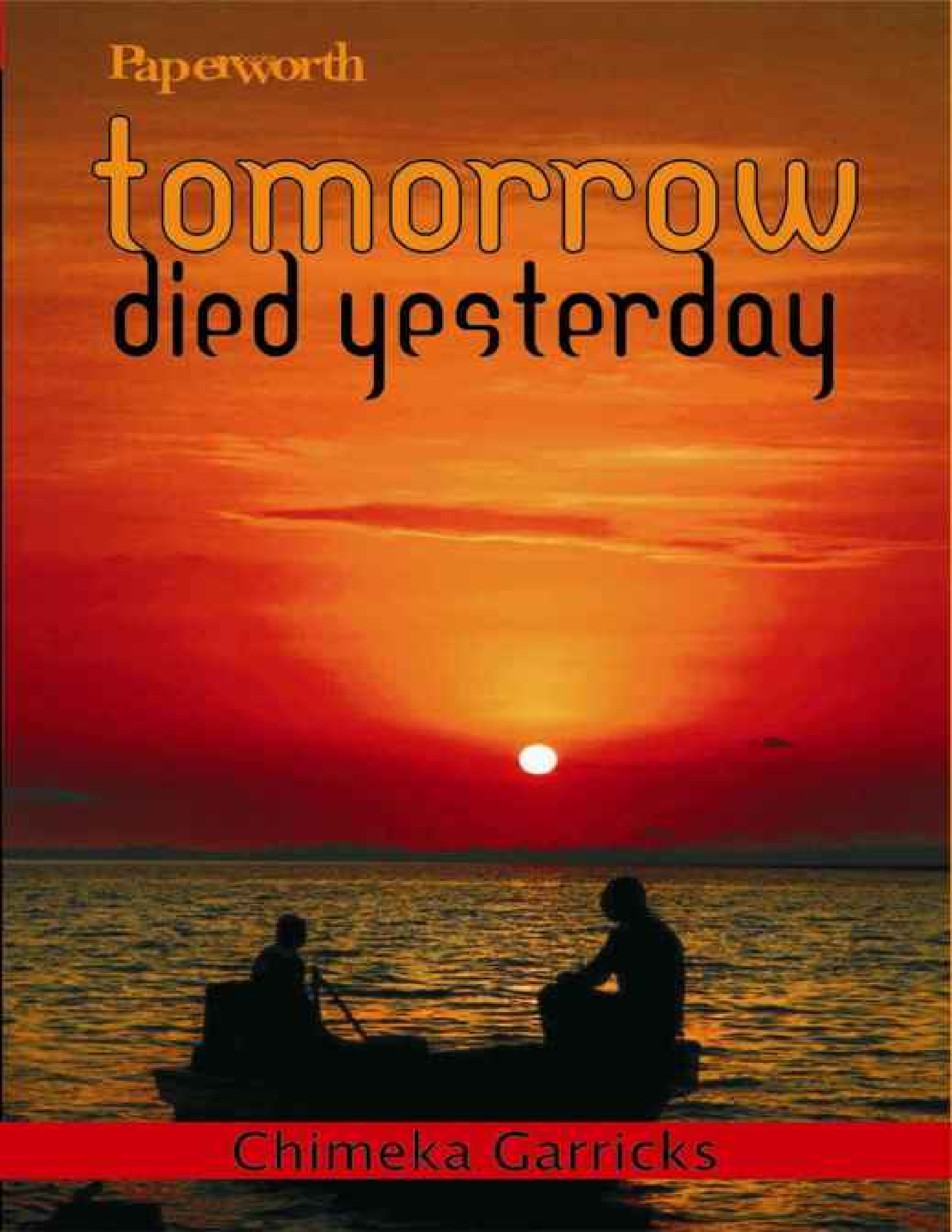
Paperworth

tomorrow died yesterday



Chimeka Garricks

TOMORROW DIED YESTERDAY

Chimeka Garricks

Published by
Paperworth Books Limited
24B Samora Machel Street
Asokoro, Abuja
Nigeria.
+ 234 8023130116
www.paperworthbooks.com
paperworthbooks@gmail.com
@PaperworthBooks

ISBN 978-978-901-012-7

For Biyai, for being beautiful.

BOOK I
2003–2004

Chapter 1
Doughboy
Asiama River, 2003

We planned to kidnap the white man at about 11.27 a.m. on a drizzling Friday morning in August. We were on one of the nameless, winding creeks that flowed from the Asiama River. The white man was on a boat, a 20-seater speed boat owned by the company he worked for, Imperial Oil. Other staff of the company on the boat were the captain and the two deckhands. The boat also had other passengers – two naval officers and four mobile policemen who did not exactly work for Imperial Oil, but were on its payroll. Their job was to protect the white man from all dangers that face white oil workers in the Niger Delta, especially kidnapping. To do their jobs effectively, all six of them were armed with semi-automatic rifles.

The twenty-three of us on this mission were not exactly ill prepared. We had Uzis, three tripod-mounted belt-fed machine guns and one rocket propelled grenade launcher. They stood no chance. Sixteen minutes, that's how long we waited for them. We knew that their boat would have to slow down to negotiate a particularly sharp bend in the creek and as such we positioned ourselves, so that they would run into us when they did this. It was all going exactly as I had planned. Naturally, the planning had taken longer than sixteen minutes. It took me ten days. In this time, I had studied the Imperial Oil boats and their boat schedules. That was how I knew that this boat, the PO44, would come with the white man today, at this time and would come by this bend.

I could see the surprise on their faces when they saw us. We were on six small boats, each with two 250-horsepower outboard engines. We could outrun them easily. They didn't try to run. The captain was an old professional, and at a glance, he understood the meaning of impossible. Besides, we looked frightening. We were all bare-chested. Our muscle taut bodies were glistened by the flicking raindrops. We all wore black on our heads – bands, bandanas, kerchief's and caps; palm fronds were tied on

our right arms just under our shoulders and we had leaves in our mouths. We were scowling.

The PO44 stuttered to a stop. The flow of the water rocked it gently. Front and back, side to side. They were about thirty metres from our nearest boat, my boat. Slowly, I stood up straight, Uzi hanging loosely in my favoured left hand. They watched me, the trapped rat watching the encircling snake. I saw their fear and as always, I was thrilled by the fear of other men. I looked right back at them, seeking the pale face of the white man and locked eyes with him. He shuddered and looked away and somehow in that moment became certain of his fate. But, I made them wait. I put my head back slightly and closed my eyes. There was a slight smile on my face. I inhaled, long and hard the familiar river air. The air I was weaned on. I was at peace with myself at that moment. Above the hum of the boat engines, I heard the squawking of gulls and egrets on the swampy mangrove banks just metres away. I also heard the panic and mad scrambling on the PO44. I didn't have to open my eyes to know that the white man's bodyguards were making a half-hearted attempt to take up firing positions from the windows. In response, I felt my men go a bit skittish as they gripped their guns tighter and waited for my command. Still, I kept everybody waiting. I was in control. I felt powerful. I opened my eyes and spat out the leaf in my mouth at the same time. I was still locked on the white man. Like a frightened child, he refused to look at me. And then I spoke.

'We are the Asiama Freedom Army,' I declared. I was rewarded with the gasps from the Imperial Oil boat. We, the AFA, were the most feared of all the ethnic militia in the Niger Delta. We were credited with oil bunkering, kidnapping and bombing of oil installations.

'I am the leader of the Asiama Freedom Army.' I paused, 'You may have heard of me, People call me Doughboy.'

The white man's heard jerked up. He held my gaze just long enough to send what I guessed was a silent futile plea. He had heard of me, and so had the others.

I heard someone muttering, 'Blood of Jesus, blood of Jesus, blood of Jesus...'

'We will take the white man.' It was not a request. I addressed my next words to the mobile policemen and the naval officers. 'Mopol, Navy, you can try to stop us. Or, you can throw your guns in the river and let us

take the white man. But I warn you – if you try to stop us, your bullets cannot harm us because we are the children of this river.' I let my words sink in for a moment. 'After you have wasted your bullets, we will kill you. And I promise you, your people will not find your bodies to bury. If you wish to stop us, I advise you to start shooting now.' At this, I felt my men stiffen. From the corner of my eye I saw Kabongo, my 2-I-C (second-in-command); open his mouth in surprise. This was not in the script. I was practically inviting the Navy and Mopol to shoot us. I heard the thousand silent questions I knew they wouldn't dare ask then. I ignored them.

'If you choose not to stop us, throw your guns in the river. Now!' I should say now that they didn't mean anything – the black headgear, the palm fronds and the leaves. They didn't mean a thing. We also did not have any bullet-defying charms as I had hinted (at least not at that time). It was all a charade. But it was a very effective way of sowing terror in the hearts of men. It also fuelled wild rumours and added to my myth: my own manipulation of my publicity.

There were loud splashes as they threw their guns in the river.

'Abeg, no kill us, o! We don throw way we guns. No kill us. We all be Nigerians. Abeg, we all be brothers. We be one people. We take God beg you.' I led the way as some of us boarded their boat. It was cramped when we fitted in. Some of them were lying face down under the seats. Others knelt down with their hands in the air. The white man cowered in the far corner of the front. I ignored him for a moment. 'Who said we are brothers?' They didn't have to answer. They all turned to look at a dark, burly mopol who was on his knees. He looked at me in terror.

'Abeg, sir, na me.'

'Where are you from?' I asked.

'Nigeria, sir…' I shook my head. He knew that wasn't what I wanted to hear.

'Sorry sir, Kano State, sir.' He knew he couldn't lie. His accent indicated he was from the North.

'Hausa man.' I lowered my voice. I didn't want my anger to show. I continued slowly, 'How can you, a Hausa man, be my brother? When your people were stealing our oil money all these years, was I your brother then?' He didn't answer. I didn't expect him to. He looked away and whimpered like a little dog.

'Abeg, sir. Abeg, sir. Abeg…'

I turned to another one who was face down on the floor. He was in the navy uniform. I kicked him hard on his ribs.

‘Hey, you! Where are you from?’

‘Eh… eh… Ekiti State, sir.’ He kept his face down. He didn’t want to look at me. I squatted near him. I whispered, ‘Yoruba man, are you my brother?’ He didn’t know what to say. Again, I didn’t expect an answer. ‘My people have the oil, yet it is your people who have all the jobs in the oil companies. Your people refuse to employ my people. They say we are not qualified. Yoruba man, answer me – are my people not qualified?’

‘Yes sir, dem over qualify sir.’ I laughed and got on my feet again.

I turned to the white man. His pink face was a blotchy and sweaty mess. Sweat plastered his thin, fair hair to his big head, and highlighted, starkly, how large his ears were. He wasn’t really fat, but had a stomach that fell odiously over his jeans. His breathing was loud, wheezing and heaving. I interpreted it as fear.

‘Oyibo, what is your name?’ I asked.

‘B…Brian.’ More wheezing, more heaving.

‘Brian who?’

‘Manning. Brian Manning.’

I gently poked his stomach repeatedly with my finger. He tried, shuddered each time I touched him. By the second poke, he tried, stupidly, to suck his stomach in. I laughed.

‘Mr Brian Manning, money from our oil has made you fat, hasn’t it?’ It was not a question. Manning’s bloated stomach could have been caused by anything else, but between heaves, he nodded sheepishly and agreed with me. It was settled. Oil money from the Niger Delta was the cause of Manning’s fat gut. I smiled humourlessly at Manning, and stretched my hand to him.

‘Come with me,’ I said.

Chapter 2
Tubo
Port Harcourt, 2003

I was late for the emergency meeting on purpose. I thought I should let them stew before I got there. I paused at the door of the conference room. The meeting had already started inside. I checked the time. 1.49p.m. I was nineteen minutes late. Good. I knocked on the door but didn't wait for an answer as I pushed it open and limped leisurely inside the room. They stopped talking when they saw me. They were all there. Omole, the balding idiot from Administration & Personnel; Bianchi, the smooth rogue from Procurement & Logistics; De Meer from Exploration who only loved teenage girls; and Lacroix, the gentleman drunkard from Production. I also despised Mustapha, Head of Security, not because he was an ex-policeman with a corrupt and violent past, but because he was dumb enough to act like he was still in the Police force. The final person was the big man himself, Granger, the new Head of Operations and General Manager of Imperial Oil in Nigeria.

'Mr Joseph, you are late. We've been waiting for you…' Omole began reprimanding me in his nasal drone. He was my immediate boss, also a recent appointment. In my view, he was an unfortunate appointment. Granger shut him up with a raised arm, and then waved me to a seat. He had no patience with Omole's histrionics. He turned to me and called me by my Christian name.

'Peter, what do you have for us?'

'Well,' I began. 'Contrary to earlier reports...' I glanced at Mustapha here. 'Mr Manning was kidnapped by about twenty or twenty-five men, and not sixty. There was no exchange of gunfire. Manning's security simply surrendered.' At this, everyone except Granger shot worried looks at Mustapha. He squirmed. I enjoyed it immensely. I let the silence hang for a while before I continued. 'They did not shoot at the kidnappers. They did not injure any of the kidnappers. The kidnappers did not threaten to

attack Asiama Base Camp.' Another pause, before I concluded. 'Mr Manning was kidnapped by the AFA led by Doye Koko.' They looked at me with the question in their eyes. The name was not familiar. 'He is popularly known as Doughboy.' They nodded in immediate recognition. Everyone had heard of Doughboy.

Omole started again. 'He can't do this. He can't keep doing this. This is a –'

'He has done it, Mr Omole,' De Meer cut in.

Mustapha tried to redeem himself and his department. 'We will increase the security for all our boats immediately. We will do the same for Asiama Base Camp. I think we should report the matter to the authorities immediately. I believe they may apprehend Doughboy and…'

'With all due respect, Mr Mustapha, the authorities can't even find their own asses in a toilet.' Granger wasn't suffering fools today. 'Yes we will report to them, but we will take our own steps to get Manning back.' He looked at me. 'I believe this is not the first time something like this has happened?'

I did not need notes for the information I passed on. 'In the past three years, Doughboy has been credited with eleven kidnappings involving eighteen Imperial Oil expatriate staff. The most recent was in January when he snatched Tanowitz, Morris and Betsen. As usual, Doughboy made a list of demands including the obligatory call for all oil companies especially Imperial Oil, to leave the Niger Delta, and Asiama in particular. As usual, all we did was to pay a ransom, secretly of course, for their release and as usual, the government somehow got the credit for their safe return.' Granger nodded.

'Hmm... So what you are saying, Peter is that we have to pay a ransom for Manning?'

I was a veteran in Imperial Oil. Here, administrative screw-ups were the norm. I knew what ideas I could safely suggest. This was not one of them.

'What I'm saying, sir is that the company has a history of paying ransoms for the release of kidnapped staff.' And with that, the ball of shit was back in Granger's court, where it rightly belonged. Granger smiled quickly at me. The old bastard knew what I had done, but didn't seem to mind.

He hit his palms on the table. ‘Okay, any alternative ideas on how to get Manning back?’

Realistically, there were none. We all knew it. We also understood that Granger had to ask the question anyway. We would have all done the same given his position. After what seemed like a long minute, time during which we acted appropriately and pretended to think, Granger rapped the table again.

‘Okay, we’ll pay a ransom. I know, Doughboy hasn’t said how much he wants, but, do you have a rough idea? Peter, how much do you estimate we are talking about?’

‘I can’t really say, sir,’ I replied. ‘For Tanowitz and the others, we paid about seven million each.’ Granger exhaled and shook his head. I knew he was still acting. Seven million naira was pocket change for an oil company operating in Nigeria. Ransoms, compensation payments, payoffs, you name it, were all factored into the yearly operating budget, and yet the profits that is the officially declared profits remained impressive. Granger turned to me again.

‘Okay. Now we have a ballpark figure. How do we contact eh…Mr Doughboy? Peter, I heard somewhere that he was a friend of yours or something?’ Now it was my turn to squirm. Mustapha smirked.

‘We were childhood friends, sir. Over time, we’ve drifted apart.’

‘So you can’t be our go-between to him?’

‘Doye, sorry, Doughboy and I are not on speaking terms, sir. I doubt that I can be an influence.’

‘So, who was our go-between when he snatched Tanowitz and co.?’

‘Dr Amaibi Akassa, sir,’ Mustapha blurted out. Mustapha just couldn’t help himself as he continued, ‘I believe he is also a friend of Mr Joseph.’

I couldn’t hate Mustapha any more than I did at that moment. Or so I thought. Omole almost snapped his head as he turned to me. He looked at me as though he had just been told that I was sleeping with his wife. The fact that Amaibi and I were old friends was news only to Omole and Granger. Granger was poker-faced.

‘Peter, another old friend of yours?’

‘Childhood friend, sir,’ I replied as calmly as I could. ‘Doye Koko, Amaibi Akassa, Kaniye Rufus and I grew up together in Asiama, sir.’ I had

quickly decided it was better if they also heard of Kaniye from me instead of from Mustapha. Granger cocked his head quizzically.

‘Kaniye Rufus is, was, a lawyer, sir. He is the one who represented those fishermen in the ‘97 oil spill case, sir.’

‘Hmm,’ said Granger.

‘Sleeping with the enemy, aren’t you, Mr Joseph?’ sneered Omole. As usual, my buffoon of a new boss was theatrical about things he had no understanding of.

‘Like I said, they were my childhood friends’ sir, but we have drifted apart in recent years.’ This wasn’t exactly true, but what the hell? I continued, ‘Besides, sir, as the Public and Community Relations Officer of this company, I think it is to the company’s advantage that I have a wide variety of contacts. I simply cannot function effectively without these contacts.’ This was true.

Amaibi was an environmental consultant and activist, a lecturer at the State University, and one of the most brilliant scientific minds in the country. He had a Ph.D. in Petroleum Geosciences from Imperial College, London, by the time he was twenty-six. He had the obligatory bookish air and glasses of most nerds, except that he was dapper. Usually, he was a placid fellow, except when he was talking and writing about what he called ‘the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta’; which was often. His lectures, interviews and addresses had become mini sermons where he railed, in his quiet methodical way, either against oil companies and their operating methods in Nigeria, or against the government for their incompetence and corruption. To oil companies and the government, Amaibi was, in many ways, more dangerous than the likes of Doughboy. He was respected, informed, articulate, and always had a platform to rage from. He had testified twice as an expert against oil companies in two oil spill cases, rubbishing the testimony of the opposing experts in the process. The judge awarded a huge compensation verdict in one case. In the other, the company wisely decided to settle the claim in the middle of the trial. Oil companies learned to be scared of him as a result.

In 1997, there was a spill from one of Imperial’s pipelines into the Asiama River. Amaibi wrote a damning report, organised a group of fishermen, and got Kaniye to sue on behalf of the fishermen, for one billion naira. I still remember the panic in Imperial Oil when we received the papers and saw the report. Lacroix blanched and stayed sober for

almost a week. De Meer, in his accent, repeatedly called Amaibi a *'fooking bastard'*. Within two weeks, Imperial settled for seventy-five million naira. By Imperial's standard this was a record. Imperial was renowned for its reluctance to pay any compensation for spills. In that instance, the company got off lightly, only because of me.

I had been on the team that negotiated with Kaniye. He had initially held out for more knowing that he had us, literally, by the balls. But I went one better than him and began spreading rumours among his clients saying that he was stalling the negotiations because Imperial had bribed him. Welcome to public and community relations, Imperial Oil style. They were poor fishermen and were being offered more money than they could ever dream of. They ordered Kaniye to cut a deal at seventy-five million or find himself other clients.

I returned my mind to the present. Granger's face was still inscrutable. Omole didn't bother to hide his hostility. Mustapha sat looking smug like a swollen toad. I was riled now.

'And, Mr Mustapha seems to have forgotten that during the Tanowitz incident, Doughboy refused to receive the ransom from any of us, or any of the government people. He asked for, and I quote, sir, "*a respected neutral party from the Struggle*". After all our suggestions on whom that person should be, Doughboy finally agreed on Dr Amaibi Akassa. I had to go to the State University and convince Dr. Akassa, in spite of his profound dislike for Imperial Oil, to deliver the ransom for us. After that, Doughboy called him and told him where Tanowitz and the others could be picked up. If not for Dr. Akassa –'

'I admit that Mr Joseph's contacts have benefited this company,' Mustapha cut in. 'But, his friendships may have hindered his appreciation of some facts. For example, the fact that Doughboy and Dr. Akassa possibly orchestrated the Tanowitz kidnapping, and Dr. Akassa was just acting out a script. I have security reports which show that Dr. Akassa has advocated the use of violence as a means of solving crises in the Niger Delta. My security reports also show that Dr. Akassa may have benefited financially from the ransom paid to Doughboy. The friendship…'

Mustapha made friendship sound like a dirty word.

'The friendship between Doughboy, Dr. Akassa and Mr Joseph is –'

'Security reports?' I snorted, and threw my hands in the air in disbelief. 'Published rumours you mean?' Mustapha exhaled sharply. I

knew my words were a low blow, but hey, who said Peter Tubo Joseph fought fair? I continued, calmer this time.

‘Is it the same security report which told us that Manning was kidnapped by sixty men, and only after a fierce exchange of gunfire? And yet the mopol and navy could not account for the loss of their guns.’ Mustapha now looked like he had been kicked in the stomach. I wasn’t finished. ‘Is it the same security report which told us that Doughboy and the AFA were on their way to attack Asiama Base Camp?’ Mustapha licked his thick lips nervously. He was in a corner. ‘Is it the same security report which –’

At that point, Granger raised his hand and called a truce. He allowed himself a small smile. I suspected on another day, he may have wanted it to go on for a bit longer. Mustapha was barely managing to cling on to the ropes.

‘Gentlemen, let’s focus on poor Manning, okay?’ Granger said.

We all smiled at the description. Manning was anything but poor. He was an arrogant, obnoxious bully, and a little more than a racist thug. No one, not even the white men, liked him. Though nobody said it, we all probably thought that if anyone deserved to be kidnapped, it was Manning.

‘Okay, people, let’s get things rolling. Peter, can you call this Dr. Akassa character? Let’s see your famous persuasive skills. Maybe, we can use him like the last time.’ As he spoke, he pushed the phone on the desk towards me.

Chapter 3
Amaibi
Port Harcourt, 2003

My phone rang. I was in my office, having finished a class twenty minutes ago. As usual, a small crowd of students followed me into my office, captivated by the myth of my legend and the passion of my lectures. I always viewed them with a mixture of unease and suspicion, the reluctant Pied Piper, never completely sure why they flocked to me. I admit though the hero-worship was nice on some days. This was not one of those days. I was wondering how to politely tell them to get lost when my phone rang. I looked at the caller ID. I didn't recognise the number. The phone rang again. I cleared my throat gently, 'Erm…erm, why don't you all come back sometime tomorrow? I've got a very important call to take.' I'm a poor liar and it showed. The disappointment on their faces also made me feel bad. The phone rang again. As they began filing out, I answered the phone.

'Hello,'

'Amaibi! Amaibi, my man!' A familiar voice boomed in my ear.

'Tubo?'

'Yes, yes, yes, it's me. How are you, Amaibi? How now? How body? How life?'

Tubo was a fast, animated, impetuous talker. In his usual way, he began blasting his rapid fire questions without waiting for answers.

'I'm fine, Tubo.' I managed to put in.

'Where are you? Are you at school? How are those university chicks? Hope you have stopped slacking. All those sweet university chicks and you are slacking, I don't know what your problem is. You are no longer married, you know? I despair for you, my friend. Only God knows why I'm not a lecturer. What I would have done with all those chicks…'

I shook my head and smiled. Tubo had not changed. One quick hello and the man had already started talking of my failed marriage. I imagined Tubo as a lecturer. I was aghast at the implications.

‘I’ve got to visit you at school one day, you know? So I can get to see all those girls and remind you of how it’s done. You’ve got to move on with your life, Amaibi. It’s over between you and Dise.’

‘Thanks for your sympathy, my friend,’ I said a little testily.

‘Sure. Sure. Sure. Anytime.’ he replied. Sarcasm was lost on Tubo. I heard him clear his throat. The real reason for the call was coming.

‘Erm… Amaibi, there’s something I want to discuss with you. It’s a bit delicate to talk about it over the phone, but, erm…’

I made it easy for him. Besides, I was a busy man. ‘Tubo, I was expecting your call. Is it about today’s kidnapping?’ I heard Tubo’s sharp intake of breath.

‘How did you know? It’s only a few hours old. We’ve not put it on the news yet.’

‘Doye called me.’

‘He did?’

‘I’m not interested, Tubo. I’ve already told Doye that and…’

‘Hey! Hey! Hey! Don’t make any hasty decisions, Amaibi, please. You know Doye is a mad man and his boys are even crazier. They can do something stupid to our oyibo.’

‘I don’t care about your white man, Tubo. Just as your company didn’t care about the victims of the ‘97 Crises.’ There was a lump in my throat. I turned towards a framed picture of Dise which was still on my table. She was smiling broadly, her mischievous smile. I touched the picture gently. I kept putting off the decision to remove the picture. After all these years, the pain of it all was still fresh.

There was a long moment of silence. Bringing up 1997 had shut even Tubo up. But not for long. His voice was subdued when he continued.

‘We can’t live in the past forever, Amaibi. 1997 was bad for everybody; Imperial too, even if you won’t believe it. We’ve learned from it and we are changing. McCulloch is gone and Granger, the new man, is a better person. Imperial is now more responsive to the needs of its host communities, especially Asiama. We are partnering with them for peace and progress. We –’

‘Save the propaganda for the media, Tubo,’ I cut him.

‘Please Amaibi, Please. Okay. Okay. Okay. Even if Imperial is shit, the scum of the earth, or whatever – help this white man because of our

friendship. Do it as a favour to me, and not because of Imperial.'

'Tubo, your concern for the life of one oyibo is touching. What about the people who died in 1997? What about the lives of the Asiama people who are dying prematurely because of Imperial's flaring? What about them, Tubo? Aren't you concerned about them?'

'I'm sorry, Amaibi.' The contrition in his voice sounded genuine, but I knew Tubo better.

'Why don't you take the money to Doye, yourself? Isn't he also your friend?'

'Come on, Amaibi, you know Doye and I have history. The bastard might just shoot me if he sees me.'

Now, that was true. I chuckled in spite of myself. Tubo laughed. The seriousness of the moment was lost. Tubo's begging didn't fool me. He had no compunction about grovelling to get what he wanted. Also, I realised I was wasting my time trying to make him feel guilty. Tubo was shamelessly amoral, in a charming way. It was apt that he worked for a company as despicable as Imperial. Just as I hadn't been fooled by him, Tubo hadn't been fooled by me. He knew I was a kind-hearted person and that he only had to beg long enough. Suddenly I felt very tired. I didn't want to hear Tubo beg any more. I sighed.

'Okay, Tubo. I'll do it.'

Seven days later, they were waiting for me. I smiled to myself as I saw them. On another day, I would have filled forms and gone through several security checks just to get into the gates of Imperial Oil in Port Harcourt. On another day I would be treated like one of the many contractors, con men, mistresses and unemployed, who milled at the gates of every oil company in Port Harcourt. Today was no ordinary day. They were waiting for me at the gate of Imperial Oil. As I stepped out of my car, into the weak mid-morning sunshine, they began walking slowly towards me. There were four of them. Tubo led the way, walking, or rather, limping faster ahead of them. He was beaming, and his arms were spread out. I smiled back and was surprised at how nice it felt to see my friend again.

'Small professor!' He bear-hugged me.

'Unfortunate oyibo,' I replied.

Although he didn't mind, I was always sensitive about calling Tubo an unfortunate oyibo. He even called himself that. The politically correct description for Tubo is mixed-race. Not that most people in Asiama ever cared about political correctness. The more familiar terms were 'half-caste' or 'mulatto', and those were considered respectful. 'Unfortunate oyibo' and 'born-throway' were the real derogatory terms.

'You are still adding weight.' I observed.

'Good living, my friend. Good living.' he said, rubbing his stomach.

Tubo is portly, and about my height – somewhere between short and medium. He now sported fashionable stubble over his cheeks and chin. He had a permanent limp because he was born with his left leg smaller than his right. As usual, he was the first to make fun of himself, and his 'one and a half leg' as he described it. So he nicknamed himself 'one-point-five'.

I noticed that his hair went well with the stubble. 'What's with the afro?' I inquired. 'Aren't you a little too old for it?'

'At thirty-three? Are you joking? Besides, it has done wonderful things for my already enormous sex appeal. The chicks just love to touch it, which gives me opportunities to touch them back.'

He nudged me and smiled. I laughed in spite of myself. I was still laughing when he introduced me to a balding, light skinned officious looking man with a limp handshake. His name was Omole. He barely mumbled a greeting because he was red and stiff with disapproval. He had overheard Tubo's joke. For some unknown reason, I felt Tubo was pleased that Omole was frowning. The next person I met was a thickset dark man with a familiar face. I recognised his name Mustapha, head of security. He pumped my hand vigorously and gave me an ingratiating smile that was obviously false. His shifty eyes watched my every move suspiciously. Granger's blue eyes also missed nothing. But they held respect, not suspicion. He looked like he was in his late fifties, tall, white haired, bearded and tanned. What was most impressive about him was that he clicked fingers with me, Nigeria style, as we shook hands.

'I hope your ride here wasn't stressful?' His voice was a soft and raspy; the accent was American, with a very slight trace of a South-western drawl. I had met and schooled with many Texans. I could identify them anywhere.

‘It was okay, thank you,’ I replied. I took off my glasses and went through the motions of cleaning them. I usually did this when I didn’t really feel like talking. We all piled into the white Toyota Hilux pickup truck which was waiting. Granger got in through the driver’s door. I got in through the front passenger’s side. Tubo, Omole and Mustapha squeezed in at the back.

