me."

"I am sorry if my bitter words so hurt you as to make you keep away. It must have been a very trying moment for my poor girl. Thanks for coming back. We missed you a lot. Your dad was sure you were not dead. I do not know how he knew and was convinced of that even on his dying day. Remember to tell my daughter Gladys, we love her very much, and that she owes no one anything. The only consolation is that our boys, Twister and Boris, came back. Now we wait for Gladys. Let her come to salute me whenever she will come back. With that, your dad disappeared into the night. When I found his bed empty, and I knew where he had gone."

"Those were lovely words from dad. I owe him apology for keeping away all this time."

They went to her dad's grave, and Gladys whispered to him everything that was in her heart, including her joy with him since she was a little girl to the time she left for Africa. She laid flowers she had brought with her, having already learned from Boris that his dad had passed on one year before.

“Before I go, Mom, meet Bethrow, my lost love, too. I met him a second time yesterday after fifteen years. I have been lonely since I lost my husband. Joel and Abigail's parents have been my partners in all these twenty years as we looked for the children. They got their babies back too. I derailed everyone by my fear that was without grounds, mom.’

“It must have been very sad for them too. It’s just luck that Boris had the kids. Bethrow is my darling too,” the mother went on, “He offers to drop the boys here when my Boris is busy. I am happy now he is my family. Boris told us Joel's parents had died. But I am glad to learn that they survived. It is excellent news. I am so happy for Joel. I love the boy. I still remember how happy he was as a toddler to discover that he had a grandpa and a grandma the day we first met. He always comes to see us with a gift. No one was sadder than him when your dad died. He loved him very much. They always had a good time doing things together. Maybe they were buddies in another life. They were always delighted to see each other.”

“Is Abigail the same beautiful doctor engaged to Twister, the now sister to Joel?”

“I can already see a love triangle between you three – you, your son and her.” Like many old people her attention span was very short, and no sooner had she mentioned the love triangle than she was on Bethrow.

“You must hold on tight to her, lest she disappears because it would kill me this time, Bethrow,” she said.

“I won’t let that happen, Mom, I love Gladys very much, and I have suffered as much as you from her dirty tricks disappearing on people. Had she not vanished on me fifteen years ago, she would have long found her child because Boris was my friend even then, though I only learnt of the children after I moved in with him,” Bethrow explained smiling.

“Mom dear,” said Boris joining them, “we ought not to worry about her, as Joel and Abigail's parents were always with her and will remain so. What I was surprised to learn yesterday was that Tracy and Bram survived as well. It was a very happy day for them to reunite with Joel and Abigail. They are now together.

Boris was inspecting his dad’s compound to see whether it was well kept, as Gladys continued to catch up with her mother on happening in the years she was gone. Boris always hired a gardener once in a while to trim and manicure the fence and grass, as well as ensure the flowers in the homestead

were watered. With his dad gone, the homestead now seemed overwhelming to his lonely mother who was adamant that she would not rent it out and take a small house.

It was, however, time to leave and Boris went to fetch Gladys to take her to the airport.

We need to get going. Twister and Gladys are flying out tonight to visit her late husband's parents in Eritrea."

"What do you mean Boris, didn't they reject my daughter, and didn't want her to marry that Yonas? Why must she go to people who don't want her?" protested the mother, a bit furious about it.

"After Yonas died, they started seeing him in me," explained Gladys to calm her mother. "They let me inherit everything that belonged to their son Yonas and have since been very interested in tracing their grandson, Twister. Many times, they requested to come and meet my parents, if only to bless me to remarry but I told them that would only happen after I found your son Boris, dead or alive."

"That is news to me. I am happy to hear they have embraced you. They are welcome to visit now that we have their lost grandchild, who we are not willing to give back to them. Visiting is fine, but Twister shall remain my son, especially because I have been with him longer. I don't even consider him a grandson. He filled the gap that you left. But he can return to being my grandson now that you are back."

"Speaking of Twister, there is that proverb among the Kikuyu people in Africa that says that that which is yours does not bring another mother at dawn to claim it. This is to say that Twister belongs to Yonas and me. Simply because you brought him up with my loving Brother Boris doesn't make him yours. He shall forever be your grandson, the same way he is a grandson to Yonas parents. Boris will remain the uncle and dad who brought him up, but he will remain my son forever."

"Thank you for correcting me, Gladys. Both sides have equal rights to their grandchildren. I wouldn't want to see you suffer again, my girl. Have a safe journey. Thank you for laying a flower on your dad's grave. He will rest better now that you are back. Come and spend some time with me when you get back, darling. I know your attention is now divided, but I deserve a share of it, too. Have a safe journey and pass my regards to Twister grannies on the other

side of the world. Remind Twister not to forsake me now that he has a mother, a dad and a wife.”

“I will Mom. I am so happy to visit home after so long. With you around, nothing much has changed. Keep it up to Mom. We should get going now. And I will definitely come back to spend time with you.”

“Boris, thank you for your daughter and wife. I am expecting you tomorrow. Don’t fail me.”

Gladys’s eyes were wet as they drove off.

“SAY HELLO to your grandson Mom. We are at the airport about to leave,” Boris said as he handed the phone to his nephew, Twister, who had told him he wanted to say hello. He didn’t explain why, but it was probably because he was about to take a flight to Eritrea to meet his paternal grandparents for the first time and felt a certain need he could not explain to keep connected with the grandma on his mother’s side.

As Twister was on the phone, Boris turned to Gladys and Bethrow to help with the bags at the check in counter. Soon they were on their way to Eritrea.

Twister was lost in thought trying to imagine how his father’s land was like. He wondered how it would have been like to his grandparents with Yonas had he been alive. Twister felt the same as he felt when they had made a trip with Joel and their wives. Only that this time he was not in the company of his wife and brother Joel. The landscape looked the same as that in Ethiopia. He wondered why angels took his dad before he even knew him. He consoled himself that he was at least lucky to have his mother and grandparents from both sides of the family still alive. He felt being pulled to connect with his roots and take in every little detail along the way to his grandpa’s compound.”

They found so many people waiting for them such that it felt like the whole village was at Yonas parent’s homestead. They were there to see for themselves the son of the late village hero, Yonas. The first to receive him was the grandfather and grandmother and Yonas’s only sibling, Meci. She had had a conference call earlier with Gladys and Twister and they had talked for quite a while so that even as they were physically meeting it was as if the aunt and the nephew had known each other for a long time.

“My late son Yonas was tall, handsome, and had a great smile, and looked just like Twister. It seems Twister only inherited Gladys’s blue eyes,” Explained

the grandmother, who didn't want to let go of the young man's hand. "Meet your grandpa, Twister."

"Welcome, my boy. Where have you been all this time?"

"I have been away building my muscles to fight for you my grannies, now that my dad Yonas is gone," he replied, impressing them that he had a sense of humour as his late dad Yonas. "Nice to meet you, Grandpa and Grandma. I was really looking forward to this. I thank God I am here. I am an expectant dad of twins, a girl and a boy. I hope to bless you with bringing Yonas back to life by naming my son after him," Twister said smiling, exposing a beautiful set of teeth that looked just like Yonas."

"Having you is already blessing enough, Twister; we see so much of our son Yonas in you," observed the grandmother. "He was around your age when he died. We cannot look at you with a granny's eye. We already see you as our son, Yonas. Thank you for growing up fast and coming over to see us before we are gone. Where is the beautiful wife that has our great-grandchildren in her womb?"

"She was not able to join us on this trip. She is almost due to deliver. We shall take you with us to meet her and your great grandchildren on the other side of the world."

"How we wish you had brought her with you," Yonas's father said. "Come right in for something to welcome you after your journey. You must be hungry. This will be your very first meal in your father Yonas's homestead. Here we eat traditional food, not food like you are used to in Europe."

The grandfather then went on to explain that Eritrean cuisine was similar to that of neighbouring countries, especially Ethiopia. What Twister was being served was *injera*, a flatbread prepared using wheat or sorghum which he was taking with *tsebhi* a spiced goat stew, and *hilbet*, a tasty lentil or bean paste. There was also pasta and lasagna on the menu, which the grandfather explained was of Italian influence, which had colonised Eritrea.

Twister preferred the pasta and didn't especially like *Injera* because it was prepared using sour dough which he was yet to acquire the taste for. He found the dessert quite interesting, and comprised *makeel*, a crispy doughnut prepared with honey. They were served traditional black coffee that had a sharp sweet taste to it.

They finally sat down to enjoy *sumra*, the traditional beer made of fermented barley and honey. This made for an interesting experience for Twister, who

seemed to think a good drink only came in kegs or bottles. As they enjoyed the drink, his grandfather brought out a photo album with pictures of Yonas since he was a teenager and some which were taken of him holding Twister. It was one of the most surprising things to him that he hadn't quite grasped why they kept on saying he looked exactly like his father. Looking at the pictures, it was as Twister was looking at himself in another setting long ago by the look of the old-fashioned clothes.

As the evening approached, just as the sun was starting to go down, the grandfather took Twister's hand and led him to his Dad Yonas's grave where they sat down. Twister then stood up and went to the head of the grave and spoke to his father expressing his regret that he never grew up to know him and vowed to always make Yonas proud. He also let his father know that he was going to name his soon-to-be-born son Yonas in his honour. The setting sun illuminated him in a bright splash of colours as welcoming as if welcoming Twister, a lost son of the land, back home.

He then walked back to sit with his grandfather. He had not noticed the old man go back to the house bring a tray of meat, and it was not the kind he had ever tasted - it was camel hump. Eritreans considered among the most delicious of meats and was quite lean and therefore health with less cholesterol. Twister thought the taste comparable to beef, though it had a slightly sweeter aftertaste.

"I hope you are not planning to leave soon Twister. We have a lot to talk about your dad and our culture."

"We are here to stay, Grandpa. Yonas is back and nothing will keep me away. We will be here a while. And when it comes time to go, I should take you with me to Europe to see my wife. It will give you the opportunity to bless my babies immediately they arrive."

"Twister, you strike me as a happy soul as your father was. Your dad had no time for regrets; he lived in the present, just like you. Going to Europe from Eritrea seems a very difficult a process that many people I know complain of being denied that thing they call Visa. Maybe now that we are old and not looking to settle there we will be considered. I would love to travel there, Twister. We have never gone beyond our country's boundaries."

"Oh my Goodness, not to worry Grandpa. I will be graduating from college in two weeks' time and that will be a good excuse to fly you out. I now have a beautiful wife and a beautiful house to host you."

Meci, who overheard them as she came to join them said, “I will be more than willing to begin the visa process for you Dad and Mom. It usually takes time,” she told her elderly father. “I will also offer to bring them to Europe, Twister.”

“That’s very kind of you Aunt Meci. We shall be waiting. I hope you shall be kind enough to give me a tour to this vast land, the land of my father.”

“I would be privileged to do that, son. You are this family’s future, you know.”

Twister would later wonder what his Aunt Meci had meant by that and regretted that he didn’t ask.

In the meantime, Gladys was updating the grandparents. “I hope you guys have not forgotten my friends, Bram and Tracy; they helped me a lot when Yonas died,” she said this as she showed them a photo she took with the couple during Yonas’s funeral. “Their kids disappeared the same day as Twister.” She then narrated to them what transpired until that day she met Boris and the parents were soon reunited with their children. “Abigail, their daughter, is now the wife to my Twister.”

The grandparents were happy and felt renewed at seeing Twister and the promise he symbolised of a fruitful future with the coming babies—an event they looked forward to witness and bless the new generation.

Small groups were forming for the opportunity to touch Twister’s hands, as some put it. Everyone he spoke to had their set of questions and advice to give him. And, of course, there were the girls eager to show off their beauty and talent for his benefit.

Gladys finally got the opportunity to introduce his love Bethrow, and the prospective in-laws were very happy to welcome him and bless her new journey with Bethrow. They had always been worried about Gladys’s wellbeing, having been such a lonely soul. Now she looked vibrant and much younger. They knew that love had a way of doing magic to lonesome souls.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The Imposters

TWISTER AND MECI TOOK the train from Asmara to Massawa. It would have been a short distance of less than 2 hours by road, but Meci had advised they take the longer and more exciting railway route in which they would have time to enjoy the landscape and beautiful of wilderness along the way. The train was an old locomotive but was more comfortable and spacious with a cabin to themselves.

“I hope you are enjoying the tour Twister. Eritrea is a beautiful country with a rich history. Unfortunately, the colonisers had no respect for the natives and their culture. They came and used force to impose their own culture on the people.”

“Thanks for that bit of history, but I am enjoying myself. I am finding it fun being with you, if only to distract me from Mom and my grandparents. They are babying me too much—too much pampering. How come you are almost my age mate though you are a sister to my late dad Yonas?

“That’s a good question, Twister. Your dad and I are years apart. In between us were three siblings whom Mom lost during childbirth. Doctors said the loss was due to stress complications brought on by colonial violence meted on the people in the many battles to possess our dear country—first by the Italians who eventually lost to the British before the civil war with Ethiopia, from which Eritrea gained independence. After she gave birth to me, she was advised to stop having any more children as it posed a life threatening risk. To make up for it, I remember Yonas promising her that he would get them ten grandchildren. But this was never to be, first because he died young but also because his marriage to your mom started on a wrong footing. My parents did

not want Yonas to marry a white girl, perhaps because whites do not like having many kids like Africans.”

“Yes, Meci, I would agree with that. And because of it the population in most European countries has been declining even as the number of people in Africa has been steadily rising.”

“So, Mom gave birth to five of us, and with Yonas now gone, I am the only one still alive.”

“That’s sad, yet you do not seem to be in a hurry to give them grandchildren, eh, Aunt Meci?”

“My story is complicated, Twister. I am a Lesbian,” she admitted it without blinking, giving Twister the impression that she was liberated or a feminist who were usually forthright and not ashamed of their sexual orientation. “Do not look at me with such eyes, dear nephew; you are not a child and must understand these things are real,” she laughed as she dug into her handbag to fish out a cigarette, which she lit.

“What you are calling my look is not to condemn you Aunty, but to applaud your confidence and acceptance of who you are. In life we find unexpected valleys we must cross or get lost in looking for a way out to the other side. I cannot judge you, dear.”

“What are you trying to get at young man? I am a bit lost,” Meci asked, blowing away cigarette smoke through the open window of their train cabin. But before Twister could answer, she was distracted by the beautiful view of the road winding up and down the hills from Asmara to Massawa. He could not allow the opportunity to pass him to admire the picturesque view.

“That is a spectacular view!” he declared. “I wish we were travelling by road; I would have stopped to walk the slopes or trek to the top of the hill to enjoy the view from there.” Then, changing the subject, he said, “Before the beautiful view interrupted us, I was about to say that it is when we distinguish between ‘need’ and ‘want’. and realise that ‘need’ is the more important because we can’t do without it. It is when we come to that realisation that life starts. We need to de-stigmatise beliefs that discriminate specific groups of people. Being gay or lesbian is real and is sometimes not by choice. People ought to realise that.”

“I wish it is as simple as you put it Twister. In most communities, especially in Africa, being gay or lesbian is taboo. You are shunned by your community.

The only person who stands with you is your mother, not because she might support your orientation but because you are from her womb.”

There followed brief silence.

‘I mean, you were born a girl-child,” said Twister, “then you grew up a normal girl, only for this girl to discover that she is attracted to other females and became lesbian. But some butch lesbians, for example, see things from a male perspective even though they are biologically a woman, Aunt Meci.”

“Its very complicated Twister. I don’t know where to start to make you understand that it is not by choice that I am lesbian,” she said and paused a bit, as she watched some antelopes leisurely grazing unbothered by the passing train. “Twister, a gay person waters his dreams like any other person. He has a way to turn a house into a home. He is caring; he guides and has feelings like everyone else. He can listen and cry in sorrow. He can burst into laughter and react to a sensual touch, just like everybody else. He is selective and jealous, one who protects his tuff...just like anyone else. And though some gay men may show some feminine tendencies, they remain masculine, while some are gentle and could hardly hurt a fly. Some are lonely souls longing to be loved. He doesn't know any better other than be himself or herself. His world is complete, though some may feel the world misunderstands them.

Meci took a long, last pull at her cigarette then disposed it before continuing.

“The kind of lesbian I am Twister, is one who is literally a tomboy. I am restless and can engage in physical fight with anyone and anything and I have often emerged the winner. I was always respected on the playground for participating in events that many girls shy off for fear of getting hurt. I had enough bruises, but often managed to avoid hurting myself. I hate being ordered about and I try enjoy the body I live in. I feel trapped and limited and would love to be a boy and get wasted in the fields like men seem to enjoy doing. I, however, always want to keep clean unlike the boys who wallow in the dust or mud out in the field and sometimes have to be forced to take the shower. My world is divided and a bit complicated. Most of the time I like being in the company of men, which made my parents come hard on me in the fear I would get tempted and get pregnant. Little did they know I was in my element playing football with boys. When some girls met this being – me –a thousand butterflies fluttered in their bellies after picking the scent of a man

on me. This was not always the case, but some would be afraid of me. I am Virginia, I have never allowed any man to touch, let alone explore my body.”

Meci paused again, as Twister momentarily lost himself in the thought of Dawit who he admired and thought of his sensual hands on Joel when they used to do it.

“Anti-gay people should stop trying to change homosexuals and focus on changing themselves to accept us. They ought to recognise that we exist,” Meci said almost in tears.

“I hear you Meci. Although we cannot change the direction of the wind, at least we can adjust the sail. We are the same people, whether gay, lesbian or straight. But negative beliefs about what homosexuality is drift us apart. Because of this misunderstanding, gays and lesbians have their special spaces whether on the internet or gay bars where they find mates. But it is also in those spaces that gay or lesbian pretenders act trendy and glamorous. But there is nothing trendy about being born gay or lesbian. I am a medical doctor Meci and I get very concerned that many people are unwilling to accept that homosexuality is at least partly in the genes, rather than purely a lifestyle choice. One is born gay or lesbian. And because society does not understand this, some homosexuals have been known to be suicidal because of discrimination or because of fear of being outed and shamed.

“Though it is the hope of many parents to see their offspring bear them grandchildren and bring forth the next generation, not many parents with homosexual children like me get grandchildren,” explained Meci. “I have no excuse not to give my parents grandchildren. I am a beautiful woman who has undergone all the female rites. I have boobs, nice hips, long hair, light complexion, smooth skin, menstrual periods, great mind, good job, men flock my parents’ home to marry me. I mean, how can I explain to anyone that I am different? My whole body is all woman. With a good penetration by some man I should give them a baby if not babies, except that I am a man trapped in the wrong body!”

They laughed at the mention of penetration, which for Twister reminded him playing the girl with Joel when they practiced homosexuality. He loved flowers and now lived a confused life, especially after deciding to marry Abigail. He enjoyed having sex with her, but it always felt like he enjoyed it as a woman. He wondered whether him and Abigail were in wrong bodies like Meci. Abigail feared pain, of which they agreed that the twins should be delivered by C-

section other than suffer labour pains. This is despite Abigail being the assertive one between her and Angela, despite Angela playing the man and provider in their lesbian relationship because it was she who had the money. Things had since changed, however, and Abigail hated any man coming close to Twister. The slightest hint of this happening threw her into a fit of anger as happened when he once mentioned Dawit, Amadi's son. Twister understood her anger, but he couldn't help himself and thought homosexuals some of the most adorable social beings.

Twister said suddenly, "I remember when a guy in the island of Lamu in Kenya where we had visited as tourists stating in Kiswahili, 'Twister *una umama mwingi sana kijana*,' which I was told translates to mean that I am handsomely beautiful and showed too many traits of a girl," This made them chuckle. Meci noticed a red ribbon on Twister's hair that she had not seen before. She thought it somehow matched his checked red polo and a cream scarf. She also noticed that his hands were nicely manicured and his ear spotted a sparkling earring. He had also applied lip gloss.

She did not interrupt him. "Men and women are the same. The only difference is their reproductive organs. Male and female all have X chromosome. Female has two X chromosomes while male has one X chromosome and one Y chromosome. But while there are these differences, women and men are appreciated for who they are, except when they identify as gay or lesbian."

"Let me cut you short, my dear. Can you see in the distance?" she said pointing at some structure. "That is the memorial plaza for victims of the Massawa battle with Ethiopia. that led Eritrea's independence."

"That is impressive," he said. Then he reached for his phone and retrieved an article, saying, "But it reminds me of this guy describing the Eritrea he once knew and how the war affected it. I have it here on my phone. I will read it aloud."

I was not born in Asmara, although I considered myself in that modern parlance an 'Asmarino'. I came to Asmara when perhaps I was young from the next small town, next to the next small town. Living in Asmara was like living in a big village. Asmara, at least in those times was considered cosmopolitan. It was beautiful, clean, dirty, sordid, picturesque, cramped and if you lived on the wrong end of the city like we did, ghettoized.

In my teens I remember strolling up and down Kombishtato, later known as Haile Sellasie Ave., elbows linked with my friends on Sundays. Our walk started near one of the tea houses that dotted the area near the Municipality around ten and mostly ended around twelve. The aim of the walk was to watch all the beautiful young girls who did likewise. They were ordinary, not overtly beautiful but reasonably polished and demure, giggly, and sufficiently flirty. Although I did not speak Italian I was familiar with some of the wowing words such as ‘chao bella’ ‘comme va bellissima’. The girls would smile, and sometimes open up and say something that sounded inviting. I will often flatter myself that they liked me but soon find out that they were speaking through me to one of my handsome friends.

I went to a school called Scoula Vittoria. I was never one for books. It was not that I wasn’t average, it was just that I wasn’t focused. Whoever came late into the class, my teacher will tell him “sit over there with the useless.” I was that useless. Repeating class had become a norm for me. In class I spent most of my time daydreaming or being mischievous. I was a disappointment both to my uncle and my father.

It was when I was fifteen that my uncle asked me if I would like to go to America to live and to go to school. America!! Wow, that was unbelievable. My uncle with whom I was living then was working at the American base of Radio Marina as a cook or something. Fortunately for me, he had struck up a friendship with a Marine Colonel for some time and had in his limited English beseeched the officer to take me with him at the end of his assignment. The colonel (a half African American) was reluctant at first but eventually my uncles’ persistence had won him over. I had trepidations, I wanted to run, I wanted to hide, I wanted to crawl back into my mothers’ wombs, but eventually I convinced myself what was there to loose and accepted my fate.

My adopted family did everything to help me adjust and make something out of myself.

I spent most of my adult life going in and out of school, going in and out of work. Years later I went back to Asmara and to our village because my mother was very sick. When I disembarked at the airport, my father and my uncle were there to meet me. They had become so old that it was scary to see them. In our village I found out that I was late for my mother’s funeral.

I didn’t stay long in Eritrea. Things have changed since I was there last. Our village has become a garrison town. Most of my friends had left. Some

had joined the budding Eritrean resistance army somewhere in neighbouring countries. The whole atmosphere seemed oppressive, dangerous and cruel. I didn't want to stay there anymore. I wanted to look forward from the place I once knew to be home. I wanted a life of my own. For some reason I felt that America was more my home than Eritrea. My father and uncle came to see me off. As I looked through the DC-3 window I knew in my heart that it was the last time I will ever see them again. I was right.

The war escalated, the resistance continued and the stories of atrocities and heroism became a staple of my family daily life. We lost our friends. We lost our relatives. We lost our neighbours. But the hope of one day being united with loved ones never faded. Most of us became active in the resistance to the extent we could, hoping that one day we will live free and we will live happy and we will be united. But fate is cruel. Dreams just ended up being dreams. Over two hundred thousand dead, over half a million in refugee camps or in the Diaspora!! How does one measure independence? We Eritrean are no Tunisians. We are no Egyptians or Syrians. We Eritrean are a people who feel comfortable in being afraid. In being very, very afraid. Probably that is why we never had a hero in our history. In the old days the best we could do was a feudal village bandit called Weldemichal Solomon, a.k.a Aba Gomida. Yes we now have come up with another manure named Wedi Afeworki, a riffraff who enjoys tiptoeing on sewage.

Today, we are prisoners in our own country, our true history is being rewritten. Our ruling elites and their enablers and their scribes furnish us with a narrative that suits our current purpose or the purpose of those who stand to gain the most from turning us into the most pliable, compliant and contentious subjects they need to have. We haven't failed them so far. We are a divided people. A people at odds both with ourselves and our heritage. A people who have been talking for the last twenty years. From what I observe about the so called opposition 'am afraid we will still be talking for the next twenty years. How did we get from there to here? How did we become victims of the uses and misuses of hope? I have now accepted my Karma. I have now accepted my new home away from home. It is not perfect but it is the best country to live in. My children have assimilated, acculturated, in this our adopted country. Yes, you will say home is where you are born where your father and his father before him and their fathers before them where born. For me home is where I am happy!

“I feel his pain for losing friends, relatives and neighbours,” said Twister as he finished reading. “I am Eritrean and a foreigner and like so many others who may wish to support our country but can’t or have not. I guess we are cowards. We should all come back and develop our country and leave our comfortable lives. Youth is gold and if we don’t return now it shall be harder to come back later when we are older.”

“Some of us who believed we could make a difference have done so fearlessly. We came back to Eritrea to stay, Twister. If you want to be counted, come and open a clinic here. We have enough sick people who will need your services. Forget about the non-starter in the story who is talking from outside the country. Growth is gradual, and Eritrea will not become the First World in a year. It is something we all must build on for the sake of future generations. But leave that at that; go on from where we stopped our discussion on homosexuality, dear.”

“I am married to a lesbian as we speak, and we are trying to lead a normal life. Many people believe any experience that they have not gone through is hogwash or, brainwash. Most of us are afraid to own up to these weird experiences publicly. We allow superstitions to take over instead of accepting what nature has taught us.”

“Are you gay, Twister... is it in our genes or what? Please Twister, do not blame me for being this sincere with my feelings. I have no better way of showing who I am, but it is also to remind others like us that they are not alone. Thank you for opening up too. I least suspected you to be one of us. I just confessed to you my orientation because you are family. And a young family member for that matter, because I thought you would not judge me harshly.”

“Yes I am gay, Aunt Meci, and it gives me pride how daring you are to come out and tell me about it. I have had a boyfriend and I have a wife now, but I am more comfortable being the cheerleader in my marriage in which my wife Abigail complements me perfectly. Let this be between us. I wouldn’t want Mom to get a wind of it. I need to make a family for her and Yonas’s parents’ sake because you seem lost in your own sex orientation bubble.”

“I feel sad about it Twister but I am not as brave as you are, my dear nephew. I am surprised that two members of our family – me and you, happen to be gay even though you seem to have changed. Why is discussion of sex or homosexuality so rarely spoken about in families matters, yet it touches the

core of creation? We are probably not the only ones who are gay in the family. I am sure if my grandparents were gay, they would never talk about it even on their death bed."

"Now that you are more civilised than them would you discuss with your children someday, Twister?" she didn't wait for an answer and said, "Thank God we finally found you, otherwise my parents could have gone to their graves greatly disappointed. By the way, they think I am barren and encourage me to see as many doctors as possible. I am sure that shall be the item of discussion with you when we get back. Try and help your aunt before she reaches menopause. I feel sad for them but I try to cheer them on in their prayers. I wouldn't want to break their hearts by telling them the truth."

"Now listen Aunt Meci, I am determined to fill the gap for them, but ...if you are lucky to find a lame person like yourself, I mean gay, get married and explore your lameness together just like me and my beautiful wife Abby. I am a soul with a dark past too. But I am determined to live in the present as a daddy. I should fake it until I look real...just for the sake of my family. Abby and I make a perfect couple in our own weaknesses, dear Aunt. About telling our children we are gay, that I have to discuss with my dear wife."

"I hear you, Twister, but let me be. It may sound weird, but gays and lesbians are special beings with admirable abilities. To many straight people we look trendy and affluent. There are few or no poor gay or lesbian because they are hard workers. In retrospection, I think we are very emotional, one of the reasons being that we sometimes are so looked down upon, and the second because some of us feel locked in the wrong body. The labour ward is no place for men, Twister. I am a man in a woman's body. We need to be real to ourselves, Twister. Let me live my life to the fullest as a lesbian. Besides, the man in me can't allow me get close to another man. It ruins that kind of intimacy the same way a straight man can't think of sleeping with you, Twister. You would have a difficult time sweet talking such a man to join your gay life. For him, a woman is where his urge takes him. Let me be, I am not ready to deny a woman the man of her choice. When I find a woman interested in me, well and good but gadgets do a good job as well now that I am ageing. With the knowledge that we are homosexual, we cannot fake or be disappointed in who we are. It is OK not to be OK, my dear nephew. Let me live my life in my natural world before tradition, religion and culture try to change me in their mistaken belief that they are more right than I believe I am."

“I agree Meci. I wish society would be open-minded about homosexuality, or we shall have failed as a society. But the LGBTQ hype should be controlled and the young ones should get the right guidance. Otherwise, they might succumb to peer influence and be introduced to same-sex relationships, especially during that age when they are learning about their sexual organs. Remember that where parents or guardians don’t give guidance, boys teach other boys about their sex organs as girls talk to other girls about it, where they often get the wrong information and homosexual ideas may be introduced to them. But should it turn out that one finds out that they are gay like I discovered myself, then that is okay. One should not influence or encourage someone to be gay as if it is a trend. And if we liken being gay to lameness, let it be. In my opinion, lameness is lameness, and like the disabled are allowed to marry each other, so should people in same-sex relationships be allowed to quietly marry. Then they should live their lives like other normal people without the illusion of LGBTQ as an avenue for fame and money.”

“Oh my God, that part of sex organs being introduced by the same sex peers while young had escaped my mind. When I was young we did foreplay with other girls who are today married and others are single mothers as I struggle with my lesbian tendencies.”

“I would think that even had you not had foreplay with other girls, you would still have been a lesbian Auntie, now you know. Most parents do not teach their children or engage them in topics related to sex. Such parents have no moral right as parents or society to question the choices their children make.”

“That is true Twister, hence those who are gay or lesbian are not sure whether they are homosexual because it is natural to them, or whether it was by choice.”

“I feel sad for our partners, Meci, who genuinely fall in love with us, the gay. You know, it is very hard to know who is for same sex or opposite sex. We try our luck and at times we influence normal people to join our club. Most of them have to adopt our erotic preferences. But we need them for partners because we deserve love just like everyone else. Yet, as much as we sometimes explain to them that the only difference is we like to enjoy it in a same sex relationship, some do not relate to our preferences, so they eventually get an opposite sex partner. We are the authors of these chaos and the hype that transgender should be public. The imposters’ sexual preference was from us

and maybe we need to swallow the bitter pill for they are now married and divorced in the space of gays and Lesbians.”

“Oh my God, Twister, that is very true. We have invited the normal for it is a need for us to be loved too. I had not seen it from that angle. We are a huge messed up community now.’

“I know that thing Meci. We are all from different backgrounds which does not always help the situation. For example, most children under ten years keep with agemates according to their gender – boys with boys and girls with girls. In this way they learn from each other. As they juggle their way to teenage, they expose one another to the forbidden fruit. Most parents can attest that they rarely if ever engage a discussion about sex and reproductive organs with their children, especially with those below teenage. But they quickly learn not to touch their organs in public but do so in private as they explore themselves and the sensual feelings the organs give them. In teenage, as they grow up, they get attracted to the opposite sex. Some of them continue with the habit of touching themselves and are unable to start the normal dating life of teenagers. Others are attracted to same sex relationships, some due to peer pressure. Like your friends who are married today yet you helped each other in discovering the ecstasy under the belt. The lost generation and the real homosexuals continue in the relationship until they end up losing themselves in their ways of relieving themselves to a point turning back becomes impossible. Both the homosexual and the laggards belong to the same category of the lost souls, but the laggards sometime are redeemed by their own urge to explore the greener pasture due to peer pressure.

“There is another group of people who are occasional guests to our homosexual camp Twister. After teenage, sexual feelings are suppressed especially by some religions which persuade their followers to practice celibacy until they are married. Sexual urges are different and for some people it makes them turn to homosexuality for relief. Homosexual activities are common in situations where there lack of opportunity for heterosexual contact such as prisons and colleges and schools, where boys and girls learn in separate institutions. However, when opportunity arises to meet with the opposite sex, most lead straight sex lives while others may continue to practice homosexuality. However, due to social pressure many homosexuals end up getting married and leading a normal family life, just like you Twister. I hope over time you shall get used to the life and adapt like those in heterosexual

families. I would not be surprised should I find you in the company of a handsome guy... one day.”

They laughed at the reality check.

“There are clouds of change gathering, and society is slowly accepting us. To some people our lives may appear glamorous, but they may not know the pain we endure because of social stigma.”

“God created a man and a woman for a reason. The male and female were not created just to enjoy themselves, but to make the world a beautiful place with descendants to continue life after them. The idea of a child being homosexual disturbs many who wonder, ‘How does society expect homosexuals to procreate and leave a generation behind them?’ Perhaps when we understand the role of nature and nurture in human development, maybe we shall know.”

“What do you mean by that Meci?”

“Nature is what science says influences our development through genetic inheritance and other biological factors. Nurture describes external influences like life experiences and learning from parents, schools, religion, the media, or general interaction with fellow human beings in the environments we live in. Some lead us on to a good path while others may mislead us as we grow up.”

“It is when we accept people, including accepting gay people as they are with empathy and compassion that we live in harmony. But we can’t forget there are those who adopt homosexual lifestyles mostly for money and fame. What is natural for homosexuals is difficult for such imposters. They deny who they are to become members of a group they cannot fit in because they are wired differently.”

Being gay is not something one gets out of; it is something one is. Gay people should, therefore, be better understood. But there are those who choose to become gay for monetary gain, and not merely for the pleasure they derive from it. The world should be wary of the latter – the gay pretenders – who flaunt gay-ness on their sleeve like a bling. The world shouldn’t compare them with the real gay people, many of whom feel trapped and can’t get out for fear of social stigma. Society should instead seek to understand them.

THE TWO gazed interestedly at the passing scenery outside the window against the somewhat soothing sound of the clackety-clack of the train wheels on the rails.

After a while, Twister said, "You know what Meci, man may be the most superior in the animal kingdom, but it is the only animal that pays for its existence. We pay for food, shelter, and almost everything to live our lives. We are very complicated animals."

"Who told humans they are more equal than other animals in the animal Kingdom, Twister. When I compare human beings when they were in the state of nature alongside wild animals before we got corrupted by money, it seems to me wild animals have much we should admire. Animals don't wake up to think how they should be prey to others. They wake up to live their lives hoping nothing serious happens that day. They wake up ready to face harsh conditions that the season brings. In the plant and animal kingdoms, human beings are the only creatures with the intellectual ability to dream up and afford the luxury of existence for their weak and lame who may live without fear of being preyed upon. This burden is shared between the society and the mother. A mother finds it difficult to give up on the fruit of her womb, who she gestated for nine months. Even though the lame child may be her pain and grief, she cannot give up on the joy God gave to her bearing the child. In the effort to care and comfort her lame or disadvantaged child, she is ready to put her life on the line. In the meantime, society recognizes and respects the rights of the disadvantaged. Why then would some societies discriminate the lesbians and gays, who look normal in other people's eyes, yet we are suffering in our 'lameness'? Homosexuals constitute a small fraction of humanity, but it has stirred large sections of the societies with hate and accusations of perversion. But there are those who demand that homosexuality be made legal, and many countries have done so and allowed same-sex couples to marry and adopt children."

"Eeiii... Aunt Meci, if there was no pleasure in sex, no one would indulge in it. Hence the reason most of us are born. Sex is a private matter and should be enjoyed in any way a person prefers in a safe environment without any threat of harm. We all belong to the animal kingdom, only that we are more conscious than the other animals. But those who deny people to enjoy themselves in the way they choose sow fear whose letters some have suggested to stand for False Evidence Appearing Real. I am fine with my 'lameness', but

it is not a public affair for people to be displayed to appreciate I am different. Even the straight people keep their sex life private.”

“It is because of the same fear that many human beings nurse lifestyle illnesses. And in as much as nature sometimes can be ruthless with its drought and floods, it is more predictable than human beings. Human beings must be the most stupid creatures to pay for survival, unlike wild animals that eat and live free of charge. Maybe it is the need to pay bills that make man take advantage of any opportunity that can draw money from other people’s pocket regardless of whether it is healthy or evil, or be it sex, drugs, alcohol or theft. Show people money and they will follow it to the grave; not because they would like to promote the way they get it, but for their survival.”

“Before you move the discussion to general life issues dear Aunt, this is the high time we discussed sexuality openly. Before you kill the fun, you said that you would be comfortable with gadgets than humans. I hear there are dildos and vibrators. There are Yoni eggs, geisha balls, nipple clips and many such toys that give one a wild turn-on. I have not used any, but I have seen them in sex stores. But do they work better than the real thing, human contact?”

“There is no lack of human contact here in Africa, Twister. We love sex and we are generous to our mates, but in the First World they come in handy because many people are lonely while relationships can be expensive. Hence the reason the toys are hyped. In Africa, sex is almost free.”

“What many people fear most are venereal diseases and unwanted pregnancies Twister?”

“Why then not take up the toys if they can be just as good as the real thing? Government does not go ransacking people’s homes looking for such gadgets, Mecil!”

The way Twister put it made them laugh.

“Oh my God, we are in Massawa already. Let’s get to the hotel and enjoy Eritrea cuisines as you feel the magic of waters at the shores of the Red Sea.”

They disembarked the train and held hands as they walked to their hotel, each to their own thoughts.

“Today let us try different foods from those you ate at your grannies; Twister.”

They entered a hotel and perused the menu.

“I want you to try *Zigni berbere*, a spicy and flavourful Eritrean stew which we can have with. Injera. Let’s order another stew -- the portions are not huge;

we could add *tsebhi shiro*, comprising powdered chickpeas or beans made with minced onions, garlic and, ground ginger or chopped tomatoes and chilli peppers.”

“Kindly request the chef not to put a lot of chillies,” requested Twister, “you guys consume a lot of chilli and my system is not used to yet.” He then excused himself to visit the gents and make a quick call to catch up with his wife Abby.

When he came back, there was a serving he could not recognise waiting for him. It was *ga’at* or *genfo*, a firm, porridge-like made of coarsely ground cornmeal. It was shaped into a round shape and a hole formed in the centre to create space for the dipping sauce that was a combination of butter and red peppers pulses such as sunflower seeds, nuts and flax.

“Sorry Meci for bothering you. I have seen a table being served a burger with French fries and veggies. Could I have that instead of the cuisine you ordered?”

“That’s OK, Twister. It’s a Camel burger, as in camel meat – most popular in Eritrea because we largely rear camels here.”

“I have never tasted a camel burger before. But so long as it is meat, I am happy to indulge myself.”

Meci called the waiter and added the burger to their order. Food was not too expensive, and she was determined to let Twister try as many foods as possible. She hoped it would help him acquire a taste for local cuisines during his long stay, otherwise he might go hungry should he bank on his familiar foods that may not be available everywhere they went.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Size Chef Pastries

EVERYONE WAS HAPPY to see Twister back in London, especially Abigail and her mother Tracy. She was especially eager to see him, as she did not want to tell her story without him there to hear it.

“Now that we are all here,” she told them on the evening Twister returned, “It is time I told you where you – Joel and Abigail, came from, and how Size Chef Pastries came to be. First of all, you are Ethiopians. Abyssinia, as Ethiopia was formerly known, is the land of your parents.”

They looked at each other and chuckled in a laughter that startled Tracy.

“When we took selfies at that dilapidated building with a faded image of a muffin, I told you that there was a chance it might have belonged to our ancestors, Joe,” said Abigail. “You were quick to dismiss me, saying that my love for muffins was getting to my head, remember?! Now I know why I was in love with that old building.”

“May I see the photo, Abigail?” Tracy asked surprised that they had been to Addis Ababa, but curious to see what building they were talking about. She was handed the phone with the pictures. “That was your Grandma Aida’s bakery,” she said after looking at the photograph. “I revived it a few months ago. Now you can get the original muffin at the Addis Ababa Size Chef Bakery, made from the original tasty recipe at the same spot where it all started. We even bought the building. It is our legacy. I made the muffins with her, and I continued using the recipes for Bram’s family, when I had been employed as a house help in his parents’ house. And now here is Abigail telling me the other day that she makes similar muffins. I wonder where she got the recipe, yet she was too young to understand anything.”

Tracy browsed through the pictures as Abigail explained where they had taken them. She came to the one Joel had taken by a school. "This school was my last working station in Addis," Tracy explained. "Joel started school here in baby class. Oh my God, who was guiding your photography because in this other picture is the bank your dad was employed just before we left for South Sudan. I remember us – Joe and I – used to visit him here to deliver his lunch to eat in his office. This is amazing. How did you pick out these spots, especially these ones with hints of your childhood history without realising their significance?"

"It was Joel who was suggesting the routes to take, maybe from memory because of having started kindergarten at the school, or because of your daily visits to dad's office to take him lunch," explained Abigail on behalf of his brother. "But he was convinced he knew some of the places. He joked that he must have known them in another life."

"That is very interesting, son," said their dad Bram, who had remained silent. "We are impressed that you guys could find your way and discover places one would not have thought you would have the slightest hint given that you were very young, especially you, Abigail."

Tracy went on. "After my mom Aida and Grandma Danita passed on, I was left in the middle of nowhere. My mom was a baker. She had a collection of recipes from which she made her muffins, which I would deliver orders to shops. She welcomed a guy called Amadi as a partner to more widely distribute the muffins in Addis Ababa as Mom concentrated on the baking. On days when orders were overwhelming, Amadi's wife Mona would help your Grandma Aida with the baking. Amadi is the man you met in your hometown whom you gave a list of possible distributors in the town.

"Yes, I had also met Amadi, Mona, and their handsome son Davit before you found us," said Joel. "I didn't know you guys had a history going that far. They must be family now, seeing that you are still together."

"Let Mom finish," Bram urged smiling. "She will explain all that, son."

"Amadi and Mum Aida's partnership was good for me," Tracy continued. "Had he not come on board, I probably would never have attended school because I had to help my mother at the bakery and with the distribution. She was illiterate and, like many people at that time, she didn't think educating a girl was important or even necessary. After one year of her partnership with Amadi, my mom got sick and died, and shortly after my Grandma Danita.

Maybe she lost the will to live after her daughter died. Anyway, they left me destitute, without anybody to look after me, except Amadi. But Amadi didn't care to take me in with his family, no matter how I pleaded with him, and despite his having been my mother's business partner.

'How could God leave me so desperate, with no one to call family?' I wondered after Amadi rejected me. I was pained and felt desperately lonely. I fell from being a well looked after baker's daughter to a street kid. In the meantime, Amadi was not paying rent for the business he had inherited, forcing the landlord of the building the bakery occupied to take the little that belonged to Mom and Grandma to cover for rent arrears after Amadi disappeared.

"I pondered about my situation and decided the streets were not for me. I walked door to door looking for a job. Some people were offended and beat me up. Finally, I found myself in this home. The woman of the house was a nursery schoolteacher and needed help but did not have much to pay for a full-time nanny. She offered a stay-in arrangement in which I would live with the family as maintaining me would not be a problem and I thought the arrangement perfect for me. I was to share a bedroom with her daughter Agnes. She had no extra bed, but there was a mattress on which I would sleep on the floor and fold it for storage in the morning. Sleeping on the floor was nothing compared to the nightmare I experienced on the cold and unsafe streets. Agnes warmed up to me, and we started sharing her bed. I was always keen to complete my chores, if only not to be thrown out to the streets again. I borrowed her textbooks and did homework from them which Agnes secretly took to her teacher for marking. The teacher became curious about me, and she visited my employer's home to see who this person was who was secretly sending homework to her for marking. It turned out I was better than her students. My employer agreed to her plea to be allowed to learn in class, and that is how I went back to school. Little did my employer – Bram's mom – or I, knew I was to be her future daughter-in-law?"

"What happened to your extended family, Mom? That's a sad story," observed Abigail, touched and tearful to imagine what Tracy had gone through. "I am so sorry, Mom. I thank God for Grandma taking care of you after you lost your maternal family." Angela joined her in wiping their tears, as the boys Twister and Joel burned with anger at Tracy's ordeal.

"My grandma left her village in the central highlands of Ethiopia a long time ago to be a trader in Addis Ababa. That is where she brought up my mom,

Aida, and where I was also born. But I knew nothing of our village or our extended family there. That is why I had nowhere to turn to when they died. But no matter how things looked after being left destitute, I was able to rise up with the help of your father here and was able to set up Size Chef.

“The interesting thing is that the same Amadi who didn’t want anything to do with me is the same one who has helped me amass the wealth I have today. His son Davit is my Chief Chef and a business partner. Same with Amadi, who is in-charge of sales? The client accounts that he had brought to the business I could only have imagined them in my dreams. If it was about revenge I used the person I thought an enemy as a steppingstone to soar the business high. But I was not looking for revenge. What I needed was help to kick start that business, and the Amadi family was my best bet. They knew the business and had my mom’s recipes at their fingertips. You met them at my house when friends came over to witness our reunion. That good family is the one that abandoned me back then. That is what life is about; ups and downs.

“I have chosen to be a leader, not a follower. When I requested to look up to and follow Amadi when I was a girl, he refused. Now I have given him the opportunity to follow me, and his family has been with Size Chef since. The wife divorced Amadi after he neglected me. They would reunite later after Amadi fell sick, and after having lost all his wealth.”

“What! I feel like I could kill them one by one, Mom,” said Abigail angrily as she heavily tried to get on her feet. Joel stood up to support her. She was unable to understand why she should forgive the man. “Why give them a chance again after such betrayal? Amadi is such a beast!”

“My girl Abigail, giving other people an opportunity to succeed doesn't make you poorer. Lighting a candle to show the way so that the next person doesn't stumble helps you in the process. The best punishment to a person like Amadi is to kill him little by little, to let him see his sins and for him to get haunted by them. If you kill him, it's like giving him a rest. It doesn't make you feel like a hero; you feel empty and probably regretful. Leave vengeance to God.

When you punish someone, you have a chance to say sorry. When you kill them, you have no way to redo the evil you committed when grief subsides. Let people feel their pain. Let them grieve their sins. Let them repay for their sin. Abigail, we need to live each day like it is a favour from above, because of those you may have wronged and never repented. Be at peace with yourself

and with others. And it is not that Amadi deserves any of the favours I have given to his family, but we keep our sanity by doing such deeds. Delaying hurting other people is a triumph in itself. When I remember how our lives fell apart after we lost you guys, we nearly lost hope of finding you, Joe and Abby. It was people we didn't know who saved your lives. Today I am a merchant of hope. We need to be realistic and give other people a break from the evils they committed against us. Not that after hurting me, Amadi has been having it easy. He has had his misfortunes, illness, family break ups and business losses, and death of his family members too. That happens every day to us and others. We should not lose sight of our mortality; remember everyone's days are numbered. You do not have to help God with his work by eliminating your enemies, my good family.”

Half the time Tracy is talking to herself. The anger burning her family is almost beyond redemption. She continues...

“The road to success is not smooth, my people. If it was, everyone would be successful. Painful sacrifices are what stand between success and failure. If you focus on pain, you lose the opportunity. If you focus on talent, you win the game. The Amadis have experienced both pain and success... I had to stage-manage the process and make his family as comfortable as possible by dangling a carrot and now Size Chef is reaping good results. Again, it is not the whole family that let me down when I was a girl. It was only Amadi, and now he is paying it back and I now have several Size Chef Bakeries courtesy of his work. These outlets required managing and I was alone; your dad is a career guy. The Amadis come in handy in helping me with cooking and distribution as I oversaw growth of the business. The brand is a great hit now. We have opened a few branches in the United States, too. Your dad has already completed his employment contract in the USA and with your babies on the way to make me a grandmother, I will be too busy with the little ones to follow up with the USA accounts.’

Joel was the first to speak. “These are great lessons to us, Mom,” he said. “You give a good example how enemies can agree to walk together to achieve a common goal. If it was left to me and Abigail, we would rather die poor than make up and work with someone who tried to harm us. This reminds me of a book I once read titled *Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*. Though I am a medical doctor, I am a well-read guy,” he joked. “The book observes that life is not

about the things the masses think are important. Love, emotions, and empathy are not the only ones that spice life. Many other things make life enjoyable. The book argues that the probability that a particular person will be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person, regardless of whether the person is rich, poor, intelligent, or ignorant, regardless of ethnic background or religion. Anyone can be stupid and might find themselves in either of four groups:

The Helpless: this is the group of people who work hard to benefit others with no intention to gain on their part, for example, the philanthropists. For example, you might find someone dying of hunger, you give him your plate, not that you are not hungry, but because you felt he needed the food more than you, or you do a business and by default makes a profit for a client as you count your losses. Amadi doesn't fall in this category. When you lost your mother and grandmother, Mom, he abandoned you. His greed even made him disown his wife and children when his wife tried to fight for you.

Stupid: these are a classified group of evil and malicious people. They are worse than a thief. They are happy in their malice. They spoil or destroy for others with no intention to gain for themselves. For example, someone takes your food and throws it away. He is hungry but did not eat or let you eat. He wants both of you to lose. His scheme of things is to see everyone suffer. He is a sadist. Such people are many and unpredictable. This is again not Amadi. He benefited from your mom's wealth hundred percent. He would not have let Grandma Aida's bakery shutdown had he been a good manager as you claim. But seeing what he is doing at Size Chef Bakers, his skills are top-notch.

Bandits: This is a thief. He is a character in life that is put there to benefit him without caring whether he will die or survive. If you fail to part with your fortune, they can kill to get it. They just want to gain alone without benefitting the one they are ripping off. This is Amadi. He cared little whether the generation Aida's daughter would bring forth survived her or not. Thank God, you left him alone and found a welcoming home in Dad Bram's family. He was the wrong person for you then. And if he was once the wrong person, who is to say he won't turn bad? When he gets comfortable again, might he forget your goodwill allowing him to work at Size Chef? Maybe we need to retire him before he is too comfortable. Now you have an excuse. We are back, and we could help run your businesses.

Intelligent: This group of people looks for a win-win situation for themselves and others. Imagine someone with a plate of food, divides it into two, he takes half, and gives half to someone else. Such a person has your interest at heart. If you do business with them, they are sure to guide you on how you reap profits from the item they sell to you. Amadi is not close to this. Your Mom Aida gave him the tools, including her recipes because she hoped he would help grow her business. Instead, he ran down the business and left it in debt after she was gone.

"Mom, you fall in the category of intelligent. You make others win as they carry you on their shoulders. Well, done, Mom. I don't think we have the trait in us," concluded Joel doubtfully.

"Your Dad Bram is the Bandit. He argues that the value Amadi has brought to Size Chef Pastries could have been achieved with much less, winner takes all," Tracy explained to the others' laughter.

"I am a capitalist, Mom, and I am with Dad," said Joe. "I would have only paid the Amadis salary, and nothing more. I have no time to motivate a bandit. He knew very well that what he did to you was evil before the eyes of men and God. He even chose to lose his whole family. Why must he be forgiven? He instead should be made to pay for his sins through the nose as he watches you make your way up." he argued.

"I am with you, Mom," said Twister giving another perspective. "Sometimes showing mercy is not a sign of weakness. You may do as Joel advises and leave your children disadvantaged. The monsters mentioned in the book can be found in all of us at different times. Amadi was the 'bandit' back then. Today he is the 'intelligent' one. He has helped you amass wealth you may not have gotten alone without him and his family's help. Had they made the wealth for you as workers, the monster in him might have risen and the 'stupid' guy would have destroyed himself and you. Now that you chose the right path, this will never happen. They are family to you and both you and they are content. He can as well play 'helpless' and milk you dry. I am sure Amadi is happy to make the business a success for the sake of his son Davit, who is not as mean as his dad. Davit is the dove of the Amadi family. I personally love Davit. He has terrific energy and charisma."

"I remember Twister telling me as much about Davit," said Angela, who was also there listening to her mother-in-law. "He had gone to Size Chef to buy Abigail some muffins and was quite impressed with the kind attention

Davit treated his customers. If the dead showered blessing from heaven, Davit might be gift from your mom Aida, or a blessing from God himself."

"Thanks, Twister and Angela, for correcting me," said Joel. I am a man, and men do not argue like women. I am stuck on Dad Bram's side, and I am sure Twister can relate to our point of view despite being a dove, too. That is why the saying, 'Behind every successful man there is a woman.' I only embrace Amadi because of his son Davit who I like, and who our ladies also like."

What ladies am I talking about? Twister is a man now, not my...partner! Joe thought to himself.

"What you have achieved is quite impressive, Mom," said Abigail proudly as she stood to hug her mom. "I have a long way to go before reaching your level of running a business, but I am determined to join you after my graduation. The kitchen is my place. This medical career was for my security. And now that we have Size Chef Pastries, medical corridors can take a back seat. Being around you will be more rewarding."

"I, too, am joining Mom in her real estate business," said Angela referring Tracy's other business venture. She also stood up to hug her. "I am so sorry about the hard life you went through. I am not sure what sin you could have been paying for and why. All I know now is that we have a mom we shall forever adore because she complements us in so many ways. Let us appreciate the new dawn."

"Yes, Angela, my Briks office has no CEO," agreed Tracy. "The building projects under construction need your engineer's eye, dear. Come and take it over as my boy Joe does public service like his Dad Bram. I foresee working with you girls being so much fun."

"You are right, Mom. I plan on being a public servant. I love being a surgeon, and I look forward to being in medicine all my life," said Joel clapping a high five with Twister. Turning to his Dad Bram he said, "Dad, not to worry, your son Joel is a career guy. Hospital corridors are my future. I love the surgeon's blade; I guarantee to save lives on that table as my wife Angela develops property."

"You are most welcome son," he replied, "but I am not retiring from employment. My wife Tracy will be my next employer. I'll be auditing her businesses. Diversity makes the beauty of life. We cannot be the same thing all of us."

They thought it funny that Dad Bram should insist on being an employee and laughed at him.

Twister made a surprise announcement. "I will be relocating to the United States with Abigail to manage the Size Chefs there. We need to spread our wings. They are all our businesses, and we need to honour the great work mom has done. I hate hospital corridors, too. It was Joel's idea. I better bake myself in the kitchen like the Davit guy," Twister said and remembered that he had brought some flowers to give his mother-in-law and dashed to the car to fetch them. He was ever the romantic, unlike Joel who cared little for flowers. He argued that his mothers' love was unconditional, which was all that mattered to him. It was nothing to pamper with flowers.

"Thanks a million, Twister," said Tracy. "I'll miss you guys a lot, but you have made the right decision to offer to manage the USA Size Chef Pastries for us. Again, thanks for the flowers. It has been long since I got a bouquet. My soulmate Bram here forgot an old tree still flowers." She added with a smile to Bram.

"I'll make the effort to always remember the old tree, Tracy." He replied, "I'll be buying you flowers once in a while, my darling. Thank you, Twister, for reminding me. The flower giving makes me think competition from you people is beginning to kick in, and that I need to be more vigilant," he smiled. Then changing the subject, he said, "We have a date with Angela's parents, so we need to get ready?"

"What are we getting ready about," wondered Angela. "We should all get in our cars and head there. They will be very excited to host my new parents, Tracy and Bram. I hope you will take dowry as is your tradition. For us, we just marry, and life goes on."

"Yes, we are to pay dowry to Angela parents today," said Tracy. "You belong to us, now that you married our son Joel. A wedding ceremony shall follow soon for both Joel and Twister families. I wonder whether we should have both weddings on same day, or we arrange different dates so that the other parents show off their son Twister and Daughter Angela. That I will leave for Gladys to decide for Twister. Bram and I will decide for my son Joel. I can't wait for these weddings to happen. I hope Gladys will put in the dowry for Abigail, which I suggest it goes to her foster parent Jewel and Blaze. They should take the dowry on our behalf. Abigail belongs to them. We will also chip in to help Gladys pay in." They applauded in agreement. "One more thing:

Your grandparents on Dad Bram's side are here ready to meet you. They have just arrived from a visit to Bram's sister in Germany. When news reached them that we had found you guys, they decided to come back to the UK."

No sooner had she finished mentioning them than they heard the doorbell, and the grannies entered the house.

Joel was the first to greet them, too eager to meet them. "Welcome grandpa, I am Joel, son to Bram, and this is my wife, Angela. Wow, I always wondered who I had taken after and I see you are the dark guy of the family and the tallest. How come age has not bent you already? Or were you waiting to first see your namesake, grandpa? Here I am, Doctor Joel. That is why I have been hiding to surprise you one day with a title."

The grandpa got the joked and chuckled, as he felt Joel's arm to test his muscles. "I am so pleased to share this moment with you, Joel. I've always missed the moments we spent together when you were little insisting on carrying my car keys to escort me to the gate. I cannot believe that the same boy is now a fully grown man. You look like your father, and if I am not careful I'll easily confuse you for Bram. Your chocolate complexion only betrays me. Otherwise, I see Bram in you."

"By the way," said Joel, "now that you mention it, I remember the Volkswagen beetle, green in colour. Why did I ever think I had no memories going that far back? I even remember the cows, and the river, the coffee plantation. I remember all that, Grandpa. Hello Grandma, you are all grey now. There is nothing about you that I can ever forget -- your *injera*, *tef* bread and the peanut butter meat with veggies. The tea ceremony where we all gathered in the evening for a cup -- was it tea or coffee? I remember we used to fight because of my mismatching my shoes, the left one on the right and the right one on the foot. Ooh, my God."

"I am happy you remember all that, my darling Joe," the grandmother said trying to suppress her excitement. "The process of raising a child to adulthood takes a parent twenty one years. We only witnessed the first few years of your life. And now we are meeting with a new father-to-be. We thank God you are not a spoiled brat. I already love this girl, your wife, for taking care of you, Joel, my husband. What's her name again?"

"I am Angela. It is a pleasure meeting you, Grandma. Yes, I am determined to take care of your husband, Joel. I thank God, too, for giving me a chance to

meet you. These kids have been missing out on a lot for far too long, Grandma.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I never thought I’d live long enough to see Joel and Abigail again. You are right, Angela. It is a miracle. Where is my namesake?”

“Here I am, Grandma,” Abigail stood up to hug her. “You look younger than I expected. It is so sad I disappeared before I got to grow fond of you. I need to have time with you to spoil me the way you did with Joel, Grandma.”

“I am all yours, my darling granny,” replied the grandmother. “We can start all over again. I can see you are expectant too, who is the lucky man?”

“I am here, my elder wife. I am Twister. I asked for a cook, and I got the best. I love your namesake so much. Nice to meet you, Grandma.”

“What a handsome young man with blue eyes. I like him a lot,” Grandma said admiringly. “Please take good care of my granny and the young one on the way. When did you grow this big from the tiny girl I once held in my arms? You and Joel are now like two river streams flowing together. You are adorable souls from heaven. A perfect-looking Abigail must have inherited her beauty from Tracy, a beauty that was nurtured by the good Samaritans who raised her. You are an adorable couple. It is clear that the foster parents that brought you up did a very good job. We have no way to repay them except to express our gratitude and pride at how well you’ve turned out, my grannies.”

“Thanks, Grandma. Not only did they bring us up, but they also gave their son and daughter to marry those they brought up, just like you gave Tracy a chance to marry your son Bram. Abigail was brought up by my wife Angela’s parents, while Twister was my brother who has now married my sister Abigail. The relationships are as twisted as his name. What goes around comes around, Grandma?”

“If that is so, Joel, I got a double portion despite the long wait. We are now one big family united by blood. Now that you are all expecting to bring us new family members... Oooooe! I need to take a seat. I have been standing for long,” complained Grandma as she held on to her walking stick for support.

Twister led her to a seat so that she may rest her tired limbs on the sofa next to her husband.

“This must be one of the most miraculous moments I have ever witnessed,” Grandma observed.

Gifts for Jewel and Blaze were with the Amadi family which was driving ahead to arrive early and oversee things. The family had already organised the schedule of traditional rituals, of which Amadi would be the spokesperson for the Bram family at the ceremonial gathering they were going to.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Dad's Girl

IT WAS ANOTHER QUIET afternoon and all four graduands were relaxing at Bram's house after the rehearsal for the forthcoming ceremony to receive their degrees. They requested Tracy to tell them more about her roots and upbringing. They thought her resilience and work ethic must have come from somewhere in her past and they wanted to hear it. She was eager to oblige.

Back then, I was either very optimistic or had a loose wire somewhere for such a little girl to have the courage to fend for myself, she began. The experience hardened me. And though I was determined to triumph in the end, there were moments that things seemed so difficult that I almost lost the will to better myself. However, that will be getting ahead of the story.” She smiled at the fascinated faces looking at her eager to hear what she had to say.

My mother, Aida, and Grandma Danita were businesswomen. It is probably because of this I, too, entered business and became an entrepreneur.

When I remember my time with my mother, I remember market days. They were usually dominated by traders trying to attract customers by making loud sales pitch touting their wares that included household items, electronics and foodstuffs, as others showcased their clothes for sale by holding them up to display their beautiful patterns. One such market day, a trader grabbed my hand and pulled me to see her new arrival of second-hand dolls. I was so interested in the dolls that I got left behind by my mom Aida, only for her to realise she had lost me. But I was least concerned

picking one toy after another trying to decide the one I liked best. It didn't matter that I had not a coin to pay for it. I particularly liked this doll with long hair with removable clips and shoes and attached to it an extra set of dresses to change it. It didn't cost much, but I had nothing in my pocket. When my angry Mom finally traced me, she would not hear any of my lame excuses and didn't even greet the vendor as was the custom to say hello to anyone you or your child had the slightest personal interaction. She just pulled me away and warned me never to stop and admire trivial things. This left me sad, as in my small head I worked hard for my mother distributing her muffins and yet I did not earn anything from it to buy anything I wanted. This dolly was as important to me as was my mom's muffins to her. I went home crying, but I was determined to go back for that toy. Once home we didn't speak a word to each other. I took a bath and never went out to play that day. But I had to get that doll, and that is how the thought of stealing money from mom first entered my mind.

I remembered Naibo, a girl I knew in our neighbourhood, whose mother had bought a nice sweater and sundress that made us all turn in admiration whenever she wore it. I went to visit her one day but found no one including her in their house which was unlocked. The thought that entered my mind when I entered the house was to set the sundress and sweater on fire so that she may never again steal the show. It was just like in the example of the stupid person in the book Joel was telling us about. I took the clothes and bundled them between the three cooking stones that made the fireplace in the kitchen ready to set them alight. A voice in my mind however reminded me I would certainly go to hell should I let jealousy make me commit such an evil act. I returned the clothes where I had found them and left Naibo's house. I never told anyone this story. But now you know that I was once jealous of a friend and I was willing to commit a sin not to see her thrive. I acted like the bandit in Joel's book. It was religious belief that prevented me. Religion helps shape people's actions in their fear of painful punishment especially the endless pain promised in hell. But not even hell could shake my desire for the doll.

Everyone gave Tracy a knowing smile, as each one of them was as guilty as her of such silly jealousies that nonetheless spice life.

I believe in purgatory, but my desire for the doll was stronger. I told myself that I would repent but I had to have the doll by hook or crook. I

knew where my mum kept her money and took the penny I needed for the doll. I tied the loot in a cloth and hid it in my pants. It was difficult to walk in the morning because of the discomfort the bundle was causing between my legs. Mom seemed to notice it, but I got away with it. I gave the excuse that I slept on one side for too long, leaving my leg numb. I told her to go ahead that day and that I would catch up with her in the market. She saw no problem in that as I was only going to slow down her pace to the market. I dashed to a bush and removed the money I decided to first buy the doll and take it home, before joining Mom at the market. It didn't seem to bother her that I took so long joining her. Supplying her muffins to the market was more urgent than a limply daughter. A limp was a minor issue and parents in those days could not be overly concerned. If you were not bedridden, no one could care less. She did not even bother to ask how I was feeling, and I had no business explaining what I was not asked. My Grandma Danita, who was home when I brought the doll, nearly snatched on me but she did not know what I had brought.

'What was this about walking into the house one moment, and the next you were out again?' Grandma had enquired.

'My leg was hurting grandma. I wanted a rest but I realised it was not so painful after all. I felt sorry for Mom working alone in market and went to help her out.'

Upon hearing this exchange between me and Grandma, Mom showed delight that her girl could be so mature. What she did not know was that I had become a petty thief. I had to look for a sneaky way to be playing with the doll with my friends and return it to its hiding place without Mom or Grandma knowing it. The kids were very fascinated by dolly and wanted one. I told them the price, which I added a few pennies on top. Some had a way of getting the money from their parents, and within a short time I had sold enough dolls to return the money I had taken from my Mom. It did not take long before Mom realised what was going on. One kid stole money from her mother, who frogmarched her to my grandmother's house.

'Your daughter has been hawking these dolls in the neighbourhood and has turned our children into petty thieves. This will be the second time my daughter has stolen from me to buy the damn toys,' the angry parent complained to Mom.

My mom immediately took to me and didn't want to hear any excuses, or pause to consider how brilliant her daughter to have learnt to become a trader from skills she had gained over time selling the muffins. Instead, she turned on me and gave me a thorough beating. I could not walk for three days. After that, I feared my mom like the plague. We were never the best of friends after that. She destroyed the business urge in me. I hence feared money; I feared to trade; I feared to think beyond distributing her muffins. I feared what I loved most: multiplying money. I was reduced to my Mom Aida's daughter. It was a very humbling experience. As I lay on my bed the day after the beating, I could not help but wonder how many parents probably killed their children's dreams without knowing it.

When I recovered from the beating I chose to follow God's way; it was either that or have another violent confrontation with Mom. I enrolled for Holy Communion classes to understand God's Commandments before I could start partaking in the Holy Sacrament in church. The classes were in two stages, beginning with junior introductory class before graduating to the confirmation class that bestowed one the honour of partaking in the Sacrament. It was while in introductory class that I discovered most of my friends were in confirmation class. I decided to join the confirmation class just to be with them even though I was not qualified yet.

Each class was one hour each over a period of several weeks and it so happened that the junior class started at 4pm and the confirmation class at 5pm. This meant that by taking the confirmation class I was going to be home later than Mom had expected me. But it also happened that the day I took the class my friend Naibo had been assigned an errand by her mom to undertake after the confirmation class ended at 6 pm and she requested me to accompany her. It would take 30 minutes to deliver a package after which we would be home by 6.30 pm.

When I finally reached home, I found Mom waiting for me at the doorstep. I tried to explain to her that I had graduated to the 5pm class and had to accompany my friend to undertake an errand. My grandmother had to intervene because, despite the beating my mother was giving me for the lateness, I did not cry or shed a tear. I was once again bedridden for some days, this time with open wounds from the corporal punishment. I did not discontinue my classes. It was the only social life I had, as I didn't attend normal schools.

When the day of confirmation came to graduate into taking sacrament symbolised by taking bread (body of Christ) and wine (Jesus' blood) in Holy Communion, I was never to be found. Being the playful girl I was I went to be with the other kids in the field after the confirmation, only to realise that the kids from my estate had left me behind two kilometres away. Another girl Soiya invited me to spend the night with her at her aunt's house. The aunt, who didn't have a child of her own, despite her aged look, was very loving and kind. Soiya went to school the following morning, leaving me behind at her aunt's place. She enquired why I did not go to school, and I told her I had never been enrolled. I also told her that I worked with my mom in her muffins business. I spent the day there, leading Soiya's aunt to ask me what time I was to leave for home. She knew my mom and knew that having slept out without Mom's consent the punishment I would receive would be severe. I was therefore reluctant to go back to my mom's house, which to me was a house of terror.

I took Soiya's aunt's dirty clothes and washed them. I swept her compound and trimmed grass in front of the house. She had no running water in the house, so I fetched it from a stream down the valley. It was a steep climb so that my ten-year-old knees bent at an angle they were almost touching my nose as I struggled to the top of the hill. Until then, I had only seen how the extremely bent knees hitting the nose often left kids with a nosebleed. Most girls had I seen from this part of the country had something that resembled a depression on top of their head that came about from pressure exerted by the rope that bore the weight of the water container on their back. And they bore all these not for anything much, but to earn their keep for a bed and food despite being members of their family."

In the gestures she used and the manner she told the story made everyone burst into laughter.

Tracy continued with the rest of her story.

Soiya's aunt was very impressed with my work and didn't know how to send me away, especially in my refusal to go home. On the fourth day, she decided to visit my mom at her workplace and explained to her how I got late from church and ended up in her place. She also informed Mom that I

didn't want to go home for fear of being skinned alive by my tyrant Mom Aida. I guess mom didn't know the harm she had caused me with her two previous beatings. She cried to realise this and requested Soiya's aunt to bring her to me.

They found I had already completed my chores and had left briefly to collect clothes Soiya's aunt had sent me to take for mending at the local tailor's shop. They found that I had laid the table for Soiya's aunt and food was ready. Everything was sparkly clean, from the chicken coop to the dog kennel. The aroma of food made from my family's recipes filled the house. She invited mom to share a meal, which she could not decline.

As I walked back, I found Soiya's aunt outside the house with a woman I could not identify from the distance I saw them. Soiya's aunt was the taller of the two and she partially blocked my view of the lady as they walked into the house. When I reached I took some time outside the door to wipe my dusty feet.

Tracy didn't tell this in her story, but she remembered that when she entered the house, she saw Soiya's aunt's legs spread in front of the lady she had seen her with; both were beside her bed letting out moans of pleasure. On seeing her enter, both women stopped in what they were doing. She left this part out, as she continued in her story.

The woman I could not recognise from the distance turned out to be my Mom Aida. It's been many years now, and come to think of it now that I am a grown up, I have always wondered whether Mom was a lesbian?

Upon seeing Mom, I dropped the bag containing the repaired clothes and ran as fast as my legs could carry me. I heard her scream after me and a guy approaching from the opposite direction managed to catch and hold me for Mom. I was in a pool of tears when my mom caught up with me. I covered my eyes with my tiny hands so as not to watch her thrashing me. Instead, to my surprise, she lifted me and I saw that she was crying too. People started to gather around us. Since we did not come from the area, they probably thought I was a schizophrenic child. They let us be.

'I am so sorry, Tracy,' said my mom tearfully. 'I have been impatient with you of late. I did not realise my punishment has so affected you that you do not like your mother anymore. I conceived you after being raped by

some of the male customers who drunk at your grandma's bar. I never told your grandma who your father was, but that was because I did not know who it was either. They were new clients, three of them. I had never seen them before. I was too scared to tell mom what had happened, even though I thought she could not have cared either way. She knew the dangers of me helping out in the bar at night, especially when she went to bed early so that she could wake up early to open the hotel. I vowed to protect you the best way I could. Thus the beating I gave you to discourage you from behaviour such as spending the night away from home. That you can keep away from home for all these days shows that I have failed, and that has left me very anguished. I have been searching for you everywhere. I have not been going to work looking for you, and this has affected my business. Thank God you are OK, Tracy. I shall never lay my hand on you again. I promise. I hope you will forgive me for the misunderstandings. Make sure you explain everything to me, whether good or bad. I promise to protect you, Tracy. There are many dangers out here. Grandma and I are there for you. You are all I have; I am nothing without you. I wake up early every day to make money so that you grow up without problems. You have put meaning to my life. I never knew I cared so much until the day you went missing.'

I did not know how or whether to trust my mother again, even with all the promises. The pain in my heart was still very fresh. I was paying for the sin caused by my three daddy rapists that I did not know. Mom Aida would have aborted her pregnancy of me had she known how to go about it. But going through labour pains must have made her attached to me. She never got to love a man. Her chance was also lost to decide for herself when to become a mother. She was forced into a lifetime responsibility bringing up an unwanted child—a child of shame. I had no idea people have a dark side. I have since feared men and until I met your father, Bram, and I was never able to argue with a man. I knew they were the reason I was not my mom's favourite, even though I was an only child. Maybe that is why she never took me to school. She did not want expenses on a hopeless child. How I longed to in a regular family. After reconciling with my mom that day we went straight home, and I never got a chance to go back and say thank you to Soiya's aunt. When I finally got the opportunity to visit her, I found that she had relocated to another town.

My grandmother Danita was not a good storyteller. She seemed only comfortable with her age mates. She made sure I wasn't home when her granny friends paid her a visit. She would let me go play with my friends or send me to the shops so that she could be alone with her visitors. One day I pretended to be gone, but I hid behind the sitting room window outside to eavesdrop. What I heard shocked me.

Three men did not rape my mom. Two of men had held her down as their ringleader, Amadi, did the deed. They did not know who the lady was, because it happened by chance after a young lady walking home alone as they loitered about. He did the act and left her alone. One of my grandma's visitors' son was one of the guys who held down Mom for Amadi. This is the same Amadi who would later become a partner in my mother's muffins business. Hence, I must have taken my business acumen from my dad Amadi and Mom Aida.

The visiting grandmothers decided to keep that secret from Mom because Amadi was from an affluent family and could have caused them problems. When we met again with Amadi in the UK, I decided to take DNA test to check whether he was the Amadi that raped my mom. And, lo and behold, I found out I was his daughter. I have no one else to share this with but you. I have one parent alive. I will, therefore, fight for Amadi with my soul. Despite what he did, he gave birth to a great child. I love him with all my soul. Amadi might look like a bad person to all of you but let me remain my father's daughter.

The family was divided about what to make of what Tracy had just informed them. But she was already speaking before any of them could say something.

Imagine that had this rape not happened, Bram would not have had a wife, at least not this one, and neither would Abigail and Joel have been born. Perhaps I might have had another sibling, but my mom never fancied men after what happened to her to get another child. I never saw her with man during the time she was alive. But that does not matter now. What is important is to restore her dignity and celebrate Danita's descendants by showing them love.

There followed an awed silence after Tracy was done with her story.

“Mom, you have such a good memory,” observed Abigail breaking the silence. Then turning to the rest she said, “We should learn from the way she has lived her life. No one has all the answers, but we should know enough to know what to keep and what to let go. Thank you, Mom, for sharing your story. You have cleared so much that Joel and I struggled with in our minds” she added, referring to what mom Tracy had revealed about her grandmother and father, Amadi

“No one has all the tools to help him or her survive, so you are right Abby. Also no one is right or wrong about life. If you listen to everyone’s argument, each has a good point or another point not everyone agrees with. The thing is to let people follow their choices in life so long as they don’t interfere with other people’s lives. The different religions don’t always allow believers to leave alone people who don’t believe what they preach. This has left us fighting each other unable to decide what is good or bad, or what is right and wrong as each tries to impose their religion on the others. But we must understand something before we rush to judge others. The only thing we can’t avoid is death, and the more I prolong my dad's life by supporting and caring for him the happier I will be.

“Amadi is a doer. But simply because I unconditionally love my dad, it does not mean everyone has to love him. Now that you understand who my dad is, maybe you’ll want to support him. He is an intelligent man, and I would not classify him as a rapist simply because of what he did when he was a teenager. The rape, despite its ills, was still a happy instance in which I became. Amadi the man is a marketing expert. He is a go-getter. He is a fighter. All I urge is for all to learn to know him and appreciate his beauty. He is the reason I am back on my feet after the trials I have gone through in my life.”

After she was finished talking, everyone was quiet and seemed to take it with mixed reactions. Some wished they never had about their grandpa Amadi’s dark side.

AMADI SOON arrived to deliver the traditional attire that was to be presented at the Jewel and Blaze event. He delivered it with some relief, as he might not have made it. He had forgotten to place the order for the attire on time, thus the late delivery.

“Good afternoon, Bram’s family. You seem to be engaged in a serious discussion. You will excuse me to first deliver these Ethiopian outfits we had ordered for Angela’s parents. I am sorry I’ve delivered them late but here they are,” he said.

He opened the parcel and displayed the attire to everyone’s admiration. After this, as he was about to excuse himself to leave and allow Bram’s family its privacy, Tracy said, stopping him short:

“Thank you Amadi. Would you kindly take a seat? I would like to break some news to you now that you are here. The news may not be the best to hear, but it is the reality. I am your biological daughter, Amadi.”

“Yes indeed you are Tracy,” he replied not grasping what he had been told. “With all the great things you have done for me I have no doubt in my heart. I hope your family now knows all the evils I did to you back then. I hope they will be able to forgive me.”

“They should Amadi, but I don’t mean I am a daughter in the sense of the work relationship we share. I am saying that the one who fathered me, Amadi.”

“My dear Tracy, I knew your mom Aida and she hated men like the plague. I tried proposing to her once, and I almost lost the opportunity to work with her. But you were already born. I don’t see how I can be your father.”

Tracy replied, “She conceived me from the rape you did to her when you were a teenager, when your friends held down a lady who was walking alone home. That lady happened to be my mom Aida. I heard this from an old woman visiting my grandma explaining exactly what happened because her son was one of the boys who held my mom down for you. And when I met you again later in life, I did a DNA test from a sample of your hair and found that we are a perfect match. Despite the mistake you made back then, I have nothing against you. You are the only parent I have. I will always hold you up as my parent, hence the reason I gave you a home in one of my houses and transferred ownership of the house to you. Without what you did, Aida would probably not have had descendants, who you see here today. Yours was a gift wrapped in the wrong package, but it marked the beginning of this great family. That is why I love your family. It is the only family I have, Amadi.”

Amadi was surprised beyond words. He was an old man and such disclosure in front of grandchildren he never knew he had must have come with a bit of embarrassment. There were no words to describe what he felt.

Tracy was apologetic and said, "I know Dad Amadi that this great news should not have been delivered in the manner I have broken them, but I have always known you to be a flexible guy. Let this storm not cloud you, Dad. This is the reality we must now live, and nothing can be done to improve the past. Accept and make the best out of it. You were now aware that you are the daddy to a girl called Tracy Bram that you love so much. I have given you a second chance with Aida's muffins business—a dream your daughter is happy to keep alive running it from where her mother ran it before she died. It doesn't matter whether others choose to forgive you or not, except that you should be at peace with yourself and the reality we now find ourselves. Forgiving yourself is all that matters, Dad Amadi. I am proud to be your daughter. I don't remember where I heard that a wise man once said: *If you could erase all the mistakes of your past, you might as well erase all the wisdom you have gained. I urge you Dad to remember only the lessons you have learned. Remember also the disappointments because they still make you and us who are here because of you.*"

Amadi was lost for words and could only seem able to express himself through the sobs that wracked his body. Everyone else had mixed feelings. Some wanted to kill him as others felt proud of him. He fathered a smart girl, of whom Tracy wasn't sure whether the dead, such as her mother who never knew of the father and daughter finally coming together, would receive the news wherever they were. If they did, her mom must by now have known who Tracy's father was. Tracy imagined her mother being happy wherever she was because her daughter was now taking care of her absent dad, not because he was the greatest daddy but because he was her daddy.

Amadi finally spoke, still unable to believe what had been revealed to him. "Thank you, Tracy," he said. "Thank you for revealing who I really am as your father and you as a daughter I never imagined I had. It is a beautiful thing, even though it all came about from a very evil deed. I am ashamed of my youth. I abused your mom, abandoned you and abandoned my family to pursue my greed. That, however, is now in the past and I am determined to make a difference as I grow old. I have happy news for you, too. I have been able to trace your ancestral roots in the highlands of Ethiopia where your grandmother came from. I traced it from the leads your late mom Aida gave to me when we were business partners. I should take you there to meet your people."

“Oh my God! That is great news, Dad,” Tracy was beside herself. “I have always longed to meet my Ethiopian relatives.” She had tears of joy in her eyes as she stood up and hugged her dad Amadi.

After the hug, Amadi made a plea: “With all said and done,” he said, “I hope my grandchildren and my son-in-law Bram shall find a place in their hearts to forgive me for my past.”

The appeal seemed to touch Abigail, who felt a certain kinship with him for the things that must lie hidden in people’s lives. This made her say, almost shouting, “We all have our dark secrets that we hope never to become public. You are the grandpa we never knew we had. We shall always be there for you. The past can never be changed; we can only learn from it and strive to become better people. We love you, Grandpa.”

She stood up and hugged him.

Feeling the hug from his new granddaughter, he was lost for words, but his beaming face told it all. He soon excused himself to attend to an urgent errand. But he left seeming unsure whether to leave this family that had suddenly become his own. He would join them back later.

Though Tracy had tried to be sensitive to her dad Amadi when she broke the news, she could not control how everyone in the room would think of him. Amadi did what his youthful urges led him to do. Given a chance, he probably would have done it in a more decent way through marriage to beget her. But repentance before God always made things feel a little easier.

About the Author

Mirigo Kinyanjui is a Kenyan motivational speaker and writer. Her books aim to impart practical lessons drawn from real life experiences and close observations of family life. Where many give up because of perceived insurmountable personal mistakes and frustrations of life, Mirigo hopes the experiences portrayed in her books will manifest into positive life choices for the reader towards a better version of themselves. The author seeks to help tap into opportunities often obscured by the hardships and calamities many encounter in life.

Other Books by the Author

1. Cross-Roads Legend

Wairimu Ndegwa is a goodhearted African girl studying at USA University Academy. Due to her kindness, she offers to assist a classmate whose visa card has failed. She feeds him using her ‘peanuts’ of pocket allowance for a fortnight. She later learns he is a Muslim billionaire heir-apparent. They connect and one thing leads to another, one cross-roads at a time.

2. The Cloud Between

Duofold’s dad wished him dead for being his illegitimate child. Duofold got entangled in dark family secrets, lost his wife to his brother and, despite being cast out, would become the savior of the entire family.

3. Transition

Miss Morgan is born out of wedlock by a black father and white mother. She creates her own blissful world to live in with all the enjoyment and fun that nature offers. But life seems to have had its reservations as she helps the family navigate through inheritance chaos.

4. The Layman Entrepreneur

The saying, “*If you must burn bridges, build new ones,*” is not an idle suggestion. A bridge is for others to cross over as they find themselves or for you to find your way back to the crossroads to rediscover yourself should you lose your way. That is the way of entrepreneurship, as we must keep recreating our paths for our business ventures to succeed.

The book draws from personal experience and tips from the business world at all levels of entrepreneurship.

5. The Prodigal Daughter

Experience the resilience of a mother. The prodigal son left with wealth but came back empty-handed. The prodigal daughter left with her womb, and she brought back generations. Life is but a few moments, yet those moments last a lifetime.

6. The Remnants

The book tells the story of a young man born in Kikuyuland who loves his language and culture so much that it inspires him to trace the origins of Bantu peoples to understand where his community came from. This takes him to many Bantu communities around Africa, only to later learn that his ancestors were Maasai, who are Nilotic. He would later learn of a prophesy by his ancestral spirits that he would die at the horns of a buffalo at his prime age as a warrior. Did this come pass?

MY **SICK & LAME**



MIRIGO
KINYANJUI
..... Author

Meet Abigail and Joel who were separated early in their childhood and always imagined themselves orphans. A twist of fate brings them together as strangers with strong romantic feelings for each other except that both are of a sexual orientation that much of society considers abnormal and are therefore incompatible.

How the siblings' meeting comes to be, and what transpires after that into the normality of straight marriage and the discovery of their blood relation, is a tale full of surprises. But it is a tale of hope that 'it is okay not to be okay' even for the marginalised and social outcasts. Things turn out well in the end when they discover the truth and reunite with their erstwhile 'dead' parents.



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