

An enthralling journey of hope for love.

Evolving



A NOVEL

ONIFELOLUWA ADEBAJO

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Evolving

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– DORCAS OYEWOLE

Evolving

“DAILY, WE ARE TRANSFORMED INTO THE IMAGE OF
CHRIST, EVOLVING THROUGH HIS EVERLASTING LOVE.”

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EVOLVING

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INTRODUCTION

What if I told you there were no such thing as an ideal life? Huhn? There is no perfect model of life that you might have been told, to strive for to stand a chance at making something out of your life. I used to think there was. Apart of the life Jesus died for us to live, there is no standardized, generally acceptable model of living that fills all spectrums of life. I did not come to this realization lightly; not from the number of books I've read nor from external knowledge sources. Years ago, I had an accident that led to a Eureka moment as my breakthrough, and that accident is about to cause a breakthrough for you.

Our mirage of an ideal life has set a bar for every aspects of life ranging from physical health to mental wellbeing and the slightest tumble from that bar is frowned at. This means that we've got a lot of people creating an outward picture that shows they are doing fine, refusing to admit they don't always have it all together and a people defeated by the 'standard' and therefore, see no reason to try again.

It is difficult to embrace vulnerability in a system that discriminates. Letting the next person know you're going through a mental downtime or worse, a total breakdown sometimes is as good as jumping off a cliff – especially when you are in a position of influence. We live in a mental framework where the doctor is not allowed to be sick, nor the leader permitted to be lost at any time. The weight of responsibilities has rid us of the opportunity to be what we

are, human and in those times, it is almost impulsive to either paint a fake life of a picture or give up and throw a pity party. What I have set out to do through the help of the Holy Spirit is to show you, as a reader, that when faced with a downtime, there is an option that does not involve you becoming emotionless or losing yourself in self-pity.

Through the characters' journey, you will learn that it is okay to not be okay sometimes. You will understand that pain has a language, so does your tears and fears and there is someone who understands all these languages. In this book, you will realize that if you let him, he will show you a new path. You will learn to appreciate every relationship placed by God in your life and see every situation as an opportunity to evolve and grow into a more balanced version of yourself.

This book in your hands, although inspired by God is not a replacement for the ultimate life's book, the Bible. It is not a quick fix manual as you would eventually see, or a one-size-fits-all guidebook. However, it is a show and tell stories that will show you that your experiences are not invalid and hopefully and ultimately, point you in the direction of the true helper. Evolving shows you that getting to know the person beneath the problem is the first step to recovery even if you are that person, and only true the help of the Holy Spirit can we see and know this person.

Onifeloluwa Adebajo
April 13, 2021

“C-01”

ZAMAR ADEMOLA BANKOLE

Looking out the window of the yellow-coloured Uber he was currently seated in, Zamar watched as the large clouds moved towards him. The rhythmic tapping of rain on the window soon quickly became a pitter-patter. Angling his head to the side, he noticed the sky was tar-black. He expected the rain as it was still the month of August. So, he let his eyes wander to the retreating form of the airport and to the stranded travellers struggling to find cover from the rain. Puddles quickly began plinking as the rain became heavier. It sounded like the murmuring of angry bees.

"It feels just great to be back in Nigeria," he thought sarcastically to himself as he checked for the time on his midnight blue wristwatch, the red light glowed to reveal it was 2:57 am.

He had arrived much later than he was supposed to, and he just knew she was going to lock him out for sure. He had left the Ottawa International Airport, Canada for her opposite airport, Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos Nigeria after being delayed for over five and half hours. He was exhausted to say the very least. He pulled out his Samsung Galaxy phone and placed a call through to his client's daughter. No answer. He could not be more grateful. He loved his job, no doubt but the last thing he wanted to do at this time was work.

Plugging in his earphones, he leaned further into the back seat and fell into a light slumber.

The loud horn of the car and the aggressive opening of the gates brought him back to consciousness. He was finally home. Thank God. He instructed the driver to pull into the empty parking spot so he could alight without getting drenched by the rain which had increased even more. He pulled his travelling bags out and set them carefully as he had books in there that should not get soaked at any cost.

"This is serious, you did not mention you were coming to Nigeria by slug" A slightly high-pitched voice boomed over the sound of the rain. He would recognize that level of sarcasm anywhere in the world. It was his childhood friend, Stephanie Adegoke.

He paid the driver who was hoping to receive a little more than the usual, but he was not going to indulge him. He shut the door of the Uber as if to pass the message across and said a curt goodnight.

"Hi, my name is Zamar. I am not too late, am I?" He said after deciding not to comment on how ridiculous she looked struggling to keep the umbrella in place with the mismatched flip flops she had on. He chuckled to himself.

"Comment reserved till morning. Follow me so I can show you where you would be staying except you have decided to live out here with my dog. He could use the company and I really could not care less. Make me wait up for you on a weekday..." She continued to grumble to herself as she stomped over to the outhouse. She had not changed one bit.

She was still ever so cranky when she had to stay up late. He noticed she was a bit taller than when he had last seen her, deciding she should have grown to about 5'5 with the way she looked now. Nevertheless, she was still a midget compared to his 6'4 height.

"Should I tease her about her hair that still had not left ground level even after all these years?... Probably not tonight" He thought to himself as he tried to hide his smile.

"Annie, I'm sorry, okay? My flight was delayed and there was nothing I could do. I promise I will make it up to you. Please, do not be mad" He tried to pacify her, but she was not having it.

"One more word and I will kick you out. You promised you would be here before 10 pm and look where we are. So, you can make your promises into a pillow and sleep on it" She said. He decided not to make things any worse and remained quiet.

"That is the bedroom on the right, you would find everything else yourself. Goodnight." She said and slammed the door behind her. Zamar chuckled at her dramatic behaviour and put down his bags. He looked around and was more than satisfied. She had done a thorough clean-up for his arrival and even left him food. Instinctively, he moved to the mahogany table and uncovered the flask. Fried rice and peppered chicken or turkey, he was not sure but one thing he was sure about was that he was starving. Without wasting time or even reheating the food, he dived in to eat. Eating quickly had never been a problem especially when he was hungry and so he was done in no time. He took a shower when he entered

the room after a little mind debate on whether to have one or not, got under the blankets, said a short prayer of thanksgiving for journey mercies and fell asleep almost immediately.

The next morning, Annie was woken up by a loud knock and she made a mental note to beat Zamar up for waking her up so early. She practically dragged herself down the stairs and to the front door.

"Good morning, your Highness," Zamar said with a small smile, a covered tray in hand.

"Zamar, what do you want so early in the morning?" She said, irritated by how composed he was.

"Well, I promised I would make up for my late arrival, so I made us breakfast," He said as he pushed the lid a little to the side. She was not about to remain angry after the food was mentioned. Plus, she remembered how well he cooked.

"You sure it is not poisoned?" She teased, peeping into the plate and moving aside to give him enough room to come in even though he still had to bend his head a little bit to get in.

"Well, I am not exactly sure. But if it is, at least we would die together" He said with a straight face so she could not tell if he was being serious or not. She hated his poker face.

"So..." He started to say after they were settled at her dining table as she ate.

"Is there a problem?" She asked with a raised brow.

"I do not know how useful this information is to you, but it is not early in the morning, it is past 11 am," He said calmly but she almost choked on the piece of toast bread she had in her mouth.

"Why did you not tell me?!", she screamed. "I have a presentation in less than an hour! I hate you so much. Go get the car ready. You are driving me because all of this is your fault. I am going to..." He did not hear the rest of it; her voice faded as she ascended the stairs. He smiled lightly as he took another sip of his grape juice. Maybe coming back to Nigeria was not such a bad thing after all. He was sure God was leading him right and that was all that mattered to him.

AVIELA IFEDOJA ABRAHAM

"Miss Aviela, thank you so much for being here today. It was short notice, but you still came through for us. Every single medical student in there hopes to become just like you someday; some of them travelled across states just to hear you speak. The Lord has truly been faithful to you. My prayer for you is that He continues to reach out to many through you. God bless you." The middle-aged woman whose name Aviela no longer remembered said as she escorted her to her car.

"The pleasure is all mine. I must leave now. Thank you and have a good day" She rushed out and got into her coffee-coloured vehicle. It was an official car that had been given to her by the hospital along with the apartment she lives in when she was officially appointed Deputy Head Paediatrician at one of the biggest hospitals in the city, Alpha-Zed Clinics. She gently placed her head on the window and allowed her thoughts to travel back a few hours ago. Their display of love and respect was fake, all of it. She was convinced it was.

"God's faithfulness..." The thought of that caused her to laugh. Does He know what the word means? Does He even exist? It was easier to believe He did not exist, that way she did not have to wonder why He had been so cruel to her all these years. Memories flashed before her and she could not stop them.

She could still feel how cold it was. She was in pain; the ten-year-old child, yet she washed the clothes as quickly as she could. He had returned a lot earlier than he usually did and more intoxicated. Her hands shook and she was certain it was not because of the weather.

"God... He is back again... Do not leave me alone with him, please" The little child cried as she quickly dried the clothes remembering how her mother always used to tell her that if she called on God when she was in danger, He would always come to her rescue without fail.

"Get in here this instant, you worthless being!" His voice sent shivers down her spine. He was not in a good mood today. The little child moved as quickly as she could, completely disregarding the pain in her left leg so as not to further upset him. She had barely gotten in through the back door when she felt a force against her cheek that sent her straight to the cold floor. She jolted as the door was shut.

"Do you not plan on leaving soon ma'am?" The security guard who had knocked on her window asked. She looked around to register her present surrounding whilst trying to calm her frantically beating heart. She realized she had been

lost in thought again. She dabbed the lone tear that escaped her eyes; she was just thinking but it felt so real. She told herself it was not and there was nothing to worry about. She was just going to focus on her career, and everything would be fine. She had fought hard to get to where she was, and she was intent on keeping it that way. For a twenty-seven-year-old paediatrician, she had greatly exceeded all expectations and that came with numerous rewards, including her present employment.

She pulled into the driveway of the private hospital and quickly got out of her car. She had a lot of work piled up on her desk, not to mention the numerous appointments with patients and four upcoming operations. She had taken the weekend off and it was obvious she would have to work overtime the next few days to make up. She did not mind though. Her career was all she had; nothing and no one else.

She pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind and plastered on her rehearsed smile, acknowledging a few people who greeted her. She opened the door to her office and could not have been prepared enough for what she met.

"Who is this woman?" She thought and was going to voice out her exact thoughts but the woman at her desk beat her to it.

"Have you no manners?! How dare you barge into my office without knocking? What kind of mannerless people do they employ here?!" The young lady who looked no older than twenty ranted angrily. Aviela could not grasp most of what the

lady was spitting out because her mind could not move on from her earlier statement.

"Your office...? Mannerless...?!" Aviela stuttered. She was confused. She looked around to make sure she was in the right office. Surely there were a few changes, but she was sure this was her office. Had she been moved to another floor? Surely the management could have informed her first... Who is this lady, anyway? She was new; the other doctors knew better than to speak to her so rudely. She watched in confusion as the lady before her placed a call to someone.

"Come to my office now!" She barked and hung up. Who did she think she was to address anyone in that manner? Aviela decided that she did not need to exchange words with her though, she was going to teach her a lesson she would not soon forget. Soon enough, her immediate boss, Dr Kilani walked in.

"Dr Kilani, what is going on?"

"Dr Kilani, get this woman out of my office," They both said simultaneously. The doctor looked calm like he had been expecting this to happen.

"Dr Aviela, come with me to my office please," he said, and she could not help but furrow her brows. What was wrong with him? This was completely unacceptable! He should be showing this child her place. She decided not to cause a scene and followed quietly. She walked ahead of the elderly doctor, her entire composure showing she was mad, livid.

"Explain all of this to me, Dr Kilani because I am lost," Aviela said as soon as they were behind closed doors.

"Please have your seat, Dr Aviela," He said calmly.

"Oh, don't tell me to have my seat. I asked for an explanation!" How could he be so calm about this?

"Aviela, sit down," He said firmly. Aviela was angry but she knew better than to argue with him when he took the title out of her name. She took her seat and folded her arms, waiting for an explanation. The elderly doctor took off his glasses and drew closer to the desk as he intertwined his slightly wrinkled fingers together and placed them on the table indicating what he wanted to talk about was not going to be pretty.

"Aviela..." He started. She was very familiar with the tone he was currently using to address her; he had used it well in the past.

"Who is that lady in my office?" She spat. On the outside, you could see she was mad but the way her fingers trembled, and her hair started to stick to her temple gave out the fact that she was nervous.

"The daughter of the CEO..." He said and she remained quiet urging him to go on.

"She just finished medical school in the UK and has returned finally to Nigeria. The boss is getting old, and his health is failing gradually, he wants his daughter well accustomed to the hospital so she can take over when he is gone." He finished slowly as he searched her face for a reaction.

"Whose idea was it that being Deputy Head Paediatrician is the place to start learning? Shouldn't she start as a resident doctor and undergo training for a few years? What does she know about working this job? You seriously want to put the

lives of those kids into her inexperienced hands?!" She questioned, wondering why such an inexperienced person, regardless of how privileged, should be in that position.

"That was the boss' order." He simply limply replied.

"What does that mean? Am I fired?" She asked without beating around the bush. She could not care less about the reason; she just wanted to know her fate.

"No, not really. I was able to plead on your behalf and the management has agreed for you to keep working here, just not as the Deputy Head Paediatrician. Dr Johanna would assume that position from now on. You have been assigned to work with her till there is an opening and we can fix you somewhere" He finished just as she burst out laughing. She laughed so hard one would think she was crazy. She could not believe what she was hearing.

"You have got to be kidding me, Dr Kilani! You...You bring a child from nowhere and ask that I work as her assistant till there is an opening... Can you hear yourself, sir? I should wait for an opening that may never come in this already overstaffed hospital! That is what you are saying, is it not?!" She could not believe he had agreed to this.

"Dr Kilani, you of all people know how hard I worked to get to that position, and you agreed that it be given away to a child? How could you?!" She could not find it in her to be composed.

"Aviela, you have to be professional..." He started, but she was not going to let him.

"Sir, do not dare complete that statement. Sir, I genuinely respect you, but I will not hesitate to throw it away. What do you mean by 'professional'? Would you have been professional about this if you had been in my shoes?" She fumed. She could not bring herself to stop talking.

"Aviela..." He tried to reason with her.

"You know what? I do not need any of this because I quit! You can tell the CEO to have the whole hospital for his little princess, but I would never work under such absurd circumstances!" Aviela said and violently pushed the chair backwards. She was shaking and it was obvious.

"Don't be stupid Aviela. If you leave today, you cannot come back, and I will not be able to help you anymore. There is new management in place, so I no longer have the kind of influence I used to have. If you leave, you will have to give up your apartment too and there would be no monetary compensation. Do you want to risk that because of your pride, Aviela? I know it is a lot to take in but..."

"I am done listening to any more of this trash. My pride is the only thing I have left now since you just took my job away. I will turn in my resignation letter first thing tomorrow morning." She cut him short and picked up her bag.

"Aviela..."

"Have a good day, Dr Kilani." She said and slammed the door after her. She couldn't care if the whole ward heard her. She staggered to her car and roughly pulled out of the driveway and out the hospital building.

The tears she fought hard to hold started pouring, completely blurring her vision and staining the bright yellow shirt she had on. As much as she could, she wiped the tears with the back of one hand, pulling to the side of the road when she could barely see ahead of her. She gripped the steering wheel with both hands trying to control herself, but it was doing very little to help. She could not go home; she knew she could not. Thinking quickly, she took out her phone and scanned through her contacts hoping to find someone she could at least call. She decided to call a one-time office colleague. She had worked at the administrative arm of the hospital for a few years before she joined an advertising firm at the start of this year. She composed herself and waited for her to pick up while she looked through her smaller phone to see if she could still find the house address.

"Hello? Ela, is that you?" She sounded surprised. Aviela could not blame her. The last time she called her was over seven months ago to congratulate her on her new job. There was no problem; she just was not good with conversation. Mrs Adegoke was a few years older than she was; maybe 32 and they had talked a few times at official gatherings and lunch breaks but nothing more except the time she had insisted that Aviela came over to her house for lunch last Christmas.

"Mrs A-Adegoke..." She croaked out. She hated how her voice failed and how weak she sounded.

"I... I am c... coming over to your house, I... Please I..." Annie stammered, tucking her hair behind her left ear.

"It's alright, it's alright. Just calm down, there is no need to explain anything." She tries to soothe her. "I am not at home now, but you still remember the address, right?"

"Yes, I do," Aviela crooked as she began to scratch her itching skin.

"Go ahead, okay? I will leave the office now and meet up with you. Okay?".

"Thank you so much." Aviela could hear shuffling in the background meaning Annie was leaving just as she had said. She put on the ignition again and changed directions, moving to the left lane and making a U-Turn and heading in the direction of her colleague's house. She tried to keep her tears-soaked eyes open, so she would not miss the way. Pulling into the street that read *Zaire Crescent*, she located the house number.

She did not notice who had opened the gate, all she saw through the tears was a tall figure almost running into the smaller building behind the main house. She barely parked the car before jumping out. She was uncomfortable in her skin. The itching had started and was getting worse by the minute; the migraine was in full swing as the voices started to speak all at once. She could feel the aching in her chest as the memories started flooding back.

As soon as she made it into the house, she collapsed to the ground holding both sides of her head in her palms to stop the violent screams.

Failure! Disappointment! Good for nothing! Ugly! Unwanted! There was no end to it. She was doing so well

before. She thought she was. She did. She cried harder because she knew what was next. She crawled restlessly to the kitchen and searched for the knife set but could not find any. She was going to lose it if she did not find a way to release quickly. She spotted the jar of Nutella and pushed it off the counter with so much force. It shattered to pieces. Picking up a piece of the broken glass, she placed it against her wrist and dragged it against her skin till it drew blood. It was not enough! She threw that piece across the kitchen and looked for a sharper one, slitting her wrist a little bit more each time, with the voice in her head screaming 'MORE'.

She could not find the release she needed. She could see the blood dripping from her bleeding arms forming indefinite pools on the floor but could not feel the pain she should have felt. She could not feel anything physically, but she needed to. The voice directed her on what she needed to do next to feel better. She grabbed her bag and took out the bottles of antidepressants she had gotten from the pharmacy a few weeks back.

"Maybe this would help," she thought as she downed a handful of them, then another and another.

"P-Please... Please!" She screamed and took another handful, gripping the edge of the slab when she started to feel the drugs take effect. She smiled weakly when she could suddenly feel calm again. A little too calm even. She tried to get up on her feet but crashed back to the ground with a thud.

She wondered what was happening as she could feel her body getting lighter by the second. Maybe this was good. At

least it was becoming silent, the voices were quieting down. She was at peace? She could feel herself drifting. She did not plan on killing herself but if death was so painless, who was she to refuse it? Maybe... Just maybe she could finally meet her mum again.

"I miss you, mum... I want to be with you. I am not strong like you said I was. H-He...was right. I am... w... weak and no... N-nobody would ever love me... Please mum, let me come to you" She whispered as the tears fell quietly.

"Not yet..." Aviela heard a voice say quietly but could not place where it had come from, so she figured it was just another one of the confusing voices in her head even though the small goose bumps that had formed on her skin told her otherwise. It was quiet for a long time... Maybe it was just a few minutes or even seconds, but it felt like years had passed with her laying in that crunched up position, her slit arms still bleeding profusely.

"Happy birthday, Aviela." She whispered to herself as black dots rapidly began to conceal her vision.

‘C-02’

Zamar felt greatly uneasy. He could not shake off the feeling. He had rushed back into the house to put off the halogen cooker after responding to Annie's text to open the gates for a friend who was on her way over. The burning stew could not have been responsible for his unease, could it? He placed his left hand on his chest and rub in a circular motion. He had been in so much of a hurry to ensure he did not burn down the house, he did not bother waiting to receive Annie's guest. She said she was only a few minutes away from home anyway so there was no need to worry. But still, nothing felt right.

"What is going on?" He wondered whilst trying to search his spirit. The sound of the dog barking continuously was enough to bring him out of the house. He approached its cage with caution. The dog was just as restless as he was, strange. He looked over at the house and wondered what could be wrong. Everything looked fine he thought as he carefully walked in the direction of the part of the compound Annie stayed. The crash sound that had come from the inside had him running into the house. He was certain beyond doubt that something was wrong. He could feel it now. He prayed in tongues as he searched the living room only to find everything in place. He moved to the kitchen and his eyes widened in horror.

"Precious Jesus!" He whispered loudly, frozen completely on the spot as he took in the sight before him. Blood, so much of it. Empty drug bottles and a blood-soaked body. He had seen this same thing before. He could not find the courage to get any closer until Annie's shriek brought him back to reality.

"Oh my God! What are you doing just standing there, Zamar? We need to get her to the hospital. She is going to die!" She screamed. The last part was enough to jolt him to action. He picked her up in his arms, staggering backwards a bit, she was heavy. He knew she should not weigh this much but it was normal for a person in conditions like this to be a lot heavier. He ran-walked as he could to the car, Annie tailing him closely.

"No, you drive. I... I need to stop her bleeding and make sure she does not fall asleep, or she may fall into a coma. Take the first aid kit out of the trunk for me, quickly!" Annie immediately did as Zamar had instructed and gave him the first aid kit before proceeding to drive them to the nearest hospital.

"Hey... Hey... Can you hear me? You need to keep your eyes open," Zamar repeated over and over whilst rubbing both his palms against hers to warm her up and tapping her cheek to make sure she stayed awake. He checked her pulse and as just as he expected, it was dropping slowly. Luckily, he stopped the bleeding and had wrapped her wounds by the time they got to the hospital. He could not stop praying, afraid that something would go wrong if he did. He was normally a much put together person but today, seeing that young woman sprawled

on the ground, he lost his cool. He barked orders at everyone in sight till he was sure she was being properly attended to. He knew she had lost a lot of blood and would need a blood transfusion.

"Please, calm down, Mister. The doctor is attending to her already," a nurse said to Zamar as he paced the hospital corridor. "But please, may I ask your relationship with the patient?", she asked as the doctor walked in from attending to Aviela.

"Friend, but that information is unnecessary right now, nurse. If you need anything urgently, talk to us. It's an emergency as you can see," Zamar concluded facing the doctor. The doctor looked from Zamar to Annie and back to the nurse. Quickly, he concluded it was more important to first save the patient and make sure she is out of the woods.

"Firstly, the drugs are being flushed out of her system as we speak. She overdosed on the pills but thankfully, you brought her in as fast as you did. But the blood she's lost is another immediate concern. She would need a blood transfusion and we..." he explained but was cut off by Zamar.

"Take mine, I am O+. You can take mine. Test me and do it now, Doctor," Zamar interjected. He was immediately directed to the laboratory. He could not shake off the memory of how he had found her no matter how much he tried. He could not believe this was happening again. He watched as the blood was taken from his body as he prayed in the spirit. He could not stop; he was completely afraid to.

"Help her, Lord. Please, help this woman for your glory," Zamar could not stop repeating those words and he did not stop, not until several hours after the transfusion when the doctors had come to inform him that she was out of danger, but they would have to keep her under close observation for a few days as she was not fit to be discharged yet.

He was going to ask to see her but decided against it. He was sure he could not handle it. He went to settle the hospital bills but was informed that Annie had taken care of everything. He had completely forgotten about her. He took out his phone and sent her a text letting her know he would be going home to supervise the tidying up before she came home. He put a call through to the cleaning agency and requested their service at the house as soon as possible but it was late, and he would have to wait till morning.

"Thank you, Jesus. Thank you." He just could not help going over words of appreciation to the Father for saving the young woman's life. He did not have the heart to imagine what would have happened if neither of them got to her in time. He tried to blink away the dizziness he felt. The doctor had instructed him to rest a little bit more before leaving but he could not stay. He took his eyes off the road for a moment to grab the bottle of water from the cup holder of the car and felt a lot better after downing the whole bottle. Glancing at the time on the dashboard, it was exactly 10 pm. He sighed deeply as he tried hard not to think about the event that had taken place a few hours ago. He thought it would be best if he did not dwell on such thoughts as they were not healthy.

"I would have to clean up myself," He thought. He could not go to sleep knowing there was so much blood in Annie's kitchen. He would not be able to fall asleep and he did not want her to do it herself after the emotional stress she is going through. He knew exactly how she must have felt, walking in to meet someone she knew in such a helpless state. He knew that feeling too well in fact.

Zamar spent one solid hour cleaning up the kitchen, his hands shaking slightly as the blood brought back memories he was trying so hard to put away. He then returned to his place and took a long shower after inspecting to make sure he did not miss out on any spot. He was not feeling well and even though he knew exactly what the reason was, he could not stop asking why. He finally got out of the shower knowing he would not be getting any answers in there and prepared for bed. He called Annie just to check up and asked if she had eaten anything; he was grateful that she had. He assured her everything was okay, and her friend would be perfectly fine. They prayed together and he hung up after promising to be at the hospital first thing in the morning.

It had been such a long day for him. The first meeting he had today with his client made him understand how serious the situation of things was and he was not sure he was prepared enough for it. The incident with the young woman was another thing entirely but he was not worried. He had this strange confidence she was fine. Even though it was not his place to, his mind could not help but wonder what could have pushed her to almost taking her own life today? He started to

pray for her and drifted off a few minutes into the prayer; the weariness from the transfusion finally settling in.

The hospital room was silent except for the occasional beeping of the heart rate monitor.

Aviela willed her eyes to open but it was a deep struggle. The pungent smell of hospital disinfectant invaded her nostrils and that made her force her eyes open. She regretted it instantly as the harsh ray of sunlight hit her, making her shut her eyes. She inhaled and as slowly as she could, she reopened her eyes, squinting them to sharpen the blurriness. It seemed to work as she started to recognize the objects in the room, realizing she was in a hospital room.

"Why am I here?" She wondered as she sat up and tried to remember exactly what happened to her. That simple action caused her to wince in pain, she had a terrible headache. The door opened quietly and a woman who she recognized as Mrs Adegoke peeked her head in before completely throwing the door open.

"Oh! Oh! Aviela, you are awake!" She all but screamed.

"N-not so l-loudly," Aviela croaked out, her voice sounding foreign to her. Why did she sound like this? What happened?

"Sorry, sorry... I am so... Oh my God, you have no idea how worried I was about you, I thought... I thought..." For some reason, she could not bring herself to complete her statement.

"What happened? Why am I here?" I was at the office and then..." Aviela trailed off as the memories started to return to

her bit by bit. She was suddenly so ashamed of herself and could not bring herself to look up.

"Oh, Aviela..." Annie sighed, coming over to the bed to hug her.

"Everything would be fine. I know it will," she cooed but it just made Aviela cry harder. The door opened and Zamar ever so quietly walked in. He noiselessly drew closer to the bedside, noticing the woman in tears first. She was slightly dark-skinned with long, black hair that had burgundy-coloured tips and was braided backwards in tiny cornrows. Her face seemed pale and a bit swollen and she had bags underneath her eyes, but it did not alter the fact that she was a beautiful woman. A very beautiful woman he thought as his lips unconsciously stretching into a small lopsided smile.

"She would not stop crying. I don't know what to do," Annie said looking at him for help.

"She has her emotions all over the place. She has been through quite a lot," Zamar explained, barely above a whisper but Aviela heard him and jerked away from Annie almost immediately.

"Who...who are y...you? Please leave..." Aviela said as soon as she found a face to match the voice she had heard.

"You need to be calm, please. No one is going to hurt you, so don't panic. Annie is here with you and she is not going to let anything happen to you. The doctors are here to help you as well, you are safe here," He explained so gently, she almost believed him.

"I do not need any help from anyone. What I need is for you to leave and for me to be discharged from here." She was stubborn, he could see that. He heaved a sigh and silently asked the Holy Spirit for help. One wrong move and he could ruin it all.

"Alright, I will leave, and you will be discharged today if that is what you want, but you need to calm down. If the doctors come in here and you look anything asides perfectly fine, they will not let you leave. That I can promise you. So, if you want to leave, you have to cooperate with Annie and let her fix you up." He said with so much surety, his voice not wavering once.

"Who is this man...?" She wondered. Who was he to give her instructions? She was a medical doctor, and she knew the hospital rules, she knew she could leave if she wanted to.

"Annie, there is food in this bag for the both of you, change of clothes for her and here are the keys as well. I have to leave now but I will be sure to settle everything with the doctor so you can both leave when she is ready". He handed over the bags and keys to Annie and left the room. He hoped that her leaving the hospital would not be a bad idea. He knocked on the door of the doctor's office and came in as soon as he was asked to.

"Good morning, doctor." He greeted calmly.

"Good morning, Mr Zamar. How may I help you?"

"My friend has requested to be discharged. She is awake now and has insisted on leaving as soon as possible," he explained.

"I understand nobody ever wants to be in the hospital for too long and even though I still believe she should remain here for a few more days under close observation, she is a legal adult, and the hospital cannot keep her here against her will. I will check her vitals and if she is considerably fine, she may leave." The doctor said, but Zamar had been hoping deep down the hospital would insist she remained.

"One more thing, Mr Zamar. As you know, your friend overdosed on antidepressants whether intentionally or not and almost killed herself. The cuts on her arm too, if I am correct, were self-inflicted. She needs professional help as soon as she can get it. So, I would strongly advise that you convince her to start therapy. It would help her," The doctor advised. Zamar agreed, thanked the doctor and left. He was right about the cuts. They were too defined to have been an accident... He cleaned it up, so he knew. He also thought the doctor had been right about her needing to see a therapist, but he had doubts about whether she would want to, much less if the idea came from him. Maybe he should talk to Annie about this. She should be able to convince her. He immediately sent a text to Annie, updating her on everything the doctor had said, promising to be home before dinner time. He left the hospital when he was sure everything was in place; he also had a lot to do today, and he was way behind schedule.

It was about late noon when Aviela could finally leave. She had not spoken a word after Zamar had left the room. She did not know what to say or how to say it. The drive back to

Annie's place was airily quiet. She knew Annie was just burning with questions she wanted to ask as it was not in Annie's nature to be so quiet but Aviela was grateful that she had been sensitive enough to leave her to her thoughts. She could not believe she almost killed herself. She instinctively pulled on the shirt she was wearing to cover her arm, she felt extremely self-conscious. She wondered who they belonged to; the track shorts were big too. Could they not have just dry-cleaned her clothes?

"Mrs. Adegoke..." Aviela started.

"It is Annie to you. Drop the honorifics please, I am not that much older than you are," Annie said making Aviela shift a little in her seat.

"Oh...Annie..." She drawled, still finding it strange to address her so casually.

"Do we go to your place or...?" Annie asked slowly. She did not want her to feel like she was sending her away or implying that she did not want her back at her place.

"Your place please if it would not be a bother. I know what I did..." Aviela stopped mid-sentence when Annie rolled her eyes at her.

"Come on Ela, are you being serious? Please do not assume I am angry with you at all. My place it is. We need some catch-up time, anyway. It's been ages," She said just in time to make the turn.

"Whose clothes are these?" She asked.

"Oh..... Hmmm... They belong to a friend. He did not want to go through my things, so he just brought something of

his just in case you needed them," Annie explained. Aviola was not exactly sure about how she felt wearing the clothes of a man she did not know but she remained quiet so as not to come off as ungrateful.

"The shirt is a little big, but it looks cute on you. You practically slay in anything you put on," Annie said and Aviola gave a small smile in return. She was not sure if Annie had meant what she said or she was just trying to make her feel better. She leaned her head backwards and sighed. She was tired. In times like this, she appreciated the nonexistence of heavy traffic jams in Abuja as they were making the final turn into the street in no time. She wanted to rest, and she wished that Annie would not ask her any questions; it was impossible, but she could hope. Soon enough, Annie was pulling into the compound. She helped Aviola into the house as they made their way up the stairs.

"Okay! Come on in, princess," Annie said as she led Aviola into the room and went in the direction of the dark brown wardrobe, taking out a black and white Zebra print bedspread and a purple duvet. They worked together in laying it out on the queen-sized bed. Annie showed her where the basic things she would need were placed, making crappy jokes to help Aviola loosen up and be more comfortable around her. Aviola wonders why she was not more like Annie; fun and carefree.

"Annie... I know I have to give you an explanation for all this and..." Aviola started to say after they were done setting up the room for use. She thought it to be so uncomfortable to have to explain herself right then.

"Ela, please... Do not behave like I am a total stranger to you just because of what happened. Yes, I am dying for an explanation but that does not mean I want it right now. You come first, your health and wellbeing; they come before anything else, so I will leave you to rest now, and we can talk later. Do not worry too much about it, think of it as girl time and just be free. We may not exactly be five and six levelled besties forever...yet, But I am here for you and I am not going anywhere."

Aviela did not have a reply to all Annie said, it had been far too long since she heard someone genuinely speak to her the way Annie did. So, she hugged her and hoped Annie got the message. Annie left after assuring her she was downstairs if she needed anything. Aviela thanked Annie as she closed the door after her. She looked over the deep purple and teal colour themed room as she walked toward the bed. Noticing picture frames scattered across the walls of the room, she paused to read the words written on them.

'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, nor the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' ROMANS 8 vs. 38 - 39

'For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.' JOHN 3 vs. 16

'And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.' ROMANS 5 vs. 5

'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself from me.' GALATIANS 2 vs. 20

'...But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.' JOSHUA 24:15.

Aviela heaved a sigh, not bothering to read the rest of them. She did not mean to insult Annie's beliefs, but she was decided on the fact that the things she read were simply baseless lies. Who convinced Annie that a God that has never been seen would be capable of all these things? Since when was he so rich in love? Eternal life; the Holy Spirit, alive in Christ...? It all made no sense at all. She had seen more than enough to disturb the state of her mind not to mention the fact that she was already lacking strength. She rubbed her temple to soothe the headache she had and soon fell into a dreamless sleep.

It was time for dinner and Annie was starting to worry about Zamar. He had promised to be home before dinner time, and he was not. Her worries dissolved when she heard the front door open.

"Do you know how rich I would be if I charged you money for every time you made a promise and fail?" She said looking at him with disapproval.

"Good evening to you too mum. My day went relatively well, thank you for asking," He said sarcastically with an eye roll.

"What is my business with how your day went, please?" She asked as she began to set the table, pretending she did not notice him take off his suit jacket and roll up his sleeves to help her out. She hated how gentlemanly he was; at least that is what she tells him but deep down she was happy he had grown into such a fine young man.

"Aviela has been asleep for well over five hours and I am not sure if it would be right to wake her up, when should I start worrying?" She said as soon as they were seated at the dining table.

"Aviela..." Zamar dragged, testing her name on his tongue. He thought it was a nice name. It was a weird name for a Nigerian, but nice, nonetheless. He made a mental note to look up its meaning before proceeding to answer Annie's question.

"Let her rest. She would wake up when she is well-rested," He said, pouring himself a glass of cold water.

"Would I not go and overdose as well so that I can sleep this long without feeling guilty?" Annie wondered out loud, dramatically resting the back of her palm on her forehead.

"Stephanie, be careful not to make jokes like that around her as she is bound to be extremely sensitive right now." Zamar pointed out firmly while giving her a pointed look. She hated it when she was called by her full name. It reminded her of her secondary school cultural and Creative Arts teacher who always made her name sound like 'Step-nee.'

"Step-nee" She voicelessly mimicked. Zamar noticed but did not comment.

"We need to talk about your friend, Aviela right?" He asked, knowing full well that was her name; he just wanted an excuse to say it out loud again. He decided then that he liked the name.

"Yeah... Why? You like her?" She joked as she loudly cut the slice of yam on her plate into smaller pieces.

"Stephanie..." He warned.

"What? Is she not good enough for you?" She continued, drawing her chair closer. Zamar quirked his brows knowing she was about to get mischievous again.

"Look here, let me fill you in. Put aside the fact that she is currently unwell and trust me, she is legit extremely pretty and I am not just talking her face. Imagine this..." Annie said waving her fork in the air.

"Clear foncé skin... No, more like dark caramel skin tone. She has a glowing round face, plum nude lips that match with her skin colour and long, thick hair. She is much taller than I am so she should be at least 5'8 which is great as she would not look odd standing next to you. She has a low-key athletic body and a pear-shaped figure with fat in all the right places. She has an amazing sense of fashion. She is also very smart too and no, I am not just talking book smart, you need to see her take control in the office. Back to her figure, her hips are so..." Annie was cut short by Zamar who pushed his chair backwards and stepped away from the dining area. He went

into the kitchen with his empty plate, Annie following behind him while trying to control her laughter.

“As I was saying...” She said as Zamar put his plate into the dishwasher.

“Stephanie! Please... I am begging you to stop. Please, help me to help myself in protecting my salvation” Zamar said blocking his ears with both his hands. His actions made Annie laugh at him even more.

“You had better stop pretending you do not want me to give you details. I know you well, I saw how concentrated you were when I was describing her. Can you see how you are blushing? I was shouting when you were in school, live life and try to be more social but what did I get in return? You socialized with more books than human beings. Even now, I am trying to assist your destiny, but you are doing rubbish here and looking at me like you know nothing” Annie continued to mock him.

“I paid attention because I am generally a very good listener and I am not blushing; it just feels awkward that you are describing her like that in her absence and well...” Zamar was suddenly struggling to find words as he was not prepared for the conversation they were currently having. He spent some extra time washing his hands just to distract his mind from dwelling on Annie’s ‘description’.

“So... You are saying that it would be less awkward if I describe her to you in her presence? If that is the case, I could just go wake her up and we can continue; you know I can do exactly that.” She threatened playfully.

"No! I mean... Do not... Do not wake her up, she needs rest and I wanted to ask you something as well." Zamar said to change the topic. He did not think he would like it if Aviela walked in on them talking about her; he did not want her to misunderstand the situation.

"Something about her hips...?" Annie teased, wiggling her brows at him.

"What? No, of course not! Her health... I was talking about her health. Why would you think I want to know about her body?" Zamar said in a hushed whisper, trying to keep his voice down, unlike Annie who spoke like they were the only ones in the house.

"I was just asking; one can never be too sure with reserved men, especially you. It takes grace to relate with what goes on in your heads." Annie said with a smirk. She enjoyed getting under his skin whenever he was trying to be serious. The happiness was usually short-lived because he always ignored her in the end and went back to being serious. He took a deep breath and rubbed both sides of his temples with his index and middle fingers; it was something he did when he was starting to get frustrated.

"Has she done anything like this before? Maybe not exactly but something like this," He questioned. She did not feel comfortable whenever he questioned her. He always had a way of making her say things she did not want to. It was not going to work in this case; she was almost as clueless as he was.

"I do not know, Zamar. We are just a little past being called colleagues. Our relationship was not anything cosy. I was so

shocked she called to come here but after what happened, I was convinced God wanted it that way. Who knows what would have happened if she went home alone," she explained, trying to choose her words carefully.

"So, you have no idea what caused her to overdose?" He asked, intentionally not mentioning anything about her slit wrist. As of now, Annie assumed the cut and blood was from the broken glass jar. He knew her well, if she knew about the cuts; she would tail the poor woman for days in the name of making sure she was alright. It was best to leave her with just the part of Aviela accidentally overdosing.

"No... No, I do not. If I did, I would have said so, Would I not?" She placed her head on her palm.

"True..." Zamar said, and Annie could tell he was thinking hard about the whole thing.

"Zamar... What do we do?" Annie asked.

"She needs to see a therapist; you know that, right?" He said and she sighed.

"Yeah, I know" She caught her words as soon as she heard the creaking from the stairs, indicating that Aviela was coming down the stairs soon.

"I am going to take your leave now; I know you both have a lot to talk about and she definitely would not be saying anything if I stayed back." He said as a matter of fact.

"Good call. I will talk to you later. As to our discussion earlier, do not be shy to let me know if you are interested" Annie whispered but Zamar wisely chose to ignore her. He looked into the small chafing dish, sorting through the fried

toppings with his eyes; she slapped his hand away when he tried to steal another piece of meat. He tried again, this time getting one piece, much to Annie's annoyance. Zamar walked away quickly, knowing it was best to leave. He had work to do anyway.

Aviela came down just in time to see the front door close. She sat on the chair opposite Annie and the two stayed quiet for a while.

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry". They both started at the same time then laughed.

"You go first," Annie urged her to speak.

"I just wanted to thank you; you know... for everything. I know you did not have to, and you also were not expecting to come home to find me that way and for that, I am sorry," Aviela said, and she truly was sorry.

"I know that I should wait a little more before asking but I need to know what happened," Annie said to Aviela as softly as she could, so as not to make her uncomfortable.

"I lost my job," Aviela stated emotionlessly, and Annie could not help the small gasp that escaped her lips. Aviela was the most hardworking person she knew while she worked at the hospital, what could have happened?

"The apartment I stayed at was given by the office, so I have automatically lost that as well. I get to keep the car, but that is all," Aviela went on ahead to explain everything that had happened at the office trying not to let her mind travel back and dwell on the memories as she spoke.

"Wow...!" It was a lot for Annie to take in. She took a deep breath before speaking remembering how Zamar does that before commenting on a serious matter.

"You know that you are welcome to stay here for as long as you want to," Annie said as she took Aviela's hand in hers. Aviela did not like it as it made her feel vulnerable, so she quietly drew her hand back and rested them on her thighs. Even though Annie was being nice, Aviela could not afford to be off guard around her. Yet, she knew that what Annie was offering was the best she was going to get. Still, she wasn't about to allow herself to receive handouts.

"I cannot thank you enough Annie. I do not want to burden you though, so I would like you to please take rent from me. I may not be able to pay you much because all I have is my savings, but it is better than living off you," Aviela proposed, and Annie could no longer find it in her to be composed as Zamar.

"God forbid!" Annie said clicking her fingers over her head to make her point.

"What kind of person would I be to do that? I stay alone, my husband is not in the country and it is our place. I am not paying rent to anyone so why would I collect money from you?" She added.

"Please Annie, let me do this. I would feel much more comfortable if you let me." Aviela pleaded. She was a stubborn woman, but Annie was just as stubborn.

"No, Ela. It does not make any sense. I am rarely ever even here. The nature of my new job demands that I travel very

frequently. Please, I want you to stay and if you truly believe we are now friends, do not embarrass me by making me collect money from you." Annie said and Aviela could not help the tears that started to roll down her cheeks. This was exactly what she was trying to avoid so she wiped them away as quickly as they fell and recomposed herself.

"I don't know what to say to you, Annie. Really..." Aviela said, sniffing slightly.

"That is because you do not need to say anything to me, woman," Annie said with a big smile knowing she had won this one.

"There is just one thing though..." Annie added.

"What is it?" Aviela asked.

"My friend stays at the back in the outhouse. I hope that is okay?" Annie asked unsurely.

"It is fine, I guess. It is not my place so I cannot exactly decide who gets to stay," Aviela said, looking everywhere. She was not sure if she was fine with a stranger, a male at that staying so close especially with Annie saying she was hardly home. She convinced herself it would not be an issue as they would not be living in the same house and they did not even have to cross paths at all.

"That settles it then. Welcome officially! We are going to have so much fun. There is like a ton of movies we can see tonight" Annie squealed and hugged Aviela who stood frozen. She wondered how she would be able to cope with all the hugs as she disliked being touched so closely.

"Annie... Is it okay if I rest just for tonight? I still have a headache, but I am in tomorrow?" She asked. She did not have a headache; she only wanted to be alone.

"Oh... That's fine. You should rest anyway. What was I even thinking?" She understood Aviela's unspoken words and decided it was best to let her be. They said their goodnight and Aviela went up to bed leaving Annie downstairs. She played random worship songs from her phone as she did the dishes and tidied up the kitchen before heading to her bedroom.

She called Zamar who had been waiting for her, taking her time to carefully explain everything to him. Occasionally, he would heave a sigh or hum in response. He pointed out the fact that she should have informed her husband before taking such a big step but told her it was not too late to talk to him about it. She agreed to do so when she got to work the next morning after which he told her he had to hang up as he was in the middle of something before she called. He hung up and opened his browser, typing in the words 'meaning of Aviela'. He smiled as he read over the response, whispering ***"My Father is God"*** before taking his pencil from behind his left ear to copy the words into the back of his journal. He shut down his laptop for the night and went back to writing. Somehow, there was a lot he wanted to write tonight.

‘C-03’

It had been over a month since the trio started living together and although there hadn't been any interaction whatsoever between Aviola and Zamar, he often found himself praying for her. Even when he did not pray in his understanding, he could sometimes feel his prayer was channelled towards her. Annie on the other hand had maintained a vibrant balance and although all three of them never sat down or went anywhere together, she made sure to not make either of them feel neglected. She would get back from work and have dinner with Aviola who always made sure Annie came home to good food. After dinner, Annie would go over to Zamar with food for him. He had started his relationship with his research journal and laptop, forgetting to have dinner on most nights. She was glad he was doing what he loved again but she wished he would not work all the time.

She had just walked in on Aviola setting the table for dinner.

"This woman is God-sent," She thought to herself.

"It is like you knew hunger drove me home tonight," Annie said as she threw her belongings on the sofa, changed into her slippers and joined Aviola on the table.

"Welcome home," Aviola said chuckling lightly.

"Like, you have no idea. As soon as my location manager said we should probably meet tomorrow, I picked up my bag

and left. I cannot kill myself, please. What are we eating?" Annie looked over the food on the dining table.

"Ha!" She exclaimed each time she opened a serving dish.

"*Ẹ gbà mí...* Who is organizing a wedding, please? What is happening? Is this not pounded yam I am seeing? What soup is this?" She was expecting the regular rice or anything along that line.

"Nobody is organizing a wedding. Nothing is happening, and yes, it is pounded yam and it is *Afang* soup" Aviela answered, laughing as she served them both.

"Ah! I am the one who is married but it is obvious you are the wife material. When will you show me the way?" Annie said, washing her hands.

"Please, stop teasing me. You have not even tasted it yet. I just thought you would want something different," she said looking down at her plate. She had decided to make a dish from Annie's state for a change.

"If I was not so hungry, I would have gone down on two knees and proposed to you." Annie laughed at her silliness but was genuinely impressed. She thought of what Zamar's reaction would be.

"Neutral... That man is so expressionless," She said to herself and shook her head, causing Aviela to raise a brow.

"Do you not like it?" Aviela asked, already feeling bad. She knew it was a bad idea and should have just done the regular.

"No no! The food is delicious. I was making fun of Zamar in my head. I actually cannot wait for him to taste this," Annie explained. She had made it a point of duty to mention his

name to Aviela at any given opportunity. She knew they would make for an awesome friendship, maybe more.

"He does not come here. Is that because of me?" Aviela asked. Annie was not sure how to answer that genuinely and nicely.

"No and yes... No, because it is not the reason you are thinking and yes because he has always been one to respect privacy. He felt you were just settling in and did not want to pose as a restriction. He is so gentlemanly; it gets me angry sometimes," Annie said but smiled. It was obvious to Aviela that both were close. She wished she had something that true.

"How did you guys meet?" Aviela's question made Annie laugh.

"It is a funny story. Our parents have been family friends since forever. You know those parents who are tight friends with other parents, but their kids hate each other? For over a quarter of our lives, it was so for us as well. My friends and I used to tease and bully him in secondary school. He is smart, so he skipped Primaries 5 and 6 and ended up getting into junior secondary school while I did. He always wore these ridiculous glasses, and his tooth gap was just way too wide for his head. He made it fun because he was always so angry and could not tell his parents he was being bullied by the very same Akwa-Ibom sweetheart who always knelt to greet his Yoruba parents." Annie narrated to Aviela who laughed all the way, she was surprisingly interested.

"Did he ever tell them?" She asked.

"He did not need to. I don't know-how but as soon as we resumed senior secondary school, he was suddenly tall and good looking. He was still quiet and slightly nerdy, but it was impossible to tease him about his looks anymore. All my friends suddenly started crushing on him in the name of a perfect tooth gap. We started talking when he was dating a friend of mine and I realized how amazing he was. So, when they broke up, I did not let that affect our 'relationship' and look where we are." Annie finished with a big smile.

"Your husband does not have a problem with him staying here?" Aviela asked because she found it considerably odd.

"Why would he? Zamar is his cousin and my 'brother-in-law'. So, if you think about it, Zamar's welfare is more of his responsibility than mine." Annie said and Aviela nodded her head in understanding. They were family. She suddenly felt out of place and to cover it up, she decided to change the topic.

"So... the office, did they get back to you on your posting?" She asked.

"Yes, yes... I even forgot to tell you. Those people posted me to Port-Harcourt. Can you imagine?" Annie said licking the soup away from her fingers.

"Wow... That is quite far," Aviela commented.

"What is my own? It is quite nice. I have not been there before, and the new product needs a lot of pushing in Port-Harcourt. So, if you look at it, it is a win-win situation." Annie said, leaning back in her chair. Aviela found it weird how she was always so optimistic about everything.

"How long and when do you leave?" She inquired.

"I have to resume on Monday so I would have to leave in two days. It is **only three months**. I was so surprised. I guess they wanted us to have the Christmas break to ourselves." Compared to her longer travels, Annie was happy she did not have to be there so long. She enjoyed travelling from place to place but it could be tiring having to stay in one place for too long.

"Okay, umm..." She was not sure how exactly to pass her insecurity across to Annie.

"I know. I know... Zamar... I promise you he will not be a bother. He is very well behaved. If I had only one choice person to stay with you, it would be him. He is that trustworthy. What am I even saying? You both are living separately; the only thing you would have to share is the compound and gate. Well... You would have to share one more thing though..." Annie said, making Aviela alert. What else could they possibly have to share?

"W...What would we have to share?" Aviela hoped it was not something she would be uncomfortable with; she did not want to offend Annie.

"The waste bin outside; there is only one," Annie said and burst into a series of hysteric laughter.

"You... You should have seen your face!" Annie was currently practically choking on her laughter.

"That was not funny," Aviela said but ended up laughing along with Annie. She could not believe how scared she was without even knowing what exactly she was going to be sharing. How silly.

"Babe, time is running. Let's tidy up. Somebody's son is probably starving to death." Annie thought she should probably have taken his food to him before she and Aviela started playing catch up.

"You take his food to him; I will tidy up. There is not much to be done anyway." Aviela offered to Annie who agreed and went on to pack some food for Zamar.

Zamar had dozed off for the fifth time in the last thirty minutes. It had been a stressful day for him. The problem with his client was looking more complex with each passing day. He drew out new plans and formed new strategies every week and he was at it again. He was greatly disturbed by the fact that things were not going as he had planned. He should have been seeing at least some level of changes by now.

"Uncle, drop the book and rest. Is it by force? You want to kill yourself, right?" Annie said making Zamar snap his head in her direction. He did not hear her come in.

"How long have you been standing there?" He asked putting his pen down. He thought she was tired and would not come over tonight.

"You see your life? What if I was a kidnapper or something?" Annie said placing the food basket on the table.

"Don't you think it is wiser to kidnap the owner of the house instead of the hungry man squatting in her outhouse?" Zamar said, taking off his glasses.

"You like to think you are so smart, right?" She asked eyeing him.

"Yes, I do actually. Just in case you have forgotten, every man is a product of his/her mindset." He answered as a matter of fact.

"Sorry o, life coach. I do not even have anything to say to you tonight. I am in a good mood." Annie said, plopping down on his couch and switching on the television.

"What exactly sponsored your good mood, you got a promotion?" Zamar asked as he took a flat plate from the kitchen space.

"I wish... Check tonight's dinner." Annie replied and he did as she said, deciding his spirit had been lifted again. He had always been a lover of dishes from the south. His mum would get so pissed off whenever he chose *Edikang Ikong*, bitter leaf or *afang* soup made at Annie's family home in Akwa-Ibom whenever they went on a joint trip over the regular vegetable soup that was usually served back at home. He could not remember the last time he had *Afang* soup and so he decided not to waste any more time. God bless Annie for him.

"What is the occasion? Has SOJ returned already?" Zamar moaned in delight after tasting the food and got up to wash his hands. His action made Annie laugh.

"Local man drops fork instantly. What happened to your posh lifestyle?" She teased even though she could relate.

"There are some ministries forks cannot handle. The Lord trained my fingers specifically for these types of battles." Zamar said as he dipped his hands into the morsel of pounded yam to establish his point. He could not get enough.

"I am telling you, Aviela killed this dish." At the mention of that name, Zamar's hand hung mid-air.

"She cooked this? Wait... Is she not supposed to be Yoruba?" Zamar could not believe what he was hearing.

"She is. I do not understand either but who am I to question good food?" She said and picked up his fork to eat from his food. He immediately got up from beside her and moved to an entirely different chair.

"Seriously Zamar, you are forsaking me because of food. The bible has said it; the heart of man is desperately wicked. Who can know it?" Annie said, shaking her head at him.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain, *ma*," Zamar fired back. They bickered like this a lot, so he had his replies handy.

"Wow! May they not use food to kidnap you again," She said referring to the time when it happened. She knew he loved eating, but this was something else. He laughed at the memory.

"How is she, though? I cannot remember the last time I saw her." Zamar asked, assuming his serious tone again.

"Honestly speaking, I do not know. I mean she was barely saying anything when she got here initially and stayed upstairs apart from dinner time but recently, she has been talking to me and laughing from time to time. She is a lot livelier." Annie explained, trying to decide if she should just tell him her observation. He looked at her without saying a word knowing there was more.

"Oh... God! Why are you still looking at me now?" Annie whined. Zamar shrugged without taking his eyes off her; he had been doing this for years, he knew he was not wrong.

"Okay! Okay! Fine! I am not exactly sure, but I think she has these nightmares. She would always say she is fine when I ask but I know she is not. I do not want to pressure her, but it is obvious this is not just about losing her job. There is much more to it." Annie finished and waited for his reply.

"Hmmm... Okay." Zamar said and Annie made a face at him.

"That is all you have to say?" Annie asked. He could not be serious right now.

"Yes, for the mean time..." He drawled.

"Goodnight," Annie said curtly and arose to leave. He chuckled, knowing how she hated one-word replies but he did not have anything to say yet though. This was new information and he had to speak and act very carefully.

"Wait. Give her something for me, would you?" Zamar said going over to the table quickly. Tearing out a piece of paper, he quickly scribbled down the words:

Dear Aviela,

Dinner was simply amazing. It lifted my spirit in ways you cannot imagine. Thank you. God has blessed you.

- Zamar

He folded the note ever so neatly and handed it to Annie who would not stop giving him sly looks. He knew exactly what she was thinking, but his reason for writing Aviela was more official than casual even though he could not deny the part of him that had wanted it to be on a more casual basis.

Annie continued to tease him by saying 'God when' till she was out of hearing range. Aviela was asleep when she got back inside but she made sure to leave the note by her bed stool. She would be happy to read that in the morning.

Zamar, on the other hand, worked with newfound enthusiasm. He was not sure if it was the fact that he ate food he loved or the fact that he was finally able to communicate with her even though it was not directly. He wondered what her reaction would be when she read it; he hoped he was not being too forward. He focused his attention on his work as he needed everything to be perfect for tomorrow. At least he would have the weekend to rest and spend time fellowshiping with the lover of his soul. He had missed that. He finally retired to bed around 3:30 am feeling a sense of fulfilment knowing his presentation was ready.

The days had gone by quickly and Aviela realized she missed Annie. It had been two days since she left and Aviela had not come out of the house for any reason. She had thought about going to say hello to Zamar, but she did not have the courage to. She wondered why he would even want to be friends with someone like her.

"If he wanted to be friends, he would have made an effort all the while," She thought back to the note he had sent a few days ago but decided he was only being nice. It was not an invitation for friendship. She decided to walk the dog again. She disliked dogs generally, but she was going to lose her mind if she had to stay in all day again. Moreover, Annie had trained

her dog well, so he was not as unappealing to her as the other dogs. She got dressed and took the leash along with her; going out through the back door so she could take the trash bag along for disposal. As soon as she stepped out, she caught the sound of an instrument playing for a short while before it ceased. Was that Zamar? What instrument was that exactly? Strings but she was sure it was not a guitar. She decided to mind her business and leave him be.

She put down the bag in hand as she reached the dustbin and unhooked it before disposing of the garbage bag. She opened the tap attached to the fence and washed her hand as the sound of a door closing startled her. She looked up to see Zamar coming out of the house with a garbage bag in hand. Slightly disoriented, her first instinct was to hide. Unfortunately, he saw her already. She shut the tap and straightened up when he reached the dustbin.

“Good evening, Aviela. What a pleasant surprise. I was not expecting to see you here.” Zamar said, smiling to ease her obvious discomfort.

“Good evening,” she replied with a small smile as she dragged her hands on her shorts to dry out the water on them. She fumbled with the edges of her clothes for a second. “Yeah well... I came to drop this on my way out.” She explained dryly but he nodded his head still.

“Alright... How are you doing though? It must be less fun without Annie around.” He asked, washing his hands as well.

“I must admit it is but not unbearable though. I trust you are good as well. Can I ask how work is and all?” she asked in return, taking caution.

“I’m sure you can. I am getting by fine. Thank you for asking.” He answered maintaining his friendly smile.

“Yeah...” She said so silently it was almost a whisper. She was so not prepared for this meeting.

“Oh! That is great. Don’t let me keep you then. Take care of yourself,” Zamar said immediately. They both said goodbye before Zamar noticed the leash on the floor by the dustbin.

“I think you dropped this,” he called after her. Aviela halted in her tracks and turned around, almost face-palming when she saw the leash in his hand.

“Oh... Thank you. I must have dropped it when I put the bin bag on the floor. I forgot I was holding it, so I was not...” Aviela let the rest of her words fall when she realized the information was unnecessary. Zamar chuckled at that because he found it cute. They said goodbye again and left.

Zamar returned to the outhouse and Aviela went in the direction of the main gate, stopping at the dog’s cage. She noticed her car in the back, cringing at how old and messed up by the rain it was; she could not believe she once treated the car like a first child. How quickly priorities changed for her. She huffed, making a mental note to look up the market price of the vehicle, deciding she should let it go to someone who would take care of it plus she could use the extra money. Aviela shook off her thoughts and unlocked the cage to let the dog out.

"Hey, Oxford..." Aviela greeted, ruffling the dog's fur and earning a deep purr. She liked how beautiful he was. He had shiny black fur except for the white patch of fur around his left eye. She thought about how he could easily pass as a wolf. He was so huge.

"Would you accompany me on a walk?" She asked as she attached the leash to his collar, already knowing he would not refuse walks. It was about 6 pm and so it was not sunny anymore, which was perfect. They set out, the dog being the more enthusiastic of the two. She did not like being alone with her thoughts, they scared her.

"Animals have it so easy. Right, Oxford?" Aviela asked the dog who paid her no attention. She laughed at herself and her situation. She could not believe she was talking to a dog. She always made fun of people who did and here she was doing the same thing. It never ceased to amaze her how life can bend you in directions you never thought possible. She came back to reality when she felt water drop on her nose. She looked up into the sky and noticed the weather had changed; it was about to rain so she decided to return home before it started. She refrained from looking up above too often as she had come to dislike looking at the sky; it reminded her that there was supposedly someone there who should have been watching over her.

"He probably watches over those who are worth it," She sighed and pulled on Oxford's leash as she felt the raindrops hit her skin more frequently. This was always the hard part of the walk; getting him to turn back.

"Oxford, come on! We need to go; it is starting to rain," Avela urged, wondering why Annie bought such a big dog. She pulled harder on his leash just as lightning struck, frightening them both. Avela's grip on the leash loosened and the dog took off running in fear as the rain began to pour. She began to run after him but soon tripped over a fallen branch and bruised her knee.

"Annie would surely murder me." She panicked and tried to call for help. Who would help her run after a dog in the rain? This was Nigeria for God's sake.

ZAMAR!

She limped as quickly as she could back to the house grateful she had not gone too far. She was soon home and banging hard on his door.

"Hello? Help! Mr Zamar. Are you in?! Please help! Mr. ..." The door was thrown open to reveal a shocked Zamar.

"What are you doing standing in this heavy rain? You could fall ill" Zamar said, wondering what was so urgent.

"Ox-oxford... I-I was walking him and... He... The rain... We were..." She could not find the right words to explain herself. Her panicking was making him panic.

"Please calm down... How far did you both go?" Zamar asked, trying to maintain his composure.

"I... We went... I don't know." She said and burst into tears. That seemed to push the button on Zamar as he started pouring out promises of finding Oxford.

"We will surely find him, I promise". He said and went back into the house for the car keys Annie had left him, his glasses,

a torchlight and his raincoat; he did not think an umbrella would be very wise. Upon returning outside, he noticed her bleeding knee.

"You are hurt! Oh, God... Please go inside. I will find Oxford and bring him back, so you have nothing to worry about. Try to calm down, Aviela... please and do not do anything drastic. There is a first aid kit on the shelf in the kitchen, please attend to your knee in the meantime." Zamar instructed and did not wait to listen to her protest as he got into the car in search of the dog.

Aviela could not stop crying. She felt so terrible. If Zamar was not able to find him, she did not know what she would do. Annie would not forgive her, and she would not forgive herself either.

"What if he is hurt or got run over by a vehicle..." Aviela's mind was reeling non-stop, thinking negative thoughts but she could not help it. Zamar had been gone for over 45 minutes and with each minute that passed, she became more anxious.

"I should probably just have some water," She said to herself, walking to the kitchen and getting the water she needed. She spotted the first aid box but knew there was no way she would get it down without breaking something. She decided it was best to just sit quietly till he got back. She hated knowing she was alone in the house this late at night.

It was almost 8 pm. 1 hour, 20 minutes and still no sight of Zamar or Oxford. She had dozed off on the sofa about 10 minutes ago. She thought about going out to search for them as

she felt even guiltier for just sitting there and doing nothing to help.

She sighed and started to limp around again being unable to settle the anxiousness within her. Just about then, she was alerted by the whining sound coming from outside.

"Oxford!" Aviela knew he had been found; she had never been more excited to hear a dog. The door opened and her heart broke when she saw the state of the dog. He was covered in mud and completely soaked by the rain. Zamar had tried his best to clean him up in the car so she did not have to feel guilty but there was only so much he could do. The dog needed a proper bath.

"Oh, my goodness! I am so sorry." Aviela said although she was not completely sure who exactly she was apologizing to. She crouched down and hugged Oxford hoping it showed how sorry she was. She cried all over again.

"Please don't do that. Dogs are sensitive to emotions. He will not feel any better if you keep crying. It would only make things worse, so please cheer up so he can do the same" As true as that was, Zamar was not concerned about the dog. He wanted her to stop crying because he did not feel right seeing her cry.

"Yes, yes, I am sorry. Where did you find him?" Aviela asked. She got up from her kneeling position, wiped her tears and dusted off the mud stains that had gotten on her clothes. He noticed them too and the fact that her wound had not been treated. She followed his gaze and realized he was looking at the bruise.

"I could not reach the first aid kit..." Aviela started to explain, feeling like he was probably thinking she was a mess and incapable of doing something so simple.

"It is fine. I should have taken it down for you since it was so high up. It was my fault." He said, making Aviela wonder if he was being serious? He was a strange man, she thought.

"He was hiding away from the rain. He was smart not to wander around. I could not trace him from the inside of the car, so I had to wait till the rain reduced a little." Zamar explained after a little while.

"I am just relieved that he is fine. Annie would have been so disappointed" Aviela honestly had no idea how she would have explained any of this to Annie.

"I am going to go clean him up very quickly. He shouldn't go back to his cage tonight because he must be cold, and the rain does not look like it will stop soon. Please excuse me for a moment." Zamar excused himself before going into what she assumed was his bedroom. About five minutes later, he returned wearing fresh, dry clothes. She needed dry clothes too, she was freezing.

"Should I ask him? Would he be fine with it?" She decided to just bear the cold until the rain stops and she can return home to change.

"I do not have any feminine clothing, but I hope you would be able to make do with these, for now, it is not healthy that you remain in wet clothes. They are new, I promise, and you can change in the restroom over there." He said pointing to the white door at the far end of the room. She slowly took the

clothes from him, too cold to refuse. It was not anything serious, just track shorts and a hoodie. She was sure she looked ridiculous. The hoodie was practically knee-length, but it was better than her wet clothes. She came out hoping he would not be there anymore but to her disappointment, he was patiently waiting with the first aid kit.

"Please, sit so that I can help you with your knee," Zamar said, pulling out a chair for her.

"It is fine, I can do it myself" Aviela refused, and he was going to insist but decided it was better to not make her any more uncomfortable. She placed her injured leg on the stool and began to clean the dried blood. He watched her actions intently noticing the injured area had swollen a lot.

"I should have attended to her before leaving." He thought to himself, his attention later diverted to the scars on her leg.

"Why so many and why are they so deep?" He wondered quietly, knowing that asking her about them would be rude. He could not stop thinking about it though. It was either she was extremely careless and playful while growing up or...

"I am done. Thank you and thank you for the clothes. I will return them tomorrow, along with the ones from the hospital," Aviela said quietly, wondering why she was feeling so self-conscious. She thought it was probably because his stares were so intense like he was analysing her.

"It is fine, take your time. Have you had dinner?" He asked.

"Oh... Not yet. I was going to cook when I got back from walking Oxford but..." Aviela's voice trailed, hoping he got the message already.

"I understand. I made pasta. Would you like some?" He offered.

"Oh no, please don't bother. That would be such an inconvenience, I know you did not plan for more than one so..." Aviela's excuse was dismissed by Zamar.

"It can conveniently feed all three of us. I normally cook in excess, so I can quickly reheat and eat. I will just serve you then." Zamar said and did exactly that. He made a cup of tea for her as well hoping she liked tea.

"Who does not like tea?" He thought to himself.

"Thank you so much, Mr Zamar. I am grateful." Aviela said and she was. He was just like Annie described him; gentlemanly.

"Zamar is just fine or else you would make me feel awkward for calling you Aviela." He said and she liked her name a pinch more as she heard him say it.

"Oh okay. Zamar it is then." She said and it caused him to smile.

"I am going to attend to Oxford; he must have made a big mess of my bathroom already. Please relax and I will be back shortly." Zamar said and disappeared into the bathroom. Aviela could hear talking with Oxford, it made her chuckled. She wondered if she sounded like that when he had been talking to him on the road earlier.

She ate her dinner and washed the dishes. Returning to the living room, she noticed something on the table across the room that caught her attention. The instrument she had heard was a violin.

How strange. That explained the solemnity. Instinctively, she walked to and picked it up, taking care to handle it gently with curious inspection of the piece. She liked how it felt in her hands.

"You play?" Zamar voice startled her causing her to drop the bow in shock.

"I did not mean to frighten you, please forgive me." He apologized.

"No... I was the one who got carried away. No, I don't play, but I heard you playing earlier and hmm..." She let her words dry up when she realized she sounded like a creepy stalker.

"Yeah, I do that when I need to relieve stress," Zamar said, making her wonder what he was stressed about. He looked completely fine to her.

"Nice... How is Oxford doing?" She asked, changing the topic.

"He is fine. I made arrangements in my bedroom for him already." He looked ahead of her to the dining table and back to her. "I must check up on a few things if you don't mind. The remote is on the table in case you want to watch anything. Please excuse me." Zamar said and moved some of his things to the dining table. She watched him put on his glasses and begin to type away on his system. She could not help but think he was busying himself, so he did not have to speak to her. She did not blame him though; she would probably have done the same because she found herself to be undesirable company sometimes. She did not bother putting on the television so as

not to distract him, she already felt like enough of an inconvenience.

Zamar had worked for over an hour before he remembered he was not alone. How insensitive of him to have left her alone for so long. He got up to see that the rain had stopped, and she had fallen fast asleep on the couch. He called her name to wake her up so she could go home but remembered she was injured.

"Should I just leave her?" He thought, deciding against it as she would not have agreed to stay if she had not fallen asleep. He knew what he must do. Taking her wet clothes and wrapping them properly, he took the keys to Annie's place and quickly opened the door and figured the room that was not locked belonged to Aviela. He returned and as the night of the dinner, he took out a blank sheet of paper and wrote her a message since he was not exactly sure if Oxford would go missing again tomorrow. If he did not, she would probably have no reason to see him so he hoped the note would do. Sliding the note into his back pocket, he went over to the couch and slowly picked her up and took her over to her place and her bedroom. He slipped the note underneath the bedside lamp where she would easily notice it in the morning.

He returned outside to lock the gates and switch on security lights since no one else was going out that night. Upon getting to his room, he found Oxford fast asleep as well. He had work to do so he could not go to bed yet, but he could not find it in him to concentrate and kept replaying everything that had happened that night in his head.

He thought about the scars on her leg and could not help but wonder how they came about. Seeing that he would not be able to focus on work anymore, he packed up and retired to bed after taking out time to thank God for giving them an avenue to communicate physically. He expressed his desire that she may come to know Jesus experientially and be truly happy and whole; he asked for the guidance of the Spirit of God that he does not do things on his own. He prayed in the Spirit and blessed God for answering his prayers before finally retiring to bed.

The following day, Aviela woke up unusually late to a slight heaviness. She looked at her wall clock noticing it was past 1:00 pm. She had not felt any vibe for a long time, but she was extra dull today. After getting Annie's dog lost, she should feel this terrible. What if Zamar had not found him? She paused and tried to figure what time she had returned to her room last night. She remembered falling asleep on Zamar's couch but that was it.

"Did Zamar carry me here? Oh, my goodness" She said and palmed her face. She could not believe she had not woken up the whole time. She got out of bed and immediately noticed the blue piece of paper, her heart beating a tad faster. The last time she woke up to a blue paper, it was a complimentary note from Zamar, and she knew this was him as well. She tried to mask her building excitement before opening the note to read.

DEAR AVIELA,

You fell asleep and I brought you home, I hope that was fine. I truly want to believe that you have let go of what happened yesterday. It was not your fault and it could have happened to anybody. Mistakes happen but getting back up is where our strength is truly revealed. And I would just like you to know that you are strong, much stronger than you give yourself credit for. The situation around does not allow you to see it but that is exactly who you are. Strong!

Have a beautiful day ahead and do things that make you happy. I should have done this in person but excuse me this one time.

If you would like us to communicate on more modern terms, I have written down my phone number at the bottom of this note. Feel free to call or message anytime and for any reason whatsoever.

JESUS LOVES YOU

Your neighbour,

Zamar. A. Bankole

08115551116

She was speechless, not knowing what to say or think. Did he have the wrong idea about her and what it meant to be strong? Was he trying to mock her? He did not seem like the kind of person to do that but then no one was really as they seemed. She sat on the edge of her bed completely confused. If he put down his number, then it meant that he wanted to be friends but assuming was not a wise thing to do. It was far too

risky. She wondered if she even wanted to be friends with him. It would be better if she did not do something that would break her even more.

"Can I be any more broken than this?" Aviela found herself asking that question. She picked up her phone and saved his number, deciding to message him on WhatsApp.

What was she supposed to say? Hello? Hi? No, she never replied to anyone who messaged her by simply sending hello.

She read through the note again then settled on typing the words:

"Because I opted for a more modern means of communication. Thank you for yesterday. Aviela"

She hit the send button and close her WhatsApp before she yielded to the voice in her head telling her to delete the message and quit being stupid. He was not online so she did not see a point in waiting for his reply. She found herself reading the note again, smiling this time around. She thought about what she could do today that would make her happy. Being a medical doctor had been her whole life's focus and she did not have that anymore. She shook away the thoughts that were beginning to surface and she felt sorry for herself.

"I am sorry Zamar, but nothing makes me happy anymore" She sighed into the quiet room and went back to her covers just as her phone beeped notifying her of a new message.

"Aviela...?"

"I did not think you would message," She read silently and reprimanded herself, knowing she should have just deleted her message. What was she thinking?

"But... I am glad you did. You have no idea." Her lips formed an 'O' as she decided his last message changed things. This meant that he wanted to talk to her.

"How are you, Aviela?" Zamar's message popped up again. She wondered what she was supposed to reply to that; should she go ahead and tell him how she feels purposeless and empty. She refrained from doing so, as that would have been uncalled for and completely improper; to bother him with her baggage.

"I am okay, I guess. Bored though. I could not find anything interesting to do" She read her response over before hitting send; at least it was true on a surface level.

"Did you consider taking Oxford out?" Zamar asked. She chuckled at that.

"Never again," She replied, and she meant it.

"That dog is staying home no matter what until his owner gets back from her trip." She added with a loud huff.

"I probably know the answer to this already, but do you need company?" She sat up after reading that. Was he the company? It can't be... He should not even be home. What should she reply?

"Is the company bringing food?"

"Well, I cannot guarantee that he is, but it is worth a shot, don't you think?" She did not feel good anymore. She did not want any male company. It would have been manageable if it were him. The doorbell rang and she froze. Should she ignore it? She looked at herself in the mirror and faked a gag as she took in her appearance. She thought she looked horrible. Bags underneath her eyes, swollen face, completely mismatched

clothing. She quickly fixed herself, washed her face, applied her signature strawberry flavoured lip gloss, wore two perfumes and a body mist, then put a hoodie over the tank top she was wearing. That was better. At least she did not look dead as she ran down the stairs, almost tripping on her injured leg. Why was she in a hurry? She did not have an answer, but she was. Looking through the peep hole, a wave of relief washed over her. He was the 'he'! Now she felt stupid. Who else would be here that quickly? She slowly opened the door to reveal Zamar standing there in all his "tooth gapped glory".

"Hi," he said, his lip stretching into a very small smile as he gave her a once over. He could almost bet she did not know she was wearing her hoodie inside out.

"Hi" she replied. Why on earth had she not just refused? What were they supposed to talk about? She was terrible at unofficial conversations!

"I know I did not specify if the company would be coming in or standing outside but it would be nice if you let him come in." He said after a whole minute of silence.

"Oh! Yeah, right. Sorry, please come in" She said and stepped aside, noticing how he bent a little to get in.

"I brought food, but it is not the cooked kind," He said dropping the bag on the table.

"So, in other words, you are here empty-handed," She said taking a seat at the dining table, watching him as he took out the contents of the bag.

"No. In other words, we are cooking here. I have a few things and I know there is food here too, so we would not starve to death" He said, and she looked over what he had.

"Are we cooking or baking?" Aviela asked.

"Fine, we are baking. I have been craving cake for a long time now" He explained as they took the bags and went into the kitchen. Zamar arranged the things he brought while Aviela sort for bowls and other needed utensils.

"Why not just buy it?" She asked, stretching on the stool she was standing on to reach the top cabinet. Noticing her distress, he took two long strides to where she was and took down the mixer. Aviela silently convinced herself that she was not short and that he was just unnecessarily tall.

"Well for one, we would probably be seated on your couch now; neither of us knowing what to say to the other if I had bought it. Secondly, if you want cake baked right, you have to let Zamar bake it." He said and she smiled at that. He was nice when he was not being too serious. She was glad she did not have to constantly worry about what to say to him. She hated making new friends. They got started with the baking process, she does more observation than hands-on participation. It was getting quiet again, so she decided to speak first this time.

"Where did you learn to bake?" She asked. Zamar stopped whisking and cleared his throat, making Aviela wonder if she had asked something wrong.

"Did I say something wrong?" She voiced. Way to go Aviela. Way to go.

"No, of course not. my dad taught me to bake when I was younger, and I guess I just picked it up."

"He must be a great man." She commented.

"He was." That took a few seconds for Avielia to register but when she got it, she buried her face in her palms. What was wrong with her?

"Why the face?"

"I am so sorry. I did not mean to bring back memories. I was just trying to make conversation; I will shut up now" She said, and he couldn't help but chuckle.

"I think about him all the time, so you did not do anything wrong; and for conversation's sake, how about we play a game. It is silly but it helps us get a bit more familiar with each other." He suggested.

"What game is that?" she wasn't sure she liked where this was going but she asked anyway.

"20 questions. I ask you a question and you must answer, and I should answer whatever question you ask as well. We keep going that way..." He explained and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. It cannot be that bad, she thought.

"Are there any rules?" She asked just to be clear.

"No lies. Rather than tell a lie, go for 'I chose not to answer'." He said looking away from his mixing and at her for a moment.

"What is the catch for not answering?" She asked and he thought for a moment before responding.

"Person with the highest number of unanswered questions has to clean up and take out the trash." He said and she almost

opted out. She knew she would lose eventually. There was a lot she could not answer if he asked.

"I hate washing dishes," she said lazily.

"Then try to answer as truthfully and often as you can. You go first," he said as he continued to pour ingredients into the mix.

"Please go first. I hate starting things". She said and his subconscious mind took note of that. He just knew he was going to bring it up some day.

"Alright. It is not that serious, so please be free. What is your full name?" He said and she smiled. That was easy.

"Aviela Ifedoja Abraham," She replied.

"Hmmm... Permission to call you Avi?" Zamar asked.

"Granted. Your turn," She answered, trying her best to hide her excitement.

"Zamar Ademola Bankole," He answered simply. She smiled.

"What is with the smile?" He asked amused. He felt great seeing her smile.

"Nothing... I always thought you were a Hausa man or a Muslim" She commented, laughing softly.

"Why would you think that? Is it because of my first name?" He asked even though he knew that was the reason. He got that a lot while growing up.

"Yeah, it doesn't sound like English at all."

"That is because it is not English. It is Hebrew. It means 'To render Praise' or 'Make music accompanied by strings'," He explained with a wide smile. She could tell he liked his name a

lot whereas she on the other hand had no idea what her name meant, it never occurred to her to find out.

"Wow... Noted, permission to call you Zam?" She said trying to mimic the tone he had used when he asked and failing miserably at it.

"That makes me sound like bread topping, but, okay. It is your turn." She thought briefly about what she would ask.

"What do you do for a living?" She asked. She had always wanted to know. He was home way too often.

"Well, I am a psychiatrist." He answered and watched her expression closely. He did not want her to think that he thought of her as one of his patients especially because of how he first met her.

"Okay... Medical doctor, I was not expecting that. You have way too much time on your hands." She worked and overworked while she still had her job.

"Well, I am a freelance psychiatrist. I worked with a hospital in Canada for about three years, but I was not comfortable with the limitation of time that came along with being a full-time doctor, so I quit. Now, I travel from place to place depending on the location of my patient or client as my current patient likes to be called." She was quiet for a while trying to take that in. It explained a whole lot about his mannerisms and actions. Psychiatry... Nice.

"That explains why you are always home."

"No actually, I should be a lot busier as I should meet with him four times a week, but my patient is a little bit hard-headed. He never wanted the treatment, so getting him to

cooperate needs a lot of planning. He rarely answers my phone calls and without an appointment, it is impossible to see him." She hummed in understanding. That must be what he was stressed about yesterday.

"So, what do you do when you are not with him?" Aviola asked. Her inquisitive self was surfacing again; she cautioned herself for a start, so she did not get too comfortable with him.

"Well, besides from being a psychiatrist, I also happen to be a writer and an online counsellor. So, when I am not chasing after patients or baking cakes for beautiful women, I write and counsel people who cannot afford to have me come over," he said. She had noticed how he called her beautiful but decided not to comment for sanity's sake.

"That is so enviable. I used to be a Paediatrician until I lost my job after the owner decided he wanted his daughter there instead and since then, I've been here," she said flatly. Compared to him, she felt she had nothing.

"I hope you know that you still are a certified Paediatric doctor, you are just not working as one right now. They can take a job from you, but nobody can take away all those years you spent in medical school and all the effort you put into becoming the doctor you are. No one at all. That is yours to keep," Zamar finished, looking her straight in the eye. Aviola was short of words; she never really saw it that way until now.

"Do you have siblings?" Zamar asked.

"No, I am an only child. What about you?" She asked and he smiled softly.

"I have a younger sister, Isadora Bankole. Well, she is Isadora Banjo now."

"She stays in Canada too?"

"No. She lives in Nigeria. Lagos to be precise. My mum lives in Lagos as well."

"It must be great having a sibling," Aviela sighed, causing Zamar to laugh out loud.

"Oh! You have no idea. It has its good and bad especially with a sister like mine; she is so amazing and loving but damn! She can also be a serious torn in my flesh; thank God for marriage and motherhood that has made her calmer." Zamar said, shaking his head at the childhood memories that surfaced in his mind. Aviela and Zamar continued to throw questions at each other, the tempo of the questions slowly rising, Zamar being very intentional about his questions. He didn't want to scare her off but there was something he wanted to know. He went over a word of prayer; asking the spirit of God for wisdom on how to present the question.

"It is my turn, right?" Zamar asked while they were both seated. They had put the game on hold so they could finish making lunch and were currently eating. She nodded, as she sipped orange juice from her glass.

"Were you the playful kind of kid growing up or the reserved kind?" Zamar asked. Aviela was quiet as she did not know how to answer that; any question as about her childhood, she did not like to entertain; none.

"Can I choose not to answer?"

"You can, but I would like it if you did," He said. She looked at him trying to figure out why he was asking but his expression gave nothing away. He just stared at her, waiting for an answer.

"Why do you want to know?" She finally asked.

"I believe we are still on my question. You can ask why when it is your turn." Zamar said without taking his eyes off her. Aviela was reluctant to answer to avoid spilling what she did not want to let out but if she did not answer he would think of her as a coward and know that something was wrong; so as nonchalantly as she could, she looked at him.

"I was not careless, my dad... He did not... He did not like mistakes." She said and looked away; his eyes made her want to keep talking but she dared not do that. They were doing fine just talking and she did not have the heart to ruin something that could be the friendship she had been silently wanting, just because she could not keep her mouth shut.

"Okay. I was not very playful either but that was because I did not exactly have many friends. Jocks were preferred to the geeks in my days," Zamar said and she laughed at that because she could relate. Zamar no longer had his mind on the game. He had started putting dots and pieces together. He could not help it; it was something he had gotten used to due to his profession and it somehow found a way of slipping into his personal affairs too.

"Do you have any past relationships? Not just casual ones, an actual relationship," Aviela asked, and it was his turn to be uncomfortable. That was one part of him he had hidden so

well from the world. It had driven him to the brink of death and back.

"Yes. One" Zamar answered, distracting himself by cutting another piece of cake.

"That is so cute. Why did you guys end things?" She knew it was a personal question, but she still asked anyway. He had asked something she also considered personal, so it was only fair that he also answered.

"We did not, she died a few years back," he answered, feeling very uncomfortable as he felt the pang in his chest afresh. He suddenly did not want to play the game anymore. Not if he would have to keep talking about her.

"Okay, I think we have known enough about each other for one day," Aviela said and brought the game to a close, sensing the hurt in his voice. She had to stop asking about the people in his life. Aviela knew how much she and Zamar had in common in so little time; she wondered how he coped with his losses.

"Yeah..." He was glad they did not have to continue. He already had so much he wanted to talk to God about. He could feel the emotions starting to rise and he decided he had to leave.

"Avi... I may have to leave soon. I have to get back to work as it is getting late," He said, hoping she would not misunderstand his reason for wanting to leave.

"Yes, you should. Thank you for today." Aviela said and she meant it. It has been long she felt this engaged.

"It was nothing. See you tomorrow" He responded, getting up as she remembered she had not returned his clothes yet.

"Zamar, please wait. I was supposed to return something to you." She said, making a pause sign with her index finger. She hurried up the stairs and into her room grabbing the bag where she had kept his clothes and the brown parcel envelope Annie had left him; she had completely forgotten about that. She returned breathlessly to him.

"I need to start exercising again, I have been so unfit," she thought to herself.

"Here," she said, handing over everything to him. He knew the content of the bag but raised the envelope questioningly.

"Annie asked me to give you that. I forgot. I am sorry" Aviola said as Zamar opened the parcel. To say he was surprised was more than an understatement. He shut his eyes tightly and reopened them, blinking rapidly. Where did Annie get this? He took out his phone and called her immediately.

"Annie," he said as soon as she picked up.

"Yes, good evening," she answered.

"I just saw the book, Annie. Thank you so much." Zamar did not know how to express his gratitude.

"Please, do not start thinking I am a nice person. SOJ was the one who wanted to get you a book. All I did was suggest a title, but I will gladly take all the credit," she said, rushing out her words. Annie's husband, Adesoji had asked her to give him a book on his behalf to encourage him through this trying time.

"I will be sure to call him tonight," he said.

"Why are you now telling me? But on a serious note, are you coping fine? I know it has been years now, but it was around this time. I know how you must be feeling having to know that she is..." She did not get to finish her statement. There was underground murmuring for a few seconds before she spoke up again.

"Zamar, I have to go now. We will talk later. Say hi to Aviela, will you? Bye!" She did not wait for a response before hanging up. Zamar was a bundle of emotions. Annie was pure gold, and he was happy she had become part of his family. She was like the twin he did not have. Adesoji was one lucky man. Aviela was looking at him the whole time wondering why he was so happy over a book.

"You must love reading if you are this riled up over a book," Aviela commented; he completely forgot she was standing there.

"No... God has been taking me through a phase and this book just so happened to be extremely timely," he explained with a smile.

"You believe in God?" Aviela had not meant to ask to say that out loud but she did, and he gave her a look she considered strange.

"Yes, with all of me. You don't?" He asked.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. 'I mean, what kind of a God is absent when you desperately need him? I do not know if he exists or not and honestly, I don't care. A father that permits his children to suffer is not worthy of recognition." She said with so much disdain in her voice.

Zamar could remember the days when he uttered words like that daily. Oh, how wrong he came to realize he had been.

"I get your point," he said and turned to leave but could not; he sighed and faced her again.

"I cannot pretend to know your story because I honestly do not. But Aviela, one thing I have come to know above all else is that God is love and His fatherhood does not allow Him to continually watch His children suffer unjustly. If God could lead you to the house of a person you barely had a relationship with and moved everything that needed to be moved to make sure you did not lose your life as a result of an unintentional circumstance, I genuinely believe He is worthy of recognition. It is all about perspective, depends on how you choose to see it. Please take care of yourself. I will send you a message on WhatsApp later," He said and left. She could not help crying all over again.

"Why do I not know you in the way everybody describes...?" She whispered to herself, unable to take her mind off what Zamar had said. She figured she should stop feeling sorry for herself and focus on tidying up the house. After hours of just randomly cleaning, she finally settled on the couch to watch a movie. She decided on an action-thriller to keep her engaged but eventually fell asleep within the first ten minutes.

“C-04”

It was a quiet evening with the pair confined to the outhouse once again. It had rained almost all day, making the sky dark and gloomy. The weather was also relatively cold, but it was the perfect weather for Zamar. Contrary to popular opinion, that bright and sunny days made people feel good, Zamar was usually in a more concentrated mood when the glow of the sun was absent, and the day was overcast with a little extra cold or rain. The smell of wet dust always created a very earthy aura that completely relaxed him and allowed his diffused mode to find expression.

Zamar reached for the plate on his side and took another bite of his chocolate-covered doughnut as he simultaneously adjusted the dark brown stool he had his legs crossed on. From the black leather couch, he shifted his gaze and watched Aviola through his glasses as she ransacked his improvised kitchen for food. He had told her to give him some time to round off his work so he could help her out, but she was stubborn. They had been talking for almost three weeks now and Zamar could not believe how free she had become around him. She would wake up to a text from Zamar, sometimes lengthy, sometimes short. They would chat whenever they could chat, talk on the phone for as long as his time would permit about anything at all. The only clash they had were at times when he suggested that she started therapy. She trivialized it when he tried to do it with her and refused to see

another therapist. He did not want to pressure her, but he knew she needed this even though she seemed fine. He knew she could be better, and he wanted her to be much more than better. He wanted her to be whole again. He had not wanted something this badly in a long time. He watched as she struggled to bring down the mugs. He thought he may need to rearrange the kitchen utensils to accommodate her height.

"You know, it won't be funny when you finally break something with all your climbing," he commented and she shot him a glare.

"Why did you arrange everything so high up?" She questioned as she took down another mug and placed it on the kitchen slab. He decided to shut down his laptop to go help her before she got herself hurt. His thoughts materialized sooner than he thought as she lost her footing and fell off the stool, knocking the mugs off the slab as well.

"Aviela...!" Zamar shouted as he put his laptop aside and took long strides towards her. She quickly got up on her feet, backing up as he walked towards her.

"Did I not warn you about breaking those things? You only ever destroy things. How about I return the favour since that is what you want us to be doing in this house?" He looked at her with disgust as he pulled her towards him and hit her hard, her head snapping to the side from the impact. She knew it was just the beginning as she began to cry.

Zamar stood frozen, unsure of what exactly was happening.

"Open your eyes, Aviela" he demanded as he tried to convince himself that his thoughts were exaggerated. She

opened her eyes but could not meet his gaze. She was scared beyond imagination; the tears dropping more quickly than she could catch them.

"Why did you flinch?" he asked, trying not to raise his voice so she would not misinterpret his tone.

"I... I... I thought... you were g... going to... to..." She stammered.

"You thought I was about to hit you," he was not asking if he was correct but as a fact. He could not believe what was going on. Why would she assume he would ever hit her after all this time? He was just going to put off the cooker she was leaning against, so she did not hurt herself any further. She went down on her knees as she started to pick up the broken glass pieces; he caught her hand.

"Aviela, please stop this. What are you doing?" The words dried in his mouth when he noticed the slit marks on her wrist. He was sure it was not from when she overdosed. These were new; he could tell they were still very fresh. He grabbed her other wrist and as he suspected, there were marks on there as well. She immediately pulled on her sweater, looking everywhere else besides from him. The last thing she wanted to see was the look of disgust he probably had on his face; he would leave her just like the rest, she just knew he would.

So many thoughts ran through Zamar's mind it was hard to keep up. He pulled her up, helped her to the sofa and made her sit down. After tidying up the mug pieces, he returned with a glass of water for her as he took his seat next to her. Her cries had reduced to noiseless sobs. He did not know what to say.

He had no idea where to start from. It was quiet between them for well over 15 minutes; Aviela too ashamed to speak and Zamar trying to organize his thoughts so he did not say the wrong thing. He was treading a fine line and if God did not step in to help him handle the situation, he would mess it up for sure. He reached out and touched her as her head shot up in fear. He did not take back his hand. Instead, he intertwined it with hers and slowly pulled her towards him till she was resting most of her weight on him. He waited for her to relax and stop being so stiff.

"I want to tell you a story." He said barely above a whisper. He could not believe he was about to do this. He hardly ever let people see his pain, but he knew he was doing the right thing. He knew she was not going to reply so he gently continued speaking while he stroked her hair.

"I used to live in Nigeria till my dad died and we had to relocate to Canada. A few months into medical school, I met someone at a coffee shop. Her name was Sophia. She was Canadian but her mum had been from Nigeria. She was studying to become a librarian. I found it so strange but at the same time, it made me want to get to know her. She had almost everything I wanted in a woman and soon enough we became friends. She practically led me to Christ as she usually said she would not date nor get married to a man who was not a submitted lover of God. I had no intention of knowing Christ but if going to church once a week with her made her happy, then I decided it was a price worth paying. About a year later, I encountered the person called the Holy Spirit and I can

boldly say that was the most memorable day of my life. I used to think meeting this woman was the best thing that happened to me, but I realized I was wrong. Jesus was... Or is the best thing that ever happened to me." He looked at her to see if she was still listening and she was.

"Soon enough, we started dating and all was well. We did everything and went everywhere together even if the other was not physically there. A few years later, I graduated from medical school and all I could think about was asking her to marry me. I was so sure she was the one that I barely consulted my mentor or the Holy Spirit. She called me one afternoon and said she wanted to talk to me. I figured it was the perfect time to propose. We decided to meet that weekend and have dinner. Avi, I was so restless with excitement. She was the one, I just knew she was. The weekend came by and I planned a private dinner at my place because that was the venue she chose. She came over, looking as flawless as usual and we got dinner started. Somewhere in the middle of dinner, I got down on one knee and asked her to marry me. She was in tears but not for the reason I thought. She pulled me up and told me she could not marry me." He paused when he heard her gasp a little. She looked up at him and he was smiling like he wasn't telling his story.

"I was confused and angry all at once. I asked her to give me one good reason why she would not get married to me. Then she sat down and passed me a paper."

"This was the reason I wanted to talk to you, she had said to me without looking up."

"I took the paper and read its content. She had Leukaemia, a blood cancer." Zamar said and Aviola was the one who felt the need to comfort him now. He kept his head up as he spoke, afraid the tears would drop if he even looked at her right now.

"I was in shock. She was in tears. She had that report for over three months, and I didn't know about it. I was so busy writing and studying for a future with her that I was about to lose. I returned to my former position, repeating the words 'Marry me' to her again. She told me to stop playing with her. She said she was going to die, and I still wanted to get married to her, why? I took out the note I had written and read it to her. I was so 'in love'; it made me act without thinking. I acted as I felt was appropriate, but I knew I wanted to be with her through it. So, she agreed to get married to me. You could not imagine my joy. We prayed for her healing every day, and I tried to see her as often as I could. I suggested seeing a doctor and she refused, saying she was fine. She convinced me she was, and I did not doubt that she was." He paused and took a deep breath, composed himself and tried to put his emotions in check as he continued.

"One day, I went to her apartment to show her the tux Soji and I had picked out. The first place I looked was the kitchen and then the study room, but she wasn't in either. I rushed upstairs excitedly into her bedroom. I found the bathroom door ajar, and I genuinely wished I had not entered. My bride-to-be was sprawled on the bathroom floor, covered in blood. She had taken her own life. She chose to kill herself before cancer would." He finished, his voice wavering from time to

time. His hand came up to wipe the tears that had escaped. Aviela could only hold his hand tighter as she had her own fallen tears to wipe. She could feel the pain oozing from him.

"I hated and blamed myself for her death. The signs were there but I never noticed. I deluded into believing she was okay because she told me she was. I hated everybody who told me everything would be fine and that we all go through hard times at some point in our lives. She didn't escape my hate too. I hated her too for being selfish; she took her life without considering how I would cope. Avi, I was not doing well for a long time; she was everywhere. In my dreams, my house. It was like wherever I turned, I could feel her presence. I practically wandered around for well over a year, acting like a derailed person. I blocked everyone out till my mentor and Soji decided to help me get back up before I ended my life too at some point. I eventually rented out my apartment and moved in with Soji," he sighed.

"It was really hard for me. I felt betrayed by her and especially by God. I ~~blamed~~ him. I mean, how could He allow someone who loved him that much suffer the way she did? For a long time, I didn't understand. Years later, I realized He was around the corner, nudging me to notice it but I was carried away by myself. Unfortunately, when she eventually died, it was too much to handle. He waited for me though... He waited for me to realize that He was with me in my struggles, that I needed Him if I would stand any chance at recovery. I cried back to him to comfort and heal me; to forgive me because I felt my negligence and disobedience led to someone's

death. I begged him to give me another chance to make things right. I could not bring her back, but I could at least make sure no one else around me had to end up the same way. I decided that was what I wanted to spend my life doing; helping people break free from these psychological chains. I decided to major in psychiatry. You can imagine how I felt when I found you in Annie's house that day..." He paused, looking at her.

"Zamar, I am so sorry you had to go through all of that," Aviela said honestly. She was just starting to realize how her actions had affected others.

"I was going to decline the job in Nigeria when it came because I did not want to come here. It's been about five years since all of that happened, but Nigeria is home and home reminded me of her. I only came here because God asked me to and looking at you now, I think I am starting to see why." She just looked at him because she did not know what to say. She thought her life was rough but his own was something else. He moved away so he could face her.

"Avi, please stop hurting yourself. I do not know how but you have grown on me. You have grown on Annie; even Oxford is attached to you. You are not just living for yourself anymore. If anything happens to you, it happens to all of us. I know you can do this because if I can get back on my feet and put my life together again, you can do the same. It does not matter what the reason was, it is not over until it is over. Avi, please, you need to talk to someone about what happened to you."

"You?" Avi interjected.

"It doesn't have to be me, Avi. At best, please allow me to take you to a therapist. That way, you would not have to be worried. It is completely on a professional basis. You must do it for us. We want to see you back up on your feet. You have no idea how I feel knowing you are in so much pain on the inside and I am just watching you and doing nothing about it. Just one appointment and if you are uncomfortable, I promise, I will never take you back again," Zamar pleaded with her.

"Okay," she whispered but he caught it.

"Really... You are serious? You are not just being emotional? You would not change your mind tomorrow?" He said sitting up straight. He could not believe she was finally agreeing. They still disagreed on the issue two days ago.

"Yes, yes, no, no," She answered his questions respectively. He could almost hit the roof. Not just because she was agreeing but because he had just found a way of making progress with his patient as well.

"Aviela, you have no idea how great this is going to turn out. You would be so happy you agreed!" He said ruffling her hair.

"You've started again, Zam," she said, as the tension in the room started to ease out.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," he said returning to his laptop.

"Okay oh, I will see how you get me to see a therapist. Because when it is time, I will also have no idea what you are talking about," she said giving him looks. He thought she was a lot more like Annie when she was being playful. He would

have a very hard time dealing with them both when she is back to her true self. He looked forward to that.

"You would not do that. I know you would not," He said, and she made a face.

"You are proud," she said eyeing him with folded arms.

"It is not pride. I am confident in you." He said and she tried hard to hide her smile. How was she supposed to handle such an open affirmation?

"I am going to play with Oxford," she said and got up so she did not have to keep smiling unnecessarily.

"We should take him on a walk. He is probably dying to go out," Zamar said, putting his laptop aside.

"Whatever... If I do not have to be the one holding the leash. I have not recovered from the last walk yet," Aviela said from outside. Zamar chuckled and joined her outside after locking up the house. He felt great...Free.

Booking an appointment with a therapist was not a difficult task. Zamar had the first meeting fixed for a week after. He spoke to a former medical student who had been attached to him when he initially got to the teaching hospital. He gladly offered his assistance and referred him to one of the junior doctors in the psychiatric team at the hospital he worked at. She was currently one of the best in the hospital when it had to do with cases like Aviela's. They had talked about the meeting and he had convinced Aviela she was going to love the therapist.

He pulled into an empty parking spot in the hospital just as the reality hit her. She had been trying so hard to be strong because she did not want to cut Zamar's expectations short. He had been hyped about the whole therapy thing and she did not know how to tell him that she was afraid. Zamar put off the ignition and watched her quietly as she twisted her fingers in her laps and as small beads of sweat tickled down the side of her head. He hoped he was not letting his desire for her to take away his logical reasoning. He knew this was good for her, but he would never compel her to do anything she found uncomfortable. He reached out and held her shaky hands.

"You know it is very okay to be afraid. I need you to be courageous, though." He said softly.

"I am not courageous; I am scared out of my wits," she admitted.

"That is my point. Courage does not imply the absence of fear. It is about doing something even when you are scared out of your wits like right now. It is about facing and walking through your fears and that is exactly why we are doing this. Avi, I cannot guarantee you that this session is going to go great, but I just need you to be alive in the fact that you are giving it your best. Do you understand what I am saying to you?" He explained and she let his words sink in. She looked into his eyes and the sincerity that settled in them made her nod her head firmly.

"You would not leave?" She asked him, needing to know that someone she cared about was close by.

"I will be right outside the room. If you as much cough, I will be there. Trust me," Zamar reassured her, and she believed him.

"Let us get this over with then," she said and stepped out of the car, Zamar doing the same.

Zamar handled everything except where she had to do things personally. Soon enough they entered the doctor's office.

"Doctor Ada?" Zamar asked as he shook the doctor's hand. The woman was not exactly what he imagined her to be.

"Doctor Ada had to attend to official duties outside the hospital; I would be attending to her patients for the rest of the week. I am Doctor Rolake. Good afternoon." The woman greeted, taking her seat gracefully.

"This is Aviela, I presume? Doctor Ada has told me everything I need to know so please be free with me and we would have an amazing session." She said with a smile. Zamar did not like the fact that the doctor he had wanted to attend to Aviela was not the one currently seated in front of them. Aviela looked at him for confirmation and he nodded his head to reassure her. He was not so sure either, but she was a trained therapist, so it should not be a problem. He made sure everything was set before leaving them to go sit outside.

For over twenty minutes, the doctor tried to cajole Aviela into pouring out her heart, but it was to no avail. The moment she tried to speak, the memories resurfaced, and all her fears came back. She was panicking again.

"C-can Zamar co-come in pl-please?" Aviela requested.

"Miss Aviela, he cannot come in. This is a private session. If you cannot speak up with me, how do you intend to speak with two persons in the room? Just take a deep breath and speak; you can do it," The doctor urged although she was slowly losing her patience.

"I-I... When I w-was a little g-girl, I-I..." Aviela stammered. The doctor heaved a frustrated sigh as Aviela failed at another attempt to speak.

"Miss Aviela, if you were not ready for therapy, you should not have booked an appointment. We have just 2 hours for this session and you have spent almost half of it fidgeting." The doctor snapped, her voice rising with each sentence.

"I am sorry, I-I-I- do not know... I-" Aviela did not want to be alone with this woman anymore.

"Excuse me, miss! You are not the only patient I have a session with today! The earlier you get your act together, the faster..." She was cut short as the door was swung open. Aviela shot up from her seat and ran into Zamar's arms. She wanted to leave immediately.

"Thank God you are here Mr Zamar. Please make your friend understand..." She started but was interrupted by Zamar.

"No, you are the one who needs to be made to understand that you do not speak to anyone, much less your patient in that manner," He knew he really should not have allowed another doctor to attend to Aviela.

"Mr Zamar, she was not speaking and was wasting so much time, I had..." She started to complain, but he was not interested. He worked this job too, so she had no excuse.

"That is the price attached to your job! If it takes your patient three, four, five hours to be comfortable enough to talk, you wait! If it takes them 20 sessions, you wait for them! If they are not comfortable, you wait however long it takes for them to talk! You are a psychiatrist and that is your job! You wait on your patients!" He reprimanded loudly.

"If you were so great at therapy, why did you not do it yourself? You are not even a doctor and you are trying to teach me my job," she retorted.

"I trained your boss, Doctor Ada before he was certified a medical doctor. You can look me up on Google if you please. You are currently a waste of a medical degree and I suggest you consult the front-liners of this profession on what it means to be a doctor because it is obvious you have no idea why you are here. Have a good day." He snapped and pulled Aviela along with him, leaving the young doctor dumbfounded.

He made his duty to report her to her superiors. It was expedient that their doctors were properly trained on how to deal with uncooperative patients before leaving them to handle things on their own. He hated indiscipline and someone with such emotional instability should not be allowed in the psychiatric department for any reason.

The drive home was silent as Aviela could not bring herself to say a word to him. She had never seen him snap and seeing him put that doctor in her place, she could not help but feel

like it was her fault. She was scared that he was angry with her as well. She had promised him that she would cooperate with the doctor and all she did was cause trouble.

As soon as they got back home, Zamar went to his room without saying a word and Aviela was on the brink of shedding tears. She thought she would be able to go through with it, but she could not. She was pained especially because Zamar was mad at her. She always messed things up.

She went into her room and began to cry. She picked up her phone and dialled Annie's number.

"Ela... I love your spirit. I was just about to call you," Annie said chirpily.

"A-Annie..." she sobbed.

"Ela, what happened? Please talk to me. Did Zamar do something wrong? I swear I will kill him with my bare hands!" she threatened.

"No... no, he did not do anything wrong. It was me." Aviela went on to tell Annie everything that had happened at the hospital and about how she knew he was mad at her.

"Oh, I was scared. Is that why you are crying? Aviela, he is not angry... at least not with you. He was pissed off because of the doctor's behaviour but I can assure you he is not angry with." Annie said but Aviela was not convinced.

"Are you sure? He is not talking to me," she said sadly.

"I am sure, Ela. Who is he to be angry at a pretty woman like you? What type of profitless anger is that?" She said making Aviela laugh through her sobs.

"Do you want me to have a word with him?" Annie asked.

"No no... It would feel like I reported him. Please don't. I am sure everything will be fine again," Aviela said. The last thing she wanted was for Zamar to get the wrong idea about the whole thing. She decided she would apologize to him till he forgave her. She and Annie talked for about an hour more before Annie had to return to work. She started to walk towards the out- house to talk to him but when she got close enough, she heard his violin playing. She decided to go back. He was not in the mood to talk.

Evening came and Zamar decided to go over and see Aviela hoping that they could talk. He spent all afternoon praying in the bid to calm down and arrange his thoughts. He only came out when he knew it was right to. He found her outside feeding Oxford, and he stood and watched her for a while. She seemed fine. As if sensing his presence, she turned her head in his direction.

Aviela was surprised to see him standing there. She was not expecting that he would come out tonight at all.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she answered.

"I am sorry about this afternoon. I did not mean to lose my temper around you like that," he said, coming to join her on the grass.

"I thought you were mad at me for not going through with it," she said quietly.

"Of course not. I was not expecting that you would go there and spill out your heart just like that; that is not how therapy works. The doctor mismanaged the whole situation, and I did

not exactly make it any better. For that, I am very sorry. I promise you do not have to see her again. We would wait till Doctor Ada gets back. She was a top recommendation from my former student." He said hoping she had not given up on the idea of undergoing therapy.

"Zam...?"

"Yes?"

"I do not want therapy at the hospital anymore," She said, and his heart sank.

"The doctor was right about one thing." She said looking at him. "I don't need to go to the hospital when I live with a therapist." He looked at her, dissecting her every word. Was she saying what he thought she was saying?

"What are you trying to say?" He asked, not taking his eyes off her.

"Do it. Help me get better, Doctor Zamar. I will listen and obey you this time, I promise. No argument," Aviela said. To say that fireworks went off in Zamar's head would not vividly describe the elation he felt.

"Are you serious?" he asked for confirmation; she had better not be joking with him.

"Yes, doctor. I am," She verified.

"Oxford, you are a witness to this. There was no form of duress or pressure inferred on the patient. You were here." Zamar said, pointing his index finger and the dog barked in agreement.

"I am only doing this if you call me client as well. I also prefer that to be called a patient." She said and he laughed.

"Yes, ma'am. When do we start?" He asked.

"I am ready whenever you are," She shrugged.

"Give me tonight to draw out a plan and I will get back to you," he said unable to mask his smile.

"Your client awaits you," Aviela said. Zamar did not know exactly what made her decide this but he was not about to question it. His Thanksgiving List just got lengthier. He was finally starting to see light peeping through. He had so many things in mind already; he had to consciously calm himself down. If God gave him this opening on a platter of grace, he was not about to ruin it.

“C-05”

DEAR AVIELA,

Tommy Newberry wrote in one of his books, “Success is a planned outcome, not an accident”. This morning, I say these words to you. As you walk down those stairs and out into the compound this morning, I want you to know that you are not only coming out to talk to a therapist, but you are also welcoming the version of you that you desire to be.

For this cause, I arose even before the sun. You have no idea how confident I am in the fact that you are going to come out of this. You may not agree with me yet, but I admire the fact that you are strong, and I would continue to say it until the day you finally believe me. You can do this.

When I look at you, I do not see the circumstantial facts; I see the truth, your truth! And I want you to see yourself that way.

I believe as your psychiatrist; it is my job to inform you that we would need to touch the scariest parts of your past and the inevitable fact is that you would need to speak about and remember things you have buried deep inside of you.

But as your friend, I promise to be right by your side sticking closer than a brother would.

You are never alone.

We are in this together, till the very end.

Say it wrong, act it wrong, there is room for all of that. Sometimes you need to get it wrong to get it right, so do not be ashamed when it does not go perfectly the first time.

We have a goal, and we must make sure we achieve that goal.

I will be waiting outside for you, only come down when you are ready.

Remember, you can do it afraid.

I, Zamar Bankole believe in you.

You can do it because you are limitless!

Your friend,

-ZAMAR.

Aviela smiled hard as she read the WhatsApp text Zamar had sent her all over again. They had agreed to start therapy after he got back from church. She quickly had her bath and got dressed. All the while, she wondered if she was doing the right thing. She wanted to get better but what if she messes up and Zamar gets angry and refuses to help her anymore. She decided she was not going to stress about any of that and just go out to meet him.

Zamar was seated outside with his violin as he went over a part of the lyrics in his notes while he very patiently waited for Aviela to find the will to come down. He was up early, drawing out the simplest plans and praying again and again. He wanted this to go right. His heart leapt when he saw her walking towards him, although he maintained a professional look. He put his music notepad and violin aside and adjusted

his glasses as she took her seat opposite him. Aviela looked around, suppressing her smile at Zamar's attempt to rearrange the garden to serve their purpose. He had moved the table and chairs from the veranda to the offset patio in the garden; the patio umbrella doing a great job of shielding them from the sun. She wondered what the black files on the table were meant for. She knew he was going to be professional with this but aren't the multiple files, notes and table a little too much? He was even wearing dress shirt and pant trousers. She decided to just go with the flow; it was much better than being locked up in some doctor's office anyway.

"Good morning, Miss Aviela," he greeted. It had been so long she saw him act this seriously, she could almost laugh.

"Good morning, doctor. How was service today?" She asked trying to mask her nervousness.

"Blissful. Shall we start?" He asked opening the file that had her name written on it.

"Yes," she answered as she shifted in her seat trying to remind herself that it was still Zamar seated across from her even though he was fully in work mode.

"Alright Aviela, I am going to need you to be as truthful as you can be with me. I am not here to judge you; I am here to help you. There is little I can do, much of the work is yours. I can only help you as far as you let me. Do you understand what I am saying to you?" He asked, looking at her intently. As much as he would have liked to make this completely unofficial, he had to create a little bit of a serious atmosphere

or else she would play away from the entire session and they would end up with little or no progress at the end of the day.

"Yes, I do," Aviela said twisting her fingers. He noticed her nervousness and sighed.

"Is there something you would like to say?" He asked as he took off his glasses. She seemed to settle down a bit.

"If this does not work out... It would not affect our friendship. Would it?" She asked with so much uncertainty laced in her voice.

"Aviela, I am not friends with you just so I can add you to my list of accomplishments when you make it out of this. As much as I want you to be better, we are doing all of this for you, not for me. You are the centre of my focus. If you did not ever agree to therapy, I would still love you the same. So, please do not think negatively; I am not going anywhere." Zamar assured her and waited till she gave a response before he started.

"Alright. I have got a bunch of forms in here that you would have to fill. Please be honest in your answering them. I would not be requesting most of them; they are mostly for you to keep. The ones I would need, you would have your copy and I would have mine. With that said and done..." He handed over the black file to her.

"Tell me about you."

"There is nothing to know about me." She said looking everywhere.

"That is not true. There is more than enough to know, and I would like to know them. From start to finish. So, let us try that again," He said, and she took a deep breath.

"Okay, as a little girl..." She started but he cut her short.

"Hold on. I do not need to know about your childhood for now. I want to move from the known to the unknown. So, let's start from before you moved here. Go on, please." He urged and she felt she could relax now. She could still handle what he was asking now.

"Okay. Well, as you know, I lost my job. I used to be a... no, I used to work as a paediatric doctor before I resigned," she said. He smiled at how she corrected herself. She remembered; that was great.

She went on to tell him everything about her job, patients and her routine since she started working in the hospital. She went over how she met Annie and how she used to bark orders in the office even though she was shaking on the inside. She talked about how passionate she was about children and Zamar listened very attentively, noting down every important point. He watched as her eyes sparkled when she talked about the kids in the hospital. He could tell she loved her job. They carried on talking for well over two hours. He had originally planned a two-hour session but seeing her talk about her experiences in the hospital and with the children, he did not have the heart to tell her they had to stop. So, he closed his note pad knowing he had gotten what he needed for the day and joined in, sharing a few of his personal experiences with

children. He did not work with children often but whenever it was an extreme case, his service was employed.

"So, Doctor Zamar, how much am I supposed to pay for this and how do freelance psychiatrists get paid? Is it per hour or session or monthly?" Aviela asked and he chuckled.

"Well, that depends on the agreement between the parties. The client I am working with right now pays me per the hour whether her father agrees to come down for his sessions or not. I still get paid for the time I spend there." He explained and she looked shocked. Who pays per hour in this country?

"Wow... You must be swimming in money then. No wonder you wear those crazy designers and use those insanely expensive gadgets," she said.

"Do not be deceived. Freelancing has its downsides too. It is not always this rosy. I am just graced with this client. Sometimes I go six months without any job, and no job means no pay, so I must invest whatever I get from this job on business and rely on my other sources of income. These gadgets and every other thing I own were gifts, directly and indirectly. I like to call it the ministry of destiny helpers," he said and laughed. He owed everything he had to God and he did not dare take credit for any of it. He would always step aside and let God be glorified in his life because without Him, he was absolutely nothing.

"Okay... I am not even going to pretend that I understand any of that so let us just talk about my payment method. I am currently broke so I cannot afford to pay you per hour or

session, but I do have savings that can cover this too." Zamar could not believe she was serious about paying him.

"I do not need you to pay me, Aviela. If you want to pay me though, there is something else I would value more than money." He said and she raised a brow at him.

"What could be more valuable than money?"

"Come to church with me. Every Sunday till the end of your therapy sessions with me." He said and the smile on her face dried up immediately.

"I am not doing that, Zamar. Let us just stick to monetary payments," she replied in a clipped tone.

"Well, I do not need it, Aviela. I was not doing this with the expectation of receiving payment in return and if you insist on paying me, that is how I would like to be paid. I do not think that I have asked too much of you, have I?" He asked. She did not know what to reply. How could she explain how filthy she felt being on such holy ground?

"Zamar, please understand... I will do anything else." She tried to reason with him, but he just kept a straight face.

"I do not need anything else, Aviela. Think of it as you are providing me company," he insisted.

"But if I decide not to pay you, I do not have to go with you, do I?" She asked.

"No. I never mentioned being paid to you. You suggested it and I told you the price you would have to pay, that does not mean it is mandatory. Your sessions continue whether you agree or not." He explained. She hated how he never insisted because then she could not argue with him. He kept his eyes

on her, patiently waiting for her to decide. On his inside, he was pleading with all his heart that she says yes.

"I don't know, Zamar..." she stalled.

"Alright, let's do it this way. I have this word and worship conference coming up in church. It would run from this Thursday till Sunday. We both attend that and if after the service on Sunday, you still do not want to go to church, I will drop it and consider attending the conference with me as payment. Deal?" He asked and she thought about it for a while; she just had to make it through the week, and she was off.

"That seems fair. Okay, deal," she agreed, shaking his outstretched hand. Zamar's lip finally broke into a wide toothy grin.

"You are so sly. I have never seen a doctor blackmail his patient," she quipped shaking her head at him.

"I do not mean to brag, but I cannot exactly be resisted. There are levels to this thing," Zamar said, smirking as he leaned back into the chair.

"You do know what it means to brag, don't you? Because that is exactly what you are doing right now." She said imitating him. He just shrugged.

"I give up. What are we eating this afternoon, please? We have been seated here for hours," She complained tiredly.

"Anything is fine by me. I am not participating in the cooking though because I just finished working and I need rest." Zamar said, gathering his notes and violin.

"All you did was listen and take notes. I did most of the exercise, talking." She said tailing him as they went into the house.

"Do you know how much brain power it takes to effectively listen to you talk for over three hours and still take notes at the speed at which you were speaking whilst keeping my handwriting flawless?" He asked as he plopped down on the sofa.

"Are you indirectly calling me a talkative?" She questioned, tapping her right foot on the floor with her hands at both sides of her hip.

"All I said was not to judge my exhaustion. You implied the talkative part." He laid down on the sofa as he finished speaking. The fact that she agreed to the conference made him smile once again.

"Beautiful... 1-0" She was so going to get him back for that. She busied herself with lunch trying to fix something for them to eat whilst deciding Zamar was making dinner. She realized they had to go to the market soon. They were almost out of food.

"Zamar, do you still have food at your place?" She asked but did not get a response. He was probably using his earphones again. She made a mental note to ask him later as she imagined the things they would need to buy.

The next day, Aviela made a list of all the needed items and waited for Zamar to get back from work. It was already past 4 pm. He sent a text message about an hour later letting her know that he would not be able to accompany her to go

grocery shopping as he got delayed at work and would be returning much later. She huffed and wondered why she didn't go by herself already. She knew how busy he had been lately. She replied to his text, informing him it was not a problem and she should return before he did.

She took her grocery list and big shopping nylon as she said goodbye to Oxford and told him to keep watch over the house. She had started to love the dog and that creped her out.

She walked for a few minutes before finding a taxi that was headed in the direction of the market. While squeezed in the back seat with other passengers, she felt her phone vibrate indicating that someone was calling her. She tried to reach it but returned to her former position when the plus-size elderly woman gave her an irritated look. Times like this, she wished she had not sold her car; she wondered what was wrong with the woman.

Twenty minutes later, she arrived at the market. She hastened her footsteps noticing that some of the traders had started to disassemble their umbrellas and pack up their goods.

"At least, things would be cheaper," She thought, recalling how Annie always told her to wait till the closing hour before going into the market because the traders who did not want to take their goods back home would sell them at much cheaper prices. She quickly went over her list and tried to spot the closest item, cereals. Moving from place to place, she bargained and bought needed food items, falling into the temptation of buying things she didn't have on her list and probably didn't even need.

She was soon drawn by a scent she caught. Suddenly, she decided what they would be having for dinner. Following the aroma, she came to a stop behind a small crowd. Stretching as much as she could, she noticed the seller was male. She was surprised as she usually found women at all the spots she has ever bought bean cakes. Few minutes went by before she was finally able to squeeze her way through and make her order. She paid him and was waiting to collect her change when she felt someone pull on her shirt from behind. She defensively turned around assuming one of those local teenage boys who roamed about the market wearing ripped clothing and crazy hairstyles were about to pick her pocket. She relaxed a little when she saw it was just a child who was about 10 years of age. She dipped her hand into her pocket to give her some money but had a good look at her. She was not dressed like she needed financial assistance; the braces and shoes she wore and even the rim of her glasses looked expensive.

"Hello dear, do you need something?" She asked crouching down to the little girl's height. She wondered what was wrong.

"No... I thought... I... You look like my mummy. I thought you were my mummy." The child answered as she started sobbing.

"Where is your mummy, dear?" She asked, genuinely wanting to know.

"I... I do not know. We were in the car before... Then mummy left and Uncle Fred left without me." She said as she started to cry louder.

"They left without you?" Now she was concerned. "Stop crying, dear. We will find your mummy. I am sure she is looking for you too." Aviela said trying to console the crying child. She did not want people to misunderstand and think she was the one who made the child cry. People could be very quick to jump to a conclusion. She concluded that she would have to postpone the rest of her shopping seeing that she was almost through anyway.

After going around the market, Aviela began to feel dizzy. She was tired. She realized there was the possibility the child had wandered too far away from her mummy and their car but she did not know how to break the news to the poor child. She took out her phone and saw eight missed calls and three text messages from Zamar. She had completely forgotten to call him; she dialled his phone immediately.

"Zamar...?"

"Avi, thank God. Where are you? I have been trying to reach you for hours now" Zamar said. He had been so concerned about her.

"I am still at the market," she said.

"What?! Why?" He asked.

"I ran into a little problem and I think I need your help," Aviela answered looking down at the child who still had tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I will be there soon. Please, keep your phone with you." He said and hung up.

"Are you cold?" Aviela asked the little girl.

"Yes. Mummy is with my sweater. I put it in the car so I would not lose it." The child responded and Aviela pulled her closer to her side.

They waited for about 15 minutes with no sign of Zamar anywhere.

"Are we going to find my mummy?" She asked looking up at Aviela through her big, rimmed glasses.

"We will have to make sure you are safe first, dear. Then we would find mummy. It is dark already. We would come and look for her tomorrow morning but I'm sure she would find you first. So, please don't worry." She reassured the child.

"But I want to go to my mummy today. Mummy said not to go with strangers," She cried, taking her hand out of her grip. Aviela was going to speak again when her phone finally rang; It was Zamar. She gave him a description of where they were and soon enough, he pulled up in front of them. He had almost driven past them, wondering why she would be with a child. Turning off the ignition, he stepped out of the car. She briefly explained the situation of things to him and he hummed in understanding. He took a closer look at the little girl, wondering why she looked familiar.

"Hey, princess," he greeted, kneeling to meet her eyes. She sized him up through her glasses and did not reply.

"I know mummy said not to go anywhere with strangers, right?" He asked and she nodded. He could not believe he was about to play on a child's intelligence, but he needed to take them home where they would be safe. He had a very strong

feeling that he knew who she was but decided to confirm his suspicion.

"Well, how about we get to know each other then. That way, we would no longer be strangers but friends. I already see some things we have in common." He said, smiling softly. She looked at him and her lips formed an 'O'.

"We both have broken tooth and glasses!" She said, realization hitting her.

"Exactly... Mine is not broken though. It is called a tooth gap." He said lightly as the child looked through her eyelashes, clearly embarrassed.

"Another thing we have in common is that we both have names. My name is Zamar. What is your name?" He asked. She came a bit closer and leaned into his ear so Aviela would not hear, and then she whispered.

"Adeife... Oh, and I am going to be eight years old soon" She said smiling at their little secret.

Suddenly, the realization hit Zamar. He remembered why she looks familiar. He could not hide his surprise. He wondered how it was even possible that she was there. He shared his surprised look with Aviela who could not be any more clueless. Her exhaustion was making her think very slowly.

"Wow...I have only heard of such a beautiful name once in my life. Your mum must have known you would be this pretty to have given you such a name." He said and she suddenly remembered why she was sad.

"I did not find my mummy. I want to go home. Will you take me home, Uncle Zamar?" She asked hopefully.

"I would love to. Want to know something?" He asked and she nodded her head.

"I know who you are, and I know your mum and your grandpa too. Look here." He said pulling out his mobile phone and logging into his LinkedIn account. He searched out his client and opened her profile.

"This is your mum, right?" showing Adeife the picture... "I told you I knew who she was. I am your grandpa's friend as well." Zamar said giving the child space to assimilate his words who was looking at the picture and then back to Zamar. Aviela was finally on track as well, realizing the child was the granddaughter of Zamar's patient. "The world is indeed smaller than we think," she thought.

"Grandpa does not have any friends apart from me; he only smiles at me and shares his food with me," Adeife replied as if to mark her territory. Zamar put his hands up in surrender, he was not about to fight a child on matters of her own grandfather's affection. He squirts his eyes trying to tell the time on his wristwatch. It was getting late.

"Okay, I agree with you on that. Adeife, so here is what we are going to do. I am going to ask you to come with me because I like you and I don't want you to be here alone with so many other strangers. Do you agree?" He asked and she was quiet for a while. Aviela simply watched the two go back and forth. One would think Zamar had asked the little child on a date.

"Are we going to my mummy?" She asked again. Zamar sighed and shifted his weight to his other leg. He felt the wind get heavier and immediately knew it would start to rain soon.

"Not immediately because it is going to start raining soon and I do not want you to get cold from being outside too long. I am going to call your mum as soon as we get into the car and let her know you are with us so she can come to get you. You can talk to her as well. Is that fine by you?" Zamar asked. His offer seemed good enough to her plus she was not comfortable with the dust and dirt the wind was throwing at her.

"Pinky promise we are going to find my mummy?" Adeife asked.

"Yes, scout's honour" Zamar answered, raising his right hand a little above his head.

"What is a scout's honour?" She questioned.

"I will tell you all about it on the way. Would you like to seat in front beside me?" He asked trying to please her.

"No. Mummy said no front seats for me till I am twelve." She said and that made Aviela and Zamar smiled. Aviela particularly found it cute.

"Alright then, get in princess," Zamar said, holding out the back door for her as Aviela helped her get in. She was glad the child agreed. She could imagine how long she would have had to spend convincing her she was not a stranger. It had been so long she spoke to a child; she had almost forgotten what a handful they could be at times.

"Do I need to hold out the bigger princess' door as well?" Zamar asked and Aviela realized she had been standing there.

She laughed and got into the driver's seat after they decided she was in a better position to drive since it was dark and raining heavily. Zamar occupied the passenger's seat and answered all Adeife's questions while he helped wipe the windscreen so Aviela could see through the rain a lot better. Rain is usually lovely till you need to drive through it.

By the time they arrived at the house, Zamar had gotten on the phone with Mrs Adunni who was stuck at the airport in Jos due to the terrible weather. She was shocked to learn her daughter was missing and grateful to know she had been found by Zamar. He felt sorry for her, knowing the distressed state she must be in; she juggled so many responsibilities that he wondered how she coped. She had spoken to her daughter, reassuring her that she would be at the house as soon as she could. The line disconnected a few minutes into the call due to the terrible network but Adeife was understanding of her mother's situation and so obeyed her and did not throw any more tantrums. She thought for a moment and then pulled on the hem of Zamar's blue and black striped dress shirt that had gotten a bit rumpled from the hassle of the day.

"Uncle Zamar, I am hungry," She said lowly unsure whether it was okay to ask for food.

"I know, right? I am also starving." He said and they both looked at Aviela. Zamar scooted closer to the child and she brought her ear closer.

"You think the pretty lady over there would spare us some food if we asked her nicely?" He asked in a whisper looking

over at Aviela to smile. It was the child's turn to whisper an answer.

"I don't know... Maybe we should try?" She asked. Aviela found it funny how the child's whisper was so loud she could hear.

"Yeah... You should ask her. No one can say no to children. Especially beautiful girls like you." Adeife blushed at Zamar's words and came down from the sofa, walking carefully behind him as they joined Aviela in the kitchen.

"Hi... Aunty... I... We..." She said motioning her hand between her and Zamar, "we're wondering if you had some food. We promise we do not litter when we eat, and we would clean up afterwards as well. You don't have to worry about that," she finished. Aviela paused and smiled down at her; she wondered how anyone would even dream of saying no to that.

"What kind of food, darling?"

"Umm...The kind you eat? Like spaghetti?" She answered but it came out as a question as she wondered what she meant by 'what kind of food'. Zamar chuckled a bit at that. He watched them as they went over food choices and he smiled.

'I want a family just like this someday...' He thought unconsciously and shook his head rigorously when he realized what he had just thought. He wondered what was wrong with him. His phone beeped indicating he had a new message. He opened his WhatsApp to see the text was from Aviela.

"Is everything okay with her mum? You were on the phone for some time." Her text read. He sighed and began texting rapidly.

"Yes. She had been with her earlier today at the airport until she had to leave. The driver was supposed to take Adeife home and then return to run errands in one of her electronics stores in the market. Instead, he had taken her to the market, not wanting to make the journey twice and asked her to wait for him in the car only to return and not find her. Turns out he did not inform anyone for a long while, hoping he could find her on his own and concealed the matter to save himself." Zamar explained and watched as her face contorted in deep disapproval. She took a glance at Adeife who seemed engrossed in the phone tablet she had in her hands.

"I don't even know what to say. To be honest, I am not sure if I am more put off by his negligence or his irresponsibility; the child could have gotten into serious trouble or worse if she had not mistaken me for her mother." Aviola sent her reply and huffed in annoyance. If she could be this upset, she wondered how Mrs Adunni would have reacted to the news.

"I agree with you. Still on the matter though, Mrs Adunni is held up in Jos and would not be able to return tonight most likely. She was going to send someone, but I told her not to because it is still raining heavily and inconveniencing people at this time of the night was not necessary. I had to offer to let Adeife stay until tomorrow morning. I am so sorry for not asking your permission first; I hope it is okay though?" He inquired, looking up at her after sending the message.

"Of course, it's okay. I understand the situation. I can take care of her for one night." She texted back with a smile emoji. Zamar once again caught himself smiling a bit longer than

necessary and cleared his throat. He diverted his attention from her, drawing the black nylon on the table closer.

"What is in here?" He asked as he untied it.

"Oh! Bean cakes... I forgot they were there," She answered, and he looked up at her with a raised brow.

"Excuse me?"

"Bean cakes... You know... *Akara*," She said deciding to refer to it by its local name.

"Did you just call *Akara* bean cakes?" Zamar asked unable to ignore it.

"Is that not its English name or whatever it is called?" She asked as he put one into his mouth.

"Yeah, but who on this planet earth calls it that? You just murdered the joy of eating it. Bean cakes" He said mimicking her.

"I cannot believe you are still going to eat it. Do you know how long ago I bought it?" She asked taking out meat from the freezer.

"Nobody told me *Akara* comes with an expiry date," he replied sarcastically. "Even if it did, I am going to microwave all the spoilage organisms and still eat it." He said, going towards the microwave to do just as he had said.

"I seriously need to confirm the part of Canada you came from," Aviela said with a scrunched-up nose.

Adeife watched the two go back and forth at each other; she thought they reminded her of her parents. "Why do not you have a daughter like me yet?" She asked suddenly causing

Aviela to knock over the lid of the pot she was trying to take out.

"What?!" They both asked.

"I thought all married people have kids," she said still looking at them. Aviela looked at Zamar instinctively to find his gaze already on her. She felt her ears go hot with embarrassment. Zamar, through his shock, was still able to manage the awkwardness. He took his food out of the microwave and came to sit next to Adeife.

"Do you think we are married?" He asked her and she nodded her head firmly.

"Yes. You live together and you bicker a lot. Just like my mummy and my daddy," she explained and Aviela could not believe what she was hearing.

"Alright, princess. I hear you." Zamar said and ruffled her hair. Aviela wondered why Zamar did not directly clear the little girl's misconception about them living together and being married. She tried to focus her attention back on dinner, sieving out the water from the pasta and pouring it into the sauce. They chatted all through dinner and Aviela was happy the child was no longer sad. She had found herself watching the child intently from time to time. Zamar left some minutes after dinner, promising to help her find her parents the next day.

She was currently watching a cartoon with Adeife who had refused to go to bed.

"Aunty," She called to get her attention.

"Yes, dear?" She answered as Adeife came to snuggle into her on the sofa she was seated. The feeling of having a child who was not a patient in her arm was overwhelming but at the same time, it felt so natural.

"My mummy must be very worried about me, don't you think?" Adeife asked.

"Yes, I am sure she is but at least she knows you are safe. If you had not been with us, she definitely would have searched the whole world to find you." Aviela said genuinely.

"I miss my mummy," Adeife said quietly and for the first time, Aviela felt another kind of pain. It was not the selfish kind. It was the kind she felt when she thought about her life almost twenty years ago.

"I miss my mum too," She answered.

"Where is your mum?" Adeife asked, looking up at Aviela.

"Heaven. She's in heaven, dear."

"My mummy says heaven is where all the children of God go to wait for the rest of us and then we would all be together forever. So do not cry, Aunty," Adeife said, wiping the tears off Aviela's cheek. She did not realize a lone tear had slipped.

"I am glad I met you, Adeife." she whispered as she hugged the child closely.

"Will you tell me a story tonight? My mummy always tells me one," she said and Aviela nodded as her phone beeped; Zamar had called to check up on them before retiring to bed. Aviela tucked Adeife in laid beside her thinking of a story to tell. She settled for made-up tales as she did not have any

ready-made bedtime stories for the child who eventually slept off cuddled into Aviela.

Aviela was woken up the next morning by the blaring sound coming from her phone. It was Zamar calling.

"Zam... Good morning." She said sleepily, glancing at the wooden bedside clock to see it was 10 minutes past 6 am. She made sure the child remained asleep as she carefully slipped out of the bed, stepping out of the room to receive the call. He was at the door.

"I am sorry to have woken you." he apologized.

"Mrs Adunni is in town. She took the first flight back to Abuja and is on her way here as we speak. I told her everything was fine, and we would bring Adeife home, but she wanted to come here to thank you personally. I could not refuse. I hope that is okay?" He asked knowing Aviela was not very chirpy about having people over, especially to see her.

"Y-yeah... It is just to pick up her daughter. No big deal. I should probably go back inside because I do not want Adeife to wake up and not find me close. She should also eat before leaving, so..." Aviela trailed off noticing Zamar's smile.

"What?" She asked.

"Nothing... It's refreshing to see you being all motherly and concerned," he said and she blushed.

"That is not it...I am just... It is just that...I am just going to leave now...bye!" Aviela said and rushed back in, leaning against the door to calm her racing heart.

Roughly an hour later, Aviela could hear a car pulling in. She knew who it was.

"Guess who is here, Adeife," she said to the child who currently had milk smeared around her mouth and was stuffing her face with pancakes.

"Is it my mummy?" Adeife did not wait for an answer as she jumped off the dining chair and out the door she went, Aviela wiping her hands and going after her.

"Doctor Zamar, thank you so much. Honestly, you have..."

"It is my mummy!" Adeife squealed, jumping at her mother who caught her swiftly as if expecting her to do that.

"My darling," she greeted in return, kissing her all over her face.

"I missed you, mummy. We looked everywhere for you. You were hidden like my princess doll, but I am happy now," she said, tightly hugging her mother's neck.

"Well, Mrs Dunni, we are glad your daughter is alright. She is an amazing child." Zamar said and beckoned on Aviela to come closer. She came over to his side opening her mouth a little when she took in the appearance of the woman before her. Her daughter was right to have said they look alike. Maybe not alike in the real sense of it but the woman did resemble her a bit.

"Oh wow...this is weird," Dunni said looking at Aviela then at her daughter.

"I told you. You look like my mummy! Do you not think so, mummy?" She asked.

"Yeah...she does. I am so surprised." She answered as Aviela composed herself.

"Hi... My name is Aviela," she said, with her hand extended.

"Oh! Where are my manners? Please pardon me; I was a bit carried away. Adunni Williams. It is so nice to meet you. Thank you for helping my daughter," she said ignoring Aviela's hand and giving her a side hug instead.

"It was my pleasure. If anything, I am the one who should be thankful for the opportunity to have met such a bright child," Aviela answered, and they kept the appreciation going until they had to leave. Aviela had packed the rest of Adeife's food when she insisted on finishing it. They were all set and ready to leave.

"Thank you, Aunty Aviela. Thank you, Uncle Zam-Jam. I will call you, okay?" Adeife said, making Aviela fight the urge to laugh at the nickname the young girl had given Zamar.

"Scout's honour?" Zamar asked with one hand raised above his head.

"Scout's honour" She answered back, doing the same thing before he hugged her. She hugged Aviela too and whispered in her ear.

"I saw my mummy and I will pray to God so you can also see your mummy someday," She said, and they exchanged smiles as her mother watched the both of them, clueless. She just knew Adeife was going to spend their entire drive back home telling her everything that had happened since yesterday. They all said their goodbyes and the little girl left with her mother. Zamar and Aviela carried on into the house to continue breakfast. Aviela was suddenly void of excitement again but did not understand why. Zamar watched her movement and wondered what she was thinking about.

"What is on your mind, Aviela?" He asked taking a bite of his pancake.

"Is it possible to miss someone you barely even know? I feel like I miss her already. I am just being silly," she said taking her seat.

"It is good that we are being silly together because I miss her too. That girl is a vibe. Remember when she said we were married," Zamar said, and she laughed.

"You never cleared her misconception, though."

"Why bother? She had a picture in her head about marriage. What kind of person would I be to change that and ruin her fantasy?" He shrugged. She hummed as he stole the last pancake on her plate and ran out.

"I am going to work! Do not judge me. Fill out the rest of those forms before I get back," Zamar said over his shoulder and Aviela simply shook her head at his childishness. She was happy though and more strangely, she looked forward to tomorrow's session.

“C-06”

DEAR AVIELA,

Rise and shine for your light is come. It is a beautiful day and I just want to say good morning.

You can begin to imagine how proud I was of you when you made it through your first session. You may think we did not do much, but trust me, my notepad was full, and I do not pen down things that are not of utmost importance.

I look forward to our session today as we would be going a whole step deeper into your person. Do not worry, I promise you it will be fun. I completely cleared my schedule for you today.

Wear something nice when you come downstairs.

Should I say something?

I am very intentional about your growth.

I am very confident in the woman you would turn out to be after all of this.

So Aviel, even when it is hard, I plead with you to cooperate with me. I want to help you see yourself the way that I see you and most of all, the way God sees you; so please hang in there.

We do not give up just because it is hard; it is not a good enough excuse.

We do not stop because we are tired; we only stop when we have finished with the results.

You are more than a name on a piece of paper, more than even a medical degree, you are more!

I hope at the end of today and this week, you begin to see yourself in a new light because that is the goal of this week - finding who you truly are.

I expect to see you downstairs by 11 am but like I said last time, only come down when you are ready. I will wait, however long it takes.

Your friend,

- Zamar. A. Bankole.

Aviela had gotten used to waking up to text messages from Zamar. She knew she should not count it as a big deal, but she could not help it. The messages somehow encouraged her, even if it was a simple one-line text that said not to give up, it still meant a lot to her. She had gotten dressed but with no idea where they were going. She had chosen one of her sundresses. It was lavender coloured, cross-path A-line, bodice sleeveless dress with a wide neckline and thin shoulder strap. She paired them with her white, low heeled, ankle strap sandals which gave her a stylish yet comfortable look. She did not want to over dress and did not want to be underdressed at the same time. She styled her hair upwards in a tight bun letting the hair that was too short to be caught in the bun fall loosely at the sides of her face. She considered it luck that Zamar made her retouch it the previous day as he insisted she would 'destroy her amazing hair' if she did not take proper care of it. She smiled as she recalled the memory. She would

have had to use a wig otherwise. Applying make-up was the last thing she did before she went downstairs.

Zamar was seated in the car. He had left his door open and stretched one leg out on the gravelled floor as he waited with a book in hand. He was always excited whenever progress was being made, however little. He looked up from the book he was reading when he heard the door open. In a split second, he gave her a visual overlook and smiled as their eyes met.

"Good morning, doctor," She greeted with a shy smile; she had still not gotten used to his direct gaze.

"Would it be unprofessional if your therapist tells you that you look extremely beautiful this morning?" He asked, causing her to laugh nervously. Zamar cleared his throat and diverted his gaze after noticing the little smear of coloured lip gloss that fell out of line on her lip. He went over to the passenger's side to get her door.

"Why exactly is this funny to you?" He asked as he pulled out of the compound and into the street.

"The fact that you are teasing me so early in the morning... I know I do not look that great so there's no need to hype me" She said without looking at him. Zamar hummed and made a turn.

"Okay," He answered.

"Where are we going today?" She asked, changing the topic. She did not like when they had to talk about her so directly, it made her very self-conscious.

"You will see," he answered as she let out an exasperated sigh. She could no longer chat as her mind was reeling with

possible places they could be going. They arrived at their supposed destination. It was a building complex. She wondered if he wanted to purchase something first.

"Am I supposed to wait for you in the car?" She asked unsurely.

"No, come with me," he said as he grabbed her file, his notepad and a bag she had not noticed when she got into the car.

"What is in the bag?" She inquired, as Zamar pulled her toward him almost clumsily to help her escape a pothole.

"If you are going to wear white footwear during the rainy season; at least look where you are stepping." He said sarcastically with a smirk as he led her up to the 8th floor of the complex. It was a quiet room, and she was getting sweaty until he turned on the lights.

"Welcome, Aviela. This is where we would be having the first part of today's session." Zamar announced as he put the bag down and started to set everything up.

"We are having a photo shoot?" Aviela wondered, not realizing she had spoken out loud.

"Yes, ma'am" He answered. She noticed he had become official with her again. She took a good look around the brightly lit, black and orange themed studio as Zamar continued to scribble things down on the sheet of paper in Aviela's file.

"Firstly, let us go over one thing. Earlier today, I mentioned how beautiful you look. What was your response?"

He asked as she pulled one of the long stools to seat in front of him.

"Umm... I am not sure. Something about you not teasing me..." She answered as she wondered what exactly that had to do with her session. He opened the file again and read out the words.

"You said 'the fact that you are teasing me so early in the morning. I know I do not look that great so there is no need to hype me'," Zamar rose his brow asking her to prove him wrong. She laughed again.

"When did you even pen that down and how do you remember my exact words?"

"It is a crucial part of my job to be attentive and have a very retentive memory. More so, I have heard you make a lot of comments along that line," Zamar stated as Aviela continued to stare at him.

"Aviela, when a person compliments you, the proper response to give is a thank you. When you are complimented and you say it right to the person's face that he/she is teasing you, they would not be eager to do it again because you have indirectly judged their opinion untrue. So rather, reply with a thank you and try to return the compliment. It also shows that you are confident in yourself, which brings us to the next part of your statement," He said as he highlighted it on the paper.

"You said you know you do not look that great. Aviela, the world can never and will never see you beyond how you see yourself. If you see yourself as beautiful, that is what you would be and treated so by others; same as when you see

yourself as 'not that great'. You cannot expect people to treat and address you in a certain way if you cannot do it for yourself. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?" He asked and she rolled her eyes.

"I was only making jokes. Why are you making it into such a big deal?" Aviola said.

"This is my point; you are defending your insecurities again. You know you were not joking; you say it all the time. 'It is not for people like me', 'When I become pretty enough', 'I am not rich, I am barely surviving', 'I am not worthy of that kind of treatment' and so on; you go on and on about the things you do not deserve or the attributes you are not worth being associated with." He explained, gently bringing her to conscious awareness.

"I get your point now. I think that it is because sometimes it is hard for me to tell when the compliment is genuine, so I just automatically try to play safe." Aviola admitted.

"That should not matter to you. It is not your duty to decipher whether a person is being genuine or not. It only matters how God sees you and how you see yourself. Once that compliment aligns with the right way you see yourself, it should not matter, take it. A simple thank you and reciprocation does it all. Be confident in whom you are, and others will be too. It is one of the two things I hope we can achieve today; who are you? What defines you, and what forms your identity? You need to have the right answers to these questions at the fore front of your mind." He said and gave her a moment to let his words settle in.

"I will work on it, promise," she said, and he smiled at that.

"I know that you will," he answered, closing the file.

"When does the photographer get here?" She asked, already getting tired of waiting.

"You are looking at him," He bent to take out the camera and carefully placed it on the table.

"Oh!" that was all she could afford to say. Exactly how many things does he know how to do.

"Alright... I am going to be taking a few of your photographs and it is just us here, so please feel relaxed and let us make it enjoyable, okay?" Zamar said. Aviela looked around, then at the camera and finally at him before nodding slowly. Taking out his phone, he connected it to a speaker as loud music began to play.

"Why is the music so loud?" She screamed.

"It is supposed to absorb your nervousness. Just go with the flow." He said and positioned his camera as she got off the stool and gave a few random poses, laughing a few times as he made comments or took weird positions to capture her perfectly. It was probably one of the most self-awareness invoking things she had done that year, but she was strangely comfortable. They had taken a couple of pictures when he stepped back to pause the music. He studied the pictures and decided they could be much better.

"Let me see," Aviela said, coming to his side. He turned the camera the other way, blocking her view of the pictures.

"We are not done yet." He said and she sighed dramatically.

"What more is there to do?" She whined as he reached for his bag.

"I am going to ask you to do something I know you might not consider comfortable," Zamar said calmly as she eyed him suspiciously.

"I am not stripping," she joked but he did not find it funny.

"Please take off your make-up, Aviela." He said, reaching into his bag and taking out the packet of face wipes. He opened it and pulled one out firmly, causing her hand to instinctively go up to her cheek.

"Why would I need to do that?" She wanted to know.

"Aviela, do you trust me?" Zamar asked, looking straight into her eyes.

"Zamar, I do but..." She looked everywhere unable to keep holding his gaze.

"Do this for me. I am requesting it of you. Come to think of it, see as nature's calling to be a natural model." He cajoled and she snapped the wipes from him, sighing loudly. As neatly as she could, and with great caution in avoiding taking off the foundation on her neck, she wiped off layers and layers of cosmetics; taking wipe after wipe until she no longer saw dark colouration on the wipe. She thought if there was no reasonable purpose to his asking her to do this, she would kill him.

Zamar sat speechlessly. He knew about a lot of things, but makeup was not one of them; he could never understand it. He tried to keep his reaction in check because at that very moment it felt like he was seated before someone else.

Without the makeup, she looked a whole lot younger and more innocent. He studied her face unable to look away. He watched as faint scars and dark spots surfaced as the layers of the foundation came off.

"Well, what now?" Aviela asked after she had finally wiped her face with a damp handkerchief.

"Hello, my name is Zamar. Nice to meet you." He said and she chuckled.

"I do not look that different but nice to meet you too," she answered with a playful eye roll.

"Please, return to your former position behind the camera and smile as much as you can," Zamar said and changed the song on his phone. He captured every pose and every look till she ran out of ways to pose. He showed her a few poses, coming closer to perfect her stance occasionally.

A little after that, he had taught her how to go about taking a picture as she insisted on taking a few pictures of him too. He joined her and took the camera back; turning it the other way as they stood together and made funny faces at the camera. They kept going, just doing random things till it was time to leave.

"Is that all? Can I see them now?" Aviela asked impatiently. She tried to reach for the camera, but he was much taller than she was. So the more she stretched, the higher he lifted the camera in his hand.

"We are done with the studio session but not done for today. Let us just grab brunch and then go home. You can rest and then we would continue in the evening; you can see the

pictures then," he said, laughing as she sulked. He considered her cute, seeing her look so young. They packed up and decided to go into the mall on the ground floor of the complex to get snacks. While they ate, Zamar continued to take random pictures of her and then of them together. He was not exactly a fan of pictures but with her, he realized that he did not exactly mind it.

The car ride home was initially quiet, the only source of sound being the music playing until she had complained about his song choices, calling him a sadist.

"How does my loving solemn music translate to being a sadist?" Zamar asked as Aviela tried to find other songs on his phone. She finally settled on his Pentatonix playlist; at least she knew most of their songs and she would not fall asleep. They sang all the way home, deciding there was more joy in singing off-key. He made fun of her inability to maintain a particular key but still found her singing voice 'not detrimental to his hearing'.

Settled down on the couch that evening, they finally went over the pictures they had taken earlier.

"It is official; modelling is not my calling" Aviela declared.

"Well, maybe not but that does not change the fact that you are very beautiful, in every sense of that word," Zamar said, looking straight at her. She smiled and moved the picture on the screen, so it was not obvious how much his compliments affected her. She wondered how he found it so easy to openly compliment her.

"I can swear I killed these struts and poses in my mind," She said as they both laughed at how funny she looked in some of the pictures where she had tried to pose like a runway model.

"I am sure you did. Where is your phone? I will send them to you," he said. She handed it to him.

"Avi, I like this one," Zamar said, stopping at one of the photographs he had taken at the studio. It was a picture he took after she had taken her makeup off. She was laughing, her head tilted slightly to the side and the camera had captured her so up, close and personal, almost as close as a passport photograph.

"Why?" She asked, wondering what exactly he liked about it as it looked normal to her.

"I am not exactly sure; it just came out right. Your eyes, your smile, everything. I could get it framed, trust me." Zamar looked at it a little bit more before moving to the next.

"When did you even take this? I look like something is very wrong with me," Aviela commented laughing at how confused she looked in the picture; with her brows furrowed together, her lips slightly parted, one hand on her waist and the other behind her head.

"When you were trying to figure out which snack to buy," Zamar laughed at the memory.

"Oh yeah... Standing in a long isle of chocolate can be confusing especially when my current financial status does not permit me to dispense cash unless it is a complete necessity." She said and he shook his head at her. They both kept staring at the photograph till he spoke again.

"Avi, how did you feel taking these pictures today?" He asked.

"Can I tell you honestly?" She asked him in return, her tone a bit soberer now.

"Yes please, tell me," He encouraged, immediately sitting up straight rather than in the slouched position he previously assumed.

"I do not feel any different. I do not know if it is normal that I cannot tell if the therapy thing is helping or not. I know that is sad coming from a medical practitioner, but it is the truth about how I feel." Aviela admitted.

"Go on and tell me exactly how you feel, Avi." He pushed gently.

"This picture... It sums up my life." Aviela said, pointing at the very picture they had been laughing about just a few moments ago.

"How so...?" He asked, putting the laptop aside.

"Confused... Uncertain even. I am lost and no matter how much I try to tell myself that everything will be fine, I just know it is a lie. I look at myself in the mirror every morning and I cannot bring myself to believe this is what my life is now. I wear makeup hoping that my life would feel as flawless as my face looks but, in the end, nothing. It is all lies. I close my eyes and can hardly fall asleep and when I finally do, it is to be woken up a few minutes later by a nightmare or the feeling that someone was coming to harm me at some point. I cannot go a single day without thinking something bad would happen and even when I know you are home, Zam, it is not enough."

Aviela finished, surprised by her confession. She normally would never tell anyone how she felt. She waited for Zamar to say something as he was being too quiet. He sighed deeply, then turned to face her.

"I am not going to be a hypocrite and say that I completely know or understand how you feel, Aviela, but I can certainly tell you that I have been in a very similar position before and to make matters worse for me... I could not even wear makeup," He said and Aviela smiled at his attempted joke.

"My point is... We are human beings and sometimes when there is a pattern of negative happenings in our lives, it is an attribute in the humanity of man to be confused, angry, and depressed and so on but do you know what makes us so admirable?" He asked and she shook her head.

"It is the fact that no matter what pushed us down, no matter how broken we are, no matter how confusing our lives become, as long as we still breathe, we can always get back up on our feet. It is just a matter of choice. It is not always easy. I know that better than anybody else, but it can be done." He said as assuredly as he could.

"I cannot do it," she said as a tear slipped through her eye.

"Yes, you can, Avi. You can and you will. If I could do it, then you stand an even better chance." Zamar said holding her hands firmly.

"What if I fail?" She asked as the fear of failure was scarier to her than anything else.

"Then you try again. You try again and again and again till you get it right; do everything and anything to get your life

back in order. It doesn't matter how slowly the changes happen; it only matters that you are getting better. It may not seem like it right now, but you are making progress and you just must trust the process. Make a lot of mistakes in the process and learn but never believe the lie of the devil that you cannot do this. Do not entertain him in your mind at all. When he says you cannot do it, tell him that if there is life in your body, you can. It is not just about saying it, you must believe those words in your heart first. Be so strongly convinced you can rise again and only after you have won the battle over your mind can your journey to victory begin. The devil is powerless against you if he cannot gain access into your mind." He explained to her, hoping she understood what he was saying to her.

"Like how a virus is non-living except inside a living organism?" She asked and he chuckled.

"Yes, doc. He attaches and attacks through your fears and replicates negative and false thoughts in your mind. So, do not permit him, okay?"

"If you say so," she answered wiping her running nose. Maybe talking to him was not such a terrible idea. She had no way of knowing whether all he said was true, but she felt a lot better.

"I am glad we talked about this though," he said.

"Me too, I guess... Thank you for listening," she said with a smile.

"I am here for you. You have not forgotten about the conference, have you?" He asked and she rolled her eyes at him.

"You make it a point of duty to remind me every single time it crosses your mind. I cannot forget, no matter how much I want to," She said.

"You will enjoy it, trust me." He said but could not get her to agree with him.

"Yeah... Sure." She answered dryly and he sighed.

"What is it going to take to bring you to the Lord?" He asked, genuinely wanting to know. He had tried one too many times to minister to her but has been unsuccessful.

"I do not know. Zam. Your God would have to overtake me and knock me down to get to me because I would not come to him with my two legs willingly. I am going to keep running and guarding my heart against him because He is not trustworthy." She said, getting up to stretch her tired legs.

"I should get going now, it is quite late," he sighed heavily, taking her getting up as his cue to leave. He packed up his laptop just as his cell phone rang; it was his mother calling. They exchanged silent goodbyes so as not to disturb his phone conversation.

Alone in her bedroom and ready for bed, Aviela went over her day in her head, admitting to herself that she did have fun with Zamar at the studio. She took her phone and looked through the pictures again, stopping when she got to a photograph of them both. She stared at it longer than she intended to, returning her phone to its home page and turning

it off after realizing what she had been doing. She shook her head to clear her thoughts but could not shake off the thoughts of Zamar and the smile on her face no matter how much she tried.

"What is wrong with me?" She thought, after over twenty-five minutes of her mind wandering off-limits. She slapped herself on the cheek to call her thoughts back to the present, as she drew the covers over her head and forced herself to get some sleep.

‘C-07’

"Avi, would you please stop delaying, it is just church. Hurry up or we would arrive after the grace," Zamar called as he gently knocked her room door for the ninth time, trying to hurry her up.

"That is the point I am trying to make here..." Aviela said, finally opening the door to let him in.

"You have not even done anything, Aviela!" He said trying to gather his fallen jaw.

"Honestly, this is not my fault. I am telling you. It has been so long since I last went to church. I do not want to dress wrong." She said, and he could not hold his hands back from going through his hair, pulling at the strands in frustration.

"What do...? What do you mean by dress wrong? Can you not just choose something decent and wear?" He genuinely did not understand what was so hard about choosing a dress to wear.

"I have ten options to choose from" She stated and at that point, he just knew they would be very late. He looked over the laid-out clothes on the bed.

"Why can you not wear this one?" Zamar asked, pointing at a red coloured dress.

"Too short," she replied.

"This?" He asked, picking up a random dress from the chair.

"It is not an official meeting, Zamar," Aviela answered, rolling her eyes at his ignorance.

“Wear this then,” he said pointing at another random option.

“No, it is way too flashy. I would look over dressed,” she said, taking the yellow pleat dress and throwing it back into the wardrobe.

“How about this one...? It looks nice.” Zamar said calling her attention to the blue-black lace dress she had laid out on her white study chair. She paused and looked the dress over.

“I do not like the colour,” she said, giving a disgusted look.

“So why on earth did you buy it?” Zamar asked, genuinely confused.

“I liked it then. Right now, it looks so wrong,” she said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“I give up. I am just going to go wait in the car. Find something and please be ready in 10 minutes. I am begging you.” He said and left so she could get ready.

Ten minutes had passed, and she still had not come outside. He rubbed his temples in a bid to ease out his growing frustration. He hated being late; especially not to the church but he could not find it in him to complain since he was practically dragging her along with him. He knew she was doing all of this because she did not want to go, so he was determined to wait however long it took for her to get ready. He was pulled out of his thoughts when he heard the front door open. He kept his gaze on her till she was standing a few inches away.

“I thought you said you did not like the colour of the dress” He commented, noticing she was wearing the same dress she said she did not like.

“I did not have enough time to pick out something else since someone could not stop complaining about the time.” She said with an eye roll, going over to the passenger’s side of the vehicle.

“I think the dress suits you though. You look nice.” He said, complimenting her.

“Let us just go,” she said and diverted her attention to buckling her seat belt.

“Aviela, what did we say about compliments?” Zamar asked passing his left hand through his hair.

“I am sorry... Thank you. I think you look nice as well,” she said, correcting herself.

“You think?” He asked with a raised brow.

“Yes... I think,” Aviela answered back, stressing her words for emphasis.

“Beautiful... You win this round.” He said but she knew he was not offended because she noticed the small smile he was trying to hide. She did admit to herself that he looked very nice; smelt nice too. She had a thing for nice scents, and she could not ever ignore it even if she tried.

The drive to church was not one Aviela considered pleasant even though she and Zamar had spoken all through the journey. There was a pit forming in her stomach and the closer they got, the more uneasy she became. The thought of being in church almost frightened her. She did not know what the

exact reason was, but she just felt so out of place there. She had stopped attending church years ago after her mother had passed away. So having to be here today was not very exciting for her. She still did not know why she had not dismissed the idea as soon as Zamar brought it up. It was probably because she did not like to disappoint him even if it meant doing inconvenient things sometimes.

Walking into the church, Zamar greeted every person who crossed their path, stopping four times to talk to certain people and taking the opportunity to introduce Aviela to the people he spoke to.

“You just hurried me up for no reason; the service thing has not even started yet,” Aviela said, noticing that the choristers were just going up on stage.

“Are you joking with me right now? We are late by two and half hours. We already missed a major part of the whole thing,” he said with a hint of irritation that did not go unnoticed by Aviela.

“It is just church...” She murmured to herself, wondering why he was so affected by their being late.

She noticed the female usher smile at Zamar in acknowledgement as she directed them to where they could sit. She wondered just how many people he knew and why that usher was so deliberate about how she greeted him; like they had a more personal relationship. She diverted her gaze and brushed the thoughts that were starting to spring up.

“Please rise to your feet as we go begin to bless the name of our Lord.” The man holding the microphone said and the

church did as they were told, raising their voices in worship. Aviela watched as the young man communicated inaudibly to the instrumentalists and soon enough the church was chorusing songs of worship led by the worship leader.

All through, the worship session, Aviela had goose bumps all over that made her uncomfortable. She barely sang along as she did not know most of the wordings neither did she know what she was supposed to do or what position she was supposed to take. She noticed most of the people had left their seats and were either at the forefront, the back or were at the far end of their rows.

Zamar remained beside her but was crouched down in a bowing position. She could not help but think it would have been funny if he had been the only one kneeling on the ground for no reason but so many other people were in the same position which made her begin to wonder why, as she recalled that the minister had said “all rise to their feet,” not bow down or kneel.

Aviela's legs were getting tired from aimlessly standing. They had been at this for almost an hour; she knew because she did not stop checking the time. About ten minutes earlier, the minister who led them in worship had handed the microphone over to an older man who ushered them into prayer. She was tired but she could not sit; she considered it disrespectful to do so when everybody else was engaged.

She was thankful when the pastor had told them to pause the prayer for a while as he began to charge them. She

hesitated for a moment before crouching down for a second, so she could get Zamar's attention.

"I do not know what I am supposed to say or pray about. My feet are starting to hurt from standing so long," she admitted to him. He sighed and got up on his feet while trying to wipe away the sting from the sweat that had gotten into his eyes.

"Open your heart and listen to what he is saying," he said referring to the pastor. They took out their bibles as per the pastor's instruction and turned to Revelation chapter 2 and verses 2-5. She peeked into Zamar's bible as they read.

"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false.

You have persevered and have endured hardship for my name and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first.

Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."

The church listened as the pastor started to explicate the scriptures; Aviela not excluded. She wanted to know what it all meant. The pastor talked about the three major points of reference from the scripture: remembering, repentance and doing.

He talked about repentance, letting them know that it was beyond the admission of a fault but also a change in a person's

state of mind which was as a result of remembering the early days of their walk with God; where loving and trusting God was as simple as it could be. He urged them to return and begin to do the things they do with the genuine, selfless motivation they had when they did things in the past.

“Do you understand what he is saying?” Zamar asked noticing the look of confusion she had written all over her face.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I get it the way that these other people do,” Aviela said, referring to the people who were in tears and those who were already on their knees pouring out their hearts before the Father. She had a lot of questions she wanted to ask; questions that even Zamar did not have answers to.

“I understand, but please keep your heart and mind open. That is all I ask,” he said, and she nodded. She had no idea why she was even considering truth in any of these things; for all she knew, she did not even want to be here.

“We are coming back to the heart of worship, where it is all about you. It is all about you Jesus.

We are sorry Lord for the things we have made it when it is all about you Jesus” Loud screams erupted from various parts of the auditorium as the pastor instructed the choristers to sing those words as they prayed.

Soon enough, the room was filled with singing, weeping and groaning as men and women found their way back to true communion. When the song had been repeated enough times for Aviela to memorize, she began to quietly sing along with

them, seeing as she did not exactly have any reason to cry or scream; she just could not relate to any of it.

The service finally ended after an altar call had been made for those who wanted to begin a new life with God and those who were rededicating their lives to the Lord. Aviela did not spend an extra minute inside the church after the grace had been shared. She was exhausted to say the very least.

“So... I am not even going to ask if you liked the service. The expression on your face would take a whole night of good sleep to improve.” Zamar said, taking his eyes off the road to look at her briefly.

“It was not exactly terrible. The choir was good; I liked that. It is just the standing and the fact that I was majorly clueless that was tiring but I would be fine by morning.” she said, yawning loudly as she snuggled into her seat. He smiled at the fact that she at least liked a part of it, it was a good enough start and if she did not intentionally harden her heart, he was sure the conference would do her great good.

Arriving at the house, Zamar saw her to the front door, not bothering to go in. They said their goodnights and she locked the door; settling down on the sofa in the living room after deciding that it was too tiring to climb up the stairs.

She unconsciously hummed the song the choir had sung and even though she no longer recalled most of the lyrics, she continued to hum till she fell asleep.

As per the usual, Aviela found herself in the middle of another nightmare. After years of reliving the same nightmare,

one would think they would have gotten less disturbing but each time she woke up, a brand-new fear accompanied her.

She ran into the dark storeroom and locked the doors shut as soon as she overheard the news. She had gotten used to many of his strange demands and habits, but this was the limit.

“Ifedoja, open this door this instant or you will be sorry,” he growled from the other side, but she could not do as he had instructed. She knew that she would rather live in a store for the rest of her life than open the doors to him.

“Jesus... Jesus... Please... I know you are busy, but you have to help me this time or I really would not make it out today, please. If you are, then please save me” she cried, going over her pleas, a lit bit louder each time just in case the Lord had not heard her the previous time. She could hear the jiggling of keys and on instinct, her desperate cries became louder. The door opened and she backed away to the end of the room.

She waited for him to come in but was shocked to see another man instead. Her fears did not reduce still for she knew it was only a matter of time before he came in as well.

“Come with me Aviela,” the stranger said to her, opening a door she had never seen in this room before even though she had spent years tidying it up. She could not bring herself to ask questions; getting away from him was her topmost priority and so she let the stranger lead her to what she hoped was safety. She felt like she had been following this stranger for ever till they eventually came to an open field.

“You are safe now, Aviela,” the stranger said ever so calmly.

"How do you know my name?" Aviela questioned.

"It is engraved on the palm of my hand. From the very beginning, I have known you."

"I do not understand. Who are you and why did you help me?" she asked, trying to see through the blinding light.

"I helped you because you called for me." He answered and her eyes widened in realization. She stepped away from him instantly.

"Get away from me! I don't need you!" She cried.

"All these years, I begged for you to come. I cried night after night that you would save me, but you never came. You took my mum away from me and you took everything else away. What more do you want?" she said pouring out accusations at Him.

"Why do you call for me and then shut me out? I was unable to help you while you remained sufficient in yourself. The very instant you opened up your heart to allow me to help you, I came running to you; to save you." He said and she shook her head in disagreement.

"You are much too late... I am already broken... I am beyond repair," she said, signalling to her torn dress and tattered outlook.

"I am never late Aviela. I may not be on time, but I am always in time, always timely. Allow me to clean you up. Let me take away your burdens and give you new memories. Return to me, I have been waiting for you," he said, and she wept even more.

"The pain would not go away; the scars and wounds constantly remind me of my helplessness," she wailed.

"I am the one who heals you. Let me be the one to handle that. Hand over your every burden to me and let me care for you as I have been longing to. Return to me daughter; find rest in me," he said, and she looked up at him.

"I do not know how..." she admitted.

"Baruch haba b'Shem Adonai..." He answered, stretching out his hand toward her and then picking her up.

"I am dirty; you should not hold me so close." She said trying to resist him.

"I have been carrying you on my back since the day you were born, and I will keep carrying you even when you are old. I will keep bearing you when you are old and grey. I have done it and I will keep doing it; carrying you on my backing and saving you."

"Where are we going?" She asked as she felt her pain slowly slip away.

"Relax child, your light has come. Trust in me for I have a better plan for you." He said leading her to the river side where he laid her and let her drink from the waters until she was no longer thirsty.

C-08

Zamar looked up from his phone and at Aviela who was absentmindedly picking at her food. He wondered what was wrong with her that she had refused to talk about for over thirty minutes. She was fine when they returned the day before yesterday, but it was like she had woken up with an entirely different attitude; moody and angry. He had asked if he did something wrong multiple times only to be met with silence. He thought she was just in a bad mood till she outrightly refused to accompany him to church as early promised without a single word of explanation and then he knew there was something she wasn't telling him. He was not exactly worried, but he did want to know what exactly was going on.

"Avi..." He called twice but got no response from her.

"Aviela...!" He called sharply this time, shaking her as well. She snapped her head in his direction with sudden alertness, only relaxing when she realized there was no danger.

"Yes?" She answered.

"What is wrong?" He asked.

"Nothing... Why do you ask?" She had her eyes everywhere else apart from on him.

"Well for one, you have been stirring your food for over twenty minutes without actually eating it." He said, bringing her attention to the plate of rice in front of her that was starting to look like pudding.

"I don't have an appetite," she said, getting up from her seat. That was true though, food was the last thing on her mind now.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To do the dishes," she said, taking his plate along with her to the kitchen; Zamar following closely behind her.

"Exactly! You do not like to do the dishes and that is why I always do it; leave it." He said, but she ignored him and washed, taking more time than needed, cleaning random and unnecessary places repeatedly.

"Why would you not talk to me? We are supposed to be friends; friends do not hide things from each other, Avi," he said, leaning against the slab beside her.

"Are we not talking?" She asked, stepping away from him to arrange the dishes in the plate rack.

"Not like this... Aviela not like this," he said.

"Well, maybe I do not feel like talking to you or anybody else today." She said throwing the napkin on the slab and walking out of the kitchen back into the living room.

"That is what I want to know. What changed your mood so badly?" He asked, stepping in front of her so she could not walk away from him.

"Nothing," she answered, still not maintaining eye contact.

"Will you please let me in on what is going on with you? I am concerned about you!" He said, tilting her chin so she was looking at him.

"You do not have to be concerned, Zamar. I already told you there is nothing wrong," she said shifting her gaze.

"Well, I don't buy it... This is not you." He said lowering his height a little as he placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Aviela... Avi... Look at me. If there is something wrong, we can talk about it. I promise we can sort it out even if I was the one who wronged you. Just talk to me... I can... I can help you..." his words were interrupted when she suddenly pushed him away from her. He struggled to keep himself from falling as he starred back at her with wide, shocked eyes.

"I do not need your help! I do not need you to help me! I just want you to leave me alone!" She screamed at him, her body visibly shaking.

"Avi, I just..." He was interrupted again.

"You just what...? Do I look like a charity case to you? Why do you think I always need your help? I am not helpless, Zamar! I can take care of myself! I don't need you!" She yelled, her words leaving her mouth faster than she could process them.

"I never said you were helpless, Avi! I was just worried for my friend!" He yelled back being unable to control himself.

"Well, don't be worried for me, Zamar! You keep clinging to me like a leech! Do you not have work to do? Must you be around me all the time? Did I ask you to be here right now? Or did I tell you that I would not be able to survive if you were not here? What exactly makes you think you are so important to me or that I have to tell you everything that goes on in my life?" She fumed, her heart rate increasing by the moment.

"What are you even saying? What in God's name is wrong with you?" He snapped at her even though he had not meant for his tone to come out so harshly.

"I should be asking you that! What is wrong with you?! If you do not have anything valuable and profitable to do with your time, then get a hobby, Zamar and stop bugging me. Go! Go away from me! I don't want to see your face!" Her chest moved up and down rapidly as she vented out her anger on him.

"You do not have to say it twice. Sorry for the inconvenience. I can assure you it would never happen again, ma'am." He said, and stormed out of the house, leaving her standing there.

He was pissed, not totally because of what was said to him but because of the person who had said them. He felt angry but more than being angry, he felt confused and even more concerned. The Aviela he knew would never talk to anyone that way and as he sat on his bed, he fought the urge to go back and have her fight with him till she got tired and unburdened to him. He was restless as he went back and forth trying to figure out what was going on. After almost ten minutes of aimlessly walking pacing, he decided to go to church. He still had about three hours before service started but he decided he was not going to remain in the house with all the emotions at war on his inside. He took a shower and flipped through the clothes in his wardrobe, settling for his black jeans and navy-blue V-neck sweater. Combing his hair which had already been softened by the conditioner, he

compressed it and gave himself an overlook in the mirror. He packed his violin after deciding to return to his place with the other choristers. He had taken permission to be off choir duties after explaining to his music director the reason why he could not robe with them. He put on his black Chelsea boots and took his writing materials, his earphones and mobile phone with him and left home.

While in the car, he played '*Promises*' by Maverick City and turned the volume all the way up as he drove to church. He caught a glimpse of his phone's screen flashing to indicate he was getting a call. Looking at the Caller ID, he realized it was his mentor who has called him. He made a mental note to call him back after he had arrived; knowing whenever his mentor called more than once, it was going to be a long call. He focused his attention back on the road, trying to ignore thoughts of Aviela that were squeezing their way through to him.

Zamar headed straight to the main auditorium, where the choir was having their last-minute rehearsal. There was a joyful interruption as soon as he was spotted by his team members; they weren't expecting him so early. He took a good number of minutes to exchange pleasantries before remembering he had to return a call. He excused himself and went into the third overflow where it was quiet except for the few sanctuary workers who were tidying up. He called his mentor who answered on the first ring.

"Ademola, good afternoon. How are you?" he said.

"Good afternoon, sir. I am well. I trust everything is fine, sir?" he asked.

"Oh yes. I just wanted to find out how things were progressing." He said, causing Zamar to sigh.

"Well, things are not bad actually," Zamar answered, and his mentor hummed in response.

"Seeing as there is a draw back in the way you sound, I can assume things are not exactly rosy either. Is it work-related again?" He asked and Zamar sighed again, trying to ease out the vein he knew had popped out on his forehead.

"No, sir. Work has been great actually; my patient is being a lot more cooperative with me and although he is not saying anything as regards his past, he is not being stubborn and disengaged anymore and that is a lot of progress that I am grateful for." Zamar explained and his mentor went silent for a while making Zamar think the line had been reconnecting. He checked his data connection to see that the call was still ongoing.

"If it is not work-related, it is safe for me to assume it is the young woman then," He said knowing there was a solid chance he was right.

"Yes sir. Nothing serious happened; it was just a little argument," He said quietly.

"If a little argument has you this riled up and sighing every second, then it is probably a cause for concern," he said and Zamar took few seconds to sigh inaudibly again.

"No, sir. It is not the argument that bothers me, we would settle that. She is the one I am concerned about. Something is

wrong and she is refusing to talk about it. It is constantly ruining her mood and has changed her attitude so drastically; it is starting to bother me. Unfortunately, there is little I can do because she would not confide in me and she thinks I am being clingy just because I ask after her. I do not know what else to do," he admitted with a sigh as he felt like a child whining to his grandpa.

"Let me ask you a question, Ademola." His mentor said, making Zamar sit up straighter in his chair.

"Please, go ahead, sir," he urged.

"This woman... Aviela right...?" He asked for confirmation.

"Yes, sir."

"What do you feel towards her?" He asked making Zamar furrow his brows in confusion.

"I don't quite get your question, sir," He frowned.

"Do you love this woman? Do you have romantic feelings for her? Are you in love with her?" He said, relaying his question in multiple ways.

"No... No sir. What I feel towards Aviela is nothing romantic. Why do you ask, sir?" Zamar asked, wondering what was going through the old man's mind this time.

"No particular reason, son. I'm only trying to understand the situation better. Well, I suggest you give her time and give her space. If something is truly wrong, then stalking her is not going to help," he said.

"I am not stalking her..." He sighed then continued to speak. "I am just concerned. If it is something serious, I do not want her to hurt herself." He said, hoping he would be understood.

"Does this have anything to do with Sofia? Are you worried the same thing would happen to Aviela?" He asked.

"I know Aviela is not going to intentionally end her life. There is this hidden tenacity she has, and I have spent enough time with her to realize just how strong she is; she does not even see it as much as I try to show her." He said and his mentor hummed in response.

"Like I said... Give her time. Be around her but not all up in her space and business. That way, you are giving her enough personal space but also letting her know you are there for her. Do you understand me?" He asked.

"Yes, sir. I will do as you have said. Thank you, sir." Hearing what he knew all the while coming as an instruction from an authority in his life made it easier for him to do. They changed topics and went back to discussing the real reason why his mentor had called him in the first place. Almost forty-five minutes later, his mentor announced that he had to hang up and prepare for a counselling session.

Zamar slouched further into the chair as he lifted his head to stare at the ceiling absentmindedly. A few minutes later, the sound of his phone falling from his hand and to the floor made him jolt awake; he had been dozing. He picked it up and inspected it for any cracks, thankful that there was none. He checked the time and saw that it was about two hours before service started and so it did not make sense to nap now. He picked up his violin and decided to return to the main auditorium in case he was needed.

Aviela put down Oxford's plate of food as she let him out of his cage and helped him settle down on the grass, sitting next to him. She played with his fur, smoothing it to the back as she tried to get him to eat but he wouldn't budge.

"I guess you are mad at me too then, Oxford." She said but got no response.

"Do you think he would forgive me? I said some hurtful things to him earlier," she added and still got no reaction from him.

"I am sorry, and I do not know how to make him see that, Oxford. I was trying so hard to figure things out and I ended up treating him wrongly, but I promise you that I am sorry about everything..." She trailed off as a thought crossed her mind.

"Oxford, do you think he would like it if I attended the conference today? I know it is the final day but..." She was interrupted by his barks.

"Sometimes I feel that you like him more than you like me, you can be biased toward me, but I guess you're right on this one. I promised to attend with him, and I already bailed on him yesterday. I guess I'll go get ready then. Would you be fine by yourself?" She asked and he proceeded to eat the food he had initially rejected as if to answer her question.

"I trust you, boy. You are a big boss, aren't you?" Aviela cooed as she ruffled the fur behind his ears; that always got him to act like the happy puppy. She got up on her feet and drew his water bowl a little closer, so he did not have to

struggle to reach it. When she was sure he was fine, she went into the house to get ready.

Glancing at the wall clock in the living room, she noticed the time. She barely had an hour before service would start. She hurried up the stairs and into the bathroom to take a quick shower. If she was attending service to show she was sorry, she might as well not get there late. While she sought what to wear, she could not help as her thoughts drifted. The dream... Was it true or was it just her mind conjuring things? It could not have been that; she thought it felt too real. What had he meant by those last words He said? The fact that she did not know the meaning of His words put her on edge. Heck, she could not even remember exactly what the words were so how was she going to find out their meaning. She found herself hoping to have had another dream the following night where He would come and interpret His words to her. She had even openly requested it out loud before she slept but was greatly disappointed as nothing happened. She woke up feeling played and even more frustrated. She could not help it and Zamar was just there at the time to be the recipient of her frustration and anger. As her thoughts wandered to him, she remembered all she had said, and guilt washed over her.

She pushed her thoughts to the back of her mind and decided to hasten up. Not wasting any time in choosing her clothes, she pulled out a random dress and examined it. It was a faded blue, knee-length denim dress shirt that was longer at the back forming a fringe style. She decided it would have to

suffice as there was no time. She quickly combed her hair out after deciding not to pack it and added a left side part that made a part of her hair cover her face. She did her makeup and left it as simple as possible using lip-gloss instead of lipstick. Taking out her off-white sneakers, she quickly put them on, deciding on wearing a slim yellow belt with her dress. Stuffing a few needed items like money and lip-gloss into her yellow shoulder purse, she looked herself over in the mirror and decided she was good to go. She noticed it was almost 5 pm. She had exactly 14 minutes to get to church early which would only be possible if she found a cab as soon as she got out. She locked up and said goodbye to Oxford who was fishing for something in his cage. He had come out at the sound of the door closing but returned to what he was busy with when he knew it was not an intruder.

Aviela had to wait about seven minutes before she found a cab. She knew she was late already but at least she was not two hours late. As the vehicle came to a stop outside the church, she noticed several people had already arrived. As quickly as she could, she paid off the driver and made her way into the church while trying to keep her eyes open for Zamar. She was able to get a space on the ninth row, but she could still see the altar from where she sat.

Three women dressed in orange and multicoloured neck scarves climbed onto the altar accompanied by two men dressed in black and patterned neck ties. She figured they were choristers when they all took their places behind their respective microphones. Another man dressed in completely

different attire took the lead microphone and addressed the church.

"Good evening, church. We apologize for the delay. Can we please rise to our feet as service would be starting now?" He announced and the people did as they were asked and, in that time, she spotted him. She knew he was the one because he saw her as well. They held each other's gazes for a millisecond before Zamar broke eye contact and went up on stage with the other instrumentalists without any acknowledgement. She wondered if he had not seen her. She told herself it was probably because he did not know she would come, so it was okay for him not to have known she was the one.

Zamar had seen her, even if it was for a split second, but he was certain beyond doubt she was the one. A wide smile almost broke out on his lips but he succeeded in keeping a straight face. He did want to wonder why she came but chose not to; he was glad she was here. He felt a burst of fresh energy he did not know he was lacking and even his teammates noticed the extra giddiness. He brought his attention back to the minister who was leading the church in the opening prayer and joined in, praying in the Holy Ghost.

Just like the last time, Aviela found it difficult to actively participate in what was going on. She looked around from time to time, picked up her phone to check for nothing. She had ghosted out on most social media platforms so there was nothing she was looking for, but she needed an excuse to stop feeling so out of place.

She was quite grateful when the short man on the altar handed over the microphone to a young woman who looked about her age. She was taller and had a slimmer body build.

"Can we continue in worship as we welcome the Holy Spirit? It is an honour to be able to worship and it is beautiful how He recognizes the voice of every person present here. So, can you raise your incense of worship this evening? The Lord is here, and his manifest presence is mighty in this place. It does not matter what you came in here with tonight, it only matters that you are not leaving the same way." Aviela thought she had a strangely calming, almost sluggish way of speaking. She found herself unintentionally watching the lady's every move, catching her every word.

"There is a sweet anointing in the sanctuary.

There is a stillness in the atmosphere.

Oh, come lay down, the burdens you have carried.

For in this sanctuary, God is here..."The chorister sang and Aviela was not sure if it was her calming voice or the way she laughed whenever she sang the words 'He is here' that drew her in. She looked from side to side, standing on her tiptoes so she could see God come into the room. She looked for the blinding glorious light and angels holding swords of fire clearing the way for God to stroll in with majestic excellence. She wondered if she were the only person who could not see, hear or feel God walk into the room. Aviela looked back at the worship leader and was amazed at the conviction with which she sang; it made her wonder if God was really in the room or if the young woman was just a passionate singer. She

continued to watch her as she refused to raise another song, going over the same words again and again.

"God is here, I tell you He is here. He is here because of you and He is here because of me and He is not leaving until whatever is it that has held you down is lifted off you. Every yoke, every burden... Let it all down, surrender to him and lay it all at His feet for even in this very moment, there is an exchange going on." As she spoke, Aviela could not bring herself to look away from the screen where the words 'He is here' were written. Every word the chorister spoke seemed to re-echo in her ears; she wondered what was going on with her, but she could not bring herself to stop singing along. It was like it became a little bit truer each time she said it and deep down within her, she wanted those words to be true.

"It does not matter what your past is, He is here for you."

"It does not matter how deep you have gone in sin; He is here for you."

"The doctors told you there is no cure to your issue, yes but He is here for you."

"Listen to me. It does not matter how dirty or unworthy you think you are; He loves you irrespective and that love has brought Him here. Do you know the good thing? He loves you in your present mess, but His love will not allow Him to leave you there. He is bringing you out! He is carrying you out of sickness, poverty, stagnation, and depression. He is bringing you out! All you need to do is take his hand. Jesus speaking in Matthew 11 and verses 28-30:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." The gentle woman who had begun to minister was no longer there. Her tiny voice now held such an audacious and compelling force that caused Aviela to break down in tears. All her memories hit at once as she tightly held onto the chair in front of her to keep from falling.

"Come to the Father, your Father and find rest in Him. He has been calling you, He is still calling you. No one can come to Him unless he calls and draws them. Right here, right now... He is calling for you. The Bible says that blessed is the one who comes in the name of Adonai! So, stop trying to figure it out on your own because you cannot. Come in the name of the Lord! That is the only authorized way; in the name of the Lord!" She said as she went down on her knees on the altar, drenched in sweat that had gotten mixed with her tears. With one hand still holding unto the pulpit, and as she was led by the Spirit of the Most High, she sang:

"Baruch haba b'Shem Adonai

Blessed is he who comes

Baruch haba b'Shem Adonai

Who comes in the name of the Lord... "

There were unorganized sounds of cries and laughter from the church, Aviela not excluded this time around as she recognized those words. She was convinced they were the same words she had needed meaning to. Knowing what it

meant, coupled with how much she had heard the chorister say, she could not control the power that came over and overwhelmed her. She was everywhere, she did not know how to control her racing heart or the tears that poured from her eyes or the way her entire body shook from being unable to house whatever it was that was going inside her, so she did the only thing she thought of at the time; she ran. She ran so fast, she tripped on her foot twice, but she did not stop, she could not stop. She thought she would burst open if she did and so with no attention to the people who saw her, she ran outside the church. On getting to the open field outside the church, she ran into the hands of two ushers who tried to get her to calm down. It was a battle as she would not stop struggling against them to free herself.

"It is fine, Shola. Leave her with me and you both can continue with the others." Zamar said getting the ushers to back off. Aviela took it as an opening to keep running but Zamar held her down as she continued to scream and cry. He had seen her run off and instinctively ran after her, handing his violin to someone in the choir. He was not unfamiliar with situations like this, so he did not try to get her to stop. He just prevented her from running off while he prayed loudly in the Holy Ghost.

He was not sure if they had been there for hours or just minutes but for every single 'I need you, Lord' or 'Please, help me' she uttered, her struggles lessened until she was no longer fighting or screaming. They both knelt as Zamar stroked her back whilst she continued to clutch the cloth material around

her chest and weep. This went on for over twenty minutes and Zamar wondered if there was anything else that contributed to this. The one thing he knew was that she could not go back inside in this state, so he waited till she was completely calm and no longer crying before guiding her to the car and returning into the church to locate her things, noticing there was only a small purse. He signalled an usher and got her to help get his violin from the chorister he had given it to and his bag before proceeding to the parking lot.

The drive home was quiet just as he expected it would be but, on his inside, he was throwing a party with very loud music. He knew all that happened was beyond her recognizing her need for the Saviour, but he made up his mind not to speak a single word about it until she wanted to talk; just as his mentor had suggested. He briefly took his eyes off the road to look at her. He could not see her face since she was leaning her head against the window with her hair covering more than half her face.

Arriving at the house to the sound of Oxford's barking, Zamar parked the car and quickly stepped out to get him to quiet down. Aviela had fallen asleep at some point and with all the crying she had been doing, a migraine was assured if Oxford's barking woke her up. As quietly as he could, he unbuckled her seat belt and got her out of the car and into the house with Oxford following closely behind him.

"Stay," he instructed as he carried Aviela up the stairs looking over his shoulder to make sure Oxford had obeyed, smiling when he saw him going back and forth but not

following him. Good boy. He got Aviela to bed and was going to leave when she caught the hem of his sweatshirt.

"Thank you..." she whispered before turning over to the other side of the bed. He did not bother responding as he put on the air conditioning, taking one look around before shutting the door behind him and going over to his place to continue his work. He was supposed to continue his session with Aviela after church tomorrow and meet his client the day after, so he had a lot to put in place.

C-09

Zamar had just left the mall and was on his way home with a huge smile on his face. He could never lose his wonder of God. He played 'Wonder' by Amanda Cook as he felt the events of the past few days have been an answer to the song. He thought about Aviola and his job and he could not be more amazed at God's mercies. She had gotten ready for church on her yesterday and was even ready before him. She was still self-conscious and looking everywhere to see if she was doing it right and he remembered how he tapped her shoulder and whispered:

"You do not need to worship the way everybody else does, just let it come from your heart." She had smiled back at him and realigned herself. He noticed she had also downloaded a Bible app on her phone which he thought was very impressive on her part. Annie had video-called them that evening after Aviola told her about her experience. They had spent over an hour just talking randomly as Annie could not help all the questions that kept flying out of her mouth, but he could understand her excitement; he was probably even more excited. He was ready to help her through her journey with Christ; he was already thinking about all the heated sessions they would have praying in the Holy Ghost especially when Annie returns but he decided to calm down and take things to step by step. Sincerely, he was truly happy for her. His patient was doing well also, and he had even decided to pick up the

bits of his life he had once thrown away. He opened the gates and drove in, taking out the groceries after he had parked the car properly. He was greeted by Oxford who could perceive his favourite snack-beef jerky.

"As much as I would love to think you came over here to help out, you and I know it is about what is in the bag." He said, chuckling at Oxford's restlessness. He decided to end his jumping around and led him back to his cage, taking out his food bowl and pouring out all the beef in the bag.

"Annie would probably need to pay me for all the beef you have been consuming. In a few months, you would be impossible to lift." He said but got snubbed as Oxford had found a better use for his mouth.

"I thought I heard you drive in and was wondering what was delaying you," Aviela said, causing him to turn around and get up from his crouched position.

"As you can see, I was ambushed on my way into the house." He said, and she laughed.

"I can relate. Let me help you with the bags." She offered, but it was immediately rejected.

"No... no, it's okay. I can do it." He said, blocking her from reaching into the trunk.

"Did you not teach me to help out even if the other person is capable of doing it themselves?" She asked raising a brow.

"Using my words against me is not even going to work this time around. I am serious. I've got it." He said, and she sighed dramatically.

"I give up. Gentleman, do it yourself." She said and stepped away from the car giving him space to get all the bags out. She laughed hard at him when one of the bags dropped to the ground.

"So much for being able to do it yourself..." She mocked.

"You could just help me and not be proud about it," He said, waiting for her to help put the fallen items back into the bag.

"No. I do not feel like helping out anymore," She said, but still came back to help him out.

"Only God knows where all the nice women in this world went to." He murmured as he got the rest of the bags into the house.

"I heard that!" She said, narrowing her eyes at the back of his head.

"What was the point of me saying it if you would not hear it?" He said, looking over his shoulder to wink at her.

"Why would you take so long, anyway?" She asked as they started to sort out things to put in her kitchen and things he needed for his.

"I went to get a haircut," He said, and she gave him a once over.

"What exactly did you cut? This was the same way you left this house." She wondered.

"Well, it is levelled, and the edges are sharper," He defended.

"Congratulations."

"You are just mean." He said pushing the box of cornflakes towards her.

"I try my best," she said, playfully shrugging her shoulders. It was quiet for about twenty-five minutes except the random 'pass me this' and 'did you get that?'. Zamar had gone over to his place for another fifteen minutes before returning. He had the case for his glasses and his famous black notepad in hand. She exhaled slowly knowing that he would get serious anytime soon.

"I downloaded the songs you asked me to, and I have been listening to them." She said while he made himself comfortable on the floor, stretching his legs into the underneath of the centre table.

"That is good. Do you like them?" He asked even though he already knew the answer.

"Yes. They are very different from what I listen to, but I liked them still, a lot. I have been listening all day." She said, smiling widely. She lifted her phone which still had her earphones connected to it so he could see.

"We bless God. Just keep your heart open, it only gets better. In a few weeks, you would probably not give me a break with your obsession over Hillsong, Elevation Worship, Bethel Music and the likes," he said, and she wiggled her brows.

"I think I am well on my way. I was going to ask you to get me a Bluetooth speaker, but I forgot," she mentioned, looking into her bag of popcorn to see how much of it was left.

"I probably would not have gotten it because you would not stop constituting public nuisance with it. Oxford's barking is enough noise." He said, and she pulled hard on his hair.

"I am the one constituting public nuisance, right?" She asked and he shook his head while trying to soothe the ache at the centre of his head. He took that as his cue to get up from the floor and seat on the farthest chair away from her before he was left without any hair on his head. She just laughed.

"I wanted to talk to you about something though..." Zamar said, as he took out his glasses and wiped the lens before putting it on. She sat up straight since she had already been expecting this.

"I am listening," She said, trying to act composed and unaffected. Zamar smiled at the fact that she thought she could hide her nervousness.

"Just relax and stop fidgeting every time I take out my glasses. I only need them to read and write. Please turn on the bigger light, it is a slight struggle to see with this one." She did as she was asked before coming back to take her seat, legs folded on the couch as she waited for him to speak.

"Okay... Firstly, I cannot but commend your growth so far. You have been improving nicely, even beyond my expectations. You learn fast and even when it is hard, you try. You have encouraged even me with your resilience, and I just know it is going to get even better..." He started, fiddling with the cap of his pen.

"But...?" Aviela knew his commendations always had butts. He smiled as he continued speaking, proving her right.

"...but there is always room for improvement, which is why I think we need to have this discussion. You can think of

it as the next phase of your therapy." He said, opening his notepad.

"So, what exactly does this phase involve?" She said emphasizing on phase and making air quotes.

"Work..." He said simply and her guard of defence shot up.

"What kind of work?" She asked feigning ignorance.

"Aviela, please be serious. You know what I am talking about," he said.

"I am not completely prepared to go back out there. I need time to organize myself, there is so much I need to..." she started to rant but he knew she was going to do exactly that, and he had something in mind he knew she would like.

"If you continue to wait till you are completely ready, you are indirectly preparing to wait all your life," He interjected, dissolving her argument.

"I agree that losing your job so suddenly was a big hit and yes, it was not your fault; you were just a victim of circumstances. But Aviela, you cannot put the rest of your life on hold just because of something that happened months ago."

"You are an active woman, Aviela. I have watched you closely and I know you are not happy being here with nothing to do. I watch you get lost in your thoughts countless times. I see how you jump at the slightest opportunity to go to the market or get fuel for the generator. You need to get your life back. You are very brilliant and capable, and you are good at what you do too. Aviela, with the right mindset and right work, you can rise higher than before and this time, it would be intentional and with a sense of direction and purpose

because with the Holy Spirit at work in you, you can cover-up. Do you understand?" Zamar asked softly.

"Yes. I get it now that you put it this way but still, how do I start applying for jobs at this time? Do you know how difficult it is to get a job in this country? The hospital I worked at before was even overstaffed at the time, same with most of the other hospitals. The connections you need to even get past first screening is something else on its own," she ranted.

"I agree and that is why I am here, to help you. You do not have to go right back to working at a hospital just yet. You just need to be engaged again."

"I was never engaged, I have been single all my life." Aviela joked, showing him her left hand, which carried no ring.

"Would you like me to put a ring on it?" He said, wiggling his brows.

"Zamar...!" She exclaimed trying to hide the fact that she could feel her face heat up.

"Calm down princess, it was a joke. If I were going propose, I would have done better than that." He said chuckling as he circled something in his notepad.

"That was not even funny..." she grumbled and shifted in her chair.

"It was and you should have seen your face. Moreover, you started it." He said, still smiling.

"Just continue what you were saying about work," she said with a frown, wondering why he always found joy in putting her on the spot. To top it up, he was still laughing about it.

"Sorry. Alright, I kind of pulled some strings here and there. From our last session two days ago, I figured this might be good for you." He said and she became curious.

"You found me a job?" She asked, wondering just how crazy he was.

"I am not a magician; it is not a job exactly. I was talking to Mrs Adunni yesterday and..."

"Adeife's mum?" She quirked and he smiled.

"Yes. Anyway, she has a foundation for less privileged and disabled children, and I may have asked her yesterday if you could volunteer at the foundation for a while. Before you say anything, it is not forever. It is only supposed to engage... Keep you occupied until you get a proper job." He said trying to keep a straight face.

"What would I need to do?" She asked cautiously. She still had not bought the idea of having to work.

"Well, basically just help out with the kids. You have proper knowledge on handling children and your medical abilities could come in handy from time to time," he explained.

"When do I start?" She asked.

"Tomorrow..." He answered causing her eyes to widen.

"What?!" She shrieked.

"Relax, I was only pulling your legs. We agreed to have lunch on Thursday evening. if you agree to the proposal, she would be able to explain further and finalize the agreement. Is that okay?" He asked for certainty.

"Yeah, it is fine I guess."

"Amazing... I will call her to let her know you agreed. "

"Tell her to say hi to her daughter for me." She said looking at him through her lashes.

"I was expecting that. I will let her know you said hi. Please, pass me the bag I left at the dining table." He said and she lazily walked over to the table and picked up the bag, inspecting the packing before taking it over to him.

"Secret admirers already sending you gifts?" She asked, and he smiled lopsidedly.

"Are you jealous?" He asked in return and she rolled her eyes evading the question deciding he did not need to know her answer.

"Here," she said, handing him the bag.

"It is for you." He said simply and she furrowed her brows in confusion.

"What is in it?" She asked as she took her seat.

"See for yourself. I must leave now, it is almost 6 pm and I have work to do. Take care of yourself and lock up properly because Oxford has been sneaking into my place to sleep in the living room recently." He said with a frown. Having to clean up the mess he makes night after night was not funny.

"I will lock up properly. Goodnight in advance," she said, and he smiled.

"Bye," he said, leaving her to unwrap her present. As per her habit, she shook the box trying to determine its content but opened it when she could not figure it out. She removed the rest of the wrap and took off the top part of the box to reveal a black journal; she took out the journal that was lying on top of what she realized was a black medium-sized bible.

Flipping it the other way, she could make out the words he had put down in the sticky note attached to the box.

I pray that your new journey with and in Christ is as beautiful as the promises and mysteries that are hidden in the pages of His word. Welcome to true intimacy!

-Zamar.

She could not help the way her lips stretched in a wide smile as she flipped through the bible quickly, already eager to start her journey.

Thursday came quickly and lunch between the trio was what Aviela considered perfect. Mrs Adunni had given her proper details and had even shown her pictures of the children in the foundation, letting her in on the hospital that was recently completed but had not been officially opened for use yet. She was impressed to say the very least and looked forward to helping.

"I take it that you are not ready to leave yet seeing as Mrs Adunni left over ten minutes ago, and you do not even look prepared to get up from your seat," Zamar said, looking up from his phone.

"I was just thinking over everything we discussed. Moreover, it is not like we have anything to do at home. So, why rush?" She said, taking a long sip of orange juice.

"Speak for yourself, madam. I always have work to do, home or not." He said as his phone rang.

"Sorry, I have to take this. It is my mum." He said, excusing himself and moving a few meters away to receive the call. As

he listened, he kept his eyes on Aviela noticing the waiter who came over to her with a bottle of wine. He could not make out what they were saying but he lost his cool when the waiter passed her a note.

"Yes, maami. I am with you." He said, replying to his mum who noticed he was no longer paying attention to her. He looked around wondering who could have been trying to hit on Aviela. He found it annoying considering that they could probably tell she was not alone. Following the direction the waiter had pointed, Zamar's eyes landed on the man who had sent the wine and note. He was an elderly man in a cream coloured agbada who looked way into his sixties.

"Do these men have any shame?" He thought in annoyance as he watched the man walk over to their table, taking his seat opposite her. He shifted his gaze back to Aviela whom he noticed was visibly shaking.

"Maami, I am sorry. Please, let me call you back." He said, hanging up without waiting for a response. He walked over to the table as quickly as he could, his eyes not once leaving her.

"Aviela, what is wrong? What did he say to you?" He asked immediately he got to her.

"Young man, I was trying to have a conversation with the lady. You cannot just..."

"This woman is with me. Next time, be certain the woman you are sending gifts to is single." He answered sharply, shooting the older man a deadly glare. Aviela shot out of her seat and dashed out with Zamar going after her almost immediately. As soon as they were outside, he caught her arm.

"Aviela, hold on," he said trying to get her to calm down.

"Ho-home... I want to go home...T...take me home," she cried and he did exactly that, knowing this was the wrong place and time to be asking questions.

Zamar had barely packed the car properly when Aviela jumped out and ran into the house. He locked the gates and went in after her, locking out Oxford who had tried to come in after him.

"Aviela," He called but got no response. He looked at the stairs and decided to go up, knowing she would be in her bedroom. He called out her name again but still, she did not answer. He knew she was inside; her screams accompanied by the sound of items falling to the ground were evidence enough for him. He was concerned, the way she had been pinching at her skin was not something new to him.

Aviela could hear Zamar call out to her but she could not answer.

"God, why is this happening to me again? I already surrendered to you," she sobbed as she held the blade against her skin, unable to go on with her intention. It was once easy to find release but right now she was struggling. There was a strong conflict going on in her mind and amid that, Zamar's pleas for her not to do anything drastic.

"Aviela, come on, please. You are stronger than this. If you talk to me, I promise you would feel better; do not let the devil do this to you." He shouted, hoping she could hear him.

"I cannot," she sobbed. She wanted to believe him, but the pressing need was overwhelming her. With tears rolling down

her cheeks, she looked between the razor and the door. She knew she would not hurt herself if she let him in, but she had been so obedient to the voice in her head that assured her relief in the blade that the short distance between her and the door looked like a thousand miles.

"Lord, please help me. Please help me, I do not want to do this anymore; I know you can help." She cried. Between her tears and Zamar's words of encouragement, she felt the blade grow hot in her hands. It was all the push she needed as she threw it across the room and ran to the door, throwing it open to reveal Zamar who was sweating profusely. She crashed into him and cried as hard as she could.

"You won, Avi... You won. It's okay... You are safe," He continued to whisper to her even through his confusion. He led her to the bed and made her sit down, drawing the stool out and sitting opposite her, still holding her hand. He was grateful she had water on her bedside table as he did not want to leave her just to go get water downstairs. He got her to stop crying and only when she had visibly calmed down, did he start to inquire.

"Aviela, what did he say to you. Please, talk to me," he said but she shook her head profusely.

"I cannot... You will leave me too," she sobbed.

"Come on, Avi. You know that is not true. Please talk to me; you know you can tell me anything. I am not here as your psychiatrist but as your friend, I will listen and not judge you; you can trust me," Zamar gently pressed and he watched as she

opened her mouth a few times to speak, only to shut it right back.

"Tell me..." He urged a few more times till she finally found the courage to let him in.

"He raped me." She wailed and for a moment, Zamar was still. Of all the emotions, he could feel anger course through him but looking into her teary eyes, he knew he had to be wise and cautious.

"Tell me everything. I am right here for you; I will not leave you." He said and it was enough to break her walls down as she started to speak of an experience no other soul knew about.

"H... he is a friend of my father. My mum... She died when I was ten, leaving me with my dad. It was her birth anniversary; dad and I had planned a massive surprise, but on our way to dinner we were in an accident and my mum died. My dad was inconsolable; he resented me from that day onward saying I was a cruel reminder of what life had taken from him." She took a deep breath, then continued.

"He would physically and verbally abuse me every chance he got. He stopped paying my school fees and, in the end, I got kicked out of school just after my junior school. I did the chores and everything else perfectly, but I never made it past one night without getting beat up by him. At first, he would only hit me if he were under the influence of alcohol but subsequently, it was like seeing me broken was therapy for him." She cleared her throat and readjusted herself on her bed.

"A friend my dad made at the time, Mr Ahmed, would come over to drink with him. When they had both gotten drunk, my dad would make me dance for his friend who consistently body shamed me, calling me fat, ugly and undesirable. It was bearable until he started to touch me in ways, I did not find comfortable, but I did not dare open my mouth in protest; not with my dad in the room."

"One day, I overheard a conversation between them. Mr Ahmed had relayed his interest in relieving my dad of the burden of taking care of me. He talked about making me his fourth wife with my dad who agreed when the supposed bride price was too tempting to refuse. I was beyond mortified but I was helpless. I did not know much, but I knew that girls my age were not supposed to be married and even if they were, not to a man like him. A few days afterwards, he took me to his house after convincing my father to let me spend some time at his home. I cried to his house, but he assured me that he did not like the way my dad treated me and wanted to make life better for me. He said he did not intend to marry me but had to act because of my dad. He said he wanted me as his child. He said he would take me to school, and he would love me as his own. Though I knew deep down he was lying, I wanted to believe him, so I did."

"In the beginning, it was good. He treated me well just like he said he would. He spent every night in my bedroom but never laid a finger on me. I was even starting to get comfortable," Aviela paused and laughed in a way that raised fear in Zamar's heart. The tears on her face were gone and the

hatred that pooled in her sobs made her look like a completely different person and that frightened him. The volume of details she gave did not help the situation at all. It was like she was not even there in the room even though he could see her right in front of him.

"You know something? An intoxicated person never fakes. I know... I know this because that night, he came home really drunk. He said he had been with my father and he sends his regards. He put on some music and asked that I dance for him just like I used to, but I refused and said I was tired. He gave me his glass to drink but I declined, knowing what state alcohol puts people in. Eventually, he got tired of being nice and pulled me by my hair, bringing me to my knees as he revealed his true form. For the first time in a long while, I wished I were home receiving the usual beatings from my dad. He made me drink from his glass, drenching my nightdress with the remaining content of his bottle and commanded that I danced for him in my wheezing and coughing. He got up from his chair a few minutes later and came up to where I stood instructing that I should not stop dancing. I was terrified but I knew better than to disobey an instruction. I cried as I felt his hands on my body, as he took off my clothes, piece by piece, cried as he hit me when I stopped dancing to cover up myself. When he was bored of my dancing, he started to undress and I went straight to my knees, begging that he would let me go but my pleas fell on drunk, deaf ears. I was sexually assaulted and beaten till I passed out."

"Aviela, hold on..." Zamar said trying to get her to stop, he knew she had to stop, and he was not just pleading for her but for him too. The information he was receiving was too much for him to break down at the speed with which she was dissipating it but Aviela was not ready to listen. She knew if she did not let it out, she would never be free.

"A year passed, two years. Day and night, he would take advantage of me. He would beat me up sometimes or sexually and verbally abuse me. There was no stopping him; not until one day..." She said, holding on to Zamar's hand.

"Not until that day when I could not take it anymore, Zam. I was scared but I knew I could do it, so when he came in from the club that evening, I was ready. I got myself dressed up in one of the flimsy nightdresses he usually made me wear and I waited for him to come into my room. When he made me drink, I did. When he asked that I danced for him, I did... I did it so well, he even commended me. He came to me just like I knew he would but before he could have his way with me, I took the knife from underneath my pillow and jammed it into his sides and got as far away from him as possible. I did not look back as I ran out. I was scared, I thought I had killed him, so I had to leave or else I would get caught. I didn't even know he survived until today."

I...I did not plan to see him ever again. What if he is here to take me again? I don't want to go with him. I would rather die than go with him." She wept and Zamar could almost thank God she was crying again. He pulled her into a hug, as she fisted his shirt and cried even more. He went on and on,

assuring her that she was fine, and no one would harm her ever again.

"Don't cry, Aviela. All of that is in the past. You are in Christ now and you are new. New has no past because the old things have passed. I am here with you as well; I will protect you every moment of the day. I may not have known you then, but I do now, and I am right here for you; I am not leaving your side," he said, trying to comfort her.

"You should be disgusted with me," she said, shaking her head.

"Why? None of this was your fault and even if it was, Christ already forgave you and gave you a new life and a fresh opportunity just like he did for me. Aviela, I choose to see you the way He sees you. Do you understand?" He asked.

"Yes," she said, and he brought his hand up to wipe her tears.

"By God's grace, I am always here for you Aviela; no matter what." He assured.

"I want to ask you a question, Zam," she said, taking a deep breath and taking his silence as a go-ahead.

"Do you love me?" She asked and for some reason, Zamar knew it was not like the other times she had asked him this question. He remained quiet as he got up to return her water bottle to the table.

"I think you should get some rest, Avi," he said, trying to evade her question but she was not having it.

"Please, answer me, Zamar. I want to know," she practically pleaded as she got up from the bed to stand before him. Zamar

passed a hand through his hair, wondering why she wanted to know at this time.

"I don't know what you want me to say to you, Avi," he said, but she was not going to back down.

"I want... I want you to... to kiss me if you do," She said and all of Zamar's resolve weakened. He did not act on her words but did not outrightly refuse her either. Taking his silence to be consent, Aviela moved to close the distance between them. At that moment, Zamar realized the answer to her question, and the question his mentor had asked as well, but he had enough sense to keep his mouth shut. The last thing they both needed this time was his answer to her question. He knew she was just acting on her emotions and she would probably regret everything in less than twenty-four hours. As difficult as it was for him, he knew he had a duty to protect her honour; he could not be selfish and take advantage of her temporary weakness. Zamar gently stepped away in the same second their lips met.

"I am sorry, Aviela, but I think that you should rest now," he managed to say.

"But..." she started to protest.

"No, Avi. I want to but I really cannot do what you want me to. I am sorry. The day I answer your question, you must be independent of my answer. Avi, right now, you desire comfort in every way possible and you have very little control over your actions. In the end, I am the one responsible for whatever I allow happening right now. Heck, I cannot even hold you by the words you speak because of the current state

of your mind. I will answer your question someday because you asked, but today is not the day. So, please forgive me. The Holy Spirit is the one who can provide you with the level of comfort your heart yearns for, Avi.”

“It breaks me to see you this way and trust me, I would do anything to make you feel better but that does not include taking advantage of your vulnerability. This pain in your heart that has dug so deep and has made you feel empty, no level of physical intimacy will ever fill it; nobody can fill that void, not even me. We can get physical, but it would not help to provide you with any lasting comfort no matter what. The only one who can give you rest, and peace is your heavenly father and trust me, He is on it already. So, please find rest in his love.” He concluded as firmly as he could. The way her face fell made his heart ache as he fought with all his might, the urge to hold her again. He knew what he wanted but he also knew what he wanted was not appropriate, given the timing.

“I... I have a headache... I f...feel...” Aviela struggled to calm the storm that was brewing in her mind.

“Shhh... Just be quiet and relax. Stop talking and lie down, you have had enough for one day. Try to sleep. I will have dinner and medication ready by the time you wake up, so there is nothing for you to worry about.” Zamar said quietly, getting her into the duvet and tucking her in carefully. He fixed up the slightly messed up bedroom, pausing to ensure she fell asleep. He left without turning to look back at her, knowing he might not be able to leave if he did. Closing the door quietly behind him, he went down the stairs and to the

outhouse. He changed his clothes and decided he would go for a run. It had started to drizzle but he did not care; there were far bigger issues on his mind and the reality of his situation caused him to bend over slightly, placing both hands on his knees; he hoped with all his heart that the connections his subconscious was starting to make were false. With his face straight ahead, he muttered the words 'God help me' as he took off, running as fast as his body permitted.

“C-10”

"We are here! If human beings live in this house, let them both come out and take our bags!" Annie screamed, poking her head out of the car window as they pulled into the house.

"You are shouting, babe," Adesoji said, shaking his head at his overhyped wife. He watched as a lady came out of their house and instantly knew she was the Ela his wife would not stop talking about. Rather than listen to him, Annie's screams increased as she joyfully got out of the car. She met Aviela halfway and hugged her.

"Girl...! See as you are glowing." Aviela exclaimed, making Annie laugh as she flipped her newly made hair and gave her a twirl to flaunt her amazing nude coloured dress.

"I cannot help it. You see, when that man is around, this is exactly how you would always find me" Annie said as she pointed to her husband who took that as an opening to say hello.

"Good evening, Ela. I am the man in question, just in case you were wondering. My name is Adesoji, but most people just call me Soji or SOJ." He introduced himself, stretching forth his hand towards her.

"Welcome home, sir. Your wife has told me a lot about you, so it is a pleasure to finally meet you." She said, with a respectful smile, as she shook his outstretched hand. She was usually scared of men who had big body builds. She carried around the notion that one wrong move and they could break

her bones, but she concluded he was not like that since he made Annie smile this much.

"I bet she left nothing out. I have also seen so many pictures that I could recognize you in a large crowd. You see this wife of mine; she does not leave out any details." He said, and Aviela laughed because she could relate completely.

"Babe...! I did not show you that many pictures, maybe two or three," Annie defended.

"You are familiar with what she means when she says two or three, aren't you?" Soji asked Aviela who laughed.

"I am very familiar."

"I do not like this. You just met, and you are already picking on me. Where is Zamar?" Annie asked.

"He is not back from work yet," Aviela answered, and Annie hissed.

"There is no friend like Jesus in this world, I am telling you. Everybody is just fake; be making promises and breaking them," She trailed as she took her phone and dialled his number. Adesoji decided to offload their luggage knowing his wife was about to give Zamar an earful. Aviela helped him take in some of the bags with Annie coming in behind them.

"Honestly, I do not have words. Don't even come home again. This thing that you have done today, just know that it has been recorded in heaven and you will be questioned on the day of reckoning." Annie said and Zamar's laughter could be heard over the phone before Annie hung up, huffing a breath of annoyance.

Zamar arrived just as Aviela and Annie were setting the table.

"Your highness... It is with great honour that we receive you." Zamar greeted sarcastically as he went over to hug her even though that came with a pinch on his arm. He said hello to Aviela as well before taking off his jacket and shoes. He was glad they were back to how they used to be after two weeks of their feelings getting in the way and almost ruining everything. It took conscious hard work and sitting through days and weeks of awkward therapy sessions to get her to be comfortable around him again.

"I am sorry for being late; I had to pick up something from the supermarket." He said as he went to the zinc to wash his hand.

"Zamar...! Good to see you again, bro." Soji greeted, returning from the bedroom where he had gone to freshen up. They exchanged their bro hugs and talked in their boy code, using 'levels' and 'package' to code things. The women looked between themselves in confusion, but Annie went ahead to question them.

"What package and what level is he supposed to be 'reasoning'?" she asked her husband who shrugged his shoulder. She did not bother with Zamar knowing she would not get anything out of him, but she made up her mind that if her husband had secretly gotten the latest Play Station 5, she would lose it finally and give them all away to charity. They all got set to eat and Annie could not help the smile that graced her lips when Aviela led them in prayer.

"Amen," they all chorused when she was done.

"Sweetheart, answer these questions before you eat out of this food," Annie said, holding on to her husband's hand.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"Do you promise to love me till we take our last breath? Unconditionally and no matter the level of excellence other women possesses?" Annie asked, trying to keep a straight face. Soji looked puzzled for a moment.

"I thought I answered that question in church before your parents released you to me. I don't understand again." He said, truly confused.

"I know what I am saying. You see this food you are about to eat, right? It is that woman sitting beside your cousin that prepared it and let me tell you that no restaurant in the whole of Abuja can do any better. If you think I am making it up, ask Zamar." Annie said with a proud smile as Soji looked to Zamar for confirmation, not trusting his wife who had a gift of exaggeration.

"This time around, she is not hyping; Aviela cooks well," Zamar said, causing Aviela to smile. Soji took a spoon of his plate of the jollof rice and could instantly affirm that they spoke the truth.

"Firstly... To you, my woman, you remain my number one chef" He said, giving his wife a lingering peck on her cheek before looking up at Aviela.

"The testimonies are real. This is amazing. Well done, Aviela," he complimented.

"I am glad you like it, sir. Thank you" Aviela said, being unable to stop her blush from spreading. The four of them spent the rest of the afternoon talking and joking around. Soji had informed his wife that he would be spending the night at the outhouse with Zamar. He said they had business to discuss but she just knew that they would play games all night. She had no worries though as she thought it was a perfect time to get all the juicy details out of Aviela who was listening to Tasha Cobbs as she tidied the dishes.

"Now that we have the house to ourselves..." She started as soon as Aviela took her seat.

"I saw this coming," Aviela sighed delightfully.

"Whatever. Just start pouring out the entire gist you have been hiding because I could not see you, face to face," she said and Aviela chuckled.

"There is no gist. Everything is not so different from how you left it." Aviela said and turned on the television only to have Annie put it off.

"Sister, you are telling lies! Do you hear me? I say you lie! Everything is different, ma. From the secret glances you and my brother-in-law were throwing at each other to the passing of glass cups and brushing fingers; let us not even mention the fact that you were asking if he was satisfied with his food like he does not have hands to serve his food. I was snapping every scene with my eyes so you better start talking while it is only both of us before I bring it up in front of everybody tomorrow." Annie threatened and Aviela's eyes widened.

"No, no... Alright, wait... I will tell you but there is nothing much to say." Aviela knew she was not going to find a way out of this one, so she decided to just come clean.

"Start talking, I can hear," Annie said.

"I may have realized that I... you know... have feelings for Zamar and well, I might have asked him to... to kiss me..." Aviela confessed.

"Ela...!" Annie exclaimed, almost choking on the water she had in her mouth.

"Nothing happened! I promise you that nothing happened. I was not feeling well when I said it and we did not do anything, I promise" Aviela said, covering her face with a throw pillow as Annie leaned back in her seat to laugh at the news. She knew she would get back to meet something like this and she could not deny that it was another reason she was happy to leave them in the first place.

"So, I leave my house for just a little over three months and you both have been playing hide and seek? Interesting!" Annie said, stretching her legs forward and resting them on Aviela's thighs.

"No... It is nothing like that. He does not even feel the same way..." Aviela defended.

"Is that what he said?" Annie asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

"No, but..."

"So, you are simply assuming you know his mind when in fact you do not," Annie said, almost frustrated at the fact that they were both completely blind to what was obvious to the rest of the world.

"No... that is not what I am trying to say. Annie, why are you doing this to me today? I got a job, and you did not even ask about that." Aviela said, trying to guilt-trip Annie into changing the topic.

"You cannot deceive me. If I am changing the topic, it is because I trust my husband to be drilling every bit of information there is to know out of Zamar at this very moment." Annie said, eyeing her playfully.

"Thank you," Aviela said, relief washing over her.

"So, tell me about the job again, all I can remember is the opening of the Health Centre you spoke about," Annie decided to change the topic rather than continue to torment the poor woman.

"Oh... The opening is next weekend, by the way," Aviela said.

"Trust me, I did not forget... I already made Soji buy our dresses before he came into the country. If you do not even like them, we would go shopping again. All I know is that somebody's son will see you and go on retreat afterwards to know what God is saying." Annie said, and Aviela wanted nothing more than to glue Annie's mouth shut.

"Annie, please stop it! I am begging you... Help a sister," she begged, and Annie laughed.

"I just wanted to say that last one. I will stop, I promise." She said, raising her hands in surrender. They continued to chat randomly, Annie breaking her promise to stop teasing her more times than necessary. Eventually, they slept off in the

middle of the movie they were seeing in the early hours of the morning.

The following day, they streamed service online as they had all woken up late and would have gotten to church late; they decided it was better to save the time and just follow online. It was around noon when Soji suggested they went out since it was getting rather uneventful in the house. After few deliberations, they settled on spending the afternoon at the lake side at Jabi. It was an amazing place to spend the afternoon unless it rained. The grassland by the side of the lake provided an awesome spot for picnics, birthdays and sometimes marriage proposals. They had just gotten off the speedboat when the men decided they were hungry again.

"You guys should just chill. My baby and I would see what we can get from the mall very quickly." Annie said, pulling on Soji's hand to help him up.

"I could come with you instead," Aviela offered but was turned down instantly.

"Madam, sit down, please. Are you my husband? Did I not see you before calling him? We would not be long. So just talk and do other things," Annie said, wiggling her brows at Aviela who wanted nothing more than to strangle her right there and then. Soji simply laughed at what his wife was trying to do and accompanied her to the mall.

"That couldn't have been more obvious," Zamar said, laughing as he got up on his feet and dusted the grass on his jeans.

"I am telling you. Where are you going, though?" Aviela asked, noticing how he looked extra tall from where she sat.

"I am going to take a stroll. You should come with me," he said, and she got up on her feet.

"What about SOJ and Annie? They said they would not be long," she pointed out and he chuckled.

"When those two are together, trust me they would use all of the time on this earth. They barely see each other more than four times a year, so they take maximum advantage of every alone time they get to spend with each other," Zamar explained.

"They are very accommodating letting us stay with them. I do need to start working towards a new place though, no matter how small. I do not want to be here longer than necessary." Aviela said, and Zamar nodded his head in understanding.

"I agree. It is the right thing to do. Just make sure you are stabilized first and do not put yourself under unnecessary pressure, okay?" He advised.

"Yes sir," she said, saluting him. They walked for a while in comfortable silence before Zamar decided to break it.

"So Aviela... What is your story?" He asked and she looked up at him confused.

"You know my story, past and present," Aviela said, but Zamar shook his head.

"I only know half the past. I want to know the other half. What happened afterwards?" Zamar asked and she took a deep breath. She noticed how it was not a terrible thing for

someone to bring up her past anymore. She did not exactly jump for joy at the mention of it, but it no longer scared her to talk about it, at least to him.

"Well, there was not much after that. I ran away and for about 2 days, I wandered the streets of Sagamu, not knowing what I wanted to do. There was a woman though; she ran a food business, and I never went too far away from her restaurant. No matter how far I walked, I never made any turns so I could always find my way back to her shop." Aviela said, with a distant look on her face.

"To eat...?" He asked and she nodded in affirmation.

"Yes. She was the only one who gave me food for free once every day because I did not exactly have any money. I usually watched people come in and eat to their heart's content because they had money. So, one day, I asked her for a job, but she said she needed my parent's permission to give me one. I told her I did not have any parents, but I wanted to be able to eat a lot like her other customers; she said no. So, every day, I would come in the morning and have breakfast, then gather all the used dishes along with mine and ask to be allowed to wash them. She eventually let me be when she figured I was not going to stop doing it anyway and I did help her gain a few extra money from the customers who always gave me tips for my activeness. When they had all left, I would spend the night by her shop and wake up before anyone arrived the next morning. I did that for about a month before she eventually caught me, wondering how I got to work before everybody else. She was not angry though, surprisingly. Rather, she let

me live with her and her two sons who were already way into their teenage years."

"That was an unusual thing to happen in this world we live in. People hardly do things out of pure compassion," Zamar commented.

"That was not even all she did, trust me. One Christmas, after we had dinner, I said to her I wanted to go to school. She laughed hard at me but eventually realized I was serious about it. Both her sons dropped out of secondary school, so she found it strange that I wanted to study. I explained that I would still complete all my work and she did not need to give me anything else other than send me to school. I wanted to return to my old school but when she found out how much my former school charged for fees alone, she almost had a heart attack. She said she could only afford to send me to the public school close to the house and I reluctantly agreed. We went on that way till I finished secondary school and my grades encouraged her and me to request that she send me to the university too. That took time before she agreed, though, considering I wanted to study medicine. So, I begged her every night and day till she made me a deal. She said I would get a job in school and fend for myself and she would only pay my fees. I told myself it could not be that hard since I did that already, so I agreed." She said and paused to laugh at her ignorance.

"If life were that easy, most people would not live the way they do now. You were zealous and determined, and that was

good though." He said, plucking at the white and yellow daisy in his hand as they walked on.

"I almost died in my first semester. I thought I would not be able to cope but eventually, I got used to it. It cost me my social life, but I was able to manage to work and study. I would work at the cafe or clean hostels and do their chores and they would pay me. It was so embarrassing, but I did not exactly have another choice. I survived till the vacation after my fourth year when I went home. I always had good grades and she was always happy about that, but then I had a clash with her younger son. He had tried to take advantage of me, and I threatened to report him. He backed off for a few days but when his advances started again and became too frequent, I had to let his mother know."

"I was scared; I did not want to be sexually assaulted again so I reported him while I still could. It backfired though as he turned the tables and said I had been trying to seduce him all along. It was his word against mine and as expected, his mother believed him. She gave me some money and asked that I did not come back to her house again because she did not want any problems." Aviela said, rubbing her arms when the harsh ray of the sun was beginning to sting her skin.

"The sun, right...? Let us move a little bit to the left; it is a lot more shaded." He said, guiding her away from the sun to a more shaded path.

"Go on," he said when she was more comfortable.

"Zamar, you do not even want to imagine how much I begged her to let me stay because I did not have anywhere else

to go but eventually, I had to leave. My last years in school were an embarrassing struggle. Imagine the attention that being in the top three of the entire faculty brought; people would be so eager to mingle with me till they found out I was practically a housekeeper for several of my course mates without a permanent place to live in the school. I spent the night in the classroom most times, fell sick there and got well again when the sickness got tired of being in my body because I was not going to spend money on drugs. Through part scholarships, general contributions from course mates, lecturers and almost every single person I ever met, I eventually made it through school and graduated. I continued cleaning houses and offices though because I had not served yet, so I could not get a job." She paused to see if he was still paying attention.

"I am with you, go on," He said, and she did.

"Service year was a bit easier, but I never stopped doing my side jobs even though I was with a hospital. I needed all the money I could get, honestly. I was retained and I worked there while I applied to better hospitals randomly. I got the job here in Abuja, but I was reluctant because I had heard that the standard of living here was too high even though I wanted to visit here someday. After weighing the salary and all, I decided to move to Abuja. It was rough at first but here I am now. The rest, they say, is history which you know already." She finished in a sing-song manner.

"So, you didn't grow up here," he said as a matter of fact.

"No. All through my childhood, I lived in Sagamu." She said and Zamar heaved a loud sigh as if she had just dropped something heavy. He looked at her from head to toe in pure admiration.

"What is with that look? Too rough a past?" She asked.

"I have to admit, you have been through a lot, but it is your strength and resilience that amazes me. I probably would have given up a long time ago if I were in your shoes... I cannot survive without three square meals." He admitted, making her chuckle.

"That was just on the surface, I was not strong. I cried to bed almost every night, struggled with constant depression and mental breakdowns. When I thought my life was finally perfect, my job was taken away. No, snatched from me. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. You've seen the evidence, Zam." She said recalling that fateful day.

"Yes, I have. But through it all, you are here right now; standing strong to the glory of the Father." He said, and she hummed.

"Now that I had to go down memory lane, I realize just how much God's mercy made up for my inadequacies. Without me even realizing it, He was taking every step with me and making sure I came out well, no matter what life threw at me. He was causing all things to eventually work out for my good." she said, feeling genuinely grateful.

"You now get what I have been trying to tell you about how he predestined that we all live out his purposes, no matter

where we go, or what happens to us." He said, and she nodded in agreement.

"Your entire life is a super script, and I truly cannot wait to see how many lives God touches through you. You went through everything you did so that you are placed in the perfect position to help people with similar challenges out there; give them hope that if you could make it through, they can choose to do the same as well." He said and she flashed back to times when she had been invited to speak simply because she was a doctor. She thought about how many people she could truly help by sharing her story and about how she only needed to find the courage to speak about it in public. She knew that when the time came, her enabler, the Holy Spirit would be right there with her; infusing her with confident strength to go through with it. They arrived back at their starting point and sat on the grass again.

"One question though..." Zamar said, slowly picking at the grasses as he spoke.

"Your father... Do you know where he is right now?" He asked and watched her expression change.

"No, and I hope that I never find out," Aviela said, pressing her lips into a thin line.

"Okay, but what if you meet him someday; just like you met the other man. Do you not want to be prepared to..." Aviela cut him off not wanting to hear the rest of it.

"Prepared to do what exactly? My father died the day my mother died and that is the last I want to hear of him, please." She snapped, and Zamar decided to change the topic.

"I told you these people would take so much time. They are just arriving." Zamar said, pointing at the couple who were strolling towards them without a single care in the world.

"Next time you say you would not be long, we are just going to go home without you. Can you see the time?" Zamar said, and Annie glanced at her wristwatch to see that indeed, time had been far spent.

"We did not mean to stay long, somebody could not pass by the perfume and makeup store and have enough self-control to look away," Soji said, motioning to Annie who rolled her eyes.

"Let us just eat and go home, please. I am already tired," Annie said, and they agreed. While they ate, they brought up each other's jobs, dwelling a bit more on the opening of the health clinic as Soji expressed his interest in giving financially as his way of contributing to the success of the day.

It was all work for Aviela and the other staffs and volunteers at the foundation throughout the whole week and Aviela was glad the day had finally come. She knew Mrs. Adunni had an amazing network but she was blown away by the calibre of people who attended the event. She made a mental note to thank Annie again for the dress seeing as it made her deserve a second glance. She met most of the guests already as most of them wanted to meet her after she had given a summary of her life's journey, being careful to leave out the extra-sensitive parts of it. She felt proud of the fact that she could speak about her past without feeling like she was being judged by the people. Adunni had taken it upon herself

to tell every single person she met about Aviela's qualifications and values. Aviela finally went to her table, careful not to trip and fall on her face. It had been so long she had to wear heels this long and wanted nothing more than to sit down and take them off. Even though the major part of the event was over, there were still a lot of people around.

"I am exhausted, to say the very least. I dislike large gatherings," Aviela said, as Annie poured her a glass of water which she was grateful for as it made her visibly relax.

"I am proud of you, Ela. What you did there on that stage today took strength and as shocked and as deeply touched as I was by your story, I am genuinely happy that you are growing, and you are not letting your past stop you." Annie said, reaching over to her and giving her hand a little squeeze.

"You all made it possible for me to be able to do it and I am very grateful for that... And for you, thank you," Aviela said.

"It is God we have to be grateful to. Every single one of us was just vessels used by Him to bring you to where He wants you to be." She said, and Aviela nodded in agreement.

"Do you women ever sit together and not gossip?" Soji said as he and Zamar came over to the table to join the ladies.

"No... It is our thing. You do not even want to know the hot gist I was just giving Ela" Annie said with an eye roll causing Aviela to laugh.

"Are you alright? You seem a bit tense" Aviela said, leaning in Zamar's direction.

"Everything is fine." He said as he and Soji exchanged a knowing look. She wondered what they were up to this time; they were like mischievous kids sometimes.

"Are you sure?" She asked, and he sighed and turned his chair to face her. Annie looked to her husband wanting in on what was going on.

"Avi, there is something you should know... I could not bring myself to say it to you any earlier than now because I did not know how you were going to react but Soji convinced me it was the right time to say this. I need you to be calm and listen to me first before making a decision." Zamar said, taking her hand in his. He noticed that she was already getting restless. She wondered if she were the only one who could hear her heartbeat because she felt it was suddenly a thousand times louder.

"I am listening..." Aviela croaked out, and Annie just watched in confusion knowing that her husband was in on this, but she was not.

"Alright guys, I am sorry for the long wait; the guests are in safe hands. I trust you all are ready; it is time to leave" Adunni said, causing all four heads to snap in her direction. They had agreed to meet at Adunni's place after the event but due to the stress that came with making the event perfect, Aviela had long forgotten about the date they fixed. Right now, all she wanted to do was sleep.

"Alright, we will be with you in a minute, ma'am," Zamar answered on their behalf.

"Amazing...!" She said and left them. Once again, there was a silent communication going on between the cousins.

"I guess we should leave then. Let us not keep them waiting." Soji said as they gathered their things.

It was not a very long drive to Adunni's house, and they were driving in behind her car and into the large house in no time.

"Good heavens!" Aviela whispered as she beheld the house. She gasped at the beautifully laid out flowers in the compound, marvelling at the roundabout inside the residential building. She was amazed by the four-storey glass house and could not imagine walking in and out of this kind of house daily. Four men in black suits smartly stepped out of the front door and positioned themselves in front of the building as another in the same attire swiftly stepped out of the car Adunni had been driven in and opened her door. Adunni smiled as she rolled her eyes at the men and the security team lined up at her entrance, asking them to be nice to the guests. She could assume her husband was back home already seeing as they were being extra again; sometimes she wished she would get a break from being the wife of a Minister, but she could fantasise all she wants.

"God! There are levels to this thing...This money, show us how they get it. Zamar, how on earth am I just hearing that your employer is the wife of a Minister. No wonder you never come home early." Annie said, giving Aviela a high five as they both laughed.

"So, it is the from the national budget you've been earning, Zamar?! How will they not pay you per hour for therapy; look at the house! Heaven knows that tomorrow, Ela and I are going shopping with your debit card; bet it with me," Annie continued to tease him. Zamar smiled softly, unable to fully concentrate on the discussion. He had his mind on more pressing matters.

"You both can go in; I need to speak to my husband. We would be with you shortly." Annie said wanting to know exactly what was going on. She watched Soji and Zamar exchange looks. Zamar gave Soji a slight nod as he and Aviela left the couple to talk. Adunni led the way into the house as Aviela did her best to remain unaffected by the intentionality and detailing that structured the house; not to talk of the aroma diffusers positioned at strategic places in the hallway. As the smell of lavender, citrus and peppermint hit her nostrils time and time again, she fought the urge to ask for a moment to take in the clean air.

"Welcome to our humble abode. My husband, whom you met earlier today, my father and daughter would be with us shortly. Please, be comfortably seated." Adunni said, ushering them in as they took their seats, Aviela resisting the urge to look around.

"Mr Samuel, please ensure they are comfortable." She asked, referring to the head chef.

"Yes, ma'am. Good evening. What would you like first? We have juice, punch, wine, tea..." He went on, speaking like he was reading from an invisible book. Aviela settled for juice

while Zamar requested just water which he very well needed at this point. In no time, they were attended to and the three began to talk about the success of the event as Aviela could not help but pour out intelligent plans and heights she saw the hospital attaining soon.

"We have people in our house! Daddy, Mummy said uncle Zam-Jam was bringing Aunty Ela along today. I always tell her they are married but she would always argue. Can you see they are here?" Adeife ranted, as she raced down the stairs.

"Young lady, would you stop running before you get yourself hurt?" Her father reprimanded as Aviela and Zamar got up on their feet to acknowledge them.

"Leave her be. If I had known I would need my son-in-law's help to come down the stairs at this age, I would have done a lot more running when I was younger. You only live once, right?" The elderly man said, quoting his granddaughter who had already gotten to the living room and was already exchanging words with the guests. The sound of glass shattering caused all heads to snap in one direction, Zamar being the least surprised person in the room.

“C-11”

The drive back home was graveyard silent. After Aviela had stormed out of Adunni's house, she had gotten into the car with Zamar right behind her. Zamar was occupied with thoughts of how to manage the situation at hand. For the first time in a very long time, he had let his emotions overtake him and he just knew this would happen. Annie did not bother speaking as she was still trying to understand the situation of things. She had been fed with too much information for one day and she was barely able to keep up. As they arrived back at their home, Aviela stepped out of the car almost absentmindedly, tightening her hands around her heel shoes when Zamar tried to help her take them. Soji and Annie watched quietly, not wanting to interfere as Soji already made his wife promise to stay out of the issue completely due to its sensitivity. He trusted Zamar to be able to reason with her if it was just them.

"Avi, would you please say something..." Zamar said after almost ten minutes of being on one knee. Zamar looked to Soji for help, but as expected, Soji said nothing to him.

"Avi..." He said, placing his hand over hers.

"How long have you known about this?" Aviela whispered. She squeezed her eyes shut so they would not see the tears that had filled them up.

"I have known for about four weeks now." He answered.

"Liar! You are such a liar..." She sobbed.

"Avi, you have to trust me..." Zamar tried to get her to reason with him but the time for reasoning was long gone.

"I did! I trusted you and you betrayed me. It was all business for you... Being my friend, helping me get better... You just wanted more money." She tried to sound strong but failed each time she opened her mouth to speak.

"Avi, that is not true, and you know it," Zamar said.

"Do not call me that!" She screamed, getting up on her feet.

"I will! I will call you that because I never lied to you." Zamar also got up and blocked her from leaving. He took a deep breath and tried to remain calm.

"I promise you I never became close to you for money. I only found out after you told me about your past with his friend. Avi, I had no idea." He explained but she shook her head, refusing to believe him.

"Look at me, Zamar. I may be anything else in the world, but I am not an idiot. Do you mean to tell me you never knew? He is your patient, for God's sake! You have his data, you held sessions where you delved into his past. You must have had conversations about me at some point! Or do you mean to tell me that the daughter he abused never came up in your discussions?" Aviela yelled in his face.

"We talked about a daughter, yes. Do you remember you helped me out when I told you my client was struggling with guilt? You stayed up all night helping me find a way out of it. I knew you had the same surname, and I cannot deny that but many people share the same name; I could not just assume he was your father based on that fact alone." Zamar said, but it

just sounded like more lies to her. She stepped away from him so she could speak her mind.

"I know you, Zamar. You are more thorough than that. Tell me you never tried to find out if there was a connection between us. Tell me he never said my name! Just tell me Zamar, that you had no idea that the man who destroyed my life is your patient!" Zamar ran a hand over his face. Everything was upside down and she did not even want to hear his explanation.

"Aviela, you of all people know the struggles that came with him. He barely came down to attend his sessions, talk less of having such personal conversations. I even tried to ask Mrs Adunni but she made me understand that she got a psychiatrist because he does not speak to anyone at home. Aviela, I had to be wise or else I would lose my job. I also never knew you had that kind of history until you told me about it. How could I have known otherwise?" He asked, hoping that she would see it from his perspective. She knew he was not at fault, but she needed someone to blame or else she would completely lose it.

"What about after you found out? Why did you keep helping him when he hurt me? You are supposed to be my friend and look out for me!" It was a selfish thing to say but at this point, she could not care less.

"Avi, you cannot be serious. I was disorganized for a whole week after I put the dots together! I did not go to see him because I could not bear to be with him at that time. I was angry for you, but I had to come to terms with the fact that he was sick and above all, it was in his past. Aviela, your mother's

death took an ugly toll on him and he was blinded by his pain..." He was cut short abruptly.

"I was in pain too! I was so young and could not fully understand the fact that she was gone forever! I was dying on the inside too! She was my mother too and I loved her! I loved her and I had just lost her. I was lost and confused; there was nobody when I needed someone to tell me everything was fine. I wanted the man I loved with all my heart to comfort me but all I ever received was blame for her death!" Aviela said, and Zamar could not bear to look into her eyes for every time he tried, the obvious pain drew him to tears.

"Avi, I may not fully understand what that was like for you and believe me, I am not trying to justify his actions in any way, but please, you need to let this go. I promise you that he has paid dearly for his actions and is still paying for them. I just want you to free yourself from what this is doing to you and that can only happen if you forgive... please," he pleaded.

"No! Not now! Not ever! Do not ever mention that to me again if our friendship is important to you. I told you I lost my dad the day my mum died, so the person you speak about right now has absolutely no connection with me." Aviela said, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. Zamar knew this was going to be difficult but he never planned for what he was faced with. It was almost impossible.

"Ela, I know situations like this can be very painful, but you need to see past it..." Annie tried to place a hand on her shoulder but Aviela stepped away.

"You know? What exactly do you know? My pain...? You smile all day and every minute of your life because you have no reason to know pain. Everything for you is giggles because you have an amazing family to catch you before you even fall. You think you are watching a movie right now and you are making comments because you are not the one in my shoes. Do not even give me the 'I know how you feel speech' because you do not. You do not have any idea what it is like." Aviola was made quiet by Zamar who knew she had just touched a nerve.

"Aviola...! That is enough!" He all but shouted at her. Watching Annie stare at her, Aviola immediately wished she could take her words back, but they were out already.

"Oh no... Zamar let her talk. You are asking what I know about pain, right." Annie asked her. Aviola was intimidated by the woman who stood before her. Gone was her chirpy and sarcastic friend.

"Babe, come on... Let it go, she did not mean that." Soji said trying to get her to calm down but that was the thing with his wife. She was almost impossible to upset but when you eventually do, she would not stop still she put you back in your place.

"No... She wants to know about pain. Do you not, Ela?" She said snatching her hand from her husband's grip.

"For a good part of my life, I was sexually abused by my father. Forced to abort pregnancy upon pregnancy till there was almost nothing left of my womb. I had no one to cry to because I had to keep up my family's reputation. I found my

way out of that and into the house of this man over there and no, it was not rosing and candles from there. Year in and year out, I would conceive and miscarry. Not one pregnancy got past the fourth month. Do you know what it means to go through the first trimester of pregnancy, endure the morning sicknesses and everything else only to have your efforts slip from your body in a trail of blood? Answer me, Aviela, do you?!" Both Annie and Aviela were in tears as they were faced with memories and guilt.

"N... no... I..." Aviela could not find her voice as she felt so ashamed of herself for being so mean.

"Do you want to know why I quit my job at the hospital? Because I could not bear to see women flood the hospital for antenatal checks or deliveries, each one coming out with their children. I had to take records of their deliveries while I counted my losses. This man has been God's greatest gift to me, but I could not even provide him with the honour of being called father by his child. There is pressure from our parents daily even up till tomorrow because I am suffering for something another person did. I did not forgive my father and he went to his grave that way and it was my loss because I kept on resenting someone God already forgave and declared free."

"Soji made me promise not to interfere but you need to know that you are the one who would keep hurting and not your father. The pain does not go away. No... Not even after you receive Christ. It will remain and keep growing till it consumes you if you do not decide to let it go. The Holy Spirit can only help you when you have taken a conscious decision

to forgive, and nobody is going to choose to do that for you. Do you understand me?" Annie said, too calmly for comfort. Aviela opened her mouth to defend herself but Annie was not done yet.

"I don't trivialize what you have been through, but you need to grow up. You have wallowed in self-pity and self-victimization for way too long and even though the past was not your fault, you will be held accountable for your present decisions. All these years you have hidden and limited yourself because of another person's mistake and still, you harden your heart and choose not to let go. I just hope that when you finally let go of your ego, because you will, it would not be too late. Let me inform you that living with the knowledge that you could have forgiven him but you did not bring yourself to do it is not going to be easy. Take it straight from my lips because I have been there, so I know. Life is beyond the box of past pain you have kept yourself locked up in and you need to realize that. I know you had a very rough childhood and I genuinely sympathize with you, but you need to grow up, Aviela. You are not a child anymore! Do you hear me? You are not a child!" Annie was breathing heavily at this point. Aviela absorbed all of Annie's dagger-like words, surprised by how deeply they cut. She could not argue back mostly because deep down, she knew her words held the truth. Annie walked out of the living room as her husband accompanied her up the stairs, leaving her alone with Zamar.

"I am so sorry about all of this but believe me, Avi, I only have your best interest at heart," Zamar said, pulling her into a hug.

"I cannot forgive him Zam... I just cannot" she sobbed, staining his white button-up shirt with makeup and tears.

"Leave that for now and calm down, please. You are going to give yourself a headache if you keep this up. Please stop crying... You hurt me when you cry, so please, stop," He pleaded, pulling away so he could take out his handkerchief to wipe her tears.

"I need you to look at me, Avi... Do you still remember you are strong?" He asked and Aviela nodded, afraid that she would sound like a frog if she tried to speak.

"I need you to always remember that, okay? You are strong, even when you are weak because in your weakness is God's strength able to find full expression. You remember, don't you?" He asked and she nodded again.

"Amazing... Right now, I beg you to please take a shower and get some rest. Sleep if you can and by morning you will be much better. If you need to talk, I am just a phone call away, alright?" He wiped her face once more before handing her the handkerchief and waiting till she went up the stairs before leaving. He looked for leftovers for Oxford, noticing how the poor thing looked, exactly how he felt. Unlike the other times he brought food for him, he did not wait to spend time with him. Right now, Zamar needed to spend time with one person and that was God; he was weary physically, mentally and emotionally.

Aviela sat at the dining table as she read over the thoughts she had penned down in the journal Zamar had gotten her.

“My Lord,

I feel confused and hurt.

I feel so angry and betrayed... Is that okay?

They see my childishness and my ego, but how come they do not see what this is about?

Come out of your box of pain, they said.

Grow up and let go, they said.

I see the truth in their words but this truth of theirs does not set me free, so what do I do?

I... I cannot do what they want me to do because I am scared. It is not that I do not want to; it is that I cannot find the will to do so. There is a restraint, and I am not strong enough to fight through it.

I need help. Nobody understands... they refuse to see it from my standpoint.

I know that there is probably freedom on the other side if I do as they say but how long before I am brought back to where I started? How long before I am screaming for help again?

Who would assure me of safety? Who would secure me?

My body feels like it is on fire and I want to come out of my skin anytime I think about it because no matter how hard I try, the memories will not leave. I feel used and dirty, I am hardly comfortable in my skin, and it is all because of

him! He left me! Vulnerable and without protection, he left me to the one who broke me.

Is that what fathers do? If that is the definition of fatherhood, then I do not want any of it. Why did you let him come back into my life? I do not need him! I do not want to see him! I do not want to be anywhere close to him... He walked away first... He left and now my fractured heart refuses to bring down its wall and it will not listen to reason or pleas because it wants to protect me.

Something he should have done...

Help me..."

She wiped the tears that had fallen from her eyes and onto the page. She could not stop crying because somehow it helped to ease her pain and kept her from feeling like she would burst open.

"I figured you would be here" Aviela jumped at the voice, her head snapping up to fix a face to the voice. It was Soji.

"I am sorry, sir. I was just about to leave," She rushed, closing the journal immediately as she gathered her things and got up on her feet. Soji simply smiled at her actions.

"Please sit, I was hoping to talk to you." He said, taking a can of soda from the fridge and even though the last thing she wanted to do was listen to another speech about how proud and egoistic she was, she obeyed and returned to her seat, while he simply leaned against the slab by the zinc. She continued to play with the cover of her pen as she waited for him to speak. She looked up when he chuckled and made a face when she realized he was laughing at her.

"Okay firstly, this is not therapy or whatever you and Zamar call it so there is no need to act like you have done something unforgivable. I just want us to talk a little. I was going to do it later today but if you are still awake at almost 3 am, then I guess I could seize the opportunity to talk to you." He said and she shifted in her chair, his words doing nothing to reassure her. He took in a deep breath after realizing she was not going to ease up.

"Second, I want to apologize on behalf of my wife; that was out of line and way too harsh. Although, call me bias but you are not faultless either. This is a very sensitive thing for Annie and those words you spoke to her were a bit too much, you hurt her, and I cannot explain how seeing her cry so much made me feel. I cannot seem to overlook it because I am hurt when my wife is hurt, and I would not have taken it lightly if anybody else had said those things to her; I am letting it go this one time because you did not know anything about our situation." He stated, and she dropped her head in shame, suddenly finding her fingers interesting.

"I had no idea... I thought you both decided not to have kids yet." Aviela said without looking at him.

"Oh, we do... I will be forty in a few weeks which is sooner than I want. So, of course, I want to have my kids run around the house and all that but anyway, that is not the point. Annie was just trying to protect you... Sure the approach was wrong, but she just wanted to save you from the guilt she had to suffer. She would probably give everything for one chance to right that one thing." He explained.

"I know, but we are not the same person. That she wants another chance does not mean that I want the same thing." Aviela said with a frown.

"You are very guarded..." Soji commented, after a while.

"Excuse me...?" She raised a brow.

"You as a person are very guarded. All through, I noticed how your words formed a shield for you; protecting your fears," he said, taking a sip of his drink.

"I thought this was not supposed to be therapy... You are starting to sound like Zamar," She said uncomfortably.

"There it is, right there... the guard. Alright, let's do this... Just for tonight, we talk truths only and we pretend we never had this conversation when we wake up." He suggested and she nodded, knowing he would not leave even if she refused.

"So, you were talking about my 'guard'," she said, making air quotes and causing him to smile a bit.

"Yeah... The tough 'I do not care' exterior... I think I find it easy to recognize because of Annie. She may look all chirpy and fun, but she has also had times when she was almost a living dead. She may have forgotten her insecurities, but I was the one who watched her day and night, so it is plastered in my head. During your display of rage and anger earlier, your insecurity and vulnerability were visible. Your mouth spewed sharp words, but the fear was radiating off you." He said, maintaining eye contact; she could see the heavy resemblance between him and Zamar, just that he did not radiate the security she felt whenever she was with Zamar.

"I am not afraid... My heart was hardened a long time ago and it is going to stay that way," she tried to keep her voice firm as she spoke. To have someone display her emotions before herself was not very entertaining.

"Your heart is hard? Why do I disagree?" He laughed and it seemed to anger her.

"Trust me, it is super solid, rock hard. My mind is made up and so is my heart." She said, impressed by her lies.

"Says the person whom I have been talking to but has not made eye contact even once... Oh, and have you ever heard that you can tell how fragile a person is just by feeling the texture of their palm? And if I still remember from when we first met, you have the softest palms I know," he said, causing Aviela to unconsciously feel her palms.

"That is just a myth," Aviela defended.

"I know but it is applicable in this case. You might need to move away though, there is a gecko there." He said, pointing to her side. Aviela jumped far away from where she sat without thinking and only realized she had been played when his laughter filled the kitchen. She slowly returned to her seat, looking around to make sure it was not there. In her opinion, wall geckos were the most irritating living creatures and the fact that they could show up anywhere in the house just made her overly cautious.

"That was not funny," she said, feeling so gullible.

"I know but it proved a fact." He said, causing her to smile a bit.

"That does not mean that I am weak," She said with a small voice.

"I never called you weak. My point is that your heart is not hardened. If nothing else, the fact that God replaced our heart of stone with a heart of flesh reassures me that the exterior you let us see is very much the opposite of what is going on inside your mind and your heart."

"I do not know what you are talking about... I..." she sought for words, but he had more to say.

"You do, Aviela. You know... it is perfectly okay to be vulnerable, right?" He asked, and she swallowed hard knowing he had finally hit home.

"I...I..."

"It is why you do not want this right? The knowledge that the moment you choose to let this go, you may fall victim to it all over. That scares you and somehow you feel more secure holding onto those memories than letting them go, right?" He asked, but she did not answer, she just could not but still, Soji knew for a fact that he was on track.

"Aviela, you are a grown-up woman, and nobody can force you into doing something you do not want to. My being here right now is not to compel you into anything, but I felt I needed you to know this. What you feel is not wrong, that vulnerability... It is natural but Aviela, this time is different. You are not taking a blind risk by letting go, you have God now and with him, your vulnerability is not a weakness but an advantage; that you need no longer seek security in the promises or words of men but rather you know your security

lies in Christ for there is no other form of safety outside him. I agree that what your father permitted to happen to you is unforgivable but If you ever decide to forgive him, let it be because of the nature of God's love that you now exhibit and not based on what he did or if he is sorry or not or if he deserves to be forgiven or not... No, forgive him because you are the daughter of God, your father, and love is who you are." He said as he watched her catch her tears.

"I cannot forget what he did," she sniffed.

"Unfortunately, that is true. Aviola nobody expects you to just erase it from your mind like it never happened; you are not a machine or robot. There is almost a 100% chance you would always remember it but let me show you something." Soji said, making her look up at him as he drew up the sleeves of his sweater to reveal a big, long scar that ran from a little above his elbow to his wrist. She fought the urge to gasp at the sight of it.

"I was in an accident that caused this. Till the day I die, I will always remember the story of how I almost lost my life and how scared I was of entering vehicles for years. I had nightmares for a long while which made it feel like I was in an accident every night," he said, and she could completely relate to that experience.

"It must have been so terrible," she whispered.

"You have no idea, for every time they sewed it up, it would reopen... You do not want to know how traumatic it was for me to have hands but not be able to move it one inch till they were sure it would not open again. The pain was

almost too much to bear considering that was not the only cut I had, there are three more of this size and they were equally as painful but... 'Touch it now' He said, and she started to shake her head, afraid that she would cause him pain. He urged her and she slightly ran her hands over the scar. He pressed his other hand firmly on the scar and she watched how he did not even flinch.

"It does not hurt anymore; neither does it hurt when I talk about it. I cannot forget it, but it does not hurt me anymore. That is the point I am trying to draw out. Your scar is not physical like mine, but it does not matter, it does not have to hurt you anymore. It is a symbol of your strength and tenacity so embrace it because it is nothing to be ashamed of. Someday, you would help other young women find their way out of similar situations and you would be so glad you chose to take the risk. You need to trust God and let him take care of you and tend to your battle wounds. I know it is completely messed up right now, but trust God even through the pain because it would not always be this way. He is working day in and out to make you better and heal you. So, trust Him, alright?" Soji encouraged. Aviela nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She watched him crush his can and dispose of it.

"I am going back to bed. I don't want Annie to wake up and not find me there. Take care of yourself," he said, and she smiled.

"Thank you... I do not know what to say... I... I am just..." she stammered.

"You don't have to say anything. Try to get some rest so you do not look too tired in church tomorrow. Oh, and Aviela..." He called on his way out.

"Sir...?"

"Zamar... He did not betray you, every single moment with you was genuine and none of it was business... You know that, don't you?" Soji asked and Aviela was quiet for a moment before answering.

"Yes, sir." She answered as they said their good night wishes, Soji leaving her to her thoughts. She returned to her bedroom a few minutes later and plugged in her earphones, going online to YouTube to find worship songs. Stumbling on 'No longer A Slave' by Tasha Cobbs, she found comfort in the lyrics of the song and immediately Google searched and downloaded it, putting it on repeat as she soaked herself in the spirit of the song till sleep caught up with her.

The next three days were somewhat awkward for Aviela. She felt guilty being around Annie who still had not had a proper conversation with her since their blow out. They communicated when necessary and did things together but the tension that surrounded them was so thick the cousins started to worry, especially Soji who knew his wife's silence was never golden. She was not one to hide her thoughts and feelings but whenever she got like that, he would almost choke from concern. He had persuaded her to get over what happened, and she had agreed to talk to Aviela but the atmosphere around them still was not as it used to be. Zamar, on the other

hand, had hit the wall with the spiritual malice going on. He was tired of watching as they used one-word responses to communicate with each other, so he worked on getting the two women to make up. He reached out and spoke to Annie first then offered to pick up Aviela from the foundation after her shift.

Seated in the vehicle, he cast a glance at Aviela who had her head thrown back on the head rest with her eyes closed. He sighed as he made a left turn.

"Avi, are you asleep?" He asked, wanting to know if she was awake.

"Yes," she drawled without moving from her laid-back position.

"Seriously, so you sleep-talk now?" he chuckled lightly, and she hummed in response.

"I hear you. We should be home soon so you can rest properly since you are tired." He said, turning down the volume of the radio.

"We do not have to go home right now," she said, hoping he got her underlying message.

"Where do you want to go?" He asked, shaking his head at her. She acted like a teenager sometimes.

"Just drive somewhere while I rest my eyes, the sun is disturbing me." She answered shutting her eyes again as Zamar made a turn, deciding to drive somewhere they could talk at length without being disturbed. He checked the time to calculate how much time he could spare before he had to get

back to work. All things being equal, he had to be home within the next two hours.

Zamar put aside his notepad when he noticed Aviela was starting to wake up. He put off the ignition and rolled down the glass for cross ventilation. He watched as she looked around, the confusion on her face starting to clear out.

"Good morning," he greeted sarcastically, making her roll her eyes at him.

"I must have dozed off, sorry," Aviela apologized, rubbing her eyes as she tried to stretch her cramped up body.

"Dozed off?" Zamar said with a raised eyebrow.

"You have been sleeping for well over an hour now. I was just about to get angry and drive back home. The engine has been running to keep the air conditioning on as well. Next time I have to fuel, just know that you are paying for it" He added rolling his eyes. Aviela simply laughed, hoping he was kidding. She looked around, registering her surroundings.

"Why are we at the stadium?" She asked him.

"It was the closest somewhere I could drive to that was relatively quiet and had a spacious parking lot." He explained passing her the plastic bottle of soft drink in the cup holder.

"So, what are we supposed to do here now because I am personally too tired to play any sport?" She asked still yawning.

"It is funny how you make it sound like you play any sport. Just get out of the car and follow me. We are not here to play sport; we are relaxing for a little time and we go home. I have to study." Zamar said as they got out of the car and walked towards the main field.

"Let us go and sit up there," Aviela said pointing towards the stadium chairs.

"Are you from the bush? Stop pointing." He reprimanded, bringing her hand down to his side. She pulled her hand from his hold and took off his face cap as payback, putting it on her head to block the sun. He did as she asked, guiding her up to the middle seats.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, just staring at the empty football field until Zamar decided to break it.

"How are things with you and Annie?" He asked.

"I don't know." She replied with a sigh. She was surprised he had not brought this up before now.

"Meaning...?" He asked in the bid to press further.

"Well, it has been a bit cold between us. We talk but more like question and answer because she does not initiate any free conversation anymore and replies to my questions with straight answers. It has been like that since the... you know..." Aviela finished, fiddling with the pebble she had picked up.

"Did you apologize?"

"What?"

"Annie... Did you apologize to her for what you said?" He asked even though he already knew the answer.

"Oh... I did not think about it. I just thought she knew I did not mean what I said, and we would be fine if we sleep on it. I did not expect we still would not be talking even after three days." Aviela explained and Zamar hummed.

"She is mad at me because I did not apologize? She could have just said so and I would have apologized to her." She said

making Zamar shake his head slowly, still looking straight ahead.

"You do not need to be told before you say sorry, Avi, especially when you are in the wrong. I was not going to bring it up but seeing as you are oblivious, let me say a few things."

"Here we go... I just knew we did not come out here to chill." She said, trying to mask the nervousness she usually felt anytime he was about to lecture her.

"I am not kidding, Aviela, so please pay attention and get this. I know that you and Annie are close and despite the age difference, she relates with you without boundaries but believe me when I tell you that whatever you do not respect and place value on eventually leaves you and that includes your relationships." Zamar said finally taking his eyes off the field and fixing them on Aviela, trying to search her face.

"I do not understand. I value and respect Annie and you know it. I just did not see apologizing verbally as a big deal since she already knew I was sorry about what I said to her." Aviela explained, not getting his point.

"Let me explain it to you like this. Annie's love language happens to be words of affirmation meaning that spoken words are amplified in her ears whether good or bad and she naturally takes them more seriously than an average person, the same with me. I know you do not mean to, but you tend to speak a lot of hurtful words to people when you are hurt and you think because you recover quickly from them, everybody should too. That is why you do not usually see the need to apologize for the hurtful things you say but it does not work

that way, love language or not. I am pointing this out to you because it is not the first time it has happened. If you think about it, you never apologize for your wrongs. I let it slide whenever we fight, but I think that is the reason why this is happening now." Zamar pointed out to her, carefully selecting his words.

"That is because they say there is no need for sorry or thank you in true relationships, so I never saw the need to." She said in her defence. Zamar smiled a little at that.

"Do not buy into that school of thought. Respect and acknowledgement are necessities for every relationship to grow and last. It does not hurt any relationship to apologize when you are wrong and say thank you when you are grateful. Rather, it shows how much you love and value the other person and the relationship. Even when you are not wrong, sometimes you need to overlook being right and apologize first. It just shows your relationship is more important to you than being right. It is the burden of love you should be willing to carry." Zamar explained to Aviela as he waited for her to absorb his words.

"So, Annie is mad at me because I did not apologize, right?" She asked for clarification.

"She is not mad at you. I am personally just bringing to your consciousness the need to be more intentional about your relationships and not just assume people can read your mind just because they love you." He said, watching her as she nodded in understanding.

"I will apologize and explain to Annie." Aviela proposed only to be met with Zamar's disapproving look.

"Do not ever ruin an apology with excuses or explanations. If you think there is something you want to clear out, clear it out before you apologize. Do not give your reasons for doing what you did while you say sorry because it makes it look like you are not sincere with your apology or you are trying to defend your actions. Let your apology be just that; no explanations, no excuses otherwise you can potentially start a bigger fight." Zamar explained.

"I am sorry. I will try to make amends."

"Try?" He said raising his brow in question.

"Fine... Fine! I will make amends, starting with you. I am sorry for always using you as my verbal punching bag and then pushing you away right after. I am sorry for disrespecting you and making you feel like I did not need you. Please, forgive me." Aviela said, making puppy faces at him.

"I will forgive you after you have paid for the fuel you used up today. Don't think you are off the hook just because you are making cute faces at me." He said eyeing her playfully whilst trying to keep a straight face.

"You are so petty," she teased with a scrunched-up nose.

"If you are done avoiding going home to face Annie, can we leave?" He said ignoring her remark. As much as he would have loved to stay, he knew he had responsibilities to get back to. Aviela reluctantly agreed to leave, not knowing exactly how she was going to coin a sincere apology. Unable to think of a perfect apology, she decided she was going to just say

whatever comes out of her mouth and hope it was the right thing to say. They walked back to where the car was parked and got in to leave.

"At least you agree I am cute," Aviela said out of the blue making Zamar furrow his brows, completely confused.

"What?" He asked.

"Back there, you said I was making cute faces indirectly meaning that you think I am cute." She said with a huge, victorious grin on her face.

"How old are you?" Zamar questioned.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you a teenager? Most women your age would rather be called beautiful or sexy, but your face is about to crack from smiling so hard at being called cute." He said without taking his eyes off the road. She could tell he was kidding from the way the edge of his lip stretched into a smirk.

"Whatever. You are no fun, just drive your drive" She said, deciding to drop the matter and listen to some music from his car instead. She hit the play button and turned the volume up, only to have turned it down.

"Zamar, are you kidding me right now?" She asked, shooting him a glare.

"You are about to blow my ears off. At least allow us to get home before you start causing noise pollution." He said, turning down the volume once again. She turned it off completely and got into a sulking position, crossing her arms and pouting. Aviela heard Zamar mutter the words 'such a

child' as he shook his head at her, but she decided to leave it be, for now, telling herself she would get back at him later.

Back at home, Aviela spent some more time with Zamar only leaving when he said he had to work. She realized she felt even more nervous having to apologize as she did not know exactly what the outcome will be. She had a lot more respect for those who were quick to say they were sorry seeing as it was posing as a difficulty for her now.

Aviela went up to her room to freshen up first and then came downstairs to join Annie in the kitchen whilst trying to calm her frantically beating heart. She watched for a few seconds as Annie went about the kitchen, putting things in place without acknowledging Aviela's presence. Aviela picked up the serving dishes Annie had arranged by the halogen cooker and started to dish their supper into it.

"Is this enough?" She asked, hoping Annie would respond.

"Yes. You know what to serve, you are not a visitor." Annie pointed out without looking at her. Aviela put down the serving spoon and took deep breaths, rubbing her sweaty palms together.

"I am sorry." She whispered, unsure of whether Annie heard her.

"You do not have to be sorry; just serve the same portions as always since no guest is coming over," Annie said after a while.

"No, I am not sorry about that. I mean I am sorry about that but that was not what I was trying to say." Aviela found herself

fumbling and looking everywhere except at the one whom she was talking to.

"Then what were you trying to say?" Annie asked as she turned her back to Aviela. She paid her attention to cleaning the non-existent dirt off the slab so Aviela would not see the smile she was trying to hide.

"I am sorry for... Honestly, Annie, I do not even know how to apologize right. I have been rehearsing all evening, but you are before me now and I do not have proper words. I just... I just want you to know that I regret what I said to you and if I could, I would take them all back." Aviela said as sincerely as she could.

"Well, you cannot take it back now," Annie deadpanned.

"Yes, I know that and so I am asking you to forgive me, please. I will do anything to show you that I am sorry." Aviela continued to plead.

"Do not give me such an open cheque. You do not know what I can ask you to do, so don't make promises you may not be able to keep. You did not know about it, so it is fine. I forgive you." Annie said, finally turning to face her, the smile she had on her face making Aviela relax.

"I promise you it will not happen again." She said coming over to hug Annie.

"I hope you keep that promise." Annie chuckled, returning the hug. She knew Aviela was not one to give hugs so generously and so whenever she did, Annie could not find it in her to refuse it, plus she was comfy as a bear.

"I will. Thank you... Thank you. I felt like I was going to blow up if you stay mad at me for one more day." Aviela blurted as she snuggled into Annie a bit more, deeply inhaling her lavender based perfume.

"Are you sure it is healthy to love me this much? I hope you realize I am a married woman, and my husband does not like to hear that someone loves me more than he does." Annie said shaking Aviela off her so she could finish up with the cleaning.

"I am sure he would make an exception since it is me." Aviela reasoned.

"I genuinely doubt that. Please help me set the dining table and call Zamar over. SOJ should be home anytime from now, so let us try to hurry up." Annie said as she moved over to the zinc to do the dishes. Aviela took a deep breath, her lips spreading into a smile she could not suppress. She thought that went better than she expected and brought along a relief she did not realize she needed all along.

"Earth to Ela...! Hurry up and stop spacing out" Annie said making Aviela snap out of her thoughts. She went back to setting up the dinner table, with hopes that things would return to how they were before her father came into the picture.

‘C-12’

The days had rolled by quickly and Aviel could not say they had been great. Everywhere she went, there was some talk on forgiveness or love, and it made her very uncomfortable. Home was not excluded because whenever they sat together to eat or have devotion or worship sessions together, Zamar would unfailingly end their prayer with thanksgiving.

"Lord, finally because your word says that with you, all things are possible, we thank you for Avi's perfected healing and we also thank you for she has forgiven her Father in Jesus name," He would say and everybody except her would chorus a loud 'Amen'. He did that for a whole week irrespective of the person who prayed and eventually, Soji and Annie picked it up till it became a daily declaration of faith. At first, she would get so pissed and even walk away but in time, she decided to ignore them. It was like they had gotten God on their team because that very morning when she had her quiet time with the Lord, He just seemed to keep directing her back to a part of scriptures she had been avoiding in Ephesians 4 especially verses 31 and 32 for days now.

As all four of them held hands in the living room, praying in the Holy Ghost, each person speaking as influenced by the Spirit of the Lord, they made bold declarations for a few minutes before Annie rounded off their devotion. They had not done anything other than sing songs and give thanks in the

Spirit. The year was at its tail end and because it was Christmas, they spent more time just giving thanks and ministering to him in songs and psalms especially Soji who happened to be turning a year older as well. As per the usual, they went over their declaration of faith on Aviela's behalf.

"Amen!" They all chorused, Zamar's head snapping to his side upon hearing her agree. The shock written all over her face showed that she had not meant to say the Amen. She did not realize it until the word had left her lips already. She cleared her throat, ignoring the wide smiles on their faces.

"Happy birthday to you, sir. Merry Christmas, everyone!" Aviela said, and they all passed around 'Merry Christmas' and hugs before they started to sing for the celebrant.

"Violinist, blow his mind away," Annie said with a localized accent.

"They will not blow my mind away in Jesus' name," Soji replied causing laughter to erupt throughout the room.

"Not literally, babe," Annie said with an eye roll as she made her husband sit down. Zamar picked up his violin and bow and began to play for Soji, doing freestyles from time to time. Afterwards, they took turns in sharing a few personal experiences they have had with him, Annie getting emotional and crying a few minutes into her talk. When she eventually got a hold of herself, they went over words of appreciation for his support and faithfulness over the years as Aviela got to know more about his person from the words Annie and Zamar had spoken about him. They spent a few minutes praying for him before they decided to get on with the preparation for a

small Christmas/birthday party they had planned, inviting only about ten family friends.

"Where do I put this, Annie?" Aviela asked, needing guidance on how to arrange the dishes. Annie patiently explained all over, pointing out what each plate was used to serve and the right cutlery arrangement. Aviela thought the last time she was this clueless was the very first day of practicals in her third year of medical school. She smiled at the memory before bringing her attention back to what Annie had been showing her. Setting everything perfectly on the food trolley, both women carefully rolled the trolley out the back door and into the garden, the smell of barbeque filling their nostrils.

"Zamar will not kill us with food," Annie commented, causing Aviela to peek around Annie to get a good view of him. Although she knew he had been on the grill all day, she had no idea he was going all-in with grilled food, from steak to whole croaker fishes and rice cakes to shawarma. Her stomach grumbled in delight, but she decided to help Annie settle the guests first before settling down to eat. She held onto a chair to keep from falling when a sudden wave of dizziness hit her; drinking a bottle of chilled water, she tried to calm her rising body temperature.

"Aviela, come, I will introduce you to a few friends," Annie said after they had transferred all the dishes to the serving table. From one person to the other, Annie took her, and it was then she realized a lot more people had arrived.

"Avi, please come with me," Zamar said into her ear.

"Zam, I still have some work to do," She protested, trying to motion at the things she had to attend to.

"You will return to your work in a moment, just come with me for now," He said tugging on her hand.

"Where are you taking her? I was going to introduce her to the Adejumo's," Annie shouted over the loud music.

"It would only take a few minutes, she will be back here with you soon," he said before she finally agreed. He got her into the house where it was a lot quieter.

"Where are we going?" Aviela asked.

"The kitchen is where we are going, ma." He answered just as he opened the door and held it for her to proceed him inside.

"Do we need to pick something up here?" She asked again.

"No. We are here so you can eat something." Zamar said putting the takeaway packs on the kitchen table.

"I cannot eat right now, there is probably something that needs to be done outside." She said but he was not having it.

"No way... Avi. You need to start taking better care of yourself, it is almost 4 pm and you have been working all day. May I also remind you that when everybody else had breakfast, you skipped, meaning you have not had anything to eat today if I am correct?" He said giving her a disapproving look when she did not object. She got two plates for both of them while he verbally went over some of the food, he had brought in so she could make her choice. She settled for the shawarma since she already had her eyes on it while he went for the grilled fish and rice cakes. He watched her eat with so much gusto as she smeared the corner of her lips with mayonnaise.

"What?" Aviela asked, making him realize he had been staring for way too long.

"I am trying to imagine you eat shawarma in public," Zamar said, handing her a serviette.

"It would be a very messy sight." She said chuckling a little bit. They slipped into a comfortable silence, Zamar constantly reprimanding himself for watching her every move. His phone rang and he hurriedly picked it up causing Aviela to furrow her brows in confusion. He answered very briefly and hung up a few seconds after letting the caller know he was on his way.

"Is it work?" She asked, without looking up from her plate.

"No, not exactly... I will be back soon. Please, do not leave until you finish eating what you have on your plate because I know you," he said and left the kitchen before she could give a reply. She wondered why he was in such a hurry as she continued to eat quickly; hoping Annie was not working all alone outside. She was tidying up the dishes when the kitchen door opened.

"What took you so long?" Aviela asked.

"It is I..." Aviela turned around sharply so she was directly faced with the one who had come. There was silence between them as Aviela was not expecting to meet her. She knew Zamar was behind this and she made a mental note to deal with him later.

"Good evening, Aviela" She greeted but Aviela simply gave her an acknowledging nod.

"Merry Christmas..."

"Likewise, ma'am," Aviela replied curtly.

"It has been a long time. How are you doing?" She inquired softly.

"Mrs Adunni, how may I help you?" Aviela said, looking away when she realized how rude that must have sounded.

"Aviela..." Adunni sighed, stepping closer and taking her seat where Zamar had been seated before he left.

"I just want us to talk for a little bit," She said. Aviela hesitated for a second before taking her seat opposite her.

"You have been away from the foundation for almost a month, and I will not pretend that I don't know why because he told me already," Adunni said, referring to her father.

"Of course; he probably twisted everything, so he came out looking like the victim," Aviela said with disdain.

"I do not think so; not with what he told me. But that is not why I am here basically." She said, dipping her hand into her bag and pulling out an envelope, sliding it across the table.

"What is this?" Aviela asked puzzled.

"Open it," Adunni said and Aviela did so, tearing the envelope open and unfolding the letter. She read its content, furrowing her brows for a millisecond whilst trying to understand why she would give her this.

"You want me to work for you at the clinic?" Aviela asked.

"No, not work for me, I want you to work with me," Mrs Adunni corrected simply.

"Why? The agreement we had was limited to volunteering at the foundation," she said trying to understand why she suddenly wanted her as full-time staff.

"I think that you deserve it. It was not just my decision, it was collective. You have been so diligent with the little you oversaw at the foundation, and we are not ignorant of your qualifications either. There is no one better suited to head our paediatrics team than you, Aviela." Adunni said, hoping she would take the job.

"This does not sound right. Why would you suddenly give me such a position without even applying for a job? Did Zamar put you up to this?" Aviela questioned, refusing to believe her qualifications landed her a job she did not even apply for.

"He did put in good words for you but no, he does not have anything to do with this. It was solely from the board." Adunni explained, but it did nothing to reassure Aviela. She stood from her stool and began to pace around the kitchen, trying to understand what was going on. This offer would give her the life she had lost months ago but she did not understand why she was reluctant.

"Mrs Adunni, I appreciate this and believe me when I say that I am truly honoured, but I am going to need a few days to think about this," Aviela said when she finally came to a standstill.

"That is fine; I will be expecting your positive response. I do have to leave now. Dad would be happy that you agreed to..." Adunni's words were interrupted by the sudden change in Aviela's countenance.

"I knew it... It is him, is it not? He is the one who is behind this." Aviela said feeling like a fool for hoping the job was on complete merit.

"Aviela, please... He has nothing to do with this. I do admit that he feels terrible about everything he did to you and he truly wishes that you would someday find it in your heart to forgive him, as undeserving as he is of it."

"So that is why he is trying to buy my forgiveness with a job?" Aviela said, raising her voice a little bit.

"Aviela, I told you he is not behind our wanting to hire you."

"That is a lie, and you know it. He thinks I am going to throw away the past just because of a job. Well, you can tell him that I do not need it and I do not need him. I am done! With him, with all of you...!" She yelled, squeezing up the paper and throwing it to the other end of the kitchen.

"Aviela, I know that I have no right to butt into this matter, but you need to believe me on the genuineness of the job. Asides from that, you also need to know that he is truly sorry... Since that very day he set his eyes on you again, he has been in constant pain and I know that he hurt you a lot but please... Please Aviela." Adunni said, her tough exterior finally giving way for her emotions to surface.

"No!" Aviela screamed back.

"Aviela, please...! My dad is dying! Please!" Adunni said, bursting into tears. Her words registered in Aviela's head causing her to freeze up at the news. It was only for a split second as her walls were back up again.

"Ma'am, you need to leave," Aviela said, looking away from Adunni.

"Just once Aviela, see him just once. I am no longer asking you to forgive him, just for you to please meet with him once... I beg you in the name of God... Please." Adunni begged, hoping Aviela would consider her request.

"I do not want to disrespect you, ma'am, but I need you to leave right now." She said, with her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"Aviela, it is just once. I promise..." she pleaded, trying to reach out to her.

"I said leave! Leave me alone! Go away and do not come back! I do not want to see any of you ever again! You are all betrayers, and you are all completely selfish!" Aviela screamed. The door swung open and Zamar came in, stepping between the two women and holding Aviela. He had been waiting in the living room but came in when he heard the loud voices; things were spiralling out of control. Were it not for the loud music playing outside, all the guests would have been alerted by their shouting.

"Mr Bankole, please... Please reason with her... I beg of you," Adunni pleaded, hoping Zamar would be able to help out.

"Zamar, tell her to leave right now! Leave! Just go away from here!" Aviela continued to scream uncontrollably, trying to fight through his hold.

"Avi... Aviela! Look at me... No! Not her... Look at me" Zamar said, shaking her by her shoulders till her hard gaze shifted from Adunni to him.

"Breathe Avi, breathe. That is very good, do not look anywhere else; it is me. You are fine. Nobody is going to make

you do anything you don't want to, and nobody can hurt you while I am here, so just breathe." He continued to utter words to help her calm down till she was reduced to tears.

"Mrs Adunni, please you have to give her time. She is not in the right state of mind and forcing her right now would not do you any good. I only agreed to your coming because you said you would only talk but right now, I do not think you can do that, so please ma'am, allow me to handle this." Zamar said to Adunni while keeping his hold firm on Aviela's trembling body. Adunni gathered herself and agreed to leave, trusting Zamar to stay through to his promise. As soon as they were alone, Zamar let her go and sat on the stool, rubbing his temples with his index and middle fingers. He watched her calm down till her breath was even again before he placed his elbow on the slab and buried his face in his palms.

"I did not mean to lash out," Aviela said after a long while, feeling a bit ashamed.

"I know... I know," Zamar replied, his face still hidden in his palms.

"It is just that whenever I hear anything about him, I just get so angry," she said.

"It is not anger; It is just... your defence mechanism against vulnerability." He said, finally looking up at her tiredly.

"I do not want to get hurt again," she whispered as he took her hand and got up from his sitting position, so he was standing right in front of her.

"I know... Avi, I know but you have to try. You need to make a conscious effort to try. You would be surprised at how

much you can change if you would just try." Zamar tried to encourage her.

"It is hard. It is much harder than you think it is," she said, shaking her head as she spoke.

"I know it is not easy, but you trust me, right?" He asked, looking into her eyes as she nodded.

"If you trust me, you will trust my intentions too. Avi, I could never intentionally push you in the direction of danger." He said tiredly. He was not tired of her, just tired of the fact that there was not much he could do to ease her pain. They had come this far but their progress was highly dependent on her agreement and cooperation.

"I know but still..." She started.

"Please, do not give into fear. I am here for you and with you and even more assuring is the fact that God is with you and He is in on this too. I know it is a huge risk, but He is with you, all the way." He said but was met with silence. He took it that she was absorbing his words and pressed a bit further.

"We will take it one day at a time, go at whatever pace you choose and only do what you are comfortable with. I promise you, Avi, that I will stand by you from start to finish. So, please trust God in me on this one even if you do not trust me as a person. Just come with me to see him once." He said, and she started to pull away, but he held her hand in place.

"Avi, listen to me... Mrs Adunni was not lying to you; your father is sick and presently hospitalized. He has lung cancer; non-small cell lung cancer, stage IIIB. The doctors are doing all they can but at this point, we can only trust God for a miracle.

Aviela, you are a doctor... You know how it feels every time a life is saved by your hand. Just think of it that way; that your decision could be saving his life, beyond his mortal body. Please, help his soul find rest."

"It is not my fault that he is sick," she said lowly but she was not sure if she was telling Zamar or saying it so she did not have to feel guilty.

"I know... It is not your fault, but you can help him get better and if not, at least he would not battle with guilt and a terminal disease at the same time." He persuaded as though he were talking to a little child.

"If you come with me to the hospital, we do not even have to go in. We can just look from outside and that is all till you want to go further with this," He said and waited for her to think it over.

"I will not say a word to him," she said firmly.

"Agreed," he said, deciding to agree with all her terms and conditions.

"We just look and leave," she added.

"Agreed," He complied.

"If it does not go right..." She started.

"It will go right in Jesus' name, don't be negative," Zamar said, immediately disarming her negative thoughts.

"If you were not the one asking, I would never take a step in his direction," Aviela grumbled.

"You are not going because I am forcing you to. You are going because you love God and me too... Love is driving you and I know you will not regret this," Zamar said, excitement

building up in him slowly as he maintained a straight face so she would not change her mind.

"I truly hope not," She said more to herself than to him. Zamar straightened himself up when the door opened thinking it to be a random guest but relaxed when he saw it was Soji.

"I am sorry to interrupt but Annie has asked that I bring you both outside, the cake is about to be cut and we need to take a few pictures as well." He said quietly, knowing he had intruded on their conversation.

"We are right behind you," Zamar said before Soji closed the door.

"We should go join them before Annie rains down the heavens on me for stealing you away for hours," He said making her laugh.

"I do not feel picture ready. My makeup is completely smug after all my crying and sweating." Aviela said, trying to judge her appearance using the steel tray on the counter.

"I am just going to take it all off" she decided, making him run a palm over his face.

"Aviela, you look absolutely fine, just dab out the sweat and you are good to go. You can take it off after Annie has fulfilled her picture desires but there is not enough time to do it now," Zamar said. He took out his handkerchief and dabbed at random places on her face in the bid to get the oil and sweat out. Being that close, they could not help the three times they locked eyes longer than necessary. Zamar took an entire step backwards after realizing he had invaded her personal space again; something he had been doing a lot lately. There was a

certain way she looked at him that made him lose environmental consciousness for a moment and pulled him in.

"Done?" Aviela asked him to clear out her nervousness and he nodded in response, just as the knock on the door came a second time.

"We really should get going," Zamar said without making eye contact this time around. He led her out the back door and into the music-filled garden once again.

The party eventually came to an end at about 9:30 pm and it was just a few minutes past 11 pm when they were finally done with the tidying up. Exhausted, Aviela tiredly collapsed on the sofa wondering where Annie and Soji were.

"Did they go to bed already? They have been upstairs for a long while," She asked Zamar who seemed more tired than the rest of them. He motioned to her left indicating that they were right behind her.

"I thought you both went to bed already," Aviela said as they came into the living room and took their seats, Annie sitting on the arm of the sofa Soji was seated on.

"We would go to bed soon, Soji wanted to have all of us together for a few minutes before we all retire for the night," Annie explained, giving room for her husband to speak.

"Alright, I just wanted to appreciate all of you for today. Firstly, my amazing woman with whom forever is like a few minutes; thank you for putting the amazing party together and making it look like I know how to have fun even though I am almost clueless beyond law cases, contracts and sports," Soji started, cracking them up.

"I have so much to thank you for but Zamar's exhaustion is making me feel guilty. Anyway, I cherish you so much and I could not have asked for anyone else, I love you, Stephanie Adesoji Adegoke." He added, giving her a side hug.

"I love you so much more, Michael Adesoji Adegoke," Annie said with so much adoration.

"Zamar... My guy! I have known you all my life and it has been nothing short of an amazing experience. With each passing year, you keep beating the record for the previous year. You are such a passionate lover even though you do not like to put all your emotions on display. We may not have had the same parents and society says we are cousins, but you know that you are more than even blood to me; our relationship is a spirit certified covenant. Thank you for always, brother." He said, Zamar responding with an almost inaudible 'it was nothing'. A total of six hours of sleep in four days was finally taking effect; he probably should not cheat nature so often.

"To you Aviela... I have only known you for a few weeks, but you surprised me today. All day, you were on your feet helping so much that you were everywhere. I do not have words to show my appreciation for what you have done for me, for Annie and of course... For Zamar," Soji said with a small smirk.

"I did not do anything extraordinary; if anything, I have been the recipient of your kind heart and I should be grateful." She said shyly but truthfully. She could not believe he was thanking her when she has been the one living under their roof for almost half a year. Annie and Soji communicated

silently before he pulled out an envelope and handed it to Aveli. It was the second envelope she would receive today, and she wondered what was in it. She looked at Zamar who was no longer lying on the sofa but now in a seated position.

"Open it," Zamar said. Aveli did as he said, her eyes widening just as her jaw fell.

"Merry Christmas from all of us," Zamar said. To say she was shocked would have been a huge understatement. She stared at the words 'One million naira' written on the cheque, not knowing how to react.

"I do not... I do not under- understand. What is going on?" Aveli managed to ask.

"Well, Annie said you had been going over apartment choices and had found a place you would like to move in to, so we decided to pull together what we could and help out a little. This should be able to cover your rent for two years and still leave you with enough to save and invest. We honestly hoped to do more but please take this as a token of our love and support." Soji said, Annie and Zamar nodding in confirmation when Aveli turned to them.

"I did not mean to burden you with this; I have savings that could have paid for the place..." Aveli said, fighting tears.

"We know, you are a very prudent woman, and you took care of yourself even when you had the house all to yourself, but this is how we have chosen to support you, so please do not refuse us otherwise you throw our love for you back in our faces," Zamar said.

"Zamar..." She said as the tears started to drop.

"Aviela, take it," Annie said, coming over to hug her. That simple act was enough to release in full force, all the tears she had been trying to contain as she cried into Annie's arms.

"Stop crying, girl... I already boasted on your behalf that you were not going to cry over this so do not disappoint me in front of these men," Annie said wiping her tears.

"Thank you so much... I do not know what else to say, I have never been this cared for by anyone," She said trying to control her feelings that were all over the place.

"You are a part of this family now, Aviela, so don't see this as a favour. God was out to bless you, he just used us as channels to reach you. Accept it and do not rob us of the blessings that come from giving." Soji said, and they all agreed.

"Can we pray so we can all go to bed? It has been a long day. Zamar, please pray for us." Annie said, and they all got up on their feet and joined hands together like they usually did, as Zamar raised a song of worship and led them in prayer. They said their goodnights, each one retiring to bed with a lingering sense of happiness and fulfilment. It was a merry Christmas especially for Aviela who finally understood the old saying 'the blood of a covenant or chosen family is thicker than the water of the womb.'

“C-13”

"...Three... Two... One... Happy New Year...!" The church chorused as loud shouts filled the whole room. The sound of rejoicing was loud in the air as families congratulated each other, friends gave thanks for seeing the New Year in one piece and children ran around the church. A few minutes later, the praise team ushered them into a session of high praise as most people danced their best in gratitude to the Most High God.

"What are you doing?" Zamar asked, wondering why she was sitting out in the garden all alone.

"I am catching up on cross over service online because I fell asleep at some point. It was so cold," Aviela said, shivering at the memory.

"I told you to dress warm, but you decided that you wanted to slay by all means," He said, teasing her as he looked over her shoulder and at the phone screen.

"I was shocked to see you play the keyboard though, I had no idea you played." She said.

"Well, because I never mentioned it." He said, coming around to sit on the bench across from her.

"How do you even know so many things at your age?" She said making him laugh.

"When you travel the world and meet different people who respond to different forms of therapy, you have to adapt to their ways to even stand a chance of helping them get any

better. Some just want you to read to them, some want you to be around them, some respond to music, some just want to have someone listen to them and pay close attention, I even have to be a punching bag sometimes; the list is endless." He explained.

"You allow yourself to get beaten up?" she asked him in shock, but he just shrugged.

"I do not enjoy it but sometimes it is inevitable. I was just in my first year of residency when a patient slapped me for the first time. I was so shocked; I almost instinctively returned the slap because I thought being slapped was so rude and uncalled for. I got used to it when I realized that things like that happen on the job. I just learnt to make excuse for them and turn the other cheek as long as they get better." He laughed reminiscing the old days.

"That is a lot of work; people like me should just stick to general surgery and consultation. Sometimes, I wonder how you cope with all the sitting down and listening to stories..."

"That is what I love about my job; the adventure, the experience, the challenge that comes with every patient and the joy of seeing them become a whole lot better for themselves and those around them." He said with so much passion in his voice that she was starting to wonder if he was talking about a job.

"So, where is your next destination after Nigeria?" She asked, refusing to acknowledge the fact that she did not want him to have to leave Nigeria.

"I am thinking of taking the job in Southampton. The one I told you about," he said, and she hummed in response.

"How long...?" She asked, twisting her fingers in her laps as she was not looking forward to his response.

"A year and a half... It may be longer depending on the patient's response. I have not finalized anything with them yet though," He said.

"So, this is all you are going to do all your life? Travel the world. No marriage, no kids or anything like that because I cannot imagine you not having a permanent location if you want to build a family someday," she said, and he was quiet for a while.

"Well, I can travel around for the rest of my life because it is what I love to do," Zamar said, sitting up in his chair.

"Ohhh..." She drawled.

"But... If I do ever meet someone whom I think is worth staying for, someone whose passions and purpose aligns with mine, someone with whom I can fulfil God's purposes even while having a permanent home, someone who from one location can work hand in hand to help me accomplish what years of travels could not. Then, trust me, for that kind of woman, I will lay me down. I will move everything and make my home with her and only God's instruction can stop me." Zamar said, his voice not wavering once. The intensity of his gaze forced her to divert her eyes to her phone.

"You've not found her yet?" Aviela asked quietly.

"I would have put a ring on her already if I had. More so, I would have introduced her to you by now so no, I have not

found her... yet" He answered, pulling at his lashes to remove the baby leaf that had fallen from the tree.

"I truly hope you find that woman someday because with what you do for everybody else, you deserve nothing short of that compensation. As they say, a great marriage is a salary paid by God and Zam, you have served Him well, so he would not give you any less than what you deserve," She said with a genuine smile.

"Amen. I do not mean to ruin your mood, but you said you would come with me to the hospital today to see... to see him..." Zamar said slowly. Aviela leaned back in her chair with a huff.

"I had a feeling that was the real reason you came here. I was starting to believe you came to spend time with me. This life is not balanced at all. I do not even feel like going out today." She said, stretching her body and returning to rest her head on her left palm.

"Aviela... The first day of the year, you already want to start breaking promises," Zamar said disapprovingly.

"I said I do not feel like going, but it does not imply that I will not go with you. I admit that English is not your mother tongue, but you can at least try sometimes, you know?" Aviela said, getting up on her feet right after.

"You have a five-second head start because once I get my hands on you, I am not letting you go," Zamar said, smirking at the double meaning his words carried.

"I would like to see you try, Mr Bankole," She said over her shoulders as she took off running. He went after her immediately, causing her to run faster.

"You said five seconds!" She yelled, increasing her pace.

"English is not my mother tongue!" He yelled, closing in on her and lifting her off the ground and over his shoulder.

Aviela's good mood was short-lived as they arrived at the hospital roughly three hours later. She still could not believe she had agreed to come and somehow, she wished she were dreaming about everything that was happening. She wished every step she took in the direction of her father was imaginary and she was still in the comfort of her bedroom, but alas, it was real, and that truly frightened her.

"Stop trembling, Aviela. You are not alone." Annie said, intertwining their fingers and although her words provided Aviela comfort, there was still a part of her that knew at this moment none of them could relate to her situation totally, but she made up her mind to get it over with irrespective of how she felt.

"Thank you for being here Annie... Even though you did not have to go through the trouble, much less now that you are unwell," Aviela said, as they approached the ward.

"Do not even start. I was not joking when I said that you are now family to us. Family members stick together, no matter what, okay?" Annie replied giving her a tight hug, one Aviela desperately needed. They arrived at the ward and as they came to a standstill, she felt like she could hear her

heartbeat, she swallowed hard on the lump that was starting to form in her throat as she got closer to the window. Memories of her past started to resurface as she remembered being in a hospital just like this when her mother had died and right now, she was standing right before the very same person she vowed not to have anything to do with ever again. Adunni who had been sitting next to her father spotted them and got up immediately, quietly making her way out of the room. Aviola heard the door open but did not bother to shift her gaze from the man lying helplessly on the sickbed.

"He is asleep right now," Adunni said to Aviola quietly.

"I know this is a sacrifice you are making, and I cannot thank you enough for being here," she added.

"Why do you care about him so much? He is not a good man," Aviola's voice was hard as she continued to stare at his sleeping form.

"He may not be the best, but he is not completely hopeless either," Adunni said, smiling in the direction of the old man.

"It has been sixteen years, but it still feels like yesterday when I met him. I had visited Sagamu right after secondary school for a wedding with my parents. On our way back, we were robbed just around the Expressway. I can still remember moving to sit at the far back of our 2007 Toyota Sienna because my parent's conversation was disrupting the movie I was watching on my tablet. It was late at night, but the road was unusually quiet as we approached the police check point. It wasn't a strange sight for check points at that time of the night, but it was mostly military check points. My dad smelled a rat.

When they barked at him to step out, he motioned for me to get down on the floor and stay down. It turned out, they were armed robbers, impersonating the police.”

They instructed my mum to step out too. She took her time out of fear, but they probably thought she was being difficult. One of the robbers went to her side to drag her out. My dad reacted loudly, but he was head-butted with the butt of a rifle. Then they shot my mum. My dad shouted and crawled to her side; he was shot too. Maybe they didn’t intend to kill or realised their chances of getting money just went away, they fled the scene immediately. They did not take any money, just innocent lives. When everywhere was silent, I crawled out of the car to my bleeding parents; my dad was still alive. He asked me to go get help. Of course, I didn’t fully understand what has happened or why; I was just a scared fifteen-year-old teenager. I ran as fast as I could back the direction we came until I spotted someone and began to scream for him to come and help my parents.” He paused and looked longingly at the man on the sick bed.

“One minute he was screaming at me to leave him, next minute he was calling me Doja. I did not understand as I had never met him in my life, but I did not think about it, I just kept reiterating I needed help and after much persuasion, he came along with me. He reeked of alcohol, but I could not care any less at that time, I just wanted help. By the time we got there, my dad and mum had passed away. Aviela... my world stopped. Nothing made sense and it was all black." She narrated making Aviela take her eyes off her father to look at

Adunni for a second as she knew very well the trauma of losing a parent.

"Aviela, I will not lie; it was not the best experience because he barely spoke to me. He was warm at first, always apologizing and promising to never give me away again until about three days after when he went back to alcohol and silence. Eventually, I was able to get in contact with my uncle who stayed in Lagos and they planned to pick me up but when the day finally came for me to leave, he kept on shouting that I was his daughter, and he was not going to give his daughter away a second time. He insisted that he would come along if I had to be taken away and even though my uncle did not like the idea, I pleaded with him to let dad come along with us. I narrated his effort to try and save my parents and even exaggerated how much he took care of me. I said that it would be just for a brief period promising he would go through rehabilitation and would not pose a threat to us. Maybe having him around when my mind was gripped with so much fear and grief created an attachment and dependence to him that I could not easily separate from; I did not want to just leave him either, to be honest. He has been with me ever since and although he never took the rehabilitation sessions seriously, I cannot remember us having any major fight besides from times when I ask about his family. It usually brought out a very violent part of him, so I just decided not to ask about it anymore and he too never said a word about it. Even up till now, he still unconsciously calls me Doja occasionally, but I figured it was your name after he told me about you a few

weeks ago." Adunni said, placing her hand over Aviela's, only to have her pull away.

"We are taking him to India next month for his operation, but he only agreed to get the operation done if you would come to see him before he left. That was why I was so desperate, I'm sorry. I did not mean to put you under pressure, but I needed you to come and see him just once and I cannot tell you how grateful I am that you came. I might not have shared a deep bond with him for more than a few months since Zamar started helping us out, but he has been the one I knew as a family when I could not reach anybody else." She explained, and Aviela nodded but remained silent. She spent a few more minutes just standing at the window side, looking at the man who was once her whole life lying still. She did not notice when Adunni left neither did she notice when Zamar came up beside her until he spoke.

"We can leave now if you are ready," He said softly. She nodded in response and looked back at her father.

"You can also go in if you want. He is asleep currently, so you do not have to speak to him directly," He added just in case she was up for it.

"I do not know if that is a good idea." She said, shaking her head.

"This might be your last chance to see him before he is flown abroad," he pressed further, slightly.

"I... I am not sure..." She was starting to feel her palms get sweaty.

"If you cannot go in alone, I will go with you" He offered and after over three minutes of silent consideration, she agreed to go in.

Zamar put his hand in hers as he slowly opened the door and took her in till they were standing by the side of his bed. Starring at her father so closely felt unreal; it had been years since there was this little distance between them. She slowly brought up her hand and then decided against going any further as she rapidly blinked to keep the tears from falling. She could barely recognize him as he had been covered by so many wrinkles, she knew he should not have at his age. She squeezed her eyes shut reminding herself that she should not feel sorry for him much less cry because he deserved to feel the pain she felt too.

"Do not hold back, Aviela. Even though he has not been a good father, you are a great daughter, and you have every right to cry and feel for your dad. Nobody can stop you from doing that, not even yourself." Zamar said, encouraging her. She hesitated for a while before gently placing her hand on her father's wrinkled hands, drawing a bit closer to him. She hated that she was not as strong as she had planned to be, but the little child that had been ignored all these years did not know how to hide any longer.

"D... dad?" She whispered as a lone tear escaped her eyes, went over her nose and landed on his hands. He stirred, turning in the direction where the voice had come. Forcefully willing his eyes to open, he stared at her. He had his words but lacked the energy to communicate them.

"J... just calm down... You... You do not have to say anything. We will have all the time in the world to talk but for now, please be calm." She said, as Zamar helped him relax into the bed and stop his struggle to speak.

"D... D... Do... Do...ja," He exhaled weakly, the cotton pillowcase absorbing his tears as they fell down the side of his eyes. A nurse came in and informed them they had to leave as visiting hours were over.

"I... I will come again tomorrow, dad. Just... just be fine." She always thought she would have so much to blame him for and scream about, but right now she was simply blank. There was just one thing she knew was right to tell him, so she summoned the courage to say it.

"Dad, I... I forgive you. I do not know if I will ever forget any of it but... but I choose to forgive you, Dad. You do not have to beat yourself up about it anymore. I will see you tomorrow." She said and rushed out before she completely broke down. She could physically feel the weight being lifted off her shoulders as she uttered those words. She thought she would free him by choosing to forgive but she was the one currently experiencing undeniable freedom.

Zamar said his goodbye for the day and was about to leave when he noticed the old man's attempt to speak to him. Over the months, he had learnt to understand his silence even beyond his words and so he nodded his head.

"I understand, sir. I will take good care of her; you can trust me on that." Zamar said and could see him visibly relax. Zamar left him to rest and went to join Aviela who was waiting for

him to come out. As soon as he closed the door behind him, she hugged him. He was startled for a second but soon returned the hug, feeling the warmth.

"Thank you... for everything," she mumbled into his shirt.

"We bless God, Avi. It's been Him all the way," He answered. "I do have a surprise for you, though," he said after a long while, pulling away so he was facing her.

"Here?" She asked.

"No... Come with me." He said, with a huge smile on his face as he led her upstairs to the third floor where she spotted Soji standing outside. She entered the small office on the opposite side as instructed by the men. There she found Annie lying on the bed in tears.

"Oh my God...! Annie, are you okay?" Aviela panicked, rushing over to her side to find out what was wrong.

"I am not okay, Ela... Look," Annie said, bringing her attention to the screen. Aviela watched as the doctor wiped off the gel from Annie's stomach and instructed her to sit up.

"Annie... You are... You are..." She could not bring herself to complete her statement.

"We are pregnant!" Annie finished for her causing Aviela to squeal out of sheer happiness.

"How am I the last one to find out?!" She said, realizing she was the only one who was not aware before now.

"I am sorry... I just wanted to be sure before giving you the news." Annie said, unable to keep from smiling.

"Oh, my goodness... Thank you, Father... This is super great news, Annie," Aviela said, her smile just as wide as Annie's.

"Ela, I am so happy. You have no idea," Annie said as Aviela engulfed her in a hug.

"You deserve to be happy, Annie. We all do, and I cannot wait to have a little you run around the place in Jesus' name." Aviela said as she helped Annie get off the bed. They thanked the doctor who handed Annie her report and instructed her to stick to her check-up schedule without fail.

"Amen...! I have a good feeling about this one. It will not be like the rest." She said to Aviela as they all made their way out of the clinic.

"I know and I am so excited for you, Annie."

"Me too... The best part is that I get to start demanding early morning feet and back rubs, berries or ice cream in the middle of church service and Chinese takeout at 2 am." Annie whispered and they both laughed out loud.

"What is so funny?" Soji asked as he and Zamar looked over their shoulders and at the women.

"Oh, nothing babe... We are just going over God's goodness," Annie replied and they laugh even louder.

"I no longer feel safe, Zamar," Soji said, as he went over to his wife's side to open the door for her.

"Your safety is in Christ, my love. You will be just fine." Annie said as they returned home to continue the celebration of a new year and a new life in anticipation.

“C-14”

Zamar watched Aviela quietly from a distance as she played with the hem of her veil. He heaved a sigh as the memories from a month before played before him like it was just yesterday. He recalled their visit to the hospital and how heavy the atmosphere had been with unspoken emotions as he and Aviela waited for the doctor to finish her father's vital checks. The doctor had excused himself, giving them some privacy.

"Good morning, Mr Abraham. How are you doing today?" Zamar greeted seeing as Aviela wasn't willing to make the first move.

"Well, for someone who is about to have his body opened and his organs messed with, I am doing pretty fine," He said, struggling to make long sentences.

"Do not worry, it is a minor surgery compared to the actual one you have to prepare for; you will be back here before evening. I am glad to know you are doing well, although it seems I have offended you in some way; Mrs Adunni said you would not need my services after you leave for your surgery in India." Zamar said as he glanced at Aviela who had just heard the news. She could not help but calculate at the back of her mind how long Zamar would remain in Nigeria before he had to leave.

"You did nothing wrong. I just got tired of calling you 'doctor' like you were an outsider to me. I would rather have

you be my son-in-law than my psychiatrist, honestly." He said, his directness causing Aviela to widen her eyes in shock and embarrassment. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, returning her gaze to her suddenly interesting fingers. Zamar was barely fazed as he had gotten used to the old man's taunts.

"I still consider myself your doctor for now; we can talk about changing my status when you are much better," Zamar said while effectively masking his smile. Aviela looked between both men as they made comments regarding her like she was not present in that very same room.

"The youths of today are no fun. I was only hoping to make my daughter smile but apparently, I cannot even remember how to do that." The old man admitted. Aviela locked eyes with him for a second before returning her gaze to the floor as she bit down on her lips. She did not consider it alright for him to talk to her so casually like he was not absent for well over fifteen years. She was still angry at him and having him joke around only infuriated her. Even though she no longer completely resented him, she was still not sure why she came over every day or why he was not asking her anything.

"Zamar, please adjust my pillow. I want to sit up." Aviela's father instructed calmly.

"Sir, I do not think you should be moving around so much," Zamar said.

"Oh, come on, I feel hungry just lying in one position. Those rude doctors will not let me have any food so I might as well keep myself engaged. It is just for a few minutes so help me up or I will do it myself." He said making Zamar get up

from beside Aviela to help him. With him sitting down, Aviela felt even more self-conscious as she had no idea how to behave around him. He used to be the most comfortable presence in her life but right now, she did not know what to do.

"You should say what is on your mind." He interrupted her thoughts. Aviela looked at him questioningly.

"I have not exactly forgotten everything about you. Every time you come to see me, you bite down on your lips and say nothing till you leave. If I still know you, it means you are trying hard to stop yourself from saying something. Do not be afraid, demand an explanation from me; I owe you that much. So, ask me all the questions you have been meaning to." He said to her. Aviela always had a billion questions she wanted to ask but now that she had the chance to, she was struggling to remember them. Zamar reached for her hands, engulfing them in his, hoping his message of encouragement was received.

"What happened...? To you" Aviela whispered, her eyes still focused on Zamar's hand in hers as she fumbled with his fingers like a child in a parent-teacher meeting. Zamar did not think that the room could get any airier with silence, but it did as the old man looked lost in his thoughts.

"Sir, I can explain to her if you..." Zamar let the rest of his words drop to the ground after noticing how the old man's face reflected his refusal. Aviela's father had known the day would come when he would need to have this conversation; he tried to smile hoping it would ease the tension in the room.

"No Zamar, so many people have explained on my behalf, but it is never the same as hearing the story from the horse's

mouth, right?" Aviela's father said shifting his gaze to Aviela who shifted hers to the ground. He was right though; she would not find any satisfaction if someone else explained on his behalf. She peeked at the frail man who was struggling in his seated position and caught herself worrying about whether he was comfortable that way or not. Her thoughts were interrupted by her father's heavy sigh.

"As a responsible young man, I planned everything in my life from the clothes I chose to wear to work to the time the bills would be paid and even to the time we would go on holidays. Luckily, I had such a disciplined wife to complement me. It made it easy to have a perfect image of what our tomorrow held. I used to play around and say that with a wife like mine, any man would know tomorrow. How foolish of me; how ignorant of me to have thought I had it all planned out. At the time, I believed it was true, though. I believed nothing ever happened to us without your mum's prior knowledge, she was our family's anchor, literally my whole life's anchor. She loved God so much that it made me jealous but there was nothing I could but stay and love her like a puppy because my whole life revolved around her. I loved you too because she always said you were her greatest gift to me. She had you on my 27th birthday and our lives were nothing short of perfect." He paused for a long time with such a smile on his face; one would think he could see exactly what he had been saying.

"Your mum... We had just planned our 50th wedding anniversary and how perfect it would be. I can still remember how we put you to bed and sat together outside, talking about

what we would do on our golden anniversary even though it was still about thirty-five years ahead. I still hate myself whenever I recall how she had said 'I want a divinely inspired gift and even if I die tomorrow, you are not allowed to forget.' She made that statement with such sadness in her eyes, but I, unfortunately, missed the message she was trying to pass across. We had no plans for death, so I promised her the best golden anniversary gift instead. She probably knew what was going to happen but did not trust me to take it well; she just wanted our last moments to be beautiful and without hindrances. I now wish she had told me anyway, maybe I would have had a little time to brace myself for something so tragic, maybe we would not have left home that day, maybe... just maybe I could have somehow protected her; maybe things would have turned out differently, but she loved me too much to give me such devastating news a day before her birthday knowing fully well we had plans for her."

"When I got the news about her death, my world crashed; everything came to a standstill and I suddenly lost my sense of judgment and direction. No matter how many times the doctors tried to make me see, I told myself for a long time that she was only asleep and would eventually wake up. Your mother was the object of my obsession and I thought my life had no meaning with her gone. When it finally hit me that she had left me and would not be coming back, I did not know what to do or where to go; the world became too much to bear so I lost my grip and turned blind. I was angry, broken, resentful, guilty, and sad, even confused all at the same time; I

was the one who drove, but she was the one who ended up dead, so I thought I had failed as a husband, friend and protector. “

“A wise man once said, ‘When love is too much, it turns the place of love and comfort into the habitation of pain and agony.’ I was not exactly coping well with the loss of your mother and so I told myself if nothing reminds me of her, then it would not hurt as much. I took away every trace of her and burnt them all; it was why I never let you ask any questions about her or even keep a photograph or anything she ever gave you. I thought I was helping us by doing that but all those material things I got rid of did not remind me of her as much as you did; from your sparkly eyes to the shape of your face and even your smile, you were her splitting image and whenever you looked at me with so many questions in your eyes and that pleading need for comfort, I felt like even more of a failure. I had no confidence in being a good father to you, not because I did not want to but because I did not know how to. I could not remember how to love you neither could I help you get through your pain because I could not understand mine. I was so blinded by my pain that I lost sight of you and disregarded your own emotions. I physically abused you every chance I got so you could hate me as much as I hated myself.”

“It does not justify that you sold me to an alcoholic for money! What did I do that was so wrong? Tell me... Should I have died too, would it have been easier on you if I had just died with mum? You made me feel so unwanted, like everything that happened was my fault. Hitting me without

cause was one thing but I can never understand why you gave me away." Aviela interrupted, balling her fist to control her rising temper.

"I understand and honestly, I have no valid explanation because it cannot change anything, but I was a youth in his late thirties who had just lost his wife and job. Being without a job and any form of stable support, I had no means of sustaining the life you once had. When I fell into the hands of the wolf I thought was a friend, everything took a turn for worse. My vulnerability made me give undue access to the wrong person and I told him everything to get it off my chest. He told me to distance myself from you and get better if I wanted to be a good father and earn your love back. In my confusion, he convinced me that I would be securing your future by marrying you into his home and he would treat you like a daughter, rather than a wife. It sounded like such a perfect solution at that time that I pushed you into the hands of an assailant."

"After you left, I became even lonelier. Every night I met with him, I would ask about you and he would smile and say you were doing well. The years went by and although I could not be with you, I was satisfied just knowing you were doing okay but when he stopped coming, I knew something was wrong. I went in search of him and was eventually told he was hospitalized after being severely injured. He eventually told me about you one drunken night and... and my rage could not be quantified. More than him, I resented myself and the guilt was eating me up. Night after night, I would drink myself out

of sanity and well... I was a mess and I just wanted to die feeling like I did not have any right to roam the earth being such a good-for-nothing. I had no reason to live and so I locked up the house and decided I was going to join your mother right at that exact spot the accident happened. As I approached that spot drunk and tired, I saw you running towards me panicked and in tears asking me to help you. It was so unreal that you came back and that you still wanted help from me gave me the slightest beam of hope; it was the only reason I did not end my life that night... I was consoled in the realization that you came back to me and asked me to be a father to you again without hating me after all you had been through." Aviela's father had paused a while to let her take in all he had said but Aviela was unable to relate to the last part of his narration. It didn't make sense to her that he would say she wanted him back because she didn't.

"I don't understand. I never met you; the last time I saw you was the day I left with Mr Ahmed," She said in confusion, shaking her head in disagreement.

"Yes... help me from here, Doc. I think you are in a better position to explain at this point. I don't want to confuse her any further." Aviela's father said coughing repeatedly. Aviela diverted her gaze as she hated being unable to do anything to help someone in pain especially when that person was the father whose past she was trying hard to understand. Zamar sat up straighter in the white plastic chair he was seated in, clearing his throat a few times before speaking.

"Are you familiar with the condition called 'false memory syndrome' or 'pseudo memory'?" He asked but she shook her head.

"I have heard of it, but it is not a condition I am familiar with. Did he have false memories?" Aviela was struggling to wrap her head around all this new information but she was trusting the Holy Spirit to help her understand and so was Zamar who just wanted her to find the closure she so desperately wanted in all that was happening.

"Yes, he did. It is a mental condition caused by a traumatic experience; he seemingly remembers events that never really took place. You were not the one he saw that night but Mrs Adunni and even when he knew it was not you, he convinced himself that you were the one as a way of coping with the guilt. As time went on, his mind started to conjure events and occasions that never actually took place. Even up till now, it is still difficult to tell his real memories from the made-up ones. So, from this point onward, you cannot completely trust his words because the real events may have been mixed up with the false ones."

"This was why you were studying memory recall through deep meditation the night we stayed up?" She asked for confirmation.

"Yes, exactly... We were able to make some progress and that is why he could remember exactly what happened up until the point where he thought you came back to him willingly. It has been difficult to get past that point because of the strong mental hold his mind has on that particular memory

and I stopped trying to push him further when I realized that somehow that memory encouraged him to try; that you came back made him feel like you did not completely hate him."

"So right now, he cannot differentiate between Mrs Adunni and me?" She asked.

"Now, he can. He was very confused when he saw you at Mrs Adunni's house the other day but thanks to the treatments, he knows exactly who you are, and he knows who she is too." Zamar explained. Aviola rested her elbows on her knees and let her head fall in between the palm of her hands. She could not decipher her feelings; she had no idea if she felt sorry for him or sad for Mrs Adunni who had to be someone else for so many years or sorry for herself.

"My brain may be all messed up, but you can trust that I know who is seated beside me. I know you and I know Dunny too. I know you both individually and I love you both personally. No mix-ups or false memories there, I promise you," her father reassured.

"I did not know about your mental state or about most of what happened after I left," Aviola admitted as she watched Zamar helping her father return to his resting position.

"I do not tell you these things to justify my actions nor earn your sympathy neither am I trying to guilt-trip you into forming any bond with me. Right now, I just wanted to answer your question as honestly as I could but right after this surgery, you can bet that I will spend every moment of my time in and out of this hospital bed guilt-tripping you into trusting and loving me again. I promise you that." He said as his eyes

fluttered shut from exhaustion; he had exerted too much of the little energy he had to have this talk and Zamar worried greatly for his health. He wanted Aviela's relationship with her father restored and vowed to do everything in his power to bring them closer after the surgery. He guided Aviela out of the room so her father could rest and prepare for surgery whilst they got food to eat.

Zamar brought his mind to the present time and took slow strides to Aviela until he was standing next to her. It was quiet for some time before Aviela registered his presence and broke the silence with a fragile whisper.

"He never stops telling lies, does he? He said he would guilt trip me into loving him again after his surgery, but he did not come back." She whispered more to herself than to Zamar.

"He did not lie. You are here right now, standing in front of him and not raining curse words; I have watched you wipe your tears for over thirty minutes now either out of pain or sadness so does that not tell that somewhere in your heart is love starting to grow again? He only promised that he would make sure you start loving him again; he did not say he would be around when it happened, so cut him some slack, will you?"

"Still... He could have stayed a while longer" She said.

"You know what he once said to me?" Zamar asked and Aviela shook her head.

"He said he was not praying for a healing miracle from God, nor did he even want to live another ten to fifteen years. All he was asking for was an opportunity to talk to you and

explain things. He wanted nothing more from God or life than his daughter's forgiveness which he got before he transited to glory. It was equal to a lifetime of fulfilment for him so he had no regrets." Zamar explained as he took off his shades so he could directly meet her gaze which was already on him.

"I am glad he got what he wanted the most; it was an expensive thing to ask but he got it anyway."

"Forgiveness was easier when you judged him by his intentions and motives rather than his actions, right?" Zamar asked.

"Yes... It did. I get what Annie was trying to say; I really would have regretted it if I heard his side of the story from someone else after he already died." Aviela replied with a small smile.

"True," Zamar said in agreement.

"Was he... Was he saved?" She asked knowing Zamar would have done the needful but still wanting to reassure herself that he had received Christ and eternal peace before he died.

"You bet! He has been enjoying fellowship with the Father for about four months before we lost him. He never stopped talking about how he never understood his wife's obsession with God, but he has found love in Christ and he would die loving him." Zamar finished. Aviela could not suppress the smile that formed on her lip as it was a testimony she could relate with. Zamar followed the ant trail with his eyes as they crawled over Aviela's father's name on the gravestone almost getting completely lost in their activity.

"Thank you, Zam. I honestly cannot repay you for everything you have done even if I wanted to. I was nobody to you when we met but you went out of your way to help me out countless times. I truly am grateful to and for you." Aviela said, suddenly calling his attention back to her.

"We bless God. This is the life Christ mentors us to live, completely giving ourselves for those around us as we would want them to do for us. I consider everything I did for you a service to God. So, you do not have to feel indebted to me. Pay it forward instead and be good to other people if you are that grateful." He answered, pulling her into a side hug.

"I expected you to say that." Aviela smiled.

"We should go join the others; they would start wondering what is taking so long," Zamar said as they left the burial ground, walking side by side.

"It has been long I had burial food, burial jollof rice is always nice in a very different way," Aviela said trying to clear the stiff atmosphere and cheer herself up. She did not want to join the others looking like she had been crying as they would not stop giving her pity stares.

"You are a bit too enthusiastic about food," Zamar said chuckling slightly.

"You love me so." She said as a comeback; one that left her lips before she could catch it.

"I cannot deny that. Keep it up." Zamar said, completely oblivious to her ears that had grown a tad warmer by his affirmation. They went back to silently walking; her hand in his, their fingers entwined and their steps aligning as they

joined the guests in the hall in celebrating a life that was well-lived and a father that would be missed.

“EPILOGUE”

18 months after...

It was a Tuesday afternoon and Aviela had been going from one meeting to the other. Her every day had pretty much been like that ever since she took Adunni's job offer; not that she was complaining. Somehow, after Annie relocated to Canada with Soji and Zamar left for Southampton, Aviela felt like things had returned to the way they were before she knew them. This time around, there was a difference because she had a family and even though they were all in different locations, they were just a phone call or message away. Most of all, she had found a friend in the Holy Spirit who never had to leave. He was with her at work, on the road, and everywhere else and the knowledge that He never leaves or needs space or breaks, kept her going day after day. She found Jesus Christ and whatever or whoever had to leave could leave, but God, and her relationship with Him, that felt brand new every morning. She would rather die than let go of Him.

"Doctor Aviela, your meeting starts in fifteen minutes, ma" The voice of one of the junior doctors in training pulled her out of her thoughts.

"Alright, thank you." she returned her attention to her laptop screen where Annie had been reprimanding her son.

"You this woman... You need a break from work; are you the first one to head a team of paediatric surgeons?" Annie scolded.

"Says the woman looking after triplets," Aviela replied, making Annie sigh dramatically.

"You have no idea. Especially with Tobias and Theodore, both boys never stop eating and crying," Annie said with an eye roll.

"Where is Tabeal though? I cannot see that cute princess of mine anywhere," Aviela mentioned, and Annie hissed.

"She is exactly where you will always find her. She only has my time when she has to eat," Annie said and Aviela watched as she turned the camera to reveal Soji standing by the balcony with Tabeal in his arms. He had one arm around her tiny legs and the other supporting her head and neck as she slept on his chest.

"God when?" Aviela cooed.

"You are the one slacking, so, don't ask God when?" Annie said, turning the camera back to its former position.

"I am not slacking. I am waiting for the right man," Aviela said, making Annie laugh.

"I hear you. The right man landed in Nigeria over two days ago and you are doing anyhow," Annie said, making Aviela furrow her brows in confusion.

"Babe! He told you not to tell her anything" Aviela heard Soji's voice in the background.

"Did I mention anybody's name? When I told him not to tell her about us having triplets instead of one because I wanted to say it myself, he still snitched so he should consider it payback." Annie said, Aviela was confused to say the very least. They had spoken two days ago, and he never mentioned

coming to Nigeria anytime soon. Did he not want her to know about his coming? The baby's cries brought her out of her thoughts.

"Ela, I will call you later. I need to put these boys to sleep before I finally lose it. My regards to Oxford, tell him I miss him so much, but I am happy he is in good hands," Annie said. They exchanged goodbyes just as a knock came, followed by the receptionist who entered with a royal blue box in hand.

"Ma'am, this came in for you," She said and placed it on her desk. Aviela thanked and dismissed her as she shook the box trying to determine its content. She loosened the black ribbon and took off the lid as her heart rate picked up. She took out the single white rose that laid in it and put it aside, taking the other items out. She chuckled as she picked up and swooned over the printed copy of the photograph they had taken together during one of her therapy sessions. She thought he had gotten rid of them but seems not. She returned the photograph into the box and picked up the remaining items; a book and a letter, getting more and more excited.

"**EVOLVING...** by Zamar Bankole" She whispered, examining the book briefly before reading the content of the letter.

DEAR AVIELA,

If you are reading this right now, it would mean two things.

One, you have gotten the book. I promised you the very first copy.

Two, you know that I am in the country; Annie has ratted me out anyway.

It has been roughly a year and a half since we last saw face to face and it is not news that I have missed you greatly.

The picture was my lame attempt at reminding you of just how much you have grown. With each passing day, you surprise me even more and honestly, I will not deny the fact that I would have loved to be physically present by your side through it all, but purpose had other plans for me.

At this time, I searched just like you encouraged me to, and is it okay to say that I did find her?

The one I said I would gladly lay me down for... The one with whom I said life with was equal to and beyond a lifetime of travels, the one I want to have by my side until forever was exhausted, that compensation you were talking about... I found her.

Right now, she most likely will be dressed in a white lab coat with a stethoscope either in her hand or on her desk and she is reading these words I have put down in this note. She is probably also mad at me for keeping her in the dark about my arrival and I have plans to rectify that, but for now, I would love it that she accepts my written apology; I only wanted to surprise her.

I know she is working right now, but if she is up for dinner tonight, then I would be at the very first restaurant we ever went to together at exactly 8 pm.

Please note that if she does meet me tonight, I would take it as an agreement to walk this journey with me. I am confident

though because this time around, I took permission from the Most High and from her father as well and now, I just need hers.

I look forward to tonight with great expectation.

I will be the man in blue.

Enjoy the rest of your day.

With love,

Zamar. A. Bankole.

Aviela folded the note while trying to contain her rapidly budding feelings. She returned everything into the box, placing it on her side desk. She knew she was the very woman in question, and she had made up her mind about tonight as well. She shut her laptop, staring at the photograph by the side of the desk.

"Happy posthumous birthday, dad... It is strange but I wish you were still alive and here today." She whispered, staring at the picture a little longer before stepping out of her office to continue her new life. This is a life that is nowhere near perfect or free of trials and challenges but a life where she, by the influence of the Holy Spirit who helped her conform to the perfect image of Christ, is constantly ***evolving***.

*Coming Soon, Love in Aeternum by
Onifeloluwa Adebajo*

Another emotional tale, featuring characters whose adventures
will touch your life... November Jones is coming this spring!

"...He left! My fractured heart refuses to bring down its walls for it seeks to protect me; something he should have done..."

It was just an accident but young paediatric doctor, Aviola Abraham could not seem to rid herself the scars of a devastating childhood. A past filled with memories of the one man she loved the most; the one man she never wanted to see again.

Needing a place to grieve, she moves in with an old colleague where she meets Zamar Bankole, a Canadian-trained psychiatrist on contract employment in Nigeria.

Life takes a wild turn when a therapy agreement is signed between Aviola and Zamar, exposing the former to a world of self-discovery, healing and forgiveness.

With help from new and old relationships, Aviola must find the will to delve into her dark spaces, the courage to identify and own her scars; building faith to walk in light...the true Light.



Onifeloluwa Adebajo is a woman with an intense passion for God and his kingdom. Born and raised in Abuja, Nigeria, She is a Microbiologist who graduated from Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun state.

She is an advocate for mental health and wellness with basic certifications in positive psychology and mental health.

Writing is an extension of her person as she has committed herself to reproducing her mindset through her written words. When she is not writing, she enjoys listening to solemn music, watching a good movie or reading a great book.

Evolving is her first published book.