‘We are really grateful that you are doing this for us, Dr. Akassa,’ Granger continued as he started driving. ‘If there’s any way we can show our appreciation, we’ll be glad to…’

‘Well,’ I started, cutting him off. I felt a twinge of conscience for being rude. ‘How about if Imperial Oil stops gas flaring in Asiama? How about that for a start, eh?’ I killed the bonhomie in the car with those words. Granger smiled sadly. His voice went softer, soothing.

‘I appreciate your frustration over this issue. As you know, the federal government has issued a 2004 flares-out deadline to oil companies.’

‘Give me some credit, Mr Granger. You and I are aware that no oil company can meet that deadline. The government is going to move it to, say 2008, or even beyond.’

‘You are better informed than I give you credit for. All I can say is that Imperial Oil, along with the other major oil companies, has made a commitment to end gas flaring in the near future. We hope –’

‘Please forgive me, Mr Granger, but that is nonsense. Why isn’t Imperial flaring gas in Venezuela or in Libya?’ I felt bad about cutting him off again. It wasn’t very good manners. But, I continued. ‘Besides, Mr Granger, since 1984, general gas flaring is illegal, but may be allowed for in certain oil fields for which a ministerial certificate must be issued. I asked Mr McCulloch, your predecessor, if Imperial Oil has a ministerial certificate to flare gas in the Asiama Field. As I recall, he refused to give me an answer. So, I will appreciate it if you could answer the question for me, Mr Granger. Does Imperial Oil have a ministerial certificate allowing it to flare gas in the Asiama Field?’ There was an uncomfortable silence in the car. Granger looked away, and concentrated on the road. After a few seconds, he exhaled slowly.

‘Dr. Akassa, I won’t win an argument with you. So I’ll try not to be drawn into one. We are really grateful for your help in this difficult time. The Niger Delta has many problems, Dr. Akassa. It is my personal wish

that, somehow, in spite of our differences, we can work together to solve some of them.' He managed another smile at me.

We pulled into the Administration Building, got out and walked briskly through till they ushered me into a plush conference room. Three men were already there, seated and waiting for us. The first two were dressed in the traditional attire of the riverine people of these parts. One wore a simple *etibo*; the other was flashier, with a crisp *woko*, and colourful kerchief in the front pocket, chain-linked gold studs on the upper chest area, a panama hat, and an intricately carved walking stick. I recognised the flashy *woko*. His name was Chief Dumo Ikaki, a member of the Asiama Council of Chiefs. More importantly, he was also an influential politician in the state, bagging political appointments in every administration. Currently, he was the special adviser to the Governor on special duties, one of those nebulous positions created solely to reward political patronage. Chief Ikaki and I had never met before, even though we were from the same town. That did not stop him from ambling his considerable bulk round the table, and hugging me like a long lost child. He was a politician after all. I forced myself not to recoil.

Granger smiled and said that he was pleased that I had such a warm relationship with the government's representative. I wasn't introduced to the *etibo* presumably because he was just Chief Ikaki's aide. The third man wore a safari suit and was introduced to me as Wali. Granger's failure to tell me who Wali was, meant only one thing. Wali was in the government's security service. As if to prove it, he scowled at me. He was a big man, very dark, with a small head, large eyes and a tiny, bitter mouth. There was something sinister about him.

When we settled down, the *etibo* brought out a medium-sized leather bag from behind their chairs. He put it on the table with almost a reverential air. Chief Ikaki opened the bag, looked at the contents. When he seemed satisfied, he pushed the bag across the table towards Granger. 'Five million naira,' he said melodramatically. 'Our contribution to…' He waved both hands like an opera conductor, looked embarrassed, and trailed off his words. Mustapha struggled with another bag. He managed to lift it up on the table. It was much bigger and heavier than the government's bag. I watched them all stare intently at it. Breathing hard, Mustapha regained his seat. Tubo stood up. He looked at Granger. Granger gave him a slight nod. Tubo patted the bag lightly but did not open it.

Tubo faced Chief Ikaki, and said quietly. ‘Ten million.’ The ransom was fifteen million naira. The government and Imperial Oil were both putting up the ransom. For the millionth time in my life, an aberration had become the norm in Nigeria.

Tubo turned to me. ‘Would you rather count all the money?’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘What’s the point? You are not paying it to me, remember? They will count it.’

‘Where are you going to dwop the money for them?’

It was Wali. It was more of a demand than a question. Apart from his inability to pronounce ‘r’, he had a strange, almost squeaky voice. Everyone looked at him, and then at me. They kept quiet, and an uneasy silence ensued. Like Wali, they were all curious about exactly where I was taking the money to. I faced Wali. My heart was pounding as I tried to be cheeky.

‘I’m sorry, who do you represent? I didn’t catch it the first time.’

‘Who I wepwesent doesn’t matter,’ Wali retorted with his eyes growing even bigger. ‘Just answer my question.’ Clearly, he was a man who was used to interrogation.

‘I will do no such thing, sir,’ I replied, in my best attempt to sound brave. ‘I have given my word that I will not disclose that information to anyone till after I hand over the money. The only person who will have that information is the boat captain who will take me to the place, and of course, I will only tell him where when we set off from the jetty. I can tell you all this much, I’ve been made to understand that there will be no one there, or rather, no one I can see, when I drop off the money.’ Gradually, I was losing my awe of Wali. I looked at each of them, slowly, one by one. ‘I’m afraid that is how it’s going to be gentlemen. If you don’t like it, I will leave immediately and go back to the university. I never wanted to do this in the first place. You can find yourselves someone else to carry your money, but I understand that Doughboy will not accept any other person but me.’ Then I got cocky. It is a rare trait for me. It was more of a forced show of overconfidence. I leaned back in my chair, placed both hands behind my head, and stretched my legs. I looked Wali in the eye. He returned a stare of pure hatred. It chilled me but somehow I managed to hold his gaze. ‘The drop is supposed to be in four hours. It will take me about three hours to get there.’ I glanced at my watch. ‘So, gentlemen, what’s it going to be?’

Chapter 4
Doughboy
Juju Island, 2003

Amaibi was to bring my money to *Juju* Island.

The Niger Delta is criss-crossed with several rivers, all flowing southwards with a few emptying into the Atlantic. The Asiama River is one of such, beginning its journey a few miles from the Bonny River. It starts small and narrow, like the tail end of a snake. As it winds slowly towards the ocean, its sides distend and spread out. At certain places, the river becomes distracted from its journey and some of its brown waters run off into various nameless creeks. On some of these creeks are several tiny strips of uninhabited land.

Juju Island is the biggest of them. The island was named by the Asiama people of long ago. It was rumoured that witchdoctors used the place to commune with spirits, perfect their craft, and cast spells. As a result, many people were still in awe of the place, and crossed themselves when their boats went by. I was fourteen when I came to the island for the first time. I came all on my own with my father's canoe. The mangrove trees looked thicker, foreboding. The forest sounded more alive, eerier. The sticky swamp smell was more pungent. But, apart from the mosquitoes, periwinkles, crabs, alligators, there was nothing else on the island no spirits and no witch doctors. I returned frequently over the years to meditate, to hide things, to hide myself. Now I saw *Juju* Island as my own, my private haven. From *Juju* Island, the Asiama River surges on, in elaborate crooks and turns, expanding at every mile. Then, a few hundred miles from the ocean, the curves stop, and the river suddenly opens out – the swollen head of the king cobra. The river can now sense the ocean and flows faster to meet it. The only obstruction, right in the middle of its path, is Asiama Island. The river is divided by the island. Two hydra heads are formed, but the river flows on nonetheless. It glides round the island, and finally, embraces the roaring ocean.

I was on *Juju* Island with five of my men, including Kabongo, and Snow White, Kabongo's sixteen-year old cousin. The rest had returned to Asiama. They knew I was going to pick up the money today, though they didn't know where. Usually, after a kidnapping, they went back to the Asiama on my orders, and left the task of collecting the ransom to me. We would regroup later and divide the ransom. The six of us waited for Amaibi and the money. It was about midday. There was no breeze. The white sun was fierce, the heat thick, the flies thicker. The sweat, prickly and heavy, brought no relief. We remained well hidden in the dense mangrove. We swatted sand-flies, those aerial piranhas. We cursed, frequently. They were all uneasy. Kabongo's left eye twitched spasmodically. It always happened to him when he was agitated. I ignored all of them, like I had done all day. After a while, Kabongo couldn't bear it any more. He finally summoned the courage to speak.

'Doughboy, are you sure we should take the money?' he began plaintively. 'You know, with what has happened and the trouble that may…'

My cold stare stopped him. He smiled awkwardly in shame. I glared at all of them, till they lowered their eyes. When I finally spoke, I poured as much contempt as I could muster into my voice. 'I am ashamed of all of you, especially you, Kabongo. After all these years with me, you are still afraid. Have I failed to do what I said? I said that we will take the money, and nobody can touch us. We deserve it. Whatever happened was not our fault.' I lowered my voice menacingly, 'So, the next man that questions me on this issue…' I left my uncompleted threat hanging in the air. Sometimes, it was more effective that way. I went back to ignoring them. We swatted more flies and waited.

'All dis fly in this gaddem place,' Snow White whined.

I retorted, 'Stop complaining. It could be worse. You could have been near the Thing. Imagine the flies then.' Snow White shuddered and crossed himself quickly. I felt like slapping him.

The sound of an approaching boat forced me to re-focus quickly. It was an Imperial boat, a small 10-seater. There were three people on it. Amaibi was here. We dug deeper in hiding. We watched as the boat drew hesitantly to the mangrove tree with the bright red rag tied round the middle, my signal for the safest place to berth on Juju Island.

Amaibi walked gingerly to the bow. He was struggling with a bag, one of those common ones popularly called *'Ghana-must-go'*. He squinted through his glasses at the sun, and at the island. He didn't see us. He wasn't expecting to, anyway. He took off his shoes, rolled his trousers and jumped from the boat into the knee length water. When he was satisfied that the ground underneath was firm, he called the waiting deck hand to pass him the bag. He told the captain to wait for him. They watched him walk into *Juju* Island.

I waited till he got on dry land, and out of the sight of the boat. I was about twenty feet away. He still couldn't see me. My instructions had been for him to simply drop the money on dry land, out of reach of the tide, and leave immediately. Those instructions were about to change. 'Amaibi' My voice was a harsh whisper. He jerked in fright. He turned round rapidly, looking for the source of the sound. 'Amaibi, it's me.'

'Doye?' He spun wildly again.

'Yes, it's me. Stop turning round and round.' He stopped. I directed him, 'Now, turn left slowly, there, there, back a bit, okay. Now, walk forward towards the little clearing in front of you.' We came out of the bushes. Amaibi had dropped the bag, and was holding both hands high above his head. Kabongo and the others were pointing their rifles at him. I smiled at the sight of Amaibi shivering in the heat.

'D... Doye, I didn't expect to see you,' Amaibi said. 'The money is in the bag. Fifteen million naira. I want to go now.'

I shook my head and continued smiling. 'Not until we count it. Besides, we need to talk.' I nodded to two of my men. They went to Amaibi and the money. He cringed as they searched him roughly. Snow White pushed him forward towards me, Kabongo grabbed the bag.

Amaibi pleaded, 'Tell your boys to stop pointing those things at me.' I gestured to them and they lowered their guns.

'You and you,' I pointed, making sure I included Snow White for griping about the flies. 'Go and bring the Thing.' Their faces fell. I frowned in response. 'Hurry up,' I added angrily as they slunk away. I turned my baleful look to the other two. They recoiled. After a long moment, I said, 'You two, count the money. If you steal anything…' They obeyed eagerly.

I faced Amaibi again. 'Amaibi, relax. I'm not going to hurt you.' I walked to him, slapped him playfully on his face like I used to do when

we were younger. Amaibi shrunk back. I sneered at him. When we were younger, he would have punched my shoulder in return. ‘Fear fear man,’ I said, slapping him again. ‘You have to take something back to Imperial Oil with you.’

‘What is it?’ he mumbled.

‘Oh, you’ll see,’ I smiled and nodded slowly. ‘You’ll see. They’ve gone to bring it.’ We waited in silence for the Thing. Apart from the forest sounds, the only thing we heard was the excited whispers of my men as they counted the money. The atmosphere was disconcerting for Amaibi. He fidgeted. He slapped off sand-flies. He didn’t look at me. I decided to distress him a bit more.

‘So...’ I began with my biggest smile, ‘How is Dise?’ He frowned, stiffened, but didn’t say anything. ‘Seriously, Amaibi how is Dise, your wife?’ My tone was noticeably softer, but it didn’t hide my scorn. He inhaled deeply, gloom etched on his face.

‘I guess she’s fine.’ I felt no sympathy for him.

‘I’m telling you this as an old friend. Amaibi, you messed up big time. How could you lose Dise? What happened? Were you too busy organising rallies to be a husband?’ He groaned and shook his head slowly. He lowered himself to sit on the ground. He took off his glasses, squinted up at me, and shook his head again,

‘You won’t understand, Doye.’

I was still not impressed. I waved an arm dismissively and wrinkled my nose. ‘Whatever. Your loss should be someone else’s gain.’

That was when we smelled the Thing. Amaibi sniffed repeatedly. He jerked his head rapidly from side to side.

‘Can you smell anything? My God, what’s that nauseating stench?’

I smiled in spite of the smell. ‘You’ll see...’ The smell grew and enveloped us like a thick, filthy blanket. We heard the rustling of the bush, and the cursing of my men. We also heard the increasingly louder buzz of the flies. Minutes later, my men burst into the clearing. They were carrying the Thing between them. The flies droned on angrily everywhere. They settled on all of us like a dense plague. Everyone twisted and turned as they beat them off with little success. Even though my skin was alive and crawling, I didn’t bother doing any of that. There was little point. With little ceremony, they dropped the Thing in the middle of the clearing.

Amaibi turned away. I grabbed him by the back of his neck and forcefully pulled him to his feet.

'Get up, stupid fear fear man,' I snarled. 'Take a good look at what you are taking back to Imperial Oil.' I twisted his head towards the Thing. He squeezed his eyes shut. I slapped him hard across his face. I slapped him again. Still he refused to open his eyes. I whispered fiercely in his ear, 'Open your eyes, Amaibi, or I'll shoot you!' He opened them slowly, reluctantly. Through the shroud of flies, he saw the bloated, grey and decomposing body of Brian Manning. Amaibi vomited violently at my feet. He went down on his hands and knees in his mess. My hand still clutched the back of his shirt. 'Oyibo people are uglier when they die. Did you know that, Amaibi? This ugly bastard died seven days ago, on the day we kidnapped him. Just like that. We didn't touch him. We didn't kill him. He had some sort of seizure, and that was that.'

I squatted on my haunches beside him, and patted his back. 'You are going to take him back to Imperial Oil.' Amaibi wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and shook his head.

'No. Doye, no.'

There were tears in his eyes and snot in his nose. He was still on his hands and knees, head hung down. I spoke quietly, but with an edge in my voice.

'Why are you crying, Amaibi? Were they crying for us in '97? Ehn, Amaibi, answer me. After 1997, weren't you the one who always wrote, and I quote, "*violence is now a justified option for dealing with the injustice in the Niger Delta*?" This is violence, Amaibi. So, stop whimpering like a child.'

'Not like this, Doye. Not like this.' He continued shaking his head. 'Why didn't you tell Imperial Oil that the man was dead? Why…'

'For someone with a Ph.D., that is a foolish question,' I retorted. 'If I had told them, would they have paid me my money? Answer that, Dr. Amaibi Akassa.' I said the last part with a sneer in my voice.

'Give me back the money, Doye. Please…'

'Shut up, you educated idiot!' I stood up and dragged Amaibi's shirt to pull him to his feet. Some buttons tore off, but Amaibi remained on his knees. 'Get up, Amaibi. Get up and take this fat bastard to Imperial Oil. We didn't kill him, but frankly, I don't care if they believe that. The

money stays with me. I believe my men and I have earned it.' I pulled him up to his feet. He was still shaking his head like he was in a trance.

'This is going to be big trouble, Doye,' he said in a small voice.

I lowered my voice. 'You know your problem, Amaibi? You were always too soft and too sensitive about other people's feelings. You can never lead people like that.' I held his shoulders and shook him gently. 'Look at me, Amaibi. What happened to this oyibo is neither your fault nor your business. Get a hold of yourself and stop crying. It's not going to change anything, now, is it? Go back, Amaibi. My men will help you carry the body to the boat.' Child-like, Amaibi cleaned his tears and snot with the back of his hand. He bowed his head and remained staring at the ground. He didn't say anything more. I put an arm around my friend's shaking shoulders and led him gently to the river.

Chapter 5
Deola
Port Harcourt, 2004

The taxi, blue with a white trim, stopped me in a busy parking lot in front of a big, leafy, compound. I looked round for a signpost. The only one I saw declared the place to be a restaurant called Alligator Pepper. Obesere was blaring from the radio of the taxi. The driver, a tribal-marked Yoruba man, stopped nodding to the beat and lowered the music. He turned round to look at me.

‘Sister, this na the place.’

‘Are you sure this is the place? I think I’m looking for a law firm, not a restaurant.’

‘This na 17 Macaulay Street, G. R. A.’ The driver pointed to a small plaque on the fence with the number 17 clearly written on it. I checked the slip of paper in my hand again. It confirmed 17 Macaulay Street, G. R .A. I nodded but I still wasn’t convinced.

‘Sorry, sir, but are you sure this is Macaulay Street?

The driver laughed. ‘Sister, I be taxi driver for Port Harcourt for more than fifteen years now. This na Macaulay Street.’

Unlike him, I had been in Port Harcourt for a few months. I couldn’t argue with him about the geography of the city. So I paid him and got out of the taxi. He called out after me. ‘Make I wait for you? In case this no be the place.’ I smiled my thanks but shook my head. He was a nice man but I couldn’t stand any more loud Fuji music.

I walked into the Alligator Pepper. It had a huge outdoor section, housed under a wide, pale green awning. The awning hung from a white one-storey building, which housed the indoor section. The floor outside was interlocked white stones. The chairs and large tables were of dark wood with bright white tablecloths and napkins. The décor was a balanced mix of indigenous furnishings and sea themes. The atmosphere was relaxed, casual. Sade softly crooned ‘King of Sorrow’ in the background.

The place was packed full. It was lunch hour. As I hesitated at the entrance, a well-dressed waiter approached me. He smiled courteously.

‘Can I find you a table?’

‘Err, I think so. Actually, I’m not sure I’m at the right place. I’m looking for a lawyer, Kaniye Rufus Esq.’ The waiter’s smile broadened.

‘You are at the right place. Please come with me.’ With that, he led as we weaved round tables to the indoor section. He ushered me to a corner table. As I sat down, he said,

‘I’ll go and get Mr Rufus. In the meantime, is there anything I can get you?’

‘No thanks,’ I smiled. The waiter left me and walked through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. The doors faced my table. Minutes later, a man strolled through them, and came straight towards me. He was dark and rangy with prominent angular shoulders. He wore a big white apron and a chef’s hat, over a fitted tee shirt, jeans and palm sandals.

‘Hello.’

He had a radio voice – deep, distinct, mellow, rich. He pulled the chair opposite me and sat down. He observed my face for a moment. Then, he glanced at my left hand. Not seeing a ring, he smiled faintly, and looked at my face again. I thought he was rude. I found myself glaring back. He smiled impishly in return.

‘You are looking for me?’

‘I hope not. I’m looking for a lawyer, one Kaniye Rufus, Esq.’

He threw his head back and laughed. A throaty, full-bellied, laugh. His awkward shoulders laughed with him. After a while, he slapped a palm on the table, and leaned closer towards me. His eyes were still laughing.

‘Since we are going to get to know each other,’ he began. ‘You must never…’ he shook his head and made a bitter face, ‘never, call me Esquire. It is the most meaningless of titles, and it is usually favoured by boring lawyers, of whom I’m not one.’ He smiled lazily, leaned back, and took off his chef’s hat to reveal a big, shiny head, which had been close shaved to disguise the fact that he was balding prematurely.

‘Please forgive my bad manners. I am Kaniye Rufus, but please call me Kaniye.’ Mischievous grin again. ‘So, my new friend, what’s your name?’ I started to retort that I was not his friend, but I thought better of it.

‘Deola Oluwagbamila,’ I said. He tried to repeat it.

‘Deola Olu…Olu...’ He popped his eyes, blew his cheeks out and smiled. ‘I give up. Your surname’s a mouthful.’

Yes, I thought, but it certainly has more of a meaning than Rufus. He suddenly became serious for the first time since I met him.

‘So, Deola, what can I do for you?’ I looked at his apron suspiciously.

‘Are you a lawyer or a chef?’ He smiled and tugged the apron.

‘Oh, this? I own this place. When I started it six years ago, I was a chef, barman, waiter, everything. Now, I have enough people, but I still love to get my hands dirty every day.’ His face went deadpan. I couldn’t tell if he was serious or joking.

‘And to answer your question,’ he continued,

‘Yes, I’m a lawyer. I’m presuming that you have a case, yes?’ I nodded.

‘Sort of.’ He shook his head.

‘I’ve not practised law in about five years. So, as much as I would like to use law as an excuse to get to know you, I’m afraid I can’t take on your case.’

I smiled. ‘It’s not my case,’ I replied. ‘It’s someone else’s. He is an inmate in the Port Harcourt Prison who was transferred here from Abuja about a month ago. His name is Amaibi Akassa. I believe he is a friend of yours.’ Kaniye blew out his cheeks again, and leaned back in his chair. He stroked his small chin beard slowly.

‘Amaibi and I go way back. We are not only friends, we were in-laws. He and my sister, Dise were... are married. They’re separated now…’ He smiled ruefully. I nodded. Amaibi talked a lot about Dise. Kaniye continued, ‘I haven’t seen Amaibi in years. We had a sharp disagreement over some issues and drifted apart. Like everyone else, I learned about his arrest in the news some months ago.’

‘Five months ago,’ I informed him. ‘After all that time, he was finally charged, this morning: conspiracy to kidnap, manslaughter, and possession of a firearm.’ Kaniye exhaled. I continued, ‘He sent me to you. He wants you to defend him.’ He laughed out loud, a forced laugh. The look on my face told him I was serious. He looked away from me for the first time and kept quiet. I could almost hear his mind grinding away. He started stroking his slight beard again, chewed his red lower lip and then shifted his focus to the menu. Then he turned to me and asked.

‘Have you had lunch?’

I strained forward because I wasn’t sure that was what I heard. ‘What’s that you said?’

‘Lunch, I said. Food, have you eaten?’

I was baffled by the sudden turn in the conversation. He was staring at me intently, waiting for an answer. ‘No,’ I replied hesitantly. I was planning to go back to my quarters for lunch. I had yesterday’s leftover rice waiting for me.

‘Good. We’ll do lunch together. My mother always believed it was better to take bad news on a full stomach.’

I began protesting. ‘I don’t think I should...’

‘Nonsense! We may not do law, but we must do lunch.’

He pointed at me, ‘Do you like Native Soup? I make the best Native Soup in Port Harcourt.’

‘I’ve never had Native Soup. *Ewedu* is more my thing. I’m Yoruba.’ He threw up his hands in mock disgust.

‘How can you live in Port Harcourt and not try Native Soup? Are you crazy or something?’

‘No. But, I’m sure *Ewedu* is a lot tastier.’ He shook his head, got up from the table and smiled.

‘Excuse me; I’m going to bring something that will make you spit at Ewedu forever.’

He marched into the kitchen. Minutes later, I had to reluctantly admit to myself that he was right, though not to the extent that I’d abandon *Ewedu* forever. Native soup was a delicious, thick soup filled with tasty seafood – soft fresh fish, crunchy snails, spicy dried fish, juicy prawns, and some other things I could not identify. He didn’t eat much. So much for taking bad news on a full stomach, I thought. After a while, he stopped, sat back and watched me eat my best meal in a long time. He beamed,

‘Eat slowly, Deola. You’ll savour it more.’

I picked up something from my plate and asked him, ‘What is this?’

‘*Ngolo*.’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t know what it’s called in English. Same with that.’ He leaned forward and pointed in my plate.’ Everyone calls it *mgbe*.’ He pointed again. ‘Those, of course, are periwinkles, commonly called *isam*.’

‘Hmm, you’re sure you cooked this yourself?’ I asked before chewing a piece of succulent fresh fish.

‘No. On the off chance that I was going to have lunch with a gorgeous woman today, I decided that to impress her, I would masquerade as a chef and pretend to have cooked the food.’

I laughed and almost choked. After drinking some water and calming down, I steered the conversation back to serious business. ‘So you are going to take on Amaibi’s case?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. But, tell me, how did you meet Amaibi?’

‘I’m a youth corper doctor, posted to this State. I’m also part of a Christian prison ministry and as a result, I visit the prison often. Whenever I go, I talk with the inmates, share the gospel, take them food, and give basic medical care for free. I met Amaibi there.’

‘I won’t mind prison if you’ll visit me regularly.’

I laughed out loud. So loud that people on some of the other tables turned to look at me. Embarrassed, I covered my mouth with my hand. ‘Do you joke about everything?’ He nodded, smiling. Then he continued,

‘Seriously, though, if you don’t mind me asking: I mean, what’s with the whole prison thing?’

‘I’m just trying to love people like God wants me to.’ He raised his eyebrows,

‘Hmm…Evangelist Deola…’

‘Yes, Kaniye Rufus Esquire?’ I replied. He smiled and raised both arms up,

‘Ah! I surrender!’ He picked up a white napkin and waved it. ‘Truce?’ I smiled and nodded my okay.

‘Regarding Amaibi...’ He drummed lightly on the table, signifying he was serious again. ‘I’ll need to see him to clarify a few issues before I decide. When is the next time you are going to the prison?’

‘Thursday afternoon, about two o’clock.’

‘That’s two days away. Can we go there together?’

‘Sure, why not?’

He smiled, ‘I’ll look forward to it.’

I smiled back, and glanced at my watch. It was time to go. ‘Thanks for a wonderful lunch, Kaniye,’ I said. I really meant it.

He winked. ‘You are delightful company, Deola. It’s been a pleasure teasing you.’ We both smiled as we prepared to stand up.

He raised a finger, ‘I almost forgot – one more thing…’

‘Yes?’

Eyes lit up, he leaned forward mischievously and whispered, ‘Go on, just admit it – Native Soup tastes a lot better than *Ewedu*, right?’ My loud burst of laughter answered his question.

Chapter 6
Amaibi
Port Harcourt, 2004

I still don't know how I got that erection. One moment I was engaged in my usual pre-dawn routine of reciting Bible verses in my mind as I waited for daylight; the next moment, I noticed I had an erection. At first I wasn't sure what it was because I had almost forgotten what an erection felt like. Oh, God, please let it be true, I thought. I got up slightly from my bed – a dirty, damp carton, and leaned back on my elbows. My heart pounded erratically in sudden tension. Apart from the disturbed snoring of condemned men, the cell was quiet. I knew it was still very early because the Moslems hadn't started their morning prayers yet. No one was up. No one could see me in the inky blackness.

Hesitantly, I touched myself to make sure it was still there. It was massive, throbbing and alive. I grinned in the darkness like an idiot, and repeatedly punched one fist in the air. Thank you, God! It was my second erection in a month, my second erection since 1997. After that day in 1997, I couldn't get it up any more. The doctors, here and abroad told me it would get better soon, that it was only caused by 'post-traumatic stress'. While I waited for their predictions to come true, Dise and I broke up. I won't talk about the several humiliating attempts to get it up by using prostitutes, and whatever flavour-of-the-moment impotence treatment drug I could get. After more than six nightmarish years, who would have thought that I'd get an erection again, in Port Harcourt Prison of all places: and they say there was no rehabilitation in a Nigerian prison.

My first erection had been three weeks ago. I remembered it with a small smile. Deola had caused it. She had been treating my leg, where the mopol had shot me when they arrested me. The wound had been poorly treated as I had been dragged from one interrogation centre to another, all over Nigeria. Deola's long, cool fingers had touched my thigh time after time, as she gently cleaned the pus from the wound. I had been wincing in pain, gritting my teeth, when suddenly, I felt it. A small flicker of life at

first, and little by little, a flame built up: then, the roaring fire. It had been too much for me. I started crying. Deola, bless her, thought I was crying because of the pain in my leg. Anyway, as I lay there that day, watching my decaying leg and the slight but victorious bulge in my trousers, I was struck by the symbolisms on my body. The first was a mark of death and defeat. The other, was a symbol of life and defiance. It had been right then, that I really decided to fight, to go down kicking. It had been right then that I told Deola to go to Kaniye. Today was Thursday. I smiled when I remembered that Deola was going to come later in the afternoon. Her visits were the highlight of my week.

Someone lying next to me stirred in the darkness and started coughing. Instinctively, I covered my nose and mouth with my hand. Tuberculosis was the flavour of the moment. I remained like that, waiting for the coughing to die down. When there was no let up, I decided to move away. I turned towards the farthest direction from the coughing. The smell of fresh faeces wafted gently from there. I knew the toilet bucket shared by all twenty-three men in the cramped cell was in that corner. Quickly, I weighed my options: smell shit or contact TB.

I crawled quietly, feeling my way in the darkness, towards the smell. I was lucky to find some unoccupied space near a wall. I sat upright and rested my bare back on the wall. It was cold. I shivered slightly, pulled my legs towards my chest, and wrapped my arms round my body. The smell of faeces was very strong now. I knew the bucket was about two feet away from me. I knew that big, fat, maggots were crawling happily on the wet floor near me.

I knew I had to focus my mind on something or else I would go mad from smelling all that shit. I closed my eyes. Slowly, I willed my nose to stop smelling. I forced my flesh to stop crawling. Reluctantly, it obeyed. I drifted off to another place, a place of happy memories – I thought of Dise.

I stared at the silhouette of a man. The man stood, legs apart, at the door of the cell. I couldn’t see his face because the light from the corridor was behind his back. Also, I wasn’t wearing my glasses. However, there

was something familiar in his stance. Then, I noticed his distinct shoulders. There was only one person with those sharp shoulders. Kaniye.

‘Amaibi Akassa!’ He peered in through the bars at the miserable humanity in the cell. ‘Is Amaibi Akassa here?’

‘Pastor!’ someone called out my prison nickname. ‘Person dey find you.’ Slowly, I got to my feet. I carefully pulled my glasses from my pocket and put them on.

‘Oh God,’ Kaniye muttered softly as he saw me. I nodded in agreement. I didn’t need a mirror to know what I looked like. I hobbled gingerly over tightly packed sweaty bodies to the bars. I held steel with both hands to steady myself. I was about eighteen inches away from Kaniye. For a moment, we stared at each other through the cage. His face was inscrutable. ‘Well, go on, say it,’ I said shamefacedly. Kaniye lit up one of his familiar mischievous smiles, and shrugged,

‘Okay, since you insist...’ He wrinkled his nose, ‘You smell like shit. Your beard…you look like Ojukwu.’

I smiled in spite of myself. ‘Not that, you fool. I mean, say “I told you so” and all that…’ He smiled again.

‘Oh that? Maybe later.’ He leaned forward and held the same bars as me. Then tentatively, he put his hands over mine, and gently squeezed them. We continued staring. There was so much to say. And there were no words to say them.

‘You came with Deola?’ I asked after a while. He nodded, winked and glanced over his shoulder.

‘Yeah I did. I think that chick is weird. Why would she want to visit this Godforsaken place on a regular basis? Anyway, she’ll be along soon. She said she wanted to give us time to catch up. She’s treating someone in the first cell down the corridor.’ He tightened his grip on my hands, and briefly got serious. ‘It’s good to see you, Amaibi,’ I nodded. ‘Though not like this,’ he added. I nodded again.

‘I called Dise this morning,’ he said watching me closely.

There was a sudden tightness in my chest. My mouth went dry. ‘H… How is she?’ Even my voice sounded different.

‘She’s okay.’ Kaniye shrugged again, ‘She’s still in Lagos. I didn’t tell her I was coming here. I wanted to see you first, before saying anything.’

A long suppressed plea suddenly escaped from my heart. ‘I know this is totally inappropriate but, please, can you convince Dise to see me the next time she’s in Port Harcourt?’ Kaniye studied me for a while.

‘Are you sure that is wise?’

‘Please, Kaniye, I beg you in the name of God. I need to see Dise. I know she’ll listen to you. You have no idea what this place is like. I’m going mad here.’ I knew I was being shamelessly desperate, but I didn’t care. Prison had killed all my pride. He raised both palms up to calm me.

‘I’ll see what I can do, Amaibi, but I’m not making any promises.’ I nodded rapidly and stuttered my thanks. He lowered his voice to a whisper, ‘Anyway, what happened to your leg?’

‘One of the mopols shot me during my arrest,’ I whispered back. Kaniye winced,

‘Why? Were you resisting arrest or simply speaking too much grammar?’

I smiled and shook my head. ‘You know how enthusiastic they can be about killing an ant with a sledgehammer. They came to my house very early one morning, almost a squadron of them. They smashed down my door commando-style. They arrested me…in bed. I didn’t resist. They beat me up. I didn’t resist. Then, they shot me. I still don’t know why. For months, I was interrogated and tortured by the police and the state security people, in Abuja, Kaduna and Maiduguri. They accused me of working with Doye. Now, they’ve charged me with kidnapping, manslaughter and possession of weapons.’ I handed him the court papers. ‘It’s all a set-up. I swear to God, Kaniye, I’m innocent. You know me…’ I stopped when Kaniye rolled his eyes. It hurt me.

‘Please don’t give me that look, Kaniye. You know me better than most people. You’ve known me all my life. The fact that after 1997, I wrote, or said a few silly things doesn’t mean that I’m a violent person…’

He smiled sadly, ‘You still don’t get it, do you? One doesn’t necessarily have to be violent to align his politics with Doye’s, or publicly approve of his madness.’

I shook my head. ‘You won’t understand, Kaniye. We were hurt... I was hurt. I was just lashing out, albeit foolishly.’ Kaniye eyed me suspiciously, but thankfully, didn’t make a wisecrack. I continued trying to mollify him, ‘Okay, look, you warned me about Doye. I should have listened to you. And I’m really sorry for everything and what it cost our

friendship. I'm also sorry Dise and I broke up. I know you don't know what happened, because Dise and I agreed not to talk to anyone about it. But I feel that somehow, you blame me for the whole mess.' Here I remembered Tubo's words and used them, 'We can't live in the past forever. I'm hoping that somehow, you'll forgive me enough to defend me in court. I need you to represent me, Kaniye.' He blew his cheeks and turned away. 'Please, Kaniye…'

'Why me, Amaibi? I've not practised law in a long time. I don't have an office, books or law reports. I can't even remember where I dumped my wig and gown. Why not get some other lawyer, maybe even a Senior Advocate?' He paused and smiled cheekily, 'For example, your father-in-law, Sir James, SAN.' We both laughed.

'I can't imagine your father would want to represent me. Besides, I want you.'

'You still haven't told me why.'

I smiled sadly as I held his gaze, 'No leader from the Niger Delta has gone to court with the government against him, and come out a free man. I won't be the first. I'm certain of that. Twenty Senior Advocates can't save me. I'm going down, Kaniye, no matter who I get to defend me. In the circumstances, I'd prefer to go down fighting…with a trusted friend as my Counsel.'

'It's nice to know that I'm free to lose this case,' Kaniye said wryly.

'Also, you don't have to worry about money. I'll…'

'Oh, just shut up.' Kaniye chided gently. He looked away and slowly rubbed his beard, a habit of his. Then he turned to me and continued. 'You will have to tell me about what happened with you and Dise,' he said quietly.

I began shaking my head, 'I can't, Kaniye…'

'We are not negotiating on this.' His face now wore a tight smile. He cast a quick glance sideways down the corridor, 'Deola seems to be on her way here. He quickly pulled out his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans, pulled out a wad of naira notes and shoved them in my hands. He spoke fast, 'Make do with this for now. I could have given you more but I had to settle those thieves called prison warders so that they would allow me this kind of access to you. You wouldn't believe how much the bastards collected from me.'

‘I’m not sure I approve of you bribing the warders. Besides, it’s a sin and…’ I shrugged.

‘Oh, shut up,’ Kaniye snapped. ‘You are a funny man. You approve of violence, and yet disapprove of bribery. Abeg, make I hear word.’ He sighed and flicked his wrist dismissively. Then he shook his head and smiled, ‘Or have you found God again?’

I smiled back. ‘I should never have left Him, Kaniye.’ He raised an eyebrow,

‘Anyway, how are you doing for food? Have you eaten?’

I smiled at one of my friend’s favourite questions. ‘I…’ He didn’t let me finish.

‘One of my boys will bring you something from the restaurants every day. Anything you want, just say, okay? I’ll sort it out with your warders.’ His eyes lit up. ‘I’ll bribe them some more.’ I nodded, touched.

‘Who’s bribing who?’ Deola asked as she came into view.

‘Oh, I was only just trying to bribe Amaibi,’ Kaniye said smiling.

‘What for?’

He winked at her, ‘For info on you.’

She smiled wearily, sighed, and turned to me, ‘Hello, Amaibi. How are you feeling today?’ Before I could answer, someone shouted,

‘Doctor don come oh!’ And there was a mad scramble for the door. I felt the weight of my cell mates crushing me to the steel bars. ‘Doctor, welcome, oh!’ ‘Doctor, wetin you bring for us today?’ ‘God go bless you doctor, give you beta husband wey no go enter prison like we.’ ‘Doctor, my chest pain neva go, oh!’

As Deola calmed everyone down, Kaniye backed away. But not before he took out something from his wallet, palmed it in his hand and handed it over to me in a quick goodbye handshake. I promptly shoved it into my pocket, with the money he had given me. I couldn’t look at it because Deola started tending to my leg soon after, and it hurt. I didn’t want to look at it till after the commotion of prisoners seeking Deola’s attention had died down. I didn’t get to look at it till Deola and Kaniye had left. I was huddled in a corner. I carefully pulled it out of my pocket. My hands shook violently but I didn’t notice. I started crying, but I didn’t care. Here grown men cried all the time. I was looking at a picture of Dise.

Chapter 7
Kaniye
Port Harcourt, 2004

I knew Deola was crying. She got into the front passenger seat of my car, leaned as far away from me as possible, and turned to face the window. Big, dark glasses covered her eyes. She didn't make any sound. But I had noticed the tear tracks, and the way she quietly dabbed her face with her handkerchief. I understood her tears. We had just come out of Port Harcourt Prison. I started the car and drove in silence. She continued dabbing her face. After a while I said,

'My mother always believed it was better to cry on a full stomach.' She smiled, sniffed and cleaned her eyes some more.

'Food can't solve every problem.'

I shrugged, 'True, but you also can't take care of everyone in Port Harcourt Prison.' She turned slowly and looked at me. I kept my eye on the road, but smiled quietly. I had just turned off from Aggrey Road, into Lagos Bus Stop area, and as usual the Danfo bus drivers were driving like mad men. I honked several times, cut dangerously in front of a bus blaring loud music, saw a sudden space in the next lane, manoeuvred in and gunned towards Station Road.

'I cry every time I go there.' She sniffed again. 'Don't mind me. It will pass. Anyway, are you going to defend him?'

'Yes.' I said it hesitantly. She nodded.

'Good. He needs all his friends at this time.'

I frowned, 'His friends got him into this mess. Meanwhile, how bad is his leg?'

'He's…he…' she struggled with the words. 'He needs proper medical treatment. I've being doing what I can. But he's now got gangrene, and I can't do much. It's spreading. Eventually, his leg will have to be cut off.'

I passed my hand across my face. 'Sshhh…' I barely stopped myself from cursing.

‘But you can do something, Kaniye. You can get him off so he can go for the surgery. I don’t think he did all those things they’ve accused him of. He’s the gentlest man I’ve met.’

‘Well, it’s a pity you are not the judge,’ I retorted. We rode another round of silence. Fury fuelled my driving. We zipped through Azikiwe Road, went past UTC junction and got on the overhead bridge.

She said quietly, ‘Did your mother say anything about being angry on a full stomach?’

I turned to her briefly. There were still tears in her eyes, but she was smiling.

Contrite, I said, ‘I’m sorry for speaking to you in that tone.’

She flicked an arm in dismissal. ‘That’s okay. So where are we going?’

‘D-Line, It’s the neighbourhood with the best *bole* and fish in town. Want some?’ I asked.

‘What?’

‘Roasted plantain and fish,’ I repeated. ‘The best plantains are the ones that are slightly overripe, so when they’re roasted they retain their delicious juiciness. The fish are marinated in flavoured pepper sauce before roasting. The entire combination is also served with the sauce.’ I sighed and shook my head and continued, ‘It is simply delicious and almost addictive.’

‘That’s a strange combination. In Lagos, we eat roasted plantains with groundnuts.’

‘*Bole* with dry groundnuts?’ I shook my head in disbelief.

We ate in my office, situated on the top floor of the restaurant.

‘So, why did you choose to run a restaurant instead of practising law, and maybe running your father’s firm? Amaibi told me he’s one of the biggest lawyers in the state, a SAN at that.’

A chunk of fish dipped in pepper sauce was halfway to my mouth when Deola asked me that question. I lowered my hand and looked at her. ‘I practised law for three years, but never with Sir James. We’ve had a… complicated relationship. Sir James doesn’t regard what I do – cooking, owning and running three restaurants, as a proper job. I admit that I also

still see it as more of a pastime than a job. Anyway, sometime last year, Sir James offered me a partnership in his firm. But by this time, I realised we were both our own men and working together would have been difficult.' I frowned and shook my head. As I noticed Deola's puzzled expression, I smiled, and explained. 'Sir James is my nickname for my father.' I continued, 'Law was good for me, I learned fast and was very lucky to be involved in a major, one-off settlement that made me some money. With the money, I had the choice of either opening my own law firm or buying this place, which used to be an old, mismanaged restaurant. I know it's unusual but this seemed more of a logical choice for me because I've always been a fantastic cook, and I knew a bit about the restaurant business as a child. On the other hand, I didn't know anything about running a law firm, and I didn't have any clients. It was the right choice, I think. This is what I'm great at.' I winked, 'Besides, the money is a lot better.' Deola smiled. I ate the fish.

Her phone beeped. It was a text message. She read it and frowned. 'Problem?' I said.

'No, not really.' She shrugged and attempted a smile.

I sensed some kind of disappointment behind the smile. 'What is it?' I persisted. She answered reluctantly,

'A friend of mine was supposed to visit me from Lagos this weekend, but he just sent a text to say that he can't make it. Something about an impromptu meeting…' She shrugged again.

I poked a piece of soft plantain with my fingers and asked, 'Your boyfriend?'

'Sort of…' she said hesitantly. 'We have… an understanding.'

'Speak English, please,' I replied. I decided not to eat the plantain. She smiled.

'I'm not sure you'll understand this, but…we are… trying to find out God's will for our relationship and as such, he is not quite my boyfriend yet.'

I pointed my forefinger at her. 'You're right. I'm not sure I understand the God's will part, especially between consenting adults…' I took a sip from the glass of water by my side, and leaned forward and continued. 'If you like each other and get along, what has God got to do with it? Don't tell me you are one of those SU people that have to go through your pastor, fast and pray just to date someone.' She laughed,

‘Well, first of all, I am not an SU, just a deeply committed Christian. I can’t speak for everybody, but I prefer not to date. It keeps things simple. I would rather seek God’s guidance and help in choosing a life partner. At the moment, Bayo and I, Bayo is his name, are just good friends and I hope it would lead to something more, but if he isn’t the one, God would bring me someone else.’

I cut in, ‘So when you say just friends, what does it mean? Does anything… sexual… sorry, physical, happen between the two of you?’

She gasped. ‘Kaniye!’ I shrugged,

‘What? What did I say? It’s a simple question. Just answer it as truthfully and as politely as you can.’ She watched me suspiciously for a while and continued quietly,

‘Our relationship is not a sexual one. Bayo and I don’t get physical; we’ve never even kissed...’

I looked at her in disbelief and said ‘You swear?’

She laughed and shook her head. ‘I don’t swear, Kaniye. I don’t lie either.’ At this, she sipped from her glass of water.

‘Poor man,’ I muttered under my breath. ‘No wonder he chose to remain in Lagos this weekend.’ She tried unsuccessfully to hold back the sudden spray of water that spurted from her mouth as she burst out laughing. When she calmed down, she gave me a big grin,

‘Now look what you made me do.’

Smiling, I said, ‘Sorry,’ and handed her a paper napkin.

‘Seriously, though, he must be mad to leave you all alone in this city filled with predators.’ She studied me for a moment and asked,

‘Are you a predator?’

‘Of course,’ I replied. And as her big eyes popped in surprise, I flashed my most innocent smile. ‘But don’t worry, Deola. I’m a very gentle one.’

Sir Chief James Fimiye Kenebi Rufus, SAN, KSC, or JFK Rufus, as he was popularly known, or Sir James, to my close friends and I, was surprised when unannounced I strolled into his office early the next morning. The last time I had seen him was at a cousin’s wedding about four months ago, where he was the chairman of the reception, and had sat

at the high table or ego table as I liked to call them. Today, I was slightly amused to find Sir James exactly as I expected him to be. He sat behind his large, bare and very neat desk reading yesterday's edition of The Guardian newspaper. He was already dressed for court - starched white shirt, stiff wing collar, new bands – Sir James was a fastidious man and never wore the same bands twice. The only things on the desk were his black bowler hat, a walking stick with a golden knob, and a bone china teacup perched daintily on a matching saucer, giving up gentle steam. I knew the teacup contained Earl Grey tea, no milk, no sugar. Sir James drank only tea. He did not approve of the existence of coffee. So naturally, I drink only coffee.

People say I'm a spitting image of Sir James, a darker version of him. Somehow, it makes for uncomfortable hearing for both of us. We have the same face – large foreheads, expressive eyes, high cheekbones and red lower lips. I admit that I don't mind looking like him when I turn his age – sixty-nine. He's tall and slim, and remarkably fit for his age. What little hair he had left at the back of his head (I got my baldness from him), was completely grey, and neatly cut low. I stood at the door for a moment before I rapped at it gently.

'Good morning, sir.' He glanced up, startled, that anyone in his office would have the temerity to disturb his routine. He saw it was me, grunted, waved me to a seat, and continued reading his paper. I didn't sit down. Rather, I walked towards his bookshelf and glanced at his books. Othello, in a heavy set of the complete works of Shakespeare, caught my eye. Among the Shakespearean tales Father Patrick told my friends and I as children, Othello was our favourite, we were intrigued by the black man Shakespeare had written about. I pulled Othello out from the shelf and noisily flicked through it on purpose, not reading anything. That was okay, I thought to myself, as I was sure Sir James had never read Othello, though he could quote it. In spite of his arrogance, people say Sir James is a charming man. Good for them, I say. I discovered early in life that Sir James's charm, just like his mannerisms – bespoke English suits, titles, tea and Shakespeare, were all acquired. I think he guessed that I saw through him and as such he didn't bother to waste any charm on me. This gave him some relief because it allowed him to always be as true to himself as possible where I was concerned. The unspoken rules of our relationship dictated that.

Finally irritated after about five minutes of my continued rustling of paper, he put down the newspaper, and folded it neatly. I carefully returned Othello to its place and took a seat. We stared at each other. I went straight to the point.

‘I’m going to practise law again.’ Sir James gave me a wolfish smile. ‘However, it’s a one-off, just one case.’ I paused, ‘I’m going to defend Amaibi.’ Sir James frowned deeply. ‘I need your help, sir. I need the frequent use of your library.’ Sir James sipped his tea, and dabbed his lips with a silk napkin. Then he rubbed his clean-shaven chin contemplatively as he considered the matter.

‘Where will your office be?’ he asked suddenly in his clear, powerful baritone.

I hesitated before I replied. ‘I was thinking of using my current office. I haven’t made up my mind yet.’ He widened his eyes and sneered,

‘You want to receive court papers for your client at your canteen?’ I tried hard not to rise to the barb. Sir James stroked his chin some more. ‘Have you any idea what you are up against, boy?’ I answered honestly.

‘A fair bit, but I’m not so sure.’ Then I added, ‘I’ll appreciate your perspective on this, sir.’ Again this was true. Sir James was many things I did not respect, but he was also the greatest litigation lawyer I knew. He gave me a sceptical look. After searching my face in vain for any trace of sarcasm, he started,

‘I’ve been following this embarrassing affair quietly. When he was arrested, your sister called me and asked that I do all I can to help him. She wanted me to use my friends in high places as that awful cliché goes. Against my better judgement, I agreed, and did all I could. But nobody, I repeat, nobody, wanted to help when they knew it concerned Amaibi.’ He scowled, I imagined, as he remembered all the people who had dared to refuse to help him. ‘The government wants Amaibi out of the way. In this country the government is the mafia. Everything has already been arranged. The trial will be merely to rubberstamp his predetermined conviction. And the rest, as they say, will be history.’ Sir James dusted his hands sardonically in conclusion.

‘Amaibi has exactly the same view, but he wants a fight to the finish.’ Sir James sipped his tea again.

‘That’s his funeral. We’ll bury him and then console your sister afterwards.’

I gave him a hard stare which he completely ignored. He glanced at his watch, and stood up. The meeting was over. I waited for him to lay down the law.

‘You can use my library but, you will not borrow my books. Nobody, I repeat, nobody, borrows my books. I suggest you start reading immediately. You have a lot of catching up on the law to do. And in my opinion, you were never the brightest lawyer in the first place.’ I could have glowered at him, but he was too busy putting on his jacket to notice me. ‘You can use the office down the corridor. I kept it vacant for you, hoping that someday you would come to your senses. I see I have to wait a while longer. The staff and equipment are also at your disposal, subject of course to my schedule.’

I stood up and said, ‘Thank you, sir,’ a little stiffly. He tugged his cuffs.

‘No need to thank me, boy. This is one of the necessary burdens of marriage, sorting out the mess made by in laws and spoilt children.’ At this, I walked to the door thinking that I didn’t have to take this anymore.

‘Have you spoken with your sister about this?’

‘No sir, I wanted to talk to you first.’

He nodded. ‘Hmm... that’s the first thing you have done right in this matter.’

Sir James flicked imaginary dust from his bowler hat before setting it carefully on his head. He walked to a full-length mirror in a corner of his office, and surveyed himself, majestically. A slight pull at the silk in the breast pocket of his jacket, and he was ready to go. As he picked his walking stick, he faced a picture of Dise as a child on his desk. It was the only picture he kept in his office. He took a long look at the picture, frowned and shook his head.

‘Your sister, the silly child. She should never have married that deluded radical in the first place. There are no radicals in Nigeria, only mad men and martyrs.’

BOOK II
1970–1986

Chapter 8
Tubo
Asiama Island

Sometimes, we have to go back, so we can go forward. Everything began on Asiama Island. The story of us: Kaniye, Amaibi, Doye and I, started there. Everything was linked to Asiama Island. Our lives were shaped by major events and tragedies that happened there. We were also influenced by the intangibles: the history of the Island, the spirit of the place, and the secrets of the waters.

The Island was said to be discovered by a man called Asi sometime in the fifteenth century. Asi was an old sea pirate or exiled rogue prince from Nembe depending on which version of history one chooses to believe. He landed on the island with his four sons, soldiers, concubines, slaves and diviners. The Island was already inhabited by a tiny group of peaceful fishermen and their families. Asi promptly killed all the men; shared the women between his sons and his soldiers; declared himself Amayanabo and fittingly, named the island, ‘Asiama’ (Asi’s Land). History was forever unkind to the original peoples of the Island, because it never recorded the name of their tribe, or their name for the Island.

Asi set about the business of building a kingdom and a dynasty, but on his own terms. Now, usually, the riverine peoples of the surrounding islands were equally patrilineal and matrilineal in terms of rights, inheritance and succession. Asi allowed that equality of the sexes to thrive in everything in his kingdom, except in the matter of succession to his throne. He decreed that succession would be on the occasion of death, and be rotated among his four sons in order of seniority Akassa, Kenebi, Eferebo and Osuku. In the event that any of them died before their turn to ascend the throne, then their sons or grandsons would take their place. Amazingly, this decree still stands today: every Amayanabo of the Island must be a direct male descendant of Asi, from any of the four royal houses.

Asiama Island is not one Island. It is a cluster of three. It is shaped roughly like the paw print of a two-toed animal turned upside down. Asiama Town, the biggest part of the paw, is at the exact point where the Asiama River merges with the Atlantic Ocean. So, the northern part of the island is bounded by the river, and the southern part by the ocean. The other two smaller islands – the two toes, are entirely bordered by the Atlantic Ocean. They are also about fifteen to twenty minutes away, depending on the ocean waves and the strength of the person paddling, by canoe, from Asiama Town.

In the old days, one of these two islands was uninhabited. This remained so till the earlier parts of the twentieth century, when fishermen took it over for their nightly expeditions into the ocean. When they returned in the daytime, they stayed on the beaches, and sold their catch to the eager people who crossed over from Asiama Town. The best fish, and Asiama people are particular about their fish, came from the fishermen on this small island, then called *Ofirima* or Shark Island.

The other smaller island, however, has always attracted a succession of more colourful vocations and had undergone a series of name changes to mark each one. First it was the prostitutes. It is believed in Asiama that prostitutes started using this island as far back as the late sixteenth century. Then the island was aptly called *Amafi* or Prostitute Village. It had started innocently enough. Three, sea-weary Portuguese ships, drifting listlessly on the Atlantic were pleasantly surprised to suddenly sight the picturesque Asiama Island with its long, sandy, sun-drenched beaches, where coconut and palm trees waved a slow welcome in the ocean breeze. They turned in to have a closer look, dropped anchor not far away, and unleashed a wave of deprived sailors on the island.

In those days, Asiama people had a peculiar custom of not receiving strangers inside Asiama Town. The custom was started by King Asi himself who understood the dangers of welcoming strangers into one’s home. However, Asiama people have always been an inquisitive lot. They (young men, old men and some audacious women) sailed out from Asiama Town, to meet the Portuguese strangers, on more neutral ground – the small island. In spite of the language barriers, there was brisk commerce in an assortment of goods during the day, and in flesh at night. Night commerce soon surpassed day commerce and *Amafi* Village was born.

The Portuguese ships and sailors soon set sail, but not before planting tiny mementoes of their pleasant stay. The people returned to Asiama Town. The mementoes became obvious in nine months and the first wave of mixed race children were seen in Asiama. Asiama people were horrified. Strange white men, who never entered Asiama Town, were one thing. Pale children born right inside Asiama Town were another thing altogether. They were some kind of cursed race, capable of defiling the town and incurring the wrath of the gods: so said the diviners to the Amayanabo. On the Amayanabo's orders, the people set out to cleanse Asiama Town. Amafi was cleared out, animal sacrifices were made and all the children were taken from their mothers, and drowned. The gods were appeased. Or so it seemed.

Time passed. A century later, five British ships set out from Liverpool and Bristol with a cargo of muskets, alcohol and cloth. They stopped by the scenic Asiama Island, and the people, ever forgetful of their history, elected to meet the British in Amafi Village. Like the Portuguese before them, the British were also interested in the commerce of flesh, but in a flesh commerce that did not mean sex. Slaves were then one of the most profitable commodities in the world and it was time for the Asiama Kingdom to catch up. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade opened shop in Amafi. With this change in trade, came a new name for the small island. It was renamed *Omonibo* or Slave Village. No one realised then that Omonibo Village would stay in business for more than another century. At first, the Asiama people only sold captives who they had captured from raids on other villages up the river. As the years went by, Asiama warriors armed with the superior firepower of muskets finally annihilated all the other villages. Yet the demand for slaves grew. To meet the insatiable demand, Asiama people turned on their own. First, it was the convicts, the outcasts and the undesirables. Then it was the weaklings. Soon it became the turn of the enemies of the Amayanabo. Finally, the dark days of anarchy dawned on Asiama, when people fell over themselves in a frenzy to sell each other for trinkets, bowler hats, muskets, gun powder, alcohol, cloth, tobacco and snuff.

The madness came to a head when in 1805, Sopakiri, the reigning Amayanabo from the Eferebo Royal House, and also a major slave merchant, was kidnapped from his bed in the middle of the night and sold to the 'Faire Wind', a British brigantine, moored just off Omonibo Village.

She sailed off at first light the very next morning. Nobody heard of Sopakiri again. As the remnants of a once proud people gathered to mourn their loss, the diviners, perhaps conveniently, interpreted the fall of the Asiama Kingdom as the punishment of the gods for the pale children born inside Asiama Town centuries before.

Idikibo, the distant cousin of Sopakiri, the next Amayanabo by default being from the Osuku Royal House, and the rumoured mastermind behind Sopakiri's kidnap, decreed an immediate stop of the slave trade in Asiama Kingdom. Omonibo Village shut up shop. In 1807, two years later, the British finally banned the slave trade. Years later, the British came again, this time under the respectable cloak of colonisation and trade in palm oil. They gained a foothold in Nigeria by the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The Asiama Kingdom still weakened by the effects of the slave trade or the punishment of the gods, could offer only feeble resistance, before being annexed. One of the effects of British rule was the advent of the Christian missionaries. It was a time of rapid change. Asiama people had grown disillusioned with the foibles of their gods, and the speciousness of some of their traditions.

The Catholics were the first to be entrenched in Asiama Island. Amazingly, this was largely due to the practice of confession of sins. The long suffering Asiama people were particularly enthralled by a God who forgives sins. They chose to interpret it as a reason to continue sinning. Asiama loved sinning. Asiama loved confession. The people welcomed the Catholics into Asiama. The mainly Irish Catholics were predominantly of the Order of St. Joseph. They were given a large expanse of land; almost in the middle of Asiama Town (the fear of receiving strangers within Asiama Town had long been overcome). St. Joseph's Church was built in 1892 and followed by St. Joseph's Elementary School in 1901. A maternity, and quarters for the priests, nuns and teachers were added over the years.

The Anglicans arrived in 1897, hot on the heels of the Catholics. The battle for Asiama's souls began. The Anglicans built St. Cyprian's Church, smaller and less ornate than St. Joseph's, in 1900. But, things were soon levelled up when the Anglicans built a secondary school, St Cyprian's Grammar School in 1904, and an infirmary that same year. An unspoken compromise was reached. The children in Asiama, irrespective of denomination, attended the Catholic primary school, and graduated

from there to the Anglican secondary school. Years later, Father Patrick, a Catholic priest from Ireland always remarked that his country could have learned a thing or two from Asiama. By the time the Seventh Day Adventists and the Baptists came to Asiama in 1921 and 1936, it was almost too late to convert anyone. They stayed on nonetheless, no doubt to enjoy the idyllic island. They opened their churches, but thankfully, did not bother opening schools.

Nigeria, meanwhile, was living through interesting times. Independence in 1960 was quickly followed by the Civil or Biafra War in 1966. Asiama's remote location left it almost untouched by war. There were a few ships, however, that docked near the island during the war. At first they were ships carrying mercenaries, ammunition and supplies for the Biafrans. Later when the Nigerian Navy seized complete control of the seas by 1968, and horrific pictures of starving Biafra children were seen all over the world, the ships that came to Asiama Island, were mainly from international relief agencies. As always, Asiama Island was drawn to foreign ships. Some Asiama women resumed their brazen solicitation of strange sailors. The Catholics, Anglicans, Adventists and Baptists were united, for once, in their disapproval. So, the women relocated to the then defunct Omonibo Village. They were joined by nomadic prostitutes, created and displaced by the war, from tribes as far and as diverse as Ibo, Bonny, Kalabari, Opobo, Efik and Ijaw. After a hiatus spanning several centuries, international prostitution was back again in Asiama. *Ashawo* was the common slang for prostitute. Omonibo Village was renamed Ashawo Village.

They say I was born in Ashawo Village. I said they say, but the truth is, nobody really knows. No one knows the identities of my biological parents. After the end of the War in 1970, many of the prostitutes who were not from Asiama went back to what was left of their people. My mother, if I can call her that, was probably one of them. She was certainly not from Asiama because someone from Asiama Town, certainly would have known her, or gossiped about her pregnancy, and her unfortunate oyibo baby. My father was obviously a white man of some sort, possibly a sailor.

No one knows the exact day I was born. On the early morning of 29 June 1970, the white nuns of St. Joseph's Church found me, a few days old, bawling on the doorstep of their quarters. I was wrapped in a

threadbare cloth, and placed in a local fishing basket. The dampness of the basket, the wetness of the cloth, and the dew on my shivering body, told them I had spent the best part of the night on their doorstep. 29 June, became my birthday. That day also helped determine my Christian name. One of the nuns, Sister Eryn, suggested Moses, because of the basket and the fact that I probably came from Ashawo Village, across the water. Sister Maria, the head nun, refused, and vetoed the alternatives to either Peter or Paul because 29 June was marked in the Catholic Church, as both St. Peter's and St. Paul's Day. They chose Peter. But of course nobody in Asiama called me Peter. They referred to me as Tubo, which literally means 'Who', but is usually used to refer to nobody or anybody. It wasn't even a name but their way of asking who I was. The nuns, God bless the ignoramuses, mistook it for a name. Since I didn't have any family, and was a child of St. Joseph's, I was also given Joseph as a surname. Days later, Father Patrick baptised me as Peter Tubo Joseph. But I always saw myself as Tubo. It is the name which really defines who I am – anybody, nobody. The nuns gave me to Eno, Kaniye's mother, to suckle. She had just given birth to Kaniye earlier that year. Like mine, the story of Kaniye's birth makes for an interesting tale.

Before the law degree, the chieftaincy title, the knighthood, the conferment of the rank of Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN), James Fimiye Kenebi Rufus, Kaniye's father, was born into a proud, but dirt poor branch of the Kenebi Royal House of Asiama. However, blue blood alone did not put food into James's mouth, or afford to send him to the university, years after he finished from St. Cyprian's Grammar School. So, the opportunistic young man did the best thing, he married for money. His wife, Martha, was the daughter of a wealthy Asiama transport magnate. He was nineteen, and she was twenty, when they married. With the help of her father's money, and her industry (she ran textiles and provisions shops in Port Harcourt), James breezed through university and Law School, and opened his firm in Old G .R. A. Port Harcourt, in a duplex given to Martha by her father as a wedding present. The marriage was seemingly held together by their first three children Ibiere the first girl; Gogo, the only boy; and Otele, another girl. Eno, an orphaned, Efik domestic servant, came into the family when she was twelve. She cooked their food, took care of the children who were just a little younger than she was, and generally ran the house. The Biafra War broke out soon after, and the

family fled to Asiama. Eno turned a beautiful, nubile fourteen on the island, and James could not resist her. Eno got pregnant.

Asiama is an island of many secrets. The nuns of St. Joseph's whisper that Eno swore that James repeatedly forced himself on her. Martha, on the other hand, chose to believe her husband's version of events – that Eno seduced him, and he fell in a moment of weakness. What actually happened remains a secret between them. Either way, it didn't matter. Kaniye Daniel Rufus was born in St. Joseph's Maternity, Asiama, on 15 January, 1970, two days after Eno turned fifteen, and the very day the Biafra War officially came to an end. The family returned to Port Harcourt soon after, but without Eno. Also, there was no provision for her and the baby's upkeep. To be fair, James's hands were tied. His law practice had been completely paralysed by the war. He and the family were at that time, relying heavily on money from Martha's father's business which was largely based in Lagos, and so unaffected by the war. Martha controlled the purse, and she told James that it would be over her dead body first, before any of her money would be used to take care of his bastard and his whore. The nuns at St. Joseph's took Eno and her baby in. Luckily for me, they were still there when I was found by the nuns.

Our friends, Doye and Amaibi were also born in Asiama in 1970, in March and December, respectively. But, maybe because they were born into regular families, who wanted, loved and celebrated them, there is nothing remarkable to tell about their births.

Asiama also celebrated another important birth in 1970, a birth that would also become an important and inextricable part of our story. In 1970, oil was discovered in Asiama.

Chapter 9
Kaniye
Asiama Town, 1978

Tubo jigged up and down on his unequal legs. He was restless. We hid in some bushes, under a mango tree by the side of Amaibi's house. We waited. We had waiting for about ten minutes, an eternity for eight-year-old boys, for a chance to call Amaibi out. Tubo dropped the ball he was holding. He pulled out his catapult from the pocket of his shorts. The catapult was a wooden Y shaped stick, mummified in black elastic. Tubo picked up some pebbles.

'Let me stone his window,' he suggested with a glint in his big eyes.

'No!' I said, with a soft smile.

At that time, Catechist Akassa's house was the only house in Asiama, apart from St. Joseph's Church, the nuns' quarters, and parts of the Amayanabo's palace, which had glass louvre blades. Once, Tubo had mistakenly thrown a pebble through one of the louvre blades in the nuns' quarters. While Doye, Amaibi and I were stunned to immobility by the suddenness of the crash of broken glass, Tubo managed to quickly hide behind a tree before Sister Maria burst out. She saw the three of us, and immediately assumed that it was Doye and I who did it. Amaibi was beyond suspicion. He was small, he looked innocent, and he wore glasses. Sister Maria had caned Doye and me severely.

'So, how do we call him out?' Tubo whined.

'Knock on the door, Tubo,' I replied. He shook his head vigorously.

'You want me to enter trouble.' I laughed.

The last time I had convinced Tubo to knock on Amaibi's door to ask if he could come out to play with us, Amaibi's mother had opened the door, given him a five minute lecture on the need for him to read his books after school instead of playing, otherwise, he would end up as a truck pusher or bus conductor in Port Harcourt. When she had finished, she pulled him by his ears all the way to St. Joseph's where she handed him

over to the dreaded Sister Maria for another tongue-lashing. By then Doye and I had long disappeared.

Doye stood behind us. He had said nothing for ten minutes. He frowned as he chewed his cut and swollen lower lip. I turned to him. ‘Is your mouth okay? Is it still paining you?’ Doye nodded. I was not sure if the nod meant his lip was okay or if he was still in pain.

‘Whistle like a bird, Tubo,’ Doye growled, still chewing.

Tubo let out a high-pitched squawk, as he tried to mimic the screech of seagulls, which are common on the island. No one listening would have been fooled, but Tubo’s noise had the desired effect. A minute later, we heard the back door of Catechist Akassa’s house open. Amaibi snuck out, adjusted his glasses, and tiptoed to meet us. We giggled as we watched him come. We lightly punched his shoulder and arm in greeting. He punched everyone back.

‘Where to?’ Amaibi asked breathlessly.

‘Maracana.’ Tubo replied.

‘Let’s go,’ said Doye, as he did a quick on the spot jog. Then, Amaibi noticed Doye’s lip. He pointed at it, an unspoken question.

‘His father, as usual.’ Tubo quickly answered.

Doye stopped, scowled, clenched his fists, and took a step towards Tubo. Doye was the biggest and strongest of us. Tubo backed away. I quickly stepped in between them, and put my hand on Doye’s arm. I pushed Tubo further away from Doye’s long reach.

‘Pick up the ball, Tubo.’ He did so without a word. Doye sulked but didn’t offer any other explanation to Amaibi about his lip. I smiled at everyone.

‘Let’s go before Amaibi’s mother catches us here.’

We set off at a light jog, Doye ahead, and Tubo behind because of his smaller left leg. We ran towards the Maracana.

According to Father Patrick, the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was the biggest in the world. He had been there during his mission work in Brazil, and regaled us with a tale of watching the classic Flamengo-Fluminense derby in 1969, along with over one hundred and seventy thousand screaming people, in an indescribable atmosphere. One

hundred and seventy thousand people in a stadium! It sounded like a million to us. We were so impressed with the tale that we nicknamed Asiama beach where we played football, the Maracana. Besides, Maracana was also a fun word for little boys to repeat. We laughed as we ran through the streets of Asiama on our way to our Maracana. Like most riverine towns, the streets of Asiama were narrow, winding and paved in some places with concrete. We decided to take the short cut – past Doye's mud house, the eerie mausoleum of the Osuku Royal War Canoe House, and a quick zigzag through the dark bamboo thicket.

Our Maracana was a huge, open, sand field, tapering out to the ocean at one end, and backed by a small forest in another. Everyone played football here. The rule was simple. Two teams arrived, took up a field, which was a portion of the beach proportionate to the size of the teams, and started their game. Others arrived and did the same thing, being mindful of the invisible boundaries of the other teams' field. The only markings that could identify fields were the clothes and slippers piled up in heaps to make goalposts. Older boys had bigger fields, younger boys made do with smaller fields. Our Maracana could have up to thirteen simultaneous games going on at the same time.

We did not play football that day. As we burst through the bamboo thicket onto the beach, we were stopped by an apparition. We stared in disbelief. There were fishing boats on the Maracana! The once pristine beach was cluttered with nets, baskets and other fishing gear. Fishermen idled, in groups, by their boats, hard frowns on their faces. It was an unwritten rule in Asiama that the fishermen only operated from the nearby Ofirima Island, and not from Asiama Town itself. From the beach we could see Ofirima Island, across the restless ocean, just off our left. Every single boat was now over on Asiama Town. The fishermen's shacks were completely deserted. Ofirima Island looked sad and lonely. We turned our gaze to Ashawo Village on our right. We could make out movements; Ashawo Village seemed to be okay. We dragged steps, heavy with confusion and fear, across the sand. We trudged towards the boats, hoping for an explanation for the desecration. We dared not ask any of the fishermen, because they were glowering at us like we were the cause of whatever it was that made them angry. S

Suddenly, Doye spied Soboye, his elder brother, with a group of fishermen. We approached him hesitantly. Soboye was only fourteen, but

he acted like he was a lot older. He did this because he wanted to be accepted by some bigger boys. I remembered years ago, when he had been nicer, and had even played with us a few times. Now, he either ignored us or was impatient with us, like a lot of adults were. Soboye saw us coming and quietly extricated himself from the group. He strode towards us with a frown.

‘Good afternoon, Brother Soboye,’ we chorused unevenly.

‘What are you children doing here?’ he demanded.

‘We came to play football,’ Doye replied. Soboye stood with his arms akimbo, and sneered,

‘Well, as you can see, there will be no more football here. This beach is for the fishermen now. You better go somewhere else to play.’ Tubo and I stopped and turned back. Amaibi and Doye remained where they were. Doye’s head twisted and bobbed as he tried to take in all the boats at once.

‘Why? Why are the fishing boats, and Papa’s boat, not on Ofirima Island?’

Mpaka, Doye’s father, was a fisherman. Soboye helped him fish most times. Soboye tried to stare Doye down.

‘What’s your business with Papa’s boat? Small boy like you. You people should go away from here now. Run away before I open my eyes, or else I’ll conk you.’

‘You can’t do anything to me,’ Doye muttered under his breath. He turned and began walking away. Soboye swelled with rage, and marched after him.

‘Doye! Stop there! What did you say?’

Doye turned again, slowly, to face him. I noticed the familiar stiffening of his shoulders, in readiness for a fight. ‘Soboye, you can’t do more than a dead rat,’ Doye said in a quiet but calm voice. ‘The four of us will beat you, feed you with sand, and disgrace you in front of your friends over there.’

Soboye halted immediately. We saw uncertainty, fear and anger on his face. Like I said, Doye was the biggest and strongest among the four of us. He was also the most insanely audacious, like now. Although there was a six years difference in their ages, he had never backed from a fight with Soboye, despite always taking a beating, but, as I suspected, always frightening Soboye with his persistence and ferocity.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Tubo slink back, I wondered where Doye got the idea that four of us were going to fight Soboye. I could already hear Tubo's ready-made excuse of being 'disabled' – one man down. Amaibi, to the best of our knowledge, had never raised his voice in anger, or been in a real fight, before. He even wore glasses. That was a second man down. I realised that I was the only one who would have to stand by Doye. I almost wet myself at the thought. I didn't have Doye's boldness or his capacity to absorb punishment. Besides, all I stood to gain apart from a hammering was the enmity of Soboye and his big friends.

'Brother Soboye, please, we just want to know what is happening, and why all the fishermen have left Ofirima Island, that's all. Please just tell us and we'll go.'

We all turned to look at Amaibi, the smallest one in the party. He had spoken in a clear, sensible voice without betraying any fear. More importantly, he had given Soboye a face-saving escape route. Soboye squinted at us suspiciously for a moment. We all looked away. Then, he grumbled,

'The Amayanabo and his council of chiefs sold Ofirima Island to a new company called Imperial Oil to use as their base camp. It was just this morning that we were informed and ordered to move from Ofirima Island. There was no other place to go but here.'

'Where is Papa?' Doye asked in a noticeably conciliatory tone.

Soboye smiled and his face flushed with pride in his father. 'Papa went to the Amayanabo's palace to curse the Amayanabo and his chiefs to their faces.'

I heard my father's booming laughter, floating from my house as I approached. I squealed in delight as I flew through the door. I braked abruptly when I saw my father. He sat on the wooden chair in the small room my mother and I used as a sitting room. He looked very handsome in his white etibo and bowler hat which he had taken to wearing more regularly since he was installed as a chief some months ago. His walking stick leaned in a corner. A little girl, a toddler of about three years old, was perched on my father's knee. She wore a pretty red dress, spotted with tiny

white flowers, and a pair of white sandals. She coiled her arms round his neck. The presence of the little girl stopped me from running, arms open, to hug my father.

My mother stood stiffly in a corner of the room, far from my father. Her arms were folded across her stomach. She was frowning. Only my father could put a frown on my mother's usual smiling face. Beside my father and the bright little girl, my mother's famous beauty didn't show in her plain, dull coloured dress and our drab house. The scars of time showed. She looked tired and old, aged by her battle with poverty and a strange, constant illness. I felt bad for my mother. I wanted to make her smile again. So, I went to her side, put my arms round her waist, and squeezed. She smiled at me. But, it was a sad smile.

I left her and walked towards my father and said, 'Good evening, sir,' and gave him a side hug.

'Good evening, boy,' He replied, rubbing my head. 'How are you?'

'Fine, sir.'

The little girl was staring at me with big, shiny eyes. My father wagged a finger. 'Good. I hope you are not being naughty or disobedient to your mother?'

Some things I had done recently made me hesitate before answering, 'N…no, sir.' He pointed to the little girl.

'This is your little sister Dise, my youngest child.' He smiled, and explained her presence, 'She insists on going everywhere with me.' He turned to Dise. 'Greet your brother.' Cautiously, she stretched out a pudgy arm to me. I touched her hand. She took it back and smiled shyly. I smiled back. She stretched out her arm again. She let me hold it for just a moment longer before taking it back again. We had started a game. I felt a strange warmth light my body – my sister. I finally knew what it felt like to have a sister. My father always told me that Ibiere and Otele were my sisters, but they, and Gogo, my brother, never talked to me, or acknowledged my existence, anytime they came to Asiama. However, my mother always said I should not blame them, or hold their meanness towards me against them.

'Boy…' my father interrupted my thoughts. 'Take your sister to play outside for a while. I want to talk to your mother.'

I turned sharply to look at my mother. She nodded, sadly, to tell me she was going to be okay. I felt a tug, looked down and saw that Dise was already holding my hand. As I led Dise outside, my father called out,

‘Wait a minute, boy!’ He leaned back in the chair and dug in his trouser pocket. ‘I got you a gift. I got it especially for you.’

He handed me a small, marble ball. It was mainly red, with magnificent streaks and whorls of orange and yellow, and little bubbles of silver. I wanted to shrink to tiny, so I could jump inside its little magical world. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

‘Thank you, sir,’ I gushed as Dise pulled me outside. I played with Dise, but slowly inched back to the window of the house. I wanted to eavesdrop on the conversation between my mother and father. I managed to hear their argument.

First, my mother accused my father of neglecting me. Then, she told him that she was going to start a *buka*, so she could take care of me without depending on him so much. My father said he did not like the idea of his beautiful woman serving food to lascivious men. She told him she did not understand what lascivious meant, and that she was not his woman. He tried to calm her down. He promised her lots of money, and a proper house in Port Harcourt. He told her he was thinking of divorcing his wife. He told her he wanted to marry her. He told her he loved her. She seemed to calm down. Until, he suggested that they go into the bedroom for a while. She got angry. She told him to go to his wife and leave her alone. She threatened to scream. I burst into the room at this point. Dise was behind me. It startled my father and he froze exactly as he was.

He was no longer on the wooden chair, but on the two-seater cushion chair beside my mother. He was leaning towards her and trying to get one arm across her shoulder, and the other seemed to be hanging just above her breasts. His bowler hat looked out of place on the floor. We stared at each other for a moment. He knew I had been listening to them all the time. He shrugged and gave me a small smile as he lowered his hands. I did not smile back. My mother stood up and I walked to her side. Dise ran into the house looking for me. She saw me holding my mother and thought it was part of the game we had been playing. So, she ran to us, and hugged us. My mother broke into her first genuine smile since my father arrived. She cradled the laughing Dise in her arms, while still clutching me tightly. I held both of them. And somehow, the presence of an innocent child purged my mother and me of the sourness of the previous moment.

My father watched my first group hug with a wry smile. He and Dise left soon after. Two days later, I was playing with Tubo. I brought out my marble from my pocket. I wanted to brag with it. I showed it to him and said, ‘Tubo, see my marble! Isn’t it very fine? My father bought it especially for me from Port Harcourt.’

Tubo did a double take. His eyes narrowed in surprise. Then he smiled triumphantly. ‘Me too, I also have a marble.’

‘Liar!’ I retorted.

‘It’s true! I swear!’ Tubo cried. He bent down, touched his forefinger on the ground, licked it with his tongue and pointed to the sky.

‘Lie lie Tubo! Lie lie Tubo!’ I sang. Indignant, Tubo produced his marble with a flourish. It was the same size as mine, but different in colours blue, green, purple and silver. It was more beautiful than my marble. I was deflated. Tubo whooped and danced around me with his marble. He did it for two long and painful minutes. Later, when he was calmer, I asked him, ‘How did you get your marble?’ The bitterness was still in my voice. He looked at me quizzically for a moment.

‘Didn’t you know? I saw your father yesterday at the town square. Nice man. I greeted him and then he gave the marble to me. He had lots of them in his pocket.’

Chapter 10
Amaibi
Asiama Town, 1982

‘That is hellfire!’

Tubo said it emphatically. He stood and pointed at the distance to the fire – raging, unending, emitting black smoke, and spouting from what looked like a vertical pipe. The fire was far away, somewhere up on the Asiama River, but it was visible from everywhere on Asiama Island. I did a vigorous head shake in opposition. Doye sighed and glared at Tubo. Kaniye merely smiled, and stretched out on the sand. It was late afternoon on a Thursday. Finally, the violent sun was weakening. We were under the shade of a cluster of coconut trees on the beach. Apart from the roar of the ocean, and the foamy waves breaking listlessly on the beach, it was a quiet day. The fishermen were resting. Doye and I sat on the trunk of a fallen coconut tree.

‘It’s not hellfire, Tubo,’ I said simply.

‘Of course it’s hellfire, Amaibi!’ Tubo cried. Then he threw a challenge, ‘Has any of you seen that fire stop burning, even for one minute? Tell me, have you?’ He looked each of us, daring any of us to contradict him. When we didn’t, Tubo’s eyes glowed, and he became more animated. ‘See the pipe that the fire is coming out from? Well, let me tell you something that you don’t know.’ He came closer to us and lowered his voice to a whisper even though there was nobody within hearing distance of our conversation. ‘The pipe leads straight down to hell. If not for the fire coming out of the pipe, you can go down, go really deep and you will see the devil himself!’ Tubo’s eyes went even bigger, and he nodded wisely, as if nodding will somehow emphasise his point. We all went quiet for a moment. Tubo had outdone himself again.

Doye noticed a crab, crawling stiffly in the sand a few feet away from us. As he rose and went towards it, he turned to Tubo and said,

‘You are talking nonsense, Tubo.’ Tubo genuinely looked shocked that anyone could doubt him. When he opened his mouth to reply, I cut in

and said,

‘Tubo that is not hellfire.’ Tubo turned his head to look at me instead. Kaniye chuckled.

‘It is something called a gas flare.’ I said, watching Doye and the crab.

‘Gas what?’ Tubo sneered and put his hands on his hips.

‘Gas flare,’ I repeated. ‘I don’t understand it much. All I know is Imperial Oil makes a very, very, very deep hole in the ground to get oil. Somehow, the process of getting oil produces this fire which we see.’

Tubo was speechless. I allowed myself a small smile, but I turned my face away, to hide it. I didn’t want him to be too embarrassed. Kaniye, however, didn’t care. He rolled with laughter in the sand. I wanted to laugh too, so I stood up and walked to Doye and the crab. I could still hear Kaniye’s loud guffaws. Doye was using a stick to poke the crab. It was a tiny crab – blue, pink and pale orange. But it used its small, awkward claws to attack the stick in return.

‘Why don’t you leave it alone, Doye?’ I said softly. ‘It’s only a baby crab.’ Doye ignored me, and poked the crab harder. I sighed. ‘Just let it go. It’s God’s creature and it hasn’t done anything to you.’ Doye turned to smile at me briefly. Then, he raised the stick high in the air with his two hands, and brought it down with a fast, ferocious thwack on the crab. There was a sharp cracking sound and a sudden spray of pieces of crab’s shell and soft innards.

I lost my temper for the first time in my life. I ran to Doye. ‘What did you do that for?’ I stood on my toes and shouted in his face. I grabbed the stick from his hand and hurled it away as far as I could. It fell in the outgoing tide, but the tide was too weak to drag it into the ocean. Doye put both hands on my chest and pushed me with all his strength. I fell on my back in the sand, momentarily stunned, but too enraged to stay down. As I sprang to my feet, I clutched a handful of sand and flung into Doye’s face. He screamed, covered his eyes, and bent down. I glimpsed a big piece of wood, a broken tree branch, half buried in the sand, somewhere on my left. I turned, pulled it out, and shook off sand. I ran with it, raised like a sword, to Doye. His eyes were still clenched shut. I started to bring the branch down with force, exactly how he had smashed the crab. Doye opened his eyes at that moment. Immediately, he saw what was about to happen to him. He stiffened, dropped back on one knee, but was too

shocked to move away. I managed to stop the descent of the branch just a few inches from Doye's head. It was his eyes that had stopped me. I stared hard at him for a moment. We were both breathing heavily – me from anger, Doye from fear. He was still on one knee. He did not try to change his position. He was not sure if I was going to hit him. I was not sure myself.

I noticed Kaniye by my side. He spoke quietly, 'Don't do it.' He touched my arm gently. 'Give me the stick, Amaibi.' I turned to look at him. At first, Kaniye's face was composed in the proper serious and worried look. I was fooled by it. Until he gave me a small smile, a wink, and whispered so only I could hear. 'Please, give it to me before you kill our Hercules.' Everything was a joke to Kaniye. I dropped the branch in the sand. Doye got on his feet. Kaniye stood between us to prevent any further trouble. He didn't have to bother. Doye was still shell shocked. Tubo flashed me a quick thumbs up. He now had a new found respect for me.

It slowly dawned on me what I had done. I had almost taken out the dreaded Doye. I had given the fearless Doye the fright of his life. I started to feel proud of myself. My father's words came to me at that moment – 'Never approve of vice, or scorn at virtue'. I am my father's son. Suddenly, a wave of shame washed over me. I saw things differently. I had lost my temper. I had almost injured one of my best friends. I did not want Tubo's respect any more. I turned from them and started to walk to the tree trunk that was my seat. Halfway there, I turned back. I walked up to Doye. I stopped a few feet away from him. He stood rigidly, and I noticed his fists clench. We stared at each other. Kaniye, again, came between us. Tubo, a short distance away, shifted from side to side to get a better view of what he presumed would be another round of the fight.

'D…Doye,' I began hesitantly. His face was stony. 'I'm sorry,' I muttered. Doye's shoulders did a small, reflex jerk back. His eyes flicked quickly over my face. Then, his shoulders stiffened again. His face regained its tough look. 'I didn't...' I choked on my words as Doye's right hand shot up and grabbed my throat. He drew his favoured left arm, fist closed, back over his shoulder. His nose flared, his eyes bulged and his face contorted in a fierce grimace. I instinctively closed my eyes and waited for the punch. Strangely, my heart was calm. My conscience was now clear. I felt no fear. I heard Kaniye saying,

‘Doye, no! Don’t do it. No!’ Doye didn’t reply. He just snarled. I felt Kaniye and Doye struggle. Doye’s grip on my throat tightened. The punch didn’t come. Instead, Doye released his grip on my neck. Cautiously, I opened my eyes. They all started laughing.

‘I told you he could fight!’ Kaniye said to Doye. He stretched out his hand, palm open, to Doye. ‘Now, pay me my money.’

‘Your son, Amaibi, has disgraced us,’ were Mother’s first words as soon as Father settled down in his favourite chair, one week later. Father gave me a brief sideways glance. I wrung my hands as pitiably as I could and looked at my feet.

‘He has been a longer-throat, begging and taking food from strangers as if we don’t feed him in this house. This is what he has been begging from people,’ Mother sighed deeply as she placed the offending wooden bowl containing ‘*edikang-ikong*’ soup on the stool in front of Father. She eyed it with a disdain and suspicion. Then she stepped back, sighed again, and shook her head as though a calamity had befallen her.

Father gave me another look. He didn’t look at the wooden bowl. By this time, my palms were sweaty, and I had difficulties breathing.

‘Amaibi?’

I stuttered. ‘I…I…’ My chest heaved rapidly as I sucked in air erratically.

‘Take your time,’ Father said, remembering my asthmatic attacks. I managed to calm down a little. I knew Father was not going to beat me like Doye’s father always did to him. Father would merely talk, but his words were more effective than any beating.

‘Th…That…That’s not really what happened –’

‘What?’ Mother cut in. ‘So, Amaibi, now you are calling your own mother a liar. Ehn, Amaibi? Is that what your friends have taught you?’

Father put an arm up. ‘Ibiere, please…’ To me he said, ‘What happened, Amaibi?’

I started talking. I didn’t start from the beginning, however. The beginning was about Aunty Eno. Aunty Eno, Kaniye’s mother, ran a buka on Asiama Base Camp. She had started small, three years ago, with only Kaniye to help. She cooked, Kaniye washed plates, and they took turns

serving the customers. Then, Imperial Oil was still building the base camp, and the casual labourers were her first customers. But, she was a wonderful cook, and over time, she began to win over some junior workers from Imperial Oil. As her clientele improved, Aunty Eno broke down two walls and expanded the shack. Although it was still made of wooden planks and corrugated zinc roofing sheets, she managed to cement the floor, paint the wooden walls white, and start using table cloths and white lace curtains. By this time, all Imperial Oil's junior workers, and even some senior workers, deserted their staff canteen, and came to 'The White House', their nickname for her buka, for lunch every day. Now, she had seven girls working for her taking orders, serving, washing plates almost as fast as they were used. She alone did the cooking. Although sometimes, when she was ill or too busy, she allowed Kaniye to help her with the cooking.

Kaniye went to 'The White House' every day. In the mornings, he went alone, ferrying foodstuffs and ingredients by canoe, from Asiama Town to Asiama Base Camp, across the unpredictable ocean, he had been capsized once and lost a bag of garri, a half bag of rice, and ten tubers of yam. Usually by the time he returned to Asiama Town, he would be late for school. We were now in St. Cyprian's Grammar School and lateness was punished with cutting the grass in any part of the school. Kaniye didn't seem to mind punishment since we all, especially Tubo and Doye, helped him. They were eager to help him because, after school, they returned to 'The White House', with him. It was the best part of their day as they gorged themselves on Aunty Eno's delicious food. Father had forbidden me from crossing the ocean. I started by telling Father that I had never gone to 'The White House' before, even though my friends went there every day. I didn't tell Father that my friends, especially Tubo, had tried repeatedly to persuade me to go with them. They said Father would not find out. It was hard, but I had told them that it was wrong to disobey Father. Tubo had laughed at me when I said this.

I didn't tell Father that every day, after school, I walked my friends to the beach, helped them cast off their canoe, and watched with a heavy heart as they sailed to a nearby, but unreachable, paradise. When I saw them again, in the evening or the next day at school, I would listen with envy to their stories of how great the food was, and about all the interesting characters that frequented 'The White House'. I told Father that

sometimes, Kaniye, who felt I was being left out, brought me a piece of meat or dried fish. Usually it was something small, which I could eat in a few bites. I told Father that I had never begged Kaniye for food. I admitted that today, however, Kaniye brought me a bowl of *edikang-ikong* soup. Everyone had heard about the famous *edikang-ikong* soup Aunty Eno made. It is a mouth-watering dish from the Calabar area and being from the area, she knew how to make it well. She taught Kaniye how to make the soup, and today, for the first time, Aunty Eno had allowed him make the soup for her customers. No one had noticed any difference between Kaniye's soup and his mother's, and Kaniye, proud and excited, had brought some of the soup for me to taste. I told Father that I didn't hide the bowl of soup from Mother. I didn't say that Mother's rage had increased because the bowl was wooden. Wooden, clay and enamel crockery were an abomination in our house. By Asiama's standards we were high-class: I used plastic or ceramic, and Father and Mother ate from china. I also didn't bother mentioning that Mother disliked my friends. To Mother, my friends were either all ruffians, or a bad influence on me, or not likely to amount to anything in the future. According to her, Tubo's birth explained why he had no 'home training'; Kaniye's mother was a 'husband-snatcher', (but I suspected that this was more because Mother and Kaniye's step-mother are distant cousins); and Doye was 'that pagan child' because his father did not go to any church. I didn't tell Father that I had noticed that Mother never said any of those hurtful words to his hearing. I know he would have scolded her and told her to read about God's love in her bible. I had never heard Father say an unkind word about anybody, even when he and Father Patrick, the Catholic priest, had their 'friendly debates' on true Christianity. Maybe it was because Father was the catechist of St. Cyprian's Church, or maybe it was because Father is the 'Mr Jesus of Asiama' as Mother called him behind his back. I remembered but didn't recount the time last week, when I had told Mother that I didn't like it when she said things behind people's backs. She had gone into a screaming fit, told me that I was being cheeky, and called me an ungrateful child for 'supporting outsiders against my own mother'. When I tried to apologise to her, she didn't want to listen. I had waited in apprehension for Father to come home so she would report me to him as she always did. She didn't report me to Father. I'm not sure why. I

concluded by saying that I didn't take food from strangers because I saw Kaniye as my friend, and not a stranger.

There was silence when I finished. Finally, Father simply said, 'Go to your room, Amaibi, I'll call you later.' I didn't see Father till it was time for lunch. Lunch was meant to be eba and okra soup. Everyone's plates were covered as usual. Father said grace, and we turned our plates over. It was until I had dipped my ball of eba in the soup that I noticed that it wasn't okra soup. I glanced quickly at my father's smiling face. I smiled back and ate *edikang-ikong* soup for the first time in my life. Later that evening, Father told me to always ask for his or Mother's permission before eating anything anyone gave me. At this, I thanked him again for letting me eat Kaniye's soup; he merely smiled wryly, and picked up his bible. I paused by the door on my way out.

'Father?'

He raised an eyebrow over his glasses. 'What is it?'

I went quiet. I wanted to ask why, but I couldn't say the words. Asiama children were not raised to ask their parents questions. But, somehow, Father understood. He stared at me intently.

'Today, my son, you followed your conscience. It takes courage to do that. Always remember, courage without conscience is foolishness.'

Chapter 11
Doye
Asiama Town, 1985

‘Do you ever feel you will never escape your miserable life on this island?’

Soboye asked me. I didn’t reply. Instead, I focused on the moaning of the wind and the pattering of raindrops on our thatch roof. A sudden weak dripping of water, splattered on my shoulder. The roof was now leaking in one more place. I cursed Soboye silently, and moved the bench I was sitting on yet again. It was Soboye’s duty to fix the roof. There, I resolved to fix the roof myself, when the rain subsided, instead of waiting forever for him. Soboye stooped by the small, wooden window. He had grown into a big, muscular, twenty-one year old giant, who had to stoop inside our low, mud house. He opened the window a crack, peered out, and made a bitter face.

‘This stupid rain makes my cold and hunger worse. I’m so tired of this island.’

Finally, I said quietly, ‘Which is the real problem, Soboye? Asiama Island or poverty?’ Soboye laughed.

‘My brother, poverty is the main problem.’ He turned to look at me. He suddenly stopped laughing.

‘But I won’t be poor for long, Doye. Watch and see.’ I smiled indulgently.

‘What are you going to do? Go to Port Harcourt to find work?’ Soboye shook his head, and smiled like a man with a valuable secret.

‘Something better than that.’ I didn’t bother asking him what his plan to make money was. I merely waited, knowing that Soboye, the braggart that he was, would tell me even without my asking. Soboye took his time before telling me. First, he brought out a small, clear, plastic bag containing what looked like brown leaves, from his trouser pocket. From his shirt pocket, he took out a strip of paper. He regarded it for a moment,

before licking the edge. Then he expertly rolled the *igbo*, or marijuana leaves in the strip of paper. He carefully licked the edge of the strip of paper again, sealed it, and twisted one end of the jumbo wrap. I watched my elder brother light up. The *igbo* looked tiny in his massive hand. He held it between his thumb and forefinger, like the stub of a child's used pencil. He took a long drag, making appreciative sucking noises. I looked at him in disgust.

'I thought you did not have any money. Or is your money only for *igbo*?' Soboye exhaled and leaned back on the cool wall. He turned his heavy and half-closed eyelids to me. He pointed the *igbo* at me.

'I didn't buy this.'

'Mmm...' I nodded in disbelief Soboye had a big, satisfied smile on his face.

'I borrowed it from Papa.' I laughed. Soboye chuckled. Papa deserved to have his *igbo* borrowed. After all, whatever money he made, was spent on *igbo* and *kai-kai*, and none of it on us. The laughter and the smoking made Soboye choke. He hit his chest repeatedly as he coughed for a moment. When he calmed down, he turned to me again.

'Ermm… what was I saying? I have forgotten.'

'You have a new job or something,' I replied.

'Oh yes.' Soboye turned grim. 'What I'm about to tell you is a secret. You shouldn't tell anybody.'

I tried not to roll my eyes, and forced myself to nod briefly. Soboye lowered his voice to a whisper.

'There is an underground pipeline, a very long pipeline. It carries crude oil from Port Harcourt to Bonny for export. The pipeline passes through a tiny swamp island, just after Juju Island, up the Asiama River.' He licked his lips, took another drag, and spoke quickly, as smoke escaped in small puffs from the corners of his mouth. 'Every night, some people go up the river to that swamp island. From there, they open the pipeline and divert the oil from it. I don't know how they do it, but they load the oil in boats, come back down the river and sail into the ocean. There are ships already waiting on the ocean to buy the oil.' Soboye smiled at the look of curiosity in my eyes. He knew he now had my full attention.

'Isn't that stealing?' I said with suspicion.

'Oil bunkering,' he corrected, and sucked his rolled up *igbo*. The burning end flickered red, and orange as he sucked.

‘What’s the difference?’ I countered.

‘Oh, just the name,’ Soboye laughed as he blew a jet stream of smoke upwards. Soboye continued, ‘Anyway, Afonya… you know Afonya don’t you?’

‘Afonya, that lazy, never-do-well?’ Soboye frowned.

‘Not any more. He’s beginning to do well for himself because he got into the business. He finally rented a room, bought a TV, video, and radio from Leventis Stores in Port Harcourt.’

‘What is the point?’ I asked a little bitterly. ‘There is no electricity in Asiama.’ Soboye smirked,

‘Afonya also bought a generator.’

Afonya the idiot now had a generator. I shook my head slowly at the injustice of the world. Soboye continued,

‘Afonya is going to introduce me to some of the people who do the business. If they like me, they may allow me to join them.’

‘Why do you need them to like you? Can’t you just go to the swamp island, take the oil, and sell it by yourself?’ Soboye shuddered as if a sudden cold had entered his chest.

‘God forbid! They’ll kill me.’

I regarded Soboye as a bit of an alarmist sometimes. So, I smiled indulgently, ‘Who will kill you?’ Soboye looked around furtively, lowered his voice and whispered,

‘The people who own the oil.’

‘Who owns the oil?’

‘A few very powerful people in the country. I’m not sure who they are but the rumour is that they include Generals in the army, and some, mainly Hausa civilians in government and business. Afonya and others merely work for them.’

‘If they own the oil, why are they also stealing it?’

‘Don’t ask questions like a small boy. Oil bunkering is not the same as stealing meat from somebody’s pot. The government has a hand in it. I know this because Afonya says the navy turns aside as they sail away with the oil. It is the biggest business in Nigeria. And except these people approve of you, you cannot enter the business.’

I went quiet for a moment. I noticed the edge in my voice when I spoke again. ‘Let me understand this. These people, the Generals and the Hausas, their lands do not have oil, right?’ Soboye nodded, and sucked his

igbo hungrily. ‘With the permission of the government, they steal oil which was drilled from places like Asiama?’ Soboye nodded again and blew smoke in my direction.

‘Stop saying steal. The word is “bunker”.’ I nodded slowly as I stared him down.

‘And they prevent people like you, people from Asiama, from taking the oil that comes from your own land, without their permission. Is that it, Soboye?’ With sudden, violent movements, Soboye stubbed out his *igbo*. He stood up, opened the door and walked, shoulders stiff, into the pelting rain. He didn’t say a word.

‘So, Doye Koko, what do you want to be in future?’

It wasn’t what I had expected to hear. So, I went dumb in surprise. When Catechist Francis Akassa, Amaibi’s father, who also taught mathematics, physics and chemistry at St. Cyprian’s Grammar School, had asked me to see him in the staff room after school, I was sure I was going to receive punishment for me and Tubo’s supposedly secret raid on the nuns’ poultry.

‘Well, I’m waiting…’

I shifted from one foot to the other. I don’t know why, but, my immediate instinct was to tell a lie. Catechist Akassa prominent eyes, however, warned me against it. So I told the truth. ‘I want to be a soldier, sir.’ Catechist Akassa nodded slowly as he considered me from behind his glasses. He sat stiffly behind his desk, both hands on his knees, covered by his khaki trousers. He was a small, neat man, with a courteous, deliberate manner, which he had passed on to Amaibi, his only child. He was respected in Asiama for his integrity. He was respected by the students of St. Cyprian’s Grammar School for his even-handedness, and because he was one of the very few who cared.

‘Why a soldier?’ He asked quietly.

I lowered my eyes and stared at the concrete floor. ‘My father was a soldier, sir.’ That was part of the truth. The whole truth was that Papa could not afford to send me to the university when I finished from St. Cyprian’s Grammar School. Besides, I also wanted to be a soldier because I felt that it was the only profession in Nigeria where nobody could

intimidate me. When I finally raised my head, Catechist Akassa's all-knowing eyes told me he knew the whole truth.

'Hmm, I see.' He nodded slowly again as he picked up a small stack of papers from his desk. He waved them gently at me, before placing them down again. 'These are your test and exam results. Again, you did brilliantly. Despite the fact that you don't have any books, or appear to read much, you are my best student in maths and science. You do even better than my son, Amaibi, who I force to read a lot.' He paused, took off his glasses, and wiped them slowly with a soft cloth from his case. He squinted without the glasses, looked cross-eyed and seemed to have shrunk in size. He put them back on before he continued speaking. 'I'm not sure the army is the best vocation for your aptitude. Therefore, I will give you the same advice I gave my son, Amaibi. The future of this country is in oil. Asiama produces quite a lot of it. So, when next you think of your future, consider something in the oil industry. I suggest engineering or geology. Do you understand?'

I nodded. However, I thought that while it was nice to talk about engineering and geology, there was no one to pay my fees in the university. Catechist Akassa stared at me intently.

'My father died when I was about your age,' he began. I didn't know where the conversation was suddenly heading to, but I kept quiet. 'Before he died, I had planned to go to the University of Ibadan to study engineering. My plans died with my father. Or so I thought. Sister Maria, a young Catholic nun, new in Asiama then told me about this Commonwealth scholarship. The qualifying exams were held in Lagos. I am not Catholic, but she gave me money to go to Lagos for the exams. I got the scholarship, and went on to study engineering at the University of London.' Catechist Akassa smiled wryly before he continued. 'You will not understand why I chose to come back to Asiama to teach in the church and in this school. That is not important. What is important is that the Commonwealth scholarship is on this year.'

My heart suddenly started beating. I clenched my fists as I tried to suppress the hope that had sprung somewhere in me.

'The scholarship exams will be held in Lagos in two weeks. I have entered you and Amaibi for the exams.' My hope died immediately. Papa could not give me money to go to Lagos. Again, Catechist Akassa read my mind. 'I will talk to your father to let you come to Lagos with Amaibi and

me. I'll pay for your journey and feeding. If you pass the exams, and I know you will, you may want to reconsider your desire to be a soldier. Do you understand?' As I nodded, I suddenly felt the sting of tears in my eyes. Tears, which for the first time in my life, were not caused by a beating.

'You can go now.'

I enthused, 'Thank you, sir! Thank you, sir! Thank...'

He raised an arm to stop me. Then he waved me away and returned to the papers on his desk. As I turned to leave, he called out,

'Remember, engineering or geology, because oil is the future of this country and you are from Asiama, an oil-producing area.' Catechist Akassa concluded by muttering a known Asiama proverb, 'A fisherman should not wander far from where his net is.'

Papa did not go fishing on the night before I was to travel to Lagos. On the nights that Papa did not go fishing, he would go down to the town square and get drunk on kai-kai. Then, he would tell his war stories, and then curse, in no particular order – God, the Biafra War, the politicians, the Amayanabo and his chiefs, Imperial Oil, the prostitutes, and any other person he could remember. He would then return home, beat Mama or any of us he could find and in the middle of it all, suddenly fall asleep. One night, two years ago, Papa came home drunk, but did not find anyone to beat. We were all hiding behind the plantain trees at the back of our house. He called out for us. When we refused to come out, Papa got out his rifle, the one he had used during the Biafra War. He screamed our names as he released several wild shots into the night. Asiama switched off all its lamps and quaked behind its doors till Papa eventually ran out of bullets, and fell asleep.

Mama ran away the next morning. We still don't know where she went. All we know is that she left us, and Asiama. We understood. Mama Bomo, Papa's second wife, had run away a few months earlier with her children. When I was little, I used to be afraid of Papa's beatings. But not any more: I was used to them now. They were just a few wild punches, already weakened by the kai-kai. Even Soboye's punches were harder than Papa's. I didn't mind the beatings anyway. This was because, sometimes, after beating me, Papa would talk to me. He only talked about the things

he had cursed about earlier in the day. Though he rambled and slurred his words drunkenly, his eyes were always alive, shining. He had told me things he saw and did in the Biafra War – how he killed people, how he watched his platoon leader smash the heads of little children with his rifle butt, and how he was forced by hunger to eat human flesh roasted to a juicy tenderness by bombing from an air raid. Those were the only times Papa talked to me.

These days, Papa did little fishing. His reason was that Imperial Oil chased away most of the fish when it laid pipelines in the river and the ocean. However, Soboye murmured behind Papa's back that Papa was a lazy, drunkard who couldn't be bothered to fish any more. This year there was also something that happened up on the Asiama River. We woke up one morning to see oil, thick and black, floating on top of the brown water of the river. The river became sluggish in its flow, as the oil gradually choked its life away. After school, I sat on the banks and watched dead fish, turned on their sides, slowly drift by. The river stank. Papa called it an oil spill. Papa had gone to Ofirima Island, now called Asiama Base Camp, to shout at the Imperial Oil people. They had apologised and told him that the river and the ocean would be cleaned up immediately. They had also told Papa that Imperial Oil had paid ten thousand naira to the Asiama fishermen and people, through the Amayanabo. Papa had immediately gone to the Amayanabo's palace to demand for his share of the compensation money. The Amayanabo, who I thought, was afraid of Papa quickly and quietly, paid him seven hundred naira. Later on, we heard that the Amayanabo had paid only one hundred naira each to the other fishermen, and kept over seven thousand naira for himself. We did not see a kobo of the seven hundred naira paid to Papa. He spent all of it on kai-kai. He talked about marrying a third wife, but thankfully none of the teenage girls he regularly slept with, was stupid enough to be enticed by his offer.

Asiama people say that Papa is crazy. Some say that the Biafra War made Papa crazy. Others say that Papa was crazy even before the war. Before the war, Papa was already a soldier in the Nigerian Army. During the war, he had fought on the side of Biafra. Papa's mother was Ibo, and he had believed at the time, in the justice of the cause of the mainly Ibo, Biafrans. It took two years, several horrors, and terrible battles in Nsukka, Enugu and Onitsha, to re-orientate Papa's beliefs, and to convince him that

he was not really Ibo. One day, he simply stopped fighting and escaped back home to Asiama. To the people who said that Papa deserted the Biafrans, he replied that at least he was wiser than Ojukwu, the Biafra leader, who eventually did the same thing a few months after Papa. Papa may have left the Biafra War, but the war had not left him. The demons from the war tormented him every night. They were joined by the demons from his *igbo*, kai-kai, and sense of failure as a man.

Something else tormented Papa on the night before I was to travel to Lagos. I remember I was the only one at home. I could not sleep. I did not want to sleep. I had to catch Lagos. There was a sense of foreboding that Lagos would dissolve like mist under the morning sun if I closed my eyes and slept. Lagos was my escape from Asiama, and the promise of a better life for me. I didn't know why I was restless and anxious. After all, Catechist Akassa had convinced Papa to let me go with him. Papa had even been happy with the idea. All that was needed now was for the day to come to me. The day that would bring Lagos to me. I heard Papa outside before I saw him.

'Soboye!' He bellowed into the night. 'Where is Soboye?'

I realised then that I had not seen Soboye for two days. This was strange. Stranger still was that Papa was asking for Soboye. Usually, he just cursed drunkenly as he arrived home. I got up from my mat and ran quickly to open the door before Papa knocked it down again.

'Welcome, Papa,' I began. In answer, Papa grabbed my throat with his big left hand and snarled,

'I said, where is Soboye?' As he spoke, he shoved me backwards through the door, his eyes darting all over the house. I struggled to loosen his grip.

'I…do…don't…know. H…He's not here.' Papa loosened his grip and stared at me suspiciously as if that might make Soboye appear.

'When did you last see him?' he demanded. I thought for a moment.

'Yesterday morning, I think. Or was it two days ago…I'm not sure, Papa.'

Papa bowed his head and seemed to be in a daze. He mumbled, 'Since I heard it, I've been looking for Soboye. I have searched this whole town… Something tells me he was involved. Something…'

'What, Papa?' I asked with my heart beating. 'What?' Papa did a sharp turn and looked at me wildly as if he was seeing me for the first

time.

‘You are still here?’ he boomed. ‘Don’t you know we should go up the river to look for your brother?’ He spun violently in the small room and screamed, ‘Where is my gun? Get me my gun!’

I ran into Papa’s bedroom and slid under his six-spring bed with its dirty, carton-thin mattress. My groping hand found the cold steel barrel of Papa’s rifle. I grabbed it, pulled it out and held it properly with my finger in the trigger guard. For a brief moment, I felt the familiar thrill it always gave me. Involuntarily reluctant, I gave the gun to Papa, barrel first. Papa snarled,

‘Get me the paddle.’

I ran to a corner and grabbed the Koko War Canoe House paddle. It was a giant paddle, which was not used for everyday fishing but only for festivals. Or war. With a rifle in one hand, and a paddle in another. Papa barked his orders,

‘Let’s go! Go! Go! Go!’

We ran out into the night, and uptown towards the river. Asiama was quiet and eerie. The sick moon gave a weak, unnatural glimmer to parts of the dark streets. As I sprinted behind Papa, I realised something for the first time. Papa was not drunk.

We did not use the paddle. Papa stole a boat with an outboard engine. We roared up Asiama River. The boat had no lights but we did not need lights to navigate on the river. We are children of the Asiama River. I sat at the bow of the boat and stared fixedly at the moon dancing madly on the choppy waters. I had a premonition that every foot away from Asiama Town, took me further away from Lagos. The worst thing was that I still did not know where we were going. It was only when we went past Juju Island that I guessed. However, I could never have imagined what we saw past there. A roaring fire, about ten feet high, marked the tiny uninhabited island where Soboye and twelve other people had gone to steal, or rather, bunker oil. The fire, bright and brilliant, gave enough light for us to see their deep-roasted corpses which littered the shore. The corpses were contorted into violently grotesque positions in death. Death, from the pipeline explosion, had been immediate. We smelled the heady aroma of burnt flesh.

‘Oh, Soboye…’ Papa’s voice was an unfamiliar croak. I took control of the boat, and killed the engine. ‘Soboye, my first son...’ Papa whispered

in the wind. The thick, choking smoke blackened the already dark-grey sky and blanketed the stars. We bobbed on the water. I used the paddle to keep the boat as steady as I could. I did not want the boat to get to the shore just a few feet away. The intense heat from the fire could kill us. It was already making us sweat as far away as we were.

‘Soboye, talk to your father. Tell me you are not with these people.’

The night, however, refused to reply Papa. We remained there for the three hours it took me to convince Papa that there was no way, we could get on shore to collect Soboye’s body. We returned to Asiama Island just before dawn. It took the government six days to put out the fire. We were the first ones on the scene immediately after. We braved the soul defiling stench of burnt flesh. But, we could not identify exactly which of the blackened and charred corpses was Soboye. So, we simply took one and hoped. We buried it in our family mausoleum. I did not go to Lagos.

Chapter 12
Kaniye
Asiama Town, 1985

I was distracted by Chief Ikaki's nostrils. Chief Dumo Ikaki had the widest nostrils in the world. They were big enough for him to stick two of his stubby fingers in them all at once. I know – I had just seen him do it minutes before. They were upturned enough to expose bushy hair, flecked with grey, and strands of brown. His nostrils flared even more whenever he was angry. Chief Dumo Ikaki was angry today.

'JFK, did you just call me stupid?' He thundered at Sir James, nostrils opening up menacingly to bite.

A small smile played on the lips of Sir James for the briefest of seconds. He remained seated but managed somehow to raise his nose, and look down on Chief Ikaki. After a long moment, he spoke slowly,

'Dumo Ikaki, sit down. I did not call you stupid.' Chief Dumo Ikaki did not sit down. Rather, he bounced up and down, his fat body quivering with rage. Chief Opia, who was Chief Ikaki's sidekick, stood up and tried to calm him down, while shooting baleful looks at Sir James. Other chiefs murmured,

'It's enough…' 'Sit down…' 'It's okay.' Sir James waited patiently till the exact moment when Chief Ikaki sat down again. Then he said,

'Dumo, you suggested that we demand compensation from Imperial Oil for the pipeline explosion caused by some of our boys who were bunkering oil. I only said that your suggestion, not you, was the most profoundly stupid thing I have heard all day.'

Chief Ikaki was up on his feet immediately, waving his giant arms at the other chiefs and screaming.

'You heard him! You heard JFK! He is calling me stupid again!' Chief Ikaki took a few steps towards the seated Sir James, and towered menacingly over him. He slapped his chest repeatedly as he spoke, a warrior itching for battle.

‘Me! JFK! Me! It is me o! It is me you just insulted.’

Sir James sighed wearily, crossed his long legs and drawled, ‘I know it is you, Dumo. I can see.’ That drew muffled laughter from the other chiefs. The laughter diffused the tension.

It was at that moment that Sir James looked around and saw me at a corner of the hall. He glanced at his watch and noted that I was on time. He had planned for me to meet him at this Council of Chiefs meeting at the Amayanabo’s palace hall at 3.00 p.m., so we could go see Father Patrick together at St. Joseph’s Catholic Church. St. Joseph’s was closer to the Amayanabo’s palace than my mother’s house. Once I saw that Sir James was aware of my presence, I made to leave the hall to wait outside. He frowned and shook his head faintly. He wanted me to stay and watch the proceedings of the meeting. So I stayed.

Meanwhile, Chief Ikaki had turned to the Amayanabo. ‘Your Highness, I demand that you call Chief JFK Rufus to order. I demand an apology from Chief JFK Rufus. An apology, nothing less.’ Chief Ikaki huffed and swelled. His nostrils breathed out fire and smoke. After a long moment, he sat down heavily. The chiefs turned to the Amayanabo. I noticed the slight disdain in some of their eyes.

The Amayanabo sat on his imposing throne, squirmed in his elegant robes, and looked around nervously. It was a familiar look. He had never really looked comfortable as Amayanabo. Some people said that it was because he always remembered that he was the second, less popular choice for the throne. His name was Gabriel Akassa, and he was the elder cousin of Catechist Francis Akassa, Amaibi’s father. The story was that at the death of the former Amayanabo seventeen years ago, it became the turn of the Akassa Royal House to ascend to the throne. Amaibi’s father was the popular choice. But he declined, and chose instead to teach in St. Cyprian’s Church and School. His cousin, Gabriel, took his place and had been Amayanabo now for seventeen years. As Sir James once remarked, it had been seventeen years of successfully sitting on the fence, while trying unsuccessfully to please everybody.

The Amayanabo lowered his eyes and squirmed some more. He seemed to be looking for help. The chiefs refused to look at him. After an eternity of waiting hopelessly for the problem to go away, the Amayanabo cleared his throat, and muttered,

‘Gentlemen…err, we should…err, take it easy, err…take it easy.’

Sir James rose slowly to his feet. He turned to the Amayanabo, ‘Your Highness…’ He nodded to the other chiefs, ‘Fellow chiefs…’ He struck his usual oratorical pose – erect, feet apart, one hand on the shiny knob of his walking stick, eyes turned slightly skywards. ‘Before this meeting started, Chief Dumo Ikaki asked for my support for his proposal that this Chiefs’ Council demand compensation from Imperial Oil for the pipeline explosion that killed thirteen of our people. I refused to support that for two reasons and I explained them to him. The first reason, which some people here have chosen to ignore, is that our young men who died were doing something criminal.’ Sir James looked straight at Chief Ikaki, ‘I repeat they were stealing oil.’ There were sighs, and frowns from some chiefs.

Someone muttered, ‘How can you steal something that belongs to you?’

‘If the oil belonged to them, why did they have to break a pipe in the middle of the night to collect it?’ Sir James retorted. There was a pause, as the chiefs thought, in vain, for a suitable reply. Sir James’s baritone was noticeably conciliatory when it continued, ‘I did not say they deserve to die. I am only pointing out that they died while stealing. Therefore, I see no moral justification for us to demand compensation from anyone for their deaths.’ He pulled out his reading glasses from the breast pocket of his pale blue etibo and put them on. ‘Or maybe, I’m not seeing things clearly. Secondly, and this is where the stupidity of Dumo’s idea becomes clear: the pipeline does not belong to Imperial Oil.’ There were gasps of surprise from most of the chiefs. Many turned to look at Chief Ikaki. He jumped to his feet immediately.

‘Lie! That is a lie! JFK does not know what he is talking about. Imperial Oil owns the pipeline.’ He pointed a finger at Sir James, ‘Because you are rich: you don’t want your fellow chiefs to enjoy some of Imperial’s money, eh?’

Sir James gave Chief Ikaki a tight smile, ‘At this moment, I will not be drawn into the irrelevant issue of how rich you and I are, Dumo.’ As Chief Ikaki gulped, Sir James turned to the chiefs, and shook his head sadly, ‘Yes, the pipeline belongs to the government owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation. Remember, it was the NNPC, not Imperial Oil that awarded the contract to clamp the pipe and clean the area.’ The chiefs remembered, and kept quiet. Then someone complained,

‘But, why didn’t the NNPC award that contract to one of our people?’ There were murmurs of agreement.

I caught Sir James looking at Catechist Akassa and shaking his head. Amaibi’s father smiled sadly in return and got to his feet. The murmurs stopped immediately. Everyone waited for him to speak. Officially, Catechist Akassa had two jobs. The first was to teach mathematics, chemistry and physics in St. Cyprian’s Grammar School; and the other was to teach the Bible in St. Cyprian’s Church. However, unofficially, in Asiama, he was also a headmaster, pastor, administrator, community leader, and the only non-chief in the Chiefs’ Council.

‘Your Highness, honourable chiefs…’ There was a pause, as if Catechist Akassa did not really believe that Asiama had many honourable chiefs. ‘As I understand it, Imperial Oil has offered to assist in developing Asiama. This honourable Council…this Council is to decide on what projects Imperial Oil should undertake to help our town. Even if Imperial Oil owned that pipeline, I am not sure that paying compensation for the death of some of our boys is the best way to help Asiama. We have other problems in Asiama. There is no electricity, no potable water, and no hospital. Yes we have good schools, but that is only thanks to the Catholic and Anglican churches, the nuns, Father Patrick and me. Our schools have produced some excellent students, especially this year. But many of these students, who are the future of Asiama, cannot afford to go to the university. They are likely to join the many other unemployed Asiama youths who roam around restlessly, causing trouble.’ He squinted and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. ‘My suggestion is this. Let us tell Imperial Oil to give some scholarships to our young people. After all, this is not a new thing in this area. I know of a company that gives scholarships to the Nembe people. Then, maybe we can talk about electricity, water, a hospital, expanding our schools, a bridge and a road, then maybe compensation. Like I said, we have problems in Asiama. But, we have to prioritise them.’

From the corner of my eye, I saw Sir James nodding vigorously. Chief Ikaki and Chief Opia glared at the ground. Some chiefs, stony faced, refused to look at Catechist Akassa. Others who did had anger in their eyes. Catechist Akassa sat down. He looked like a man with a heavy heart. At first, I didn’t understand the antagonism from majority of the chiefs to Catechist Akassa’s suggestion. Then I realised that the chiefs were angry

because it did not give them any direct monetary benefit. Sir James was on his feet again.

‘Once again, Catechist Akassa’s words were spoken with wisdom and in the best interest of Asiama. I cannot fault either his logic or his ideas. Or, is there a better suggestion?’ he asked, with the faintest hint of mockery in his voice. Nobody spoke. Sir James looked slowly round the room, daring the chiefs with his eyes. One by one, they looked away. Then he looked directly at the Amayanabo. ‘Your Highness, since there is no contrary or better idea from anyone else, I second Catechist Akassa’s motion that this honourable Council immediately request that Imperial Oil grant university scholarships to qualified Asiama indigenes.’

The Amayanabo looked nervous. But he had to bend to Sir James’s much stronger will. Then, he raised his staff slightly, the sign of assent. Sir James nodded his thanks. There was a grimace on his face, possibly from the pain it took to get basic things done in Asiama and the knowledge that things would only get worse. It was still there when he turned and looked at me. At that moment, I hoped my eyes told my father that for the first time in a long time, I was proud of him.

When I was a child, I imagined John the Baptist to be a tall, strong, hairy, white man with a voice of thunder. Father Patrick Lennon always reminded me of John the Baptist. I never could understand why. Father Patrick was small, swarthy, and spoke softly with a lilting Irish brogue not exactly the sort of voice that would strike fear in the heart of hypocritical Pharisees. Maybe it was his hair. It grew wild, mostly grey with tiny streaks of black. A thick beard covered his cheeks and chin. If Father Patrick was surprised to see Sir James and me in his house, he didn’t show it. He ushered us in and pointed us to the well-worn cushion chairs. Catechist Akassa was already seated there. They were firm friends, these two leaders of different church denominations. It was Catechist Akassa who had insisted that the Anglican Church run St. Cyprian’s Grammar School, employ Father Patrick, the Catholic, to teach English and the Humanities – literature, history and government.

Father Patrick smiled, ‘Can I offer you some cold water?’ Sir James winced slightly and leaned forward,

‘Pardon?’

‘Cold water. Can I offer you some?’ Father Patrick said louder.

‘Ah.’ Sir James sat back in his chair. He shook his head slowly. ‘No. Thank you very much. You are too kind.’ Then he muttered under his breath in the Asiama language, ‘Only people who don’t understand culture offer cold water to a chief. Will brandy kill me?’

‘Yes,’ Catechist Akassa said.

Father Patrick turned to him, ‘What’s that you said?’

‘Yes. I said yes.’ Catechist Akassa gave Sir James a quick pastoral frown, and swivelled back to Father Patrick. ‘Yes. He’ll like some cold water, please.’

Father Patrick nodded, picked up a small bell on the floor and tinkled it. A familiar voice from somewhere in the house said,

‘I’m coming, Father.’

Moments later, Tubo hobbled into the room. He now stayed with Father Patrick and doubled as a houseboy. We exchanged quick winks.

‘Good evening, sirs,’ Tubo said. They nodded.

Sir James said, ‘Ah, Tubo. Congratulations. I hear you passed your exams.’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.’

‘Good boy. You are somebody, Tubo.’ I had never seen Tubo smile so widely. Then I remembered the meaning of his name and understood why those words meant so much to him.

Father Patrick turned to Tubo, ‘Peter… get some cold water from the fridge for us.’ When the water came, Sir James took a sip, smiled and said,

‘Congratulations to you too, Catechist!’

‘What are you congratulating me for?’

‘Your son, Amaibi. I hear he passed a scholarship exam and is going to London to study soon.’ Catechist Akassa beamed and shrugged,

‘Yes, that’s true. We are grateful to God. Even if he had been admitted into a university in Nigeria, it would have been difficult for me to pay his fees, on the little I earn.’

‘I’m happy your boy has made you proud,’ Sir James said as he shot me an acid look. Catechist Akassa noticed it and said,

‘You also have a son to be proud of.’ Sir James made a face like he had something sour in his mouth.

‘Kaniye did not pass the exams to enter the university.’ Father Patrick understood that as my teacher, Sir James held him partly responsible for this. He simply smiled sadly and said,

‘The true value of a man is not measured by academic achievements. Don’t worry, Daniel is a good boy.’ Sir James frowned,

‘Kaniye. Daniel is just his middle name. I didn’t expect anyone to call him that.’

‘I see.’ Father Patrick’s green eyes went cold.

‘Well, let’s say that I was less than impressed by his… err, inability to gain admission into a university. I understand that he is the only one among his friends who is in this embarrassing position.’

Father Patrick sipped some more water, ‘Your son is a bright boy. He comes here, reads my books, and asks intelligent questions. I believe he can pass any exam easily. The problem is that he is hardly ever at school. When he does come to school, he is always late. I understand he has personal issues. His mother, I believe, is very sick.’ He turned to Catechist Akassa who nodded confirmation. ‘He is single-handedly taking care of her, and running her business. And, he is just fifteen years old. Now, some may find that impressive. Others, rather, may choose to focus on his temporary academic setback.’ At this, Father Patrick smiled sadly at Sir James.

‘Hmm!’ Sir James snorted, still unimpressed. Then he glared at me while speaking to them. ‘Gentlemen, I think it is time the boy left Asiama. There are too many distractions for him here. I have plans for him. He will repeat his final year in a good secondary school in Port Harcourt. When he eventually passes his exams, he will study to be a lawyer. My blood has to take over my practice.’

That was when I realised that some of the rumours I had heard about Gogo, my step-brother were true. Sir James had sent Gogo to London to study law. That was four years ago. The rumours were that Gogo dropped out of school, and tried, spectacularly, to outdo everyone on the London party and drugs circuit. Naturally, he was so busy with this that he couldn’t call or write home, but Sir James and his wife continued to make excuses for him to all their friends and relations. However, it was also rumoured that Sir James finally lost patience with Gogo, when on a trip to London this year, he had seen Gogo, high/mad (depending on the version), wearing dirty dreadlocks, speaking West Indian patois, and calling himself

‘*Guzz*’. Now, I understood Sir James’s sudden interest in me, his bastard son, after all these years. I used my eyes to plead with Father Patrick and Catechist Akassa to help me. Father Patrick smiled again at Sir James,

‘Law? As his teacher, I wouldn’t have suggested that profession. He has a natural flair for business, I hear he has done wonderful things with his mother’s restaurant, and as such should study a course that would harness these skills.’

Catechist Akassa nodded and looked at me, ‘Yes. Besides, Kaniye is the one who takes care of his sick mother.’

Sir James snapped, ‘I’m uncomfortable with the notion that a fifteen year-old boy is managing a restaurant and taking care of a sick woman. I have made up my mind; the boy will join me in Port Harcourt.’ The other two men looked at me sadly. They couldn’t do any more. They were not my father. Ironically, they were more of a father to me than Sir James ever was. Sir James snorted,

‘What exactly is wrong with the boy’s mother, Catechist? I’ve asked her many times and she has refused to tell me. You are her pastor. You know, right?’

‘I know.’ Catechist Akassa replied gravely. ‘But I can’t tell you.’

‘Catechist,’ Catechist Akassa put up a palm to stop him.

‘You, of all people, should understand that confidentiality is sacred. All I can say is that it is very serious and she needs surgery. We take a collection for her every Sunday. Even Father Patrick does the same at St. Joseph’s, but it’s still not enough for her surgery.’ Sir James bowed his head, sunk his shoulders and sighed.

‘You know, she has refused to take any money from me. I’ve offered her several times.’

‘I know. I know.’ Catechist Akassa replied. ‘I also know that the boy would not want to leave Asiama until he is sure his mother is taken good care of.’

Sir James gave me a quick glance as if to warn me against daring to disobey him. Then he smiled at Catechist Akassa, suddenly turning on the charm, ‘I’ll think of a way to take good care of her.’ The meeting was over. Sir James grabbed his walking stick and stood up. ‘Two more things before I go.’ He turned to Father Patrick. ‘That boy, Tubo…’

‘Peter.’

‘Tubo. Peter. Whatever.’ He paused, ‘Don’t worry about his university fees. The Council of Chiefs is working on something that will pay the fees of all the students who passed their secondary school certificate this year. Catechist Akassa will brief you on the details. It was his idea anyway. If that fails, meet me. I’ll gladly pay his fees.’ Father Patrick’s mouth fell open. Then a smile forced open his bushy face. Then he continued ‘Together, you both have raised many young men in Asiama, who are not your children. Including my son...’ Sir James bowed his head. ‘You will get no reward for all you have done. Asiama never rewards or acknowledges good men. But you have my sincere thanks for my son, for Tubo, and the many others.’ He nodded at them. ‘Thank you.’

Two weeks later, on a balmy Sunday evening, Catechist Akassa knocked on the door of our house. My mother opened the door herself. Her smile reminded me that a beautiful woman-child had once lived underneath the wasted, bony face.

‘Ah, Catechist! Welcome, o! Please sit down.’ He smiled back as he sat down,

‘Sister Eno, you are strong today. You are on your feet.’ She nodded her head, wrapped round in a scarf, which she had taken to wearing since she started losing her hair.

‘Yes, o! We thank God.’

‘Good evening, sir,’ I called out from the corner of the room where I was sorting out some alligator pepper. My mother had recently developed a peculiar fondness for them. My mother smiled,

‘Catechist, have you eaten? Kaniye made jollof rice. He’ll get some for you.’

‘It is always a treat to eat in this house, but don’t bother, Sister Eno.’ Catechist Akassa coughed lightly, and said, ‘I have good news for you.’

My mother glanced at me nervously, and wrung her hands. She was trembling as she sat down. I went to sit beside her.

‘We now have the money for your operation.’

My mother gasped and put her long, bony hands to her face. She started sobbing quietly. I held her in my arms. After a while she raised her head,

‘H…How? How did it happen?’

‘During the church service today, somebody dropped a big envelope in the collection bag. On the envelope, the person wrote, “For Eno Henshaw”.’ Catechist Akassa pulled out the envelope from his bag and handed it to her. Her hands were shaking as she took it.

‘There’s eighty-seven thousand naira in there.’ Catechist Akassa said quietly.

She dropped the envelope. ‘Who did this? Who gave me this money?’ She eyed him suspiciously. ‘It is Sir James, abi?’

Catechist Akassa nodded gravely, ‘I don’t know. He wasn’t in church.’

My mother shook her head. We all knew that Sir James had somehow outsmarted her. She stared into space, ‘I know it is him. I don’t want his money. All these years, I raised Kaniye by myself. Sir James finally remembered us, now that he needs a son. And, he thinks he can buy my son from me, abi?’ My mother shook her head again. Suddenly, she eyed Catechist Akassa. ‘You told him I have cancer?’

He shook his head, ‘No. I didn’t tell him anything. Only me, Father Patrick, the nuns, and of course, Kaniye, know that you are ill with cancer.’ Then he knelt down in front of her, picked up the envelope and handed it to her. ‘Take it. Please. It is yours. It is enough for your operation and to take care of you while you recuperate.’

She started crying again. I took the envelope from Catechist Akassa and put it her laps. She didn’t look at it. She didn’t throw it away either. I opened my arms and held her close again. She felt small, fragile as she sobbed. I was surprised by how much I wanted to protect her. I closed my eyes, swayed in her smell – alligator pepper and talcum powder. She whispered, ‘What will happen to Kaniye? Who will take care of him?’

Catechist Akassa said softly, ‘It’s time to let go of Kaniye. He is your child, not your husband.’ Then, he started talking. His voice was soothing as he talked about my future, her operation, fear, stillborn dreams, and forgiving Sir James. He spoke the truth, kindly, like a lover’s whisper. She cried all through. But, she knew the truth. He left us holding each other.

Chapter 13
Tubo
Asiama Town, 1986

‘I’ll tell you the story of Thunder Balogun?’

‘Yaaay!’

They all shouted, well all of them, except Pius. I could see he was torn between his sense of duty, and the urge to hear one of my stories. His eyes darted back and forth, between the other altar boys and finally rested on me. He realised he was outnumbered five to one. I made things difficult for Pius by shrugging my shoulders and then made to turn away. I conveyed an unspoken message in that movement – I could not tell the story unless Pius wanted to hear it. One of the altar boys groaned in disappointment. Another one sighed. Someone said,

‘Pius, abeg na! We want Brother Tubo to tell us about Thunder… Bbb…’

‘Thunder Balogun,’ I said, helping out. Pius bowed his face and studied his feet. In a few minutes he had gone from being the odd man in the group, to the killjoy. With his head hung low, he looked like a sad puppy washed up in the rain.

Someone poked him lightly, ‘Pius, abeg. You want everybody to beg you athink? That is wickedness o! Wickedness!’

Jerkily, Pius turned to each face, palms outstretched, ‘I…I don’t want…I’m not wick…wicked…I just…’

The other altar boys turned away from Pius and started folding the robes and putting away the vessels used for Mass. It was too much for Pius.

‘O…Okay.’ He said with a catch in his throat.

There was a chorus of ‘Yaaay!’ and a succession of pats on Pius’ back. He forced a smile – the uneasy smile of compromised principles. I smiled back and began the story.

Thunder Balogun was a footballer. He used to play for Sharks of Port Harcourt, Rangers of Enugu and Flash Flamingos of Benin. In short,

he played for every big club in Nigeria. I got up from the chair I was sitting on. It was time to tell the story as I knew best – with my eyes, my expressions, the cadence of my voice, my hands and my body. ‘Thunder Balogun could dribble…’ I twisted my shorter leg this way and that, ‘One time, he started dribbling from one end of the field. By the time he got to the other end, he had dribbled ten men. Finally, he dribbled the goalkeeper like this…’ I feinted from side to side, did a step-over. The goalkeeper sat heavily on the grass as I went past.

‘HA!’ The crowd roared.

‘Thunder Balogun rolled the ball to the goal line. Then, he trapped it. Right there on the line. Everybody was waiting for him to kick it in and score.’ I paused and looked at each of them. I shook my head, ‘But Thunder Balogun didn’t kick the ball over the line. Do you want to know what he did?’ They nodded eagerly, eyes bright. I dropped to my hands and knees suddenly, with my head on the floor, like a Moslem praying. ‘He went like this, and used his head to nod the ball…’ I flicked my head, ‘…over the line…Goal!’ I jumped to my feet, shook both arms in the air, spread them out and mimicked an aeroplane in flight.

‘Goooaal!’ They yelled with me.

The door of the vestry swung open at that moment. We cut short our goal celebrations fearing that Father Patrick had come to find out what the noise was all about. It wasn’t Father Patrick. Doye, Amaibi and Kaniye stood at the doorway of the vestry. I smiled, waved them in, but didn’t stop the story.

‘But, the most important thing about Thunder Balogun was his shot. He had a very hot shot. Thunder Balogun’s shot ehn?’ My eyes shone. ‘It was so hot that it would tear the net of the goal post and break the wall of the stadium. ‘Especially the shot from his left foot.’ I shook my head gravely as I remembered all the torn nets and broken walls caused by Thunder Balogun’s shots. I noticed Amaibi from the corner of my eye also shaking his head – in disapproval. Kaniye, however, had a huge smile. He loved my stories. Doye wore his usual scowl. They had all heard me tell the Thunder Balogun story before, but not with this detail. ‘Anyway, Thunder Balogun had this friend called Okalla. Okalla was a goalkeeper. In fact he was the best goalkeeper in the world, even Pele could not score against Okalla. Pele played fifty-three shots, and Okalla caught every single one of them.’

‘Fifty-three?’ Amaibi mouthed the words silently.

I nodded confidently. ‘Yes, fifty-three. That was how good Okalla was. One day, Okalla told Thunder Balogun that he would catch any of Thunder Balogun’s shots played from the penalty spot. Thunder Balogun disagreed. So, they had a bet. On the chosen day, they went to the National Stadium. It was packed full with people. Everyone had come to see the great battle between the hottest shot, and the best goalkeeper in the world. Thunder Balogun picked up the ball…’ I held out the imaginary ball in my hands, and placed it carefully on the penalty spot. ‘Then he took some steps like this…’ I paced backwards. ‘Okalla, meanwhile, was on the goal line…’ I spread out my arms and my feet, squatted slightly and prepared to save Thunder Balogun’s shot. ‘Thunder Balogun ran towards the ball. At first, he planned to shoot with his right foot. But somebody in the crowd shouted: Thunder Balogun, remember your left leg!’ On cue, Kaniye cut in, providing the voice in the crowd. I nodded and smiled without breaking my stride. ‘Exactly, then at the last second, Thunder Balogun changed his mind took the shot…with all the power in his left foot…Gbo sa!’ My left arm was already going up in slow motion. ‘The ball flew…towards the left of the goal post. Okalla dived towards the ball…’ My right hand rose over my head and joined my left. ‘And, Okalla caught the ball, like this…’ I put my elbows together, palms upwards, in front of my stomach, and doubled over. ‘But… the ball entered Okalla’s stomach. It tore his stomach open and his intestines splattered all over the goalposts.’ I winced and spread out my arms. ‘See blood everywhere!’ They gasped in horror. After all, they were just nine year-old boys. ‘And you know what? The shot passed through Okalla’s stomach and tore the net behind him.’ I shook my head sadly and sighed. I had come to the end of the story. Someone asked,

‘What happened to Okalla?’

‘Okalla died on the spot.’

‘What of Thunder Balogun?’ It was Pius.

I turned to him. ‘Thunder Balogun cried and cried for his friend.’ I shook my head finally. ‘And, Thunder Balogun never played football again.’

‘Fifty-three shots?’ Amaibi asked out loud as soon as we left the vestry. I laughed.

‘It’s always better to use a specific number.’

‘You shouldn’t tell such lies to children.’ He lectured as we walked across the sandy lot at the back of St. Joseph’s Church.

I shrugged and spread my arms, ‘I had little choice. I had to offer them a story or else they would have reported me to Father Patrick.’

‘What for?’ Kaniye asked. I smiled,

‘Well…this morning, before Mass, I was hungry and…well, I ate some wafers to be used for Holy Communion. One of the altar boys, Pius, saw me and...’

‘You did what?’ Amaibi’s mouth fell open.

‘I ate some wafers.’

‘You stole the Holy Communion! The body of our Lord Jesus Christ!’

I wagged my forefinger at Amaibi, ‘No. Point of correction. I ate wafers. You see, technically, wafers do not become Holy Communion until Father Patrick blesses them. He hadn’t blessed them when I ate them, so they were still wafers.’ Amaibi was dumbfounded. Kaniye took a look at Amaibi’s face and roared with laughter, his awkward shoulders shaking with him. Doye sniggered. ‘Besides…’ I continued, ‘Even if it was the Holy Communion, I would not have been afraid. After all, God owes me.’

‘God owes you what?’ It was Doye’s turn to be surprised.

‘Compensation.’ I replied with a straight face.

‘Compensation for what?’ Amaibi almost shouted.

‘For not giving me parents. For making me a cripple. For...’

‘You are not a cripple!’ They all chorused. It was their familiar reply. We were now on a small path, loosely paved with brownish black periwinkle shells. The path eventually led to the field in St. Cyprian’s compound. We were going to play football. I shook my head and pointed at them. ‘You all have two legs each. I have one and a half, and you people say I’m not a cripple?’

Kaniye smiled, ‘Point of correction. Technically, you have two legs. One is just shorter and weaker than the other.’

They guffawed and slapped shoulders. ‘If you are so smart, why didn’t you pass your exams?’ In my desperation to think of a quick retort,

I had said the first thing that came to my mind. Kaniye flinched. The laughter died immediately. I was about to apologise when I saw a smile forming on Kaniye's face.

'You may be smarter, but you also have the smallest penis in this group.' He put his thumb to the middle of his pinkie finger to indicate the length. The raucous laughter that followed was the worst I had ever endured. Even Amaibi who disliked rude jokes, joined in. Kaniye was the first to stop laughing. He walked over to me, and put his arm over my shoulder. I pushed it away. This made Doye laugh even more. Kaniye put his arm over my shoulder again. I left it there but forced myself not to speak. I would have burst into tears if I had.

Kaniye whispered, 'Stop crying na. Old man like you.'

I hadn't been crying then, but his words forced the first, hot tear to roll down my cheek. He pulled me to a corner and stood close to me, using his back to cover my tears from the others. He spoke in a low murmur,

'Cry, cry, baby. Stop crying. Belema is coming.' I sniffled. I looked up at Kaniye. His eyes had their usual mischievous look. So I didn't believe him.

'She's coming nearer.' He hissed.

'Tubo, how na?' Belema called out from behind me. Kaniye laughed. I hastily dried my tears, and took some time before turning.

'Ah, Belema. How are you? We were just on our way to your house.' Belema was a nineteen year-old nymph who was popular among the young men in Asiama. There was a simple reason for her popularity. She had ponderous breasts she flaunted. She called me her 'small boyfriend'. She flirted with me, allowed me a peek here, a fondle there, but no more. I kept hoping that someday, I would get far enough. Maybe today would be my day. She said hello to my friends. We were at a quiet section of the path. A copse of trees and elephant grass flanked the path on both side, providing cover. The cover of the bushes made Belema bolder. She hugged me. And, because she was taller than I was, I rested my head on her twin wonders, and made the hug last for as long as possible. Amaibi's mouth was tight, as he turned, walked stiffly, and stood a little way off. As always, he disapproved, and made it obvious. One time, the stupid boy even went as far as preaching to a girl I was chatting up. She had listened to him, and before I knew it, she had changed her mind about sleeping with me. I still hadn't forgiven Amaibi for that one. Thankfully,

Belema was oblivious of Amaibi's disapproval. Eventually, she pulled away from me and said,

'You be small boy wey like big things.' I laughed and tried to touch them. She slapped my hand away playfully.

'Bad boy.' I smiled appropriately as if she had just paid me a compliment. Doye and Kaniye, wanting to give us privacy, walked over to join Amaibi.

'So, my small bobo, is it true that you and your friends are all leaving Asiama and going to Uni-Port?'

I shook my head. 'No. No. No. Amaibi is going to London to study geology. Doye will study Petroleum Engineering at the University of Science and Tech; Imperial Oil gave scholarships to the both of us. As for Kaniye, well, he doesn't want to go to a university now. He is looking at starting in the next session. He's going to Port Harcourt to manage some of his father's businesses. You know he's a businessman at heart.' She didn't know but she nodded. She was impressed. I shrugged, pointed to myself, and continued. 'I'm the only one who will go to the University of Port Harcourt. I'm going to study History.'

'Hmm… Uni-Port and Uni-Port girls. I've heard so much about them. I hope you won't get there and forget me o?'

What do you think, you stupid cow? I thought to myself. Instead I said, 'Of course I won't forget you.' Then I winked and added, 'Especially if you give me something to always remember you by.'

She laughed, 'Bad boy.'

I held her close, stood on my toes and whispered in her ear. She giggled all through. When I finished, she rolled her eyes, lowered and batted her eyelids in what she believed was a seductive look. It wasn't. She looked drowsy. But I kept smiling anyway. She pecked my cheek and she was gone. I returned to my friends.

'What did you tell her?' Kaniye asked.

I smiled enigmatically. 'I just suggested some of the things we could do, when we are all alone this evening.'

'You are seeing her later?' It was Doye. I nodded. Doye smiled and pumped his fist in the air for me. 'Hey! Sharp guy!' I smiled. Amaibi closed his eyes and tried to ignore us.

'So where are you meeting her?' Doye asked.

'Err…at…at your house.'

‘What?’ I was amazed at how quick it took a frown to appear on Doye’s face. Kaniye fell on the floor laughing. Fearing his temper and his strength, I tried to calm Doye down.

‘Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. You see, I had no choice. Try and understand. I can’t take her home. Father Patrick will kill me. Kaniye’s house is out of it. His mother is always there. And as for Pastor here…’ I glared and pointed at Amaibi, ‘…his house is a no-go area.’ It took five minutes of my pleading and cajoling to convince Doye to let me use his house. Eventually, he agreed. I exhaled. Yes! Finally, I get to sleep with Belema. I rubbed my hands gleefully at the prospect.

‘What makes you so confident? She could say no to you.’ Kaniye said. I shook my head.

‘Two things, first, she’s never agreed to be alone with me in a room before. Secondly, if everything else fails, then I’ll use my magic words. They haven’t failed me yet.’

‘And these magic words are…’ Amaibi’s mockery only made me smile.

‘Well, you see, anytime a girl doesn’t want to sleep with me, first, I act like I’m hurt by her refusal. Then, I’d say that I was disappointed with her, because I thought she was different from other girls. At this, she would get confused and ask me what I mean. I would pretend to not want to talk about it until she starts begging. At this, I’d then tell her that I understand her reluctance to sleep with a cripple.’

‘YOU ARE NOT A CRIPPLE!’ They all shouted.

BOOK III
2004

Chapter 14
Deola
Port Harcourt, 2004

‘What did he cook this time?’ Oghogho whispered eagerly behind me.

‘I don’t know,’ I whispered back. Both of us were standing at the entrance to our flat, and Oghogho peered over my shoulder as I collected the food flask from Timi, Kaniye’s driver. I passed it backwards to Oghogho. She whooped and banged the door,

‘Food for us! Food for us! Food for us!’ I smiled and shook my head at my mad friend and flat-mate.

‘Thank your oga for me,’ I said to Timi. Timi smiled and nodded. He thrust a note towards me, ‘Oga also said I should give you this.’ I took the note. Oghogho reached from behind me, snatched it from my hands, and ran inside. I shook my head again but didn’t chase after her. ‘You are going to the prison now, right?’ I asked Timi. Timi nodded again. His daily run now included taking food to Amaibi at Port Harcourt Prison. I pulled out an inhaler from the pocket of my shorts. ‘Please give this to Amaibi. Also tell him, that I’ll bring his antibiotics on Thursday when I come to see him. Thank you, Timi. God bless you.’ Timi flashed me a smile, and turned to leave. As I locked the door, I turned to face Oghogho mimicking a baritone as she read Kaniye’s note to me. It said,

‘*I know you miss Lagos sometimes, so I made some Ewedu for you. Surprised? I got someone to teach me how yesterday. It’s my first try; so, eat at your own peril! K.’*

‘Ahhhhh,’ Oghogho said.

‘What?’

‘That’s so sweet.’

I raised my palm up to her. ‘Oghogho, please, don’t start.’

She slapped my hand down, ‘Go away *jo*! Why are you pretending like you do not enjoy the man’s cooking. Abeg, I like him, I prefer him to

your Bayo. That Ijesha man who would want you to pound yams for him every day.'

I laughed. 'Leave Kabiyesi out of this…' Bayo was one of those amusingly overconfident men who deemed themselves infallible. So I nicknamed him Kabiyesi. Bayo and I had a strange relationship. He was confident I would be his wife, because according to him, God had told him so. My constant reply was that we would remain just friends until the day God thought it necessary to tell me the same thing. My words, however, had no effect on Bayo. He went ahead and met my mum who liked him immediately, because he was from a prominent Yoruba family, and the only man she thought was serious about her twenty-six year old first daughter.

To my mum, twenty-six was alarmingly close to menopause. After all, Toyin, my immediate younger sister, was twenty-three, and already married. And Yinka, my sister after Toyin, was twenty-one and engaged to be married later in the year. To escape my mum's nagging, and because I actually liked him, I promised to 'seriously consider' Bayo. In the meantime, my mum's shameless approval encouraged Bayo to consider himself my fiancé. Like I said, I thought he was overconfident, but Oghogho disagreed with me. She thought him obnoxious and arrogant.

'…and please don't read too much into Kaniye's food gifts. It's nothing. He does the same for Amaibi, his friend in prison. He is a thoughtful man, that's all.'

'Thoughtful *ko*, thoughtful *ni*! The man is a smooth operator, chasing you with his cooking.'

I shook my head. 'Kaniye hasn't chased me…'

'Yet, but he will. And am sure when he does, you won't be able to resist him. Not after eating his daily love potions.'

'*Wéré*!' I said, laughing.

'I may be a mad woman, but, I have spoken. Anyway, let's eat the food *jo*.' Oghogho opened the food flask.

'Wait. Wait. Aren't you the one who was just warning me about love potions in Kaniye's food? Now you want to share it with me.' I made to take the flask from her. Oghogho shielded the flask from me and sighed.

'It's too late for me. You know I've been sharing this with you from the first day. The love potion has caught me.' She threw back her head and swooned.

‘Good. Since you have fallen in love with Kaniye, you can have him.’ I turned the steaming soup into two bowls.

Oghogho smiled, ‘Thanks. I think men who cook are so sexy. It just shows they are good with their hands. Men with good hands are.’

‘Oghogho!’ I gasped.

She shrugged and laughed, ‘What did I say, Prude?’

‘I’m not a prude.’ I giggled as I divided the *amala* in two.

‘You’re a prude.’ Oghogho insisted. ‘Anyway, thanks for offering him, but I’m already taken. Besides, it is you he is interested in.’

I just laughed, ‘Well, too bad for him. It’s never going to happen.’ I pointed at her, ‘Please, bring water from the fridge.’

Oghogho called out from the tiny kitchen, ‘Why can’t anything happen between the two of you? I thought you said he was a bald hunk.’

I waited till she came back and we plopped down on the bean bags, our food on trays before us. ‘I never said he was a bald hunk, Oghogho.’ I wrinkled my nose, ‘What I said was that there was something about him that was striking. Maybe it’s his bald head. Or his luscious lips…’ I laughed at Oghogho’s shocked expression and open mouth.

‘Naughty, naughty...’ She began.

I cut her off by starting a prayer, ‘Thank you, Father for our food. Bless it and the hands that made it…’ Here Oghogho giggled. ‘And provide for those who lack in Jesus name.’

‘AMEN!’ Oghogho resounded.

We started eating. I smiled and closed my eyes, ‘Hmmm, almost like home. I’ve missed this.’

Oghogho nodded. ‘Very good for his first time. That your Kaniye must have wonderful hands.’

‘Oghogho, please.’ She laughed and resumed eating. For about a minute.

‘So…what’s your problem with Kaniye?’ I stopped eating and met her eye.

‘Kaniye’s not a born-again Christian.’ I shook my head vigorously, ‘I don’t want to be with a man who is not as committed to God as I am.’ Oghogho chewed over my answer for a moment.

‘Is that the only reason?’ She asked with a mischievous smile.

I gave her a puzzled look. ‘I guess so… I expect you of all people to understand.’

‘Of course I understand, you silly child.’ Oghogho flashed her biggest smile. ‘I’m just pleased you didn’t mention Bayo as a reason. Hallelujah! There is still hope for you.’

‘Doctor, the man dey die o!’

The voice sailed from within the wretched mass of humanity packed inside one of the prison cells. I willed myself to stay calm, and called out, ‘Who is dying? What happened?’ Someone else replied,

‘Na Pastor dey die.’

Amaibi! Amaibi was called ‘Pastor’ in Port Harcourt Prison. Instinctively, I prayed, Father, take care of Amaibi.

‘Im bin dey breathe hoo hoo, heavy heavy. Then im just faint.’ Another explained.

My voice was even when I asked, ‘How long ago?’

‘E neva reach five minutes.’

‘Have you called the warders to take him to the Prison Hospital?’ There was a harsh laugh.

‘Warders say we dey make noise.’

I turned round and ran to the Warders’ Office. There were two warders there. One sat behind a rickety desk, head thrown back in an awkward angle, eyes closed. His open mouth dripped frothy saliva on one side, and produced the discordant sounds of heavy snoring. The second man was awake, but only just. He was slouched in a low, hard-backed chair, with his podgy legs stretched in front of him. The buttons of his sickly green uniform were open, exposing his dirty, once white singlet that stretched tightly over his bloated stomach. He picked his yellowed teeth with a matchstick.

‘Good afternoon, sir,’ I began. He leaned forward and ran his eyes hungrily all over my body. He pulled out the matchstick from his mouth and smacked his lips.

‘Afftanoon, fine gal.’

I spoke fast, ‘My name is Deola Oluwagbamila, sir. I’m a medical doctor doing my national service.’ I flashed my N.Y.S.C. identity card. ‘The Superintendent has given me permission to treat some of the sick prisoners. I came now to find out that one of them just fainted.’ The man

frowned and studied his fingernails. I noticed that they were ringed black with dirt. ‘I was hoping, sir, that you would please arrange for him to be taken to the Prison Hospital.’

He sneered, ‘Yoo are hoping that me, Adibe Okoye, will take him to ospitul, ehn? Ngwa, continue hoping. Whane yoo finish hoping, *tell me*.’ He sighed, leaned back, and returned the matchstick to his mouth.

‘Sir, the man is unconscious and needs to be in the hospital.’ The matchstick was used to point at me, as he began a lecture.

‘Look. Look. Look, young gal, eevin wit ya yoonivacity degree an oyibo grammar, yoo cannot tell me how to do my work. Yoo cannot know warder work more dan me. Me, Adibe Okoye, av been in dis work for tharteen yars. Dis warder work is a force work, jos like police or army. Oh yes, esepiriti dey cops. An force work have modus operandi for effrythin. It is not awa modus operandi to take a man to ospitul, anyhowly, jos like dat, without approval from soupintendenti. Mba nu, no way.’ He shook his head vehemently to emphasise his point. ‘And soupintendenti is not on seat now. Come back tomorrow.’

That’s when I realised that it was futile to continue to talk to the man. Instead, I said another silent prayer. Father, help me not to scream at this man. Help me think. I left the room, and ran back to the sweltering corridor leading to the cells. I peered in. Even the late afternoon sun did not dare go into that dark and foreboding place. I knew there were five cells on each side. Amaibi’s cell was the middle one on my right. My heart was pounding but I didn’t hesitate. I stepped into the bleakness. However, I made sure I stayed in the middle of the corridor. That way, I was out of the reach of the groping hands from the cells that sometimes, desperately sought to touch my breasts or grab my bottom. I ignored the usual whoops and catcalls as I dashed to Amaibi’s cell. My eyes gradually adjusted to the shadowy forms of the men in the cell. But I couldn’t see Amaibi.

‘Where is Pastor?’ I asked.

‘Im dey lie down for ground,’ came the booming reply. The voice sounded familiar.

I called out hopefully, ‘Ekong, is that you?’

‘Na me.’ Ekong replied from deep in the gloom.

Ekong used to be a dockyard worker who unloaded goods from ships. One day, he and three others had been unloading bags of rice from a ship. Somehow, twenty-six bags of rice had mysteriously disappeared

somewhere in the thirty feet between the ship and the dock. Ekong was the only one who hadn't run away when the theft was discovered. Now, two years later, he was in the middle of a sentence of four years for the theft.

'Thank God. Ekong, you have to help me. Are you near the Pastor?' I knew Ekong and Amaibi got along. Amaibi was teaching him how to read and write.

'Yes, I near am.'

'Okay. I need you to lift him up to a sitting position, understand?' Ekong was a giant. He could lift Amaibi with one hand.

'You say make I make Pastor to siddon? The man don faint. Im no fit siddon.'

'Listen to me carefully, Ekong. I think Pastor is having a serious asthma attack. He needs to breathe. It is harder for him to breathe when he is lying down. So, lift him to a sitting position. Gently. Bring him here to the door. There is more air here.'

'Okay. Okay.' I heard a low groan, and shuffling as men made way for Ekong. Soon, the towering figure of Ekong emerged, carefully stepping over outstretched limbs and bodies. He carried Amaibi, like a sleeping toddler, in his arms. I directed him on what to do.

'Bring him closer, near the bars. Yes, that's it. No. No. Don't lay him down. Hold him upright. Sitting position. Yes. God bless you, Ekong.' Amaibi groaned. He was coming to it. He breathed rapidly. I squatted, reached through the bars and checked his pulse. It ran erratically weak, strong, weak, strong. His palms were sweaty. 'Ekong, I can't reach into his pockets from here. Check his pockets for his inhaler.'

'Im wetin?'

'Inhaler. One small, green, plastic thing.' Ekong stuck his big hands into Amaibi's pockets. Then he held something up,

'Na im be this?'

I grabbed the inhaler from Ekong, and put it near Amaibi's mouth. 'Amaibi…' I whispered. 'Open your mouth.' His eyes flickered open. He managed a slight smile before his heavy eyelids closed again. But, he opened his mouth and sucked, weakly, from the inhaler. Ekong and I exchanged smiles of relief. Then I heard quick footsteps behind me. To my horror, I realised that I couldn't turn round. This was because I was on my hunches with my hand inside the bars, holding the inhaler to Amaibi's mouth. The footsteps stopped directly behind me.

‘Deola.’

I exhaled with relief. ‘Kaniye Rufus,’ I replied without turning around. He chuckled. Then he whispered,

‘Deola, you’ve got to stand up.’

‘I can’t. I’m doing something important. Amaibi just had a severe asthma attack.’ Amaibi was sucking the inhaler a bit stronger now. Kaniye took in the situation quickly. He squatted beside me, put his arm inside the cell, held my hand, and said softly,

‘Let me hold the inhaler. Just stand up. Now.’

‘Why do you want me to stand up?’ I hissed fiercely. Kaniye sighed, shook his head and began whispering slowly, emphasising every word.

‘Because, the way you are squatting makes your shirt ride up your back and your bum stick out. I can see your… G-string. So can all the desperate men in the opposite cell.’

Before he finished talking, I hurriedly pushed the inhaler into his hand, and sprang to my feet. Immediately, I heard groans of disappointment and raucous laughter from the opposite cell. All I could do was to glare at Kaniye. He smiled up at me in return. In the meantime, Amaibi’s eyes were now open and he was breathing without the inhaler.

‘Amaibi needs to go to the prison hospital. But one of the warders on duty refused to let him.’

Kaniye frowned, ‘Which warder?’

‘The short, fat one. I think his name is Okoye.’

‘What? Okoye? After all the money I’ve paid him. He must be mad. Come with me.’

Kaniye got up and stormed off. I squatted again. Briefly, but with my hand holding the back of my shirt over my bottom. I gave the inhaler to Ekong, told him to watch Amaibi and call out for me if there was a relapse. Then I chased after Kaniye. I caught him at the Warders Office. The warder now looked comical. He was on his knees in front of Kaniye. The matchstick was gone. His stomach pushed through his unbuttoned shirt and seemed to rest on his thighs. He sweated and pleaded profusely.

‘Oga, abeg no vex, I did not know dat it is Pastor dat faint.’ As I entered the room, he turned to me with outstretched arms, showing me the big sweat rings under his arms. ‘Ah, sisi, *yoo* didn’t tell me dat it was Pastor. *Yoo jos* say it were a mere man.’ He licked his right forefinger,

touched it on the ground, licked it again, and pointed to the ceiling. ‘Me, Adibe Okoye, swear to Chineke, Almighty God, I did not know.’

My hand shook with anger as I pointed at him. ‘So if a prisoner doesn’t have anyone to bribe you, he can die in this place?’ He gave me a pained look like I had accused him falsely.

‘Sisi, yoo too young to understan dis place. Dis place is not for human bins. Dis place a jungul. Is a anemal farm, and eevin in anemal farm, some anemal are more equal dan oda anemals.’

Kaniye put his hand on my arm to shut me up. He needn’t have bothered. I was lost for the appropriate words to reply the incredible Adibe Okoye. Kaniye said, ‘Okoye, get off the floor and arrange for Amaibi to be taken to the hospital immediately. I mean now.’ Okoye struggled to his feet, and saluted Kaniye.

‘Yes, sah. All correct, sah.’

‘When he comes out from the hospital, I want him in a private cell where he can have enough space.’

‘He and Ekong,’ I whispered.

‘Who is Ekong?’ Kaniye whispered back.

‘I’ll tell you later.’ I patted the back of his hand.

‘Okay. Private cell for Amaibi and Ekong. Understand?’ Okoye shuffled uncomfortably.

‘It can be arranged, sah. Is just dat err…’

‘What is the problem?’

‘Sah, de problem is govement have interest in de Pastor. Govement peoples, dey want us to be suffarin de Pastor. If it were not for me, Adibe Okoye, Pastor will not be injoying as he is injoying now. Anyway, I believe dat if we sort out all de logistics, an carry de oda warders along, we can arrange somethin.’

‘Okoye, go and take the man to the hospital now. Later, we’ll talk on how much more I’ll pay.’ Okoye saluted again,

‘All correct, sah.’ Then he turned to the other warder who had been sleeping earlier, but was now wide awake, and had witnessed his humiliation. He bellowed, ‘Ewu, goat. Yoo want me, Adibe Okoye, to take de Pastor to de ospitul, while yoo sit dia, with open leg, like dis is ya fada’s house.’ The man scrambled to his feet and ran out of the room, with Okoye stomping behind him muttering, ‘Nnama, Junior officer like yoo. No respect.’

About thirty minutes later, Kaniye and I walked out of Port Harcourt Prison. We climbed into his car and just sat there. For a long time, we just sat there, not speaking to each other. Finally, I said,

‘When does his trial begin?’

‘Plea is on Monday.’

‘Do you think he will get off?’

‘I … I don’t know.’ I turned to face him.

‘Kaniye, you have to get him out of this place. You will get him out, right?’ He turned, stretched his hand and touched my face. With his thumb, he gently flicked away the teardrop that was on my cheek. Then he turned back, started the car, and began driving. He didn’t answer me.

Chapter 15
Kaniye
Port Harcourt, 2004

‘Ready for trial?’ I looked up to see Sir James standing at the door of my office. Or rather, the office he let me use in his firm. It was almost as big as his, with an ensuite toilet, and a big picture window overlooking the quiet street. The furnishing was basic – a green rug, swivel chair, two other chairs, and a shelf with no books. The desk was hidden under a pile of law reports, textbooks and Amaibi’s case file.

‘Yes, sir,’ I replied. Then I noticed he was casually dressed, wearing khaki trousers and a black polo shirt, indicating that he was probably returning from the Golf Club. ‘Good game?’ I asked with a mocking smile. Sir James opened his mouth to reply but thought better of it and kept quiet. He knew I knew that he went to the Golf Club more to socialise, than to play golf. Amazingly, he always went there with a set of golf clubs and balls.

‘Your sister called me.’

I smiled wearily, ‘I spoke to her earlier today: I give her daily updates. She’s working on getting a transfer to Port Harcourt. She’s eager to be with Amaibi at this time.’ Sir James shook his head in wonder,

‘Now, I’m confused. I thought she relocated to Lagos in the first place to be away from him. I thought they were getting a divorce, before all this…drama. Now, she’s eager to come back to Port Harcourt?’

‘Maybe it’s love.’ I said that to provoke him. ‘Heard of it?’ I muttered under my breath. But Sir James heard me. He looked at me in genuine bewilderment as though he was hearing the word for the first time. Then he snorted,

‘Madness I say, Madness.’ He pushed open the door, and walked in. He was holding a newspaper, two balloon glasses, and a bottle of brandy. He pushed papers aside, creating space on my crowded desk, where he placed the bottle and glasses. Then he sat down in the chair across my

desk, and half-filled his glass. As he was about to pour brandy in the second glass, I put up my palm to stop him, and shook my head. He looked at me quizzically. I reached down to the floor and picked up the small bottle of Guinness that I had been drinking. I placed it on the table and pointed to it. Sir James frowned, as expected; he did not understand why anyone would prefer Guinness to good brandy. I raised the Guinness to him in a silent toast and took a swig straight from the bottle. Sir James crossed his legs and sipped his brandy elegantly.

'I hear Wilcox is the judge.' He said. I nodded. 'So what do you know about him?' Sir James believed that it was important to know the precedents and temperaments of the judges. I recited what I knew.

'He is a difficult judge, but brilliant. The Court of Appeal has upheld all but one of his judgements, when they were appealed against, and he takes great pride in that. He is a pro-government judge. He hardly gives Orders, Rulings or Judgements against the government.' Sir James nodded as I spoke, but his eyes told me he expected to hear something more. I paused before I spoke, 'I also heard you and him have history. To say he dislikes you is an understatement.' I sighed, 'So, I expect him to feel the same way about me. And we've not even met.' I shook my head. 'It won't be good for Amaibi.' Sir James looked at me suspiciously.

'What did you hear about us?'

I shrugged, 'That at one time, you and Mrs Wilcox…that she was … fond of you.' Sir James allowed himself a mischievous smile.

'Don't mind Alaye Wilcox. He was always one to hold a grudge, even after all these years.' He shook his head, 'Some people can be petty, don't you agree?' I smiled in spite of myself. 'Did you also hear that he doesn't grant bail?'

'He doesn't?' I leaned forward in my chair. I had the sinking feeling in my stomach that came with crushed hopes. I had been hoping to get Amaibi out on bail before the trial started. Sir James grimaced.

'Rarely. And when he does, it's on such severe conditions that it would have been better if he had simply refused bail.'

I shook my head. 'He has to grant Amaibi bail. The man is sick. He has no criminal record.' Sir James shook his head.

'Think again. Bail is at his discretion. Besides, your other friend, the mad one, has unwittingly made things more difficult for Amaibi.' He tossed the newspaper towards me. 'Here. Front page.'

What I read gave me an instant headache. Four white men were kidnapped last night at a nightclub in Port Harcourt, by a group of armed men. Two policemen who were part of their security were killed. This morning, Doye, or Doughboy, as the paper preferred to call him, claimed responsibility for the mayhem. Sir James explained,

'The prosecution says that Amaibi and Doye conspired to kidnap the white man who died. Wilcox would have heard about the latest kidnappings. This would not help Amaibi's cause especially because it has happened a few days before his plea. I wager Wilcox will, in his mind, somehow tar Amaibi with the same brush as Doye and he'll refuse to grant bail.'

I leaned back in my swivel chair, and placed both hands behind my head. Sir James crossed his legs and swirled his cognac gently.

'What you should do is this. Apply for bail, but also apply for accelerated hearing of the trial, in the alternative.' I nodded,

'So if he refuses bail, he is likely to grant accelerated hearing, to appear fair at least.'

'Exactly. Besides, Wilcox likes accelerated hearings. He's a workaholic.'

'What about applying for Amaibi's release, briefly and under guard, just to get special medical treatment?' I asked. He wrinkled his face, and shook his head.

'Maybe. But it will delay the trial. I thought you said Amaibi wants a quick trial.' I nodded.

'He does. But his health is more important. I'll discuss it with him again. I'll also ask Deola what she thinks.'

'Deola?' Sir James raised an eyebrow.

'She's his doctor.' I explained.

'I see.' He gave me a look that said he suspected there was a lot more I wasn't telling him. I downed the last of my Guinness. Sir James pointed a finger at me,

'Hope you made sure the warders will bring him to court?' I cocked my head in surprise.

'Do I have to remind them? Isn't that their job?' He snapped,

'Oh don't talk like an idiot child. This is Nigeria. Sometimes you pay the warders to remember to bring your client to court. Otherwise they may just "forget" him in the prison, causing you to lose a whole day and

ultimately delay your trial.' I sighed. I needed another Guinness. Sir James got to his feet. 'Two things. First, the only judgement by Wilcox which was overturned by the Court of Appeal, I filed and argued that appeal. You see, Wilcox is beatable.' This was the closest Sir James could come to giving me encouragement. I smiled back. Sir James picked up his bottle and his glass. 'Secondly, about his wife, the thing that happened between us happened a long time ago. When Alaye and I were classmates in law school... Those were the days…' Sir James stared nostalgically over my head at the past. 'She wasn't yet Mrs Wilcox then.' Then he shook his head. 'Now, I wish she was.'

Justice Alaye Wilcox looked like he never left the Seventies. His hair, which pushed out aggressively from the sides of his wig, could, either pass as an Afro, or unkempt fuzz. He wore thick sideburns, a bushy moustache, and a straggly beard. His big glasses and face were permanently set like he had something bitter in his mouth, giving him the look of an intellectual snob. This was exactly what he was, having been appointed to the bench from his former job as a law lecturer in the university. I did not get off to a good start with Justice Alaye Wilcox. First, I was uncomfortable, hot and irritable. It was almost 32 degrees centigrade in the courtroom, there was no electricity to work the fans and for the first time in six years, I was dressed once again in a suit, wing collar, bands, a horsehair wig that itched, and a heavy black gown that seemed to absorb all the heat in the room. I cleaned the pouring sweat off my face, tugged at my wing collar repeatedly, and silently cursed whoever decided that lawyers in tropical Nigeria should continue to wear ridiculous Pre-Victorian wigs and gowns in 2004. The courtroom was sweaty, heavily packed, all seats were taken and people still crowded the windows blocking what air that may have come in. I was irritated by the buzz as everyone – lawyers, litigants, the press, an army of mobile policemen, and the usual busybodies who frequented court, stared, whispered and pointed unabashedly at Amaibi.

Finally, after Wilcox had dispensed with several cases, our case was called. It had just gone past 11 a.m. The Prosecutor was an experienced lawyer, fifteen years post call, named Awusu Golden 'A.G.' Ikuru. Good

looking, popular, urbane and ambitious, he was connected in political circles. Sometime last year, it was strongly believed that the Governor was going to appoint him as Attorney General of the State in an upcoming cabinet reshuffle. Ikuru was so sure of this appointment that he allowed his friends and colleagues to start calling him A.G., which coincidentally were also the initials of his first two names. On the big day, A.G. brought twenty of his close friends to the Alligator Pepper, for a pre-announcement lunch. As they seriously depleted my champagne stock, I fussed over them, and even brought a radio to their table so they could hear the Governor's speech. The party was stunned to silence when someone else was appointed Attorney General. It is rumoured now that the easiest way to annoy Ikuru is to call him A.G.

Ikuru called the case and announced himself. Then I stood up and said,

'With all due respect, my lord, my name is Kaniye Rufus. I appear for the Accused.' Wilcox paused in his writing and noticed me for the first time.

'Rufus. Rufus,' He mused. 'Are you related to the Senior Advocate?'

'I'm his son, my lord.' I replied. Wilcox frowned even more.

'You? Son? Hmmm. I know Sir Rufus very well. I know he has just one son, who's much older than you are.' He was referring to Gogo, my half-brother.

I heard this comment a lot, and it annoyed me every time I heard it, especially from people who said it like they doubted me, and expected me to prove my identity. So, instinctively, I gave Justice Wilcox the usual answer I gave such people. 'I'm his bastard son, my lord.' The Asiama people in the gallery laughed. Wilcox dropped his pen and stared at me suspiciously, trying to determine if I was being impertinent. I kept a straight face but I was laughing inside. Finally, he gave me withering look and went back to writing in his book.

After a few minor procedures, it was time to take Amaibi's plea. Amaibi looked small and frail in the dock. But, he stood as straight as he could manage, with one crutch in his hand to support his injured leg. His eyes, behind his glasses, were as intense as ever. The clerk read out the first charge.

‘That you, Amaibi Akassa, on or about the 15th day of August, 2003, at Asiama Island, within the jurisdiction of this Honourable Court, conspired with one Doye Koko, also known as Doughboy, now at large, and others unknown, to commit a felony within Rivers State, to wit, the kidnap of one Brian Manning, and thereby committed an offence punishable under section 516A of the Criminal Code Law of Rivers State. Do you understand the charge?’

‘Yes, sir, I do.’ Amaibi’s voice was low.

The clerk turned to Wilcox. ‘My lord, the charge has been read to the Accused, and he understands same.’ Wilcox recorded that in his big book.

‘How do you plead?’

‘Not Guilty.’ Amaibi’s voice rang out clear in the packed courtroom causing a buzz.

‘Order!’ Wilcox banged his gavel, and glowered at the crowd. Then he wrote down Amaibi’s plea. Then the clerk read out the manslaughter charge.

‘That you, Amaibi Akassa, on or about the 15thday of August, 2003, at Asiama Island, within the jurisdiction of this Honourable Court, together with one Doye Koko, also known as Doughboy, now at large, and others unknown, unlawfully killed one Brian Manning, and thereby committed an offence punishable under section 325 of the Criminal Code Law of Rivers State. How do you plead?’

‘Not Guilty!’ Amaibi’s voice was loud and defiant this time.

A wave of murmurs rumbled through the courtroom. Wilcox responded by telling his police orderly to clear the people who were outside and anyone inside who as much as coughed. This ensured absolute silence when Amaibi also pleaded ‘Not Guilty’ to the final charge of possession of a firearm.

It was time to ask for bail. I kept it short. I referred to the Motion and Affidavit, which I had filed earlier in support of the bail application. I also referred to the medical report signed by Deola. I conceded that bail was at Wilcox’s discretion and the alleged offences were very serious, with heavy penalties. Then I talked about the presumption of Amaibi’s innocence, the fact that he was of good character without a criminal record. I explained that Amaibi was a man of letters, a lecturer in the university and was unlikely to commit further offences or interfere with

the investigation, which was already concluded. Then I talked about Amaibi's failing health – his asthma attacks, gangrene-ravaged injury and the risks of tuberculosis and scabies. I played heavily on Deola's report. I cited a few cases. Wilcox wrote fast. I was done in fifteen minutes.

Ikuru opposed bail. His first reason was the gravity of the alleged offences. He reminded Wilcox that it was uncommon for bail to be granted for such offences. Then he got nasty. He challenged the picture I had painted of Amaibi. He said that Amaibi had been found with a gun in his house and had resisted arrest. I objected to this as it was yet to be proved in the trial. Wilcox told me to sit down, but I noticed that he hadn't written Ikuru's words. Finally, Ikuru brought up the issue of the four men who Doye, the Co-accused, had kidnapped two days before. As I got to my feet again to object, Wilcox told me to sit down again. This time, he told Ikuru that he wouldn't record that because it was irrelevant. Wilcox turned to me.

'Mr Rufus, I'm now going to write out my Ruling on your application. I think you should know that I'm going to exercise my discretion and refuse your application for bail.'

I got to my feet again, and nodded. 'As my lord pleases. However, my lord, in the circumstances, I most respectfully, ask for an alternative. I ask for the closest possible date and accelerated hearing of this case. This is because of the poor health of the Accused. I believe, my lord, that we can conclude the evidence in this case within one month…' I heard Ikuru gasp… 'Then we can adjourn for judgement.' Wilcox thought it over.

'I see. But, Mr Rufus, don't you think it would be better if I postponed the trial and made an order for the Accused to receive medical treatment under police guard of course?' From the corner of my eye, I saw Amaibi shaking his head.

'My lord, the Accused would prefer a speedy trial. He has been in custody for almost a year now. He needs to know his fate, one way or the other.' Wilcox nodded. Ikuru got to his feet.

'My lord, we cannot start this trial so soon, and we cannot conclude the evidence within one month.' He glared at me. 'It is presumptuous for my learned friend to say so. We are short staffed at the Ministry of Justice and –'

Wilcox snarled, ‘Mr Ikuru. This is my court. I alone, say what we can or cannot do in this court. Have I made myself clear?’ Ikuru nodded.

‘Sorry, my lord. I was just ...’

‘Mr Ikuru, did you read the medical report?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Did you challenge the medical report in any way?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Good. That means you agree that the Accused is in poor health. The medical report, however, did not say that the Accused is unfit to stand trial. So we’ll have ourselves a trial, but we will have a speedy one. We start in three weeks. We’ll conclude within two to three months. Get your house in order, Mr Ikuru and you too, Mr Rufus. No delays, no excuses, no unnecessary adjournments. Have I made myself clear?’

‘As the court pleases,’ we chorused. Wilcox peered at us sceptically as if to confirm that we really meant it. Then he wiped his sweaty brow and started writing his Ruling.

‘So, how do you think it went?’ Deola asked after I told her what happened in court earlier that day. I yawned,

‘Better than I expected. The judge wasn’t as bad as I had heard.’ Then I told her the ‘bastard son’ story. She smiled. Then she said softly,

‘You hate your father, don’t you?’

I chuckled, ‘Sir James? Well, there’s not much to love, is there?’ I pointed at her half-empty glass. ‘Another Chapman?’ It was evening and we were sitting in my office at the restaurant. She shook her head.

‘You want to change the subject.’ I nodded and yawned again. She smiled and shrugged. ‘Okay. But before we do, can I just say that at thirty-four, I think you are too old to hate your father or anyone else. What did you do during your teenage years?’ I grinned.

‘You don’t understand.’

‘Let me guess… You think he brought you into his house when you were younger only because your half-brother refused to return home and he needed a son.’ I inhaled sharply.

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You didn’t deny it either.’

‘Are you a lawyer now, or something?’ She gave me a sad smile.

‘There’s probably a lot more I don’t know about, but, all I’m saying is, he doesn’t have to be a nice man before you love him. Sometimes, love is a hard decision.’ She stared at me earnestly with her big, luminous eyes. I looked away. ‘Anyway, I’ve got to go. I’ve got fellowship.’ She moved her chair back and stood up. I stood up and searched for my car keys.

‘I’ll drop you off.’ I found them on the table near her, so I leaned forward to pick them up. She put her hand on the back of my palm.

‘Don’t worry. You look tired.’ I yawned instinctively.

‘I didn’t sleep last night, I was preparing for court. But, don’t worry it’s not a problem.’ I grasped the keys. But, she held my hand down. I liked the cool feel of her hand on mine.

‘Go to bed, Kaniye.’

I tried a wink, ‘Will you tuck me in?’ She shook her head.

‘No. But I’ll pray for you.’

I gave her a tired smile. As she pulled her hand away from mine, I felt a sudden, deep loss. Surprised, I gaped at her like I had just seen something different. She gave me an enquiring look in return. I opened my mouth, but what I felt was yet to grow words. So, I sighed and said instead,

‘I’ll get Timi to drive you.’

‘Thanks.’ When Timi was ready, I walked Deola to my car and shut the door behind her. As Timi started the engine, she rolled down the window.

‘Thanks again. Now, go get some sleep.’

I didn’t think before I said, ‘Don’t forget to pray for me.’ She beamed,

‘I never forget.’

I waved as the car rolled away. Then I swept my hand downwards, instinctively to rub my chin. That’s when I smelled it. The light, fresh smell of Deola’s perfume, the one I gave her as a present. It clung to the back of my hand, the lingering of her touch. I walked back into my restaurant, hand held to my nose. I was wearing my biggest smile.

Chapter 16
Tubo
Port Harcourt, 2004

It was an ambush. There were four of them waiting for me. My immediate boss, Omole, who was Imperial Oil's Head of Administration and Personnel; Mustapha, the Head of Security, and one other man, dressed in the short jacket and collarless shirts favoured by lawyers. I did not know him. The last person in the conference room was Mr Sinister himself – Wali, of the government's Security Service. As usual, he was in a safari suit and scowling. They all sat on one side of the big, long, mahogany table in the conference room. Apart from Wali, the other three sat together, huddled up and whispering. They looked like an intimidating interview panel. The whispering stopped when I walked into the room. Omole pointed to the single chair opposite them.

'Sit down, Mr Joseph.' I sat down. There was a smirk on Omole's face. His hand swept to the unknown man. 'This is Mr Ikuru.' We exchanged careful nods as greetings. None of us seemed eager to shake hands. 'Management has decided that you shall help Mr Ikuru,' Omole continued. 'I will let him tell you how.' Ikuru leaned forward. He reminded me of Doye, tall and strikingly handsome in a way that always surprised. Unlike Doye, however, he had a quiet smugness that came with being proud of his looks. He smiled at me with even, white teeth. It was a politician's smile. I hated him at once. I also hated his perfect teeth.

'I am Barrister Awusu Golden Ikuru,' he announced pompously. 'I am the Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions in the Ministry of Justice. I am currently prosecuting a very important criminal case – the most prominent trial in the country now.'

I rolled my eyes to show my boredom. 'Yes. Yes. So what can I do for you?' Ikuru's smile slipped off for a moment, like a mask. He quickly wore it again.

'It is the case of the State versus Dr. Amaibi Akassa.' He placed a small tape recorder on the table between us, and thumbed it on. 'First, I

need to ask you some questions.'

I leaned back, and folded my arms. 'Why is this being recorded?' Ikuru showed me more teeth in what he mistook for a reassuring smile.

'Don't worry. It's nothing. It's just to make sure I don't miss out, or forget anything you will say.' That was when I first suspected something was wrong. Ikuru continued smiling. 'Now, you were aware that Doughboy and his men kidnapped the late Brian Manning on 15th August, 2003?' I nodded. Ikuru shook his head and pointed to the tape recorder.

'Yes.'

'And Dr. Akassa acted as the middleman, the negotiator between your company and Doughboy?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you.' Ikuru beamed happily. 'Now, let's talk about something else. Let's talk about Tanowitz, Morris and Betsen.'

I shrugged, 'What about them?'

'They are employees of Imperial Oil. Doughboy kidnapped them in January 2003, months before he kidnapped Manning. Is that correct?' I nodded again. Ikuru pointed to the recorder again.

'Yes,' I said.

'And Dr. Akassa facilitated their return. He acted as the middleman, the negotiator, between your company and Doughboy.'

'I wouldn't say there were any negotiations. You don't negotiate with a man like Doughboy. He simply fixes his price. But, to answer your question, yes, Amaibi, sorry again, Dr. Akassa, was the go-between. He secured the release of Tanowitz and the others.' There was a wry smile on Ikuru's face as he nodded.

'But that was after Imperial Oil had paid a ransom to Doughboy, through Dr. Akassa. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'A ransom of twenty-one million naira at the rate of seven million naira for each hostage.'

'That is correct.' Ikuru nodded.

'You are aware that the Security Department of Imperial Oil maintains a close, err, professional relationship with the security agencies of the government?' As he spoke, Ikuru turned slightly to look at Mustapha and Wali.

‘I’m aware of a relationship. I’m not sure of its nature.’ Ikuru continued.

‘You are aware that after Dr. Akassa returned Tanowitz and co, the Security Department published an internal report which suggested that Dr. Akassa and Doughboy had in fact planned the kidnapping of Tanowitz and the others together?’ He pushed a sheet of paper across the table towards me. ‘This is a copy of the report. Do you remember it?’ I did not touch the report.

‘Yes, I am aware of that piece of paper. But, based on my considerable experience in Imperial Oil, it is my personal opinion that reports from the Security Department are inaccurate at best, and at worst bullshit.’ I smirked at Mustapha. His face darkened. Ikuru winced before continuing,

‘For Manning, the ransom was fifteen million naira. Correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Imperial paid the fifteen million naira through Dr. Akassa, right?’ I shrugged,

‘As I understood it, the money was meant for Doye, Doughboy. But to answer your question, yes, Imperial Oil paid Doughboy fifteen million naira through Dr. Akassa.’ Ikuru licked his lips.

‘And all Dr. Akassa returned with was Manning’s corpse?’ I paused for a moment.

‘Yes.’ Ikuru’s smile was slick.

‘Do you know that that Doughboy gave Dr. Akassa one million naira from the fifteen million he received?’ I smiled.

‘I also heard that rumour but knowing its source, disregarded it.’ I looked at Mustapha. Ikuru’s smile turned oily, as he paused the recording and leaned forward eyes bright.

‘What if I tell you we have proof from the bank records of Dr. Akassa?’

I shrugged. ‘You don’t have to convince me, Mr Ikuru. I’m not the judge.’

‘True. But you are going to help me convince him.’

I leaned forward slightly. ‘Sorry, I don’t understand.’ Ikuru smiled again, a cruel smile.

‘You are going repeat all you told me in open court. You are going to testify against Dr. Akassa.’

I shook my head vigorously. ‘No way.’

Ikuru shrugged. ‘You don’t have to convince me, Mr Joseph. I am not your boss.’

I turned to Omole. ‘I’m not doing this, sir.’

He shook his head and smiled. ‘You have to, Mr Joseph. That is an order.’

I made to get up again. ‘Then, I want to talk to Granger.’

Granger was the top man in Imperial Oil, the Head of Operations and General Manager. He liked me. He was a reasonable man. He would understand. Ikuru, Omole and Mustapha started laughing. Mustapha had yellowed teeth. Even Wali allowed himself a small smile.

‘The order came from Granger.’

After the hilarity had died down, Ikuru continued the recording.

‘Let’s go back a bit. You spoke to Dr. Akassa two hours after Manning’s kidnapping, and he had already heard of it through Doughboy. That is correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can you confirm that by this time, the press and public were unaware of the kidnapping?’

‘Yes. It was just the management of the company, and Manning’s security people who knew of the kidnapping at the time.’ Ikuru smiled triumphantly,

‘And during this telephone conversation, Dr. Akassa said that he was representing Doughboy in the negotiations with your company?’

I frowned and shook my head, ‘No. I was the one who called and convinced Dr. Akassa to be the middleman. He had already refused to do it when Doughboy asked him earlier.’

At this, Wali suddenly leaned forward and snapped the tape recorder off. The other men in the room looked at one another uneasily. Wali turned to me, and said in a shrill whisper.

‘That’s not what I heard, Mr Joseph. I heard that Dr. Akassa called you to say that he was wepwesenting Doughboy in the negotiations with Impewial.’ His eyes turned malevolent, ‘Do you understand?’

I was beginning to understand, but I shook my head again and said, ‘You heard wrong. I called Dr. Akassa, and convinced him. All this was on the instructions of management during a meeting. And everyone heard our conversation. It was on speaker phone.’ Omole and Mustapha exchanged

quick looks. They had expected me to say this. Ikuru glared at the wall in frustration. Wali kept his baleful stare on me and said,

‘Gentlemen, please excuse me and Mr Joseph for a moment. Maybe I can wefwesh his memowy.’

It sounded like a pre-agreed signal to them. They stood up, and filed out of the conference room without looking at me. I was left alone in the room with Wali. I did not want to be left alone in the room with Wali. I shuddered as I remembered all the rumours I had heard about Wali’s fondness for torture, particularly electrical jolts to the testicles of his victims. Maybe it was his way of venting his frustration for his voice, and his inability to pronounce the letter ‘r’.

Wali was cursed with a voice that sounded like a shrill little girl or a cartoon character. Because he didn’t talk much, I guessed he was embarrassed by it. It was a voice that would have been laughed at on any other man. Wali, however, was rarely laughed at. There was something about him that instantly warned people of the perils of any laughter at his expense. He continued staring at me and chewing his lower lip. He looked like he was unsure of whether to eat me now or later. Suddenly I needed to take a piss. My hands shook violently. I hid them under the table. After the three longest minutes of my life had passed, Wali squeaked,

‘Do you know what I can do to you, Tubo?’ I gulped and nodded. Wali shook his head. ‘For starters, I could make you lose your job if I tell Omole about all your secwet deals in Impewial. Do you understand?’ I assured him that I did. ‘Good. So fwom now, will you coopewate with the lawyer and stop twying to obstwuct the case against Dr. Akassa?’ I paused. Then I nodded. ‘So now wemember that it was Dr. Akassa who called you, and told you he was wepresenting and negotiating for Doughboy?’ I didn’t answer. Wali smacked the table hard. It was as loud as a gunshot. He shrieked, ‘Come on, Tubo! Or, would it be easier for you to wemember if you were being paid as usual?’ I exhaled and put my head in my hands. Wali’s voice dropped to an ominous whisper. ‘You know what, Tubo? I’ll forget about telling Omole anything; too much time and hassle. There’s an easier, faster way for dealing with cockwoaches like you…’ He rose to his feet. I raised a shaking hand.

‘P...please,’ I stuttered. ‘I remember now. It was Am…Dr. Akassa who called me.’ Wali looked at me like he was tasting bile in his mouth.

‘Are you sure?’ I nodded. ‘Well, don’t just stand there. Go and get them back here,’ he ordered. I shuffled to the door and got the others back in.

After they had all sat down again, Wali smiled nastily and announced, ‘There has been some pwogwess. Mr Joseph has wemembered.’ He put his finger over the ‘record’ button of the tape recorder and turned to Ikuru.

‘Ask Mr Joseph that last question again.’

‘So, you said yes?’ Kaniye asked.

‘I didn’t have a choice.’ I replied.

‘There’s always a choice, Tubo. You could have walked away.’

I got out my packet of Benson & Hedges. I cupped a cigarette in my palm as I lit it. I inhaled impatiently and shot smoke in the air. I shook my head.

‘To tell the truth, I’m not sure Amaibi is worth losing my job for.’ Kaniye smiled sadly,

‘Tell me something else Tubo, anything else. You can tell me that you didn’t have the balls to say no. Typical of you, but forgivable. Or, you can say that you were scared of losing your job. The economy’s messed up, I’ll understand. But, what I will not stand is you smoking in my restaurant, and you know I hate that, and then telling me that Amaibi is not worth losing your job for.’

I stubbed out my cigarette on an upturned bottle cover. I hadn’t told Kaniye about Wali. I only told him that I had agreed to give evidence against Amaibi, on the insistence of Imperial Oil. Kaniye continued without raising his voice,

‘Who convinced Imperial Oil to give you your job in the first place? Who made sure you and many Asiama kids got scholarships from Imperial Oil to study in the university? Who took care of us when we were kids, like we were his children? Who was the real father to you, me, Doye, and many others? Who? Catechist Akassa, Amaibi’s father, that’s who. Now, you may have forgotten that Amaibi is your friend and brother. That’s life and that’s okay, but you will not forget that his father made you who you are today. And if you remember that, you fat, selfish bastard, you’ll realise

that his son, Amaibi, is worth it.' Kaniye looked weary. He sighed and the sad smile returned.

'Or maybe I'm a bit old fashioned to think like that.'

'Okay. Okay. Okay.' I raised my hands up. 'I didn't have the balls to say no. So what do I do now?'

'Nothing. You'll give evidence against Amaibi.'

I sighed and shook my head slowly. Kaniye leaned forward and slapped my shoulder. 'Don't worry about it.' He smiled mischievously,

'I'll think of a way to use you to our advantage.' I smiled hesitantly in return.

'Okay. But, whatever, you do, don't make it obvious that I'm helping you. I don't want Wali's trouble.'

'Wali? Isn't he the government security service guy who investigated Amaibi? He's supposed to give evidence too.' I nodded and fingered my packet of cigarettes.

'Yes, he's the one. But there's more to Wali than you know. He's behind the whole investigation, and prosecution of Amaibi. And, can you guess why?'

Kaniye rolled his eyes. 'Because of the kidnap and death of Manning?'

I shook my head and smiled mysteriously, 'Guess again.'

Kaniye sighed, 'I'm not in the mood for games. Are you telling me why or not?'

I rolled a cigarette in my fingers; put it on top of my upper lip, and under my nose. I sniffed it. 'I need a smoke, man.' Kaniye regarded me for a long moment. Then he shook his head,

'Okay, let's go to the house.'

Kaniye's house was a small, white bungalow hidden at the back of the restaurant. A picket fence covered with thick climbing plants, shielded it from any prying eyes looking in from the big windows of the indoor section of the restaurant. A gravel path ran along between a well-kept lawn and the fence. It led to a small gate that opened into the bungalow. I liked the inside of the house best. Kaniye did it up with a unique mix of African and modern. Cane chairs, raffia, Adire-covered cushions and beanbags blended with soft lightings, and silver gadgetry, and a corner home bar. From the latter, he pulled out a bottle of red wine, pointed at it, I nodded and then fetching two glasses we settled in deckchairs in the small veranda

outside. I took off my shoes and socks. I stuck the cigarette to my lower lip and lit up and took a few delicious drags. I sipped some wine. It spread pleasant warmth in my stomach. The fresh air tickled my toes and I wriggled them. I closed my eyes. In the background Fela sang about the size of Obasanjo's stomach. I sighed in satisfaction. 'Ah, this is the good life.'

Kaniye mixed his wine with Red Bull but didn't drink it. Rather, he leaned back and watched me with his inscrutable smile till I finished my cigarette and started talking. 'For Wali, Amaibi case isn't about Manning. Manning's death was just a convenient excuse. It's really about money, and payback.' Kaniye looked up sharply.

'What money?'

'Ransom money.' Kaniye raised an eyebrow as I continued, 'Amaibi is in trouble only because he inadvertently stopped Wali from getting ransom money which used to come regularly.'

'You've lost me. I thought it was only Doye and other militants who got paid ransoms after they had kidnapped and released foreigners.'

I smiled. 'That's not entirely true.' I sipped some more wine and explained. 'After looting of public funds by government officials and oil bunkering, kidnapping is the next most profitable enterprise in the Niger Delta.' I waved my hands, and continued, 'However, kidnapping is the greatest con, the biggest wayo. This is how it works. For example, a militant group like say Doye and his boys, right? They kidnap a white man, and then make all sorts of reasonable demands –development for the Niger Delta, jobs for indigenes, compensation for spills; oil companies should leave the area, etc., etc. In reality, however, all it takes is a ransom. The companies usually cough up the ransom money. Sometimes, the government pays part of it. The government money usually comes from a special fund called the Security Vote. Imagine a bottomless pot of money, actually billions, to be spent without the scrutiny of accounts – that is the Security Vote.'

I stopped to light another cigarette and blow smoke in the evening breeze. 'Now, guys like Wali, government security guys, interface with the militants, the companies and the government to secure the release of the kidnapped hostage. In reality, many of them are working for themselves or for some politicians in government. Wali works with Chief Ikaki. You know Chief Ikaki is not just any Asiama Chief, but the power behind the

Amayanabo, as well as a special adviser to the Governor and the man who rigged the elections to bring the Governor to power. But let's go back to the militants. So, the militants make a ransom demand, for say, five million, right? Now this is where the wayo starts. Since they have the direct link to the militants, and the blessing of the politicians, the government security guys can say the figure is ten million, fifty million, or anything they want it to be. If it's the company that is paying the ransom, some people inside the company may be in the know. These company people are usually in a position to recommend that the company pay whatever the government security guys say the ransom is. Of course, they'll get a cut from the money. If it is the government that is paying the ransom, the politicians give approval to the security guys to dip into the Security Vote and collect anything they want, think Aladdin and his magic lamp.' I nodded and rubbed my palms repeatedly. 'So, using our example, the politicians and security guys take as much as they want, give the militants five million, receive the hostages, and everyone is happy.' I opened my arms wide.

Kaniye said, 'No wonder no one has been caught or charged for kidnapping. The militants are simply working for other people without knowing it.'

I smiled and nodded, 'Many of them know it, but don't mind. After all it helps smooth the process. Anyway, the more prolific a militant group is at kidnapping; the better it is for the government security guys.' Kaniye gave me a knowing look as the penny dropped in his head.

'Doye was prolific, wasn't he?'

I laughed. 'Doughboy was the best "worker" Chief Ikaki and Wali had. In the three years between 2000 and the end of 2002, Doughboy kidnapped fifteen expatriates from Imperial Oil alone. That's an average of five hostages per year. I've not even started with how many people he took from Shell and Chevron. And every single one was a Grade A hostage.'

'Grade A?'

I laughed, 'There is a pecking order for the value of hostages. Americans, Britons and Western Europeans rank top, the Grade A. Their ransoms are the most expensive. Next are the Eastern Europeans and some South Americans. At the bottom of the pile are the Asians and Arabs. Nobody kidnaps the Lebanese though.' I shook my head and made a bitter

face, ‘They are more Nigerian than we are and probably wouldn’t fetch fifty thousand. They are not worth the trouble.’ Kaniye laughed in spite of himself.

‘You are not serious.’

I shrugged. ‘I didn’t make the rules. I’m just telling it as it is. Anyway, back to Doughboy. Wali handled the ransom payments for every one of Doughboy’s hostages. Five Grade A hostages a year from Imperial Oil alone. You do the math. Maybe at first Doughboy knew what Chief Ikaki and Wali were up to and he didn’t seem to mind. Maybe he didn’t know that they were getting more money than him for each hostage. Anyway, you know Doughboy. He can be crazy sometimes.’ I threw my head back and drained my glass. ‘In January 2003, Doughboy kidnapped three Imperial Oil staff. All Grade A as usual-an American called Tanowitz; Morris, an Englishman; and Betsen, who is French.’ I refilled my glass. ‘However, Doughboy refused to deal with Wali or anybody else from the government or Imperial Oil. He demanded to deal with only Amaibi, who was at the time acting the environmental revolutionary, in the Niger Delta struggle. Worse still, he made Amaibi bypass everyone and deal directly with the top management of the company or the big boys in government. Now, you know Amaibi is naïve, but honest. If he said the ransom was, for example, one million, then it was really one million. Wali would have said three, or seven. Anyway, the ransom was paid through Amaibi, and Tanowitz and the others were released.’

Kaniye had heard enough to complete the story himself. ‘Chief Ikaki and Wali had lost their source of income and didn’t like it. In August 2003, Doye kidnapped Manning and Amaibi was brought in again. This time, no one knew Manning suffered a fatal heart attack shortly after his kidnap. Doye bullied Amaibi and collected the ransom anyway. Amaibi returned with Manning’s corpse but what I don’t understand is why Doye gave one million naira to Amaibi. Was it supposed to be a thank you? It was stupid of him. It played Amaibi into Wali’s hand, the perfect opportunity to take him out of the picture. Because, as a result, Amaibi is arrested and charged, and here we are.’

I nodded. ‘Exactly.’ Kaniye sipped his wine and mulled for a moment.

‘You have to say all this in court.’

I shuddered and shook my head violently, ‘No, No way. I don’t want any wahala.’ The sad smile appeared on Kaniye’s face again. He nodded slowly,

‘So, because of your wonderful job, Tubo, you will not only give evidence that will put Amaibi away for life, you will also withhold evidence that could have acquitted him.’

I looked away and mumbled, ‘Don’t talk like that, Kaniye. It’s not that simple. There’s no evidence to prove what I’ve told you. Ransom payments are usually made in cash. It will just be my word against Wali’s.’ Kaniye spoke through gritted teeth.

‘I’ll take that, Tubo, because I don’t have anything else at the moment.’

I shook my head again. ‘I can’t. I can’t say anything to implicate Wali.’

‘Is that because you were Wali’s partner inside Imperial Oil? The one who, for a percentage, okayed whatever Wali said the ransom was.’

I was startled. ‘I am …I d…didn’t tell you that, Kaniye.’ Kaniye threw his arms in the air,

‘You didn’t have to tell me. I’ve known you all my life. You are a greedy fool with no principles or loyalty except to yourself. The monies approved by Imperial Oil to pay as ransoms passed through your department – Public Relations. There is no way Wali would have made all that money from Imperial Oil without your help.’ Kaniye sighed and lowered his voice,

‘How much have you made, Tubo, from all this suffering? Fifteen million? Twenty?’

I pointed my forefinger at him. ‘Don’t you dare judge me. Don’t act all holier-than-thou. When I loaned you five million in 2002 to open your third restaurant, where the hell did you think the money came from?’

Kaniye groaned and put his head in his hands. He remained like that for a long time. Finally, he raised his head and said softly,

‘Get out of my sight, Tubo.’

I sighed, ‘Look man, I’m sorry, but I can’t help Amaibi. Now you know some of the reasons. Besides, you don’t know Wali. You think Doye is mean? He’s an angel compared to Wali. That man is pure evil. He can kill me, or throw me in some dungeon in Zungeru.’ I shook my head, ‘I’m sorry. I can’t.’ I downed the last of my wine, grabbed the bottle again, and

got to my feet. ‘You see, I know myself. I’m not a martyr. I’m not a hero.’ I shrugged, ‘But hey, that’s okay. The world needs its cowards anyway. Who else will tell the story of the brave after they die?’ Kaniye didn’t answer. He just leaned back, closed his eyes, and rocked back and forth. I turned and started hobbling away.

‘Tubo?’

‘Yes?’ I turned. Kaniye’s eyes were still shut.

‘Don’t walk away with my bottle of wine.’

Chapter 17
Amaibi
Port Harcourt, 2004

The first prosecution witness was a burly policeman called Ernest Idahosa. He was the one who had led a battalion of policemen to arrest and shoot me, the one who supposedly found a pistol on me. Ikuru, the prosecutor, explained to the judge that he was calling Idahosa first and out of turn because the man was scheduled to proceed on transfer from Port Harcourt to Ilorin within the week, and so he had to give his evidence before he left. Ikuru led Idahosa through the basics – name, rank, and serial number. Then he asked him if he knew the Accused, me. Idahosa confirmed that he did, and that he met me for the first time on the day of my arrest. Ikuru asked him to explain the circumstances leading to my arrest.

'There was a joint investigation conducted by the police and the government security service, into the kidnapping and subsequent death of the deceased, the late Mr Brian Manning on 15th August, 2003. The investigation showed that the Accused conspired with others at large to perpetuate the crimes against the Deceased, Mr Manning. So, on the morning of 26th August, 2003, I received a signal from headquarters authorising the arrest of the Accused. I immediately proceeded with some of my men to 27, Emekuku Street, D-Line, Port Harcourt, where the Accused resides.' Ikuru asked,

'And what happened next?'

'Well, we surrounded the area first. Then we knocked on the door of the Accused's house, identified ourselves as policemen, and asked him to open the door. But he didn't open. At first, we thought there was nobody in the house because the lights were off, the door was locked and all the windows were shut. But, we noticed that the air conditioners were on. Then, we heard the Accused running around inside the house. We called on him again to open the door, but he refused.'

‘What did you do when the Accused failed to open the door?’ Idahosa shrugged and opened his hands to the judge.

‘My lord, we had no choice but to force the door open.’

Ikuru nodded his understanding. ‘What happened next?’

‘We forced the door open and entered the house into the sitting room, when the Accused shot at us with a gun.’ There was a gasp from the public gallery. It ended immediately the judge frowned. Ikuru shook his head in sympathy with the policemen.

‘Where was the Accused at that time? Where did he shoot from?’

‘He was in a small corridor. The corridor leads out from the sitting room to the toilet and bathroom, and the bedrooms.’

‘So what did you and your men do as the Accused shot at you?’

Idahosa turned to the judge again, ‘My lord, if not for the grace of God, one of us could have died or would have been injured. But, thank God, the bullet went through a window. We had no choice but to take cover and return fire. That is how we wounded the Accused in his leg. Thereafter, we arrested the Accused, searched the house and took his gun as an exhibit. I had gone there with a camera so I also took photographs of the house, the Accused and the gun.’ Ikuru brought out a roll of film and some pictures from an envelope.

‘If you see the negatives of the pictures you took and the pictures themselves, can you identify them?’

Idahosa nodded, ‘Yes, my lord.’

Ikuru handed them to the clerk, who took them to Idahosa. Idahosa went through the motions studying the negatives and the pictures carefully.

‘Are those the negatives and the pictures you took of the Accused, his house and gun?’ Ikuru asked.

‘Yes, my lord.’ Idahosa returned them to the clerk.

Ikuru turned to the judge, ‘My lord, we seek to tender as exhibits.’

The clerk walked over and handed the pictures and negatives to Kaniye. He spread them out on the table, studied them with a frown and rubbed his chin. He took a long time.

‘Mr Rufus, I don’t have all day,’ the judge observed testily.

‘Yes, my lord.’ Kaniye agreed. But he still took his time anyway. Finally he returned the negatives and the pictures to the clerk, and stood up briefly.

‘Sorry my lord, I have no objections.’

The judge didn’t take as much time as Kaniye but he also studied each picture carefully. Then he scribbled hurriedly in his book, and read out what he had written,

‘Negatives of pictures admitted in evidence and marked as Exhibit P1. Pictures admitted in evidence and marked as Exhibits P2A to P2J.’

Ikuru got to his feet again and adjusted his black gown, which had a habit of slipping off his shoulders. ‘Now, D.S.P. Idahosa, you told this honourable court that the Accused shot at you and your men with a gun, and after he was arrested you were able to recover that gun as an exhibit. My question is do you have the Accused’s gun in this court?’

Kaniye sprang up, ‘My lord, I object to my learned friend’s choice of words. I believe it is only you, my lord, who can make an unbiased determination of who owns the gun, and that will only be after a proper evaluation of all the evidence. Till then, I think it will be prudent for my learned friend not to refer to the gun as my client’s.’

Ikuru shook his head and wore a pained expression. ‘My lord, with all due respect, my learned friend’s objection is most misconceived, intended only to disrupt my line of questioning and waste the time of this honourable court.’ He spread his palms and shook his head again at the apparent injustice of it all. ‘My lord, he cannot tell me how to conduct my case. He cannot.’

The judge nodded, ‘I agree Mr Rufus can’t do that.’ Then he smiled mirthlessly, a thin line in his bearded face. ‘But I can, Mr Ikuru. Please rephrase your question.’

Ikuru rearranged his gown and his pride, before returning to the witness. ‘D.S.P. Idahosa, do you have the gun you recovered from the Accused here in court?’

‘Yes sir.’

There was a buzz in the courtroom as Idahosa opened a small leather bag and produced a small, black, revolver. I felt all eyes turn to me but I remained deadpan, staring straight at the revolver. Ikuru allowed the murmurs to go on for as long as possible before continuing. He pointed at the gun in Idahosa’s hands.

‘I hope that weapon is not loaded.’

Idahosa smiled, ‘No, my lord, it is not loaded. I’m sure. I checked it myself.’

‘We seek to tender as an exhibit, my lord,’ Ikuru announced dramatically.

The clerk held the gun gingerly as he brought it to Kaniye. There was a scowl on Kaniye’s face as he took the gun and studied it. He pushed the cylinder open, rotated it slowly, idly. Then he motioned for the clerk to bring him the pictures. He studied two pictures closely. Then he rotated the cylinder of the gun again, making a clicking sound. His face broke into his familiar, mischievous smile. Then he closed the cylinder, handed the gun and pictures back to the clerk, and stood up.

‘No objection, my lord.’ He was still smiling.

‘Exhibit P3,’ the judge announced. ‘Anything else, Mr Ikuru?’

Ikuru shook his head, ‘That will be all for the witness.’

‘Cross-examination, Mr Rufus?’

Kaniye was already on his feet, ‘Yes, my lord.’

The judge looked at his watch, ‘Try and make it snappy. You can see the bar is full.’

Kaniye nodded. ‘I’ll try my best, my lord.’ Then he turned to Idahosa. ‘Did you have a warrant authorising the arrest of my client?’

Idahosa looked at Ikuru, then at the floor.

‘No,’ he said softly.

Kaniye nodded, ‘So you and your team went to my client’s home at about 3 a.m. on the morning of 26th August, 2003, without a warrant?’ There was a slight hesitation. Then he replied,

‘Yes.’

‘Now you said that his doors and windows were locked, and his air conditioners were on. Is that correct?’

Idahosa nodded. ‘Yes.’

Kaniye raised an eyebrow. ‘All his windows were locked?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Kaniye thumbed through the pictures. ‘These pictures were taken after you had arrested my client. Is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

Kaniye rubbed his chin. ‘Let’s talk about my client’s house for a moment. You and your team entered my client’s bedroom. Is that right?’

‘Yes we entered the Accused’s bedroom?’

Kaniye nodded and scribbled in a notepad in front of him. ‘There are two windows in my client’s bedroom. One directly behind his bed and one

beside his bed. Am I correct?'

'Yes.'

'Now, you were all standing near the door of my client's bedroom, facing his bed, right?'

'Yes.'

'So in other words, when you entered my client's bedroom you were facing the two windows in the room.'

Idahosa looked wary. He knew there was a trap somewhere. He just hadn't figured out where. So, he answered hesitantly, 'Yes.'

Kaniye gave him a warm, reassuring smile. Idahosa fell for it and was actually starting to smile back when the next question came. 'My client says you surrounded his house, smashed down his door, found him in his bedroom, in bed, beat him up, and shot him. Is that correct?'

Eyes defiant, Idahosa shook his head vehemently. 'No. No. He shot at us first. We were defending ourselves.'

He glanced furtively in my direction as he said this. Then he looked away almost immediately Kaniye put his hands up apologetically. 'Sorry, I misunderstood you. You are saying that when you got to his bedroom, from his bed, my client shot at you and your men first. And you returned fire in self-defence. Is that correct?'

Idahosa nodded his agreement. 'Yes. That is exactly what happened.'

'My client was on his bed when you and your men entered the room. True?'

Idahosa weighed his answer thoughtfully. Then he said, 'Yes.'

Kaniye quickly switched the focus of his attack. 'So, if my client, or anyone else, says that the shooting did not take place in the bedroom, he would be lying?'

'Yes, your client would be lying if he said that.' Idahosa agreed.

Kaniye scrawled lazily, acting almost disinterested. 'What if it was someone else who said it?'

'The person would be lying too.' Idahosa declared boldly.

Kaniye continued scrawling, and without looking up, drawled, 'So a person, who says that you and your team were in the sitting room, and my client was in the corridor when he shot at you, would be lying?'

'Yy…' Idahosa began, but stopped himself. It was too late. The damage had already been done. When Ikuru was questioning him, Idahosa

had said that I had shot at them from the corridor. Idahosa wiped his face, and looked at Kaniye uneasily.

‘No. Sorry, I don’t understand the question.’ Kaniye’s smile was mocking.

‘Then I shall ask you another, Mr Idahosa. You said the bullet which my client fired at you and your team went through the window. Can you please show the court the broken window in the pictures, Exhibits P2A to P2G?’

Idahosa leaned forward, ‘Broken window?’

‘Yes, broken window. It is your evidence that all the windows of the house were locked. You said that my client’s shot went out of a window. It is only logical to assume that since all the windows were locked, the bullet must have broken the window to go out. You took pictures of all the sides and angles of my client’s house. So, show the court the broken window in any of the pictures you have tendered.’

The clerk handed the exhibits to Idahosa. He took them slowly, but did not bother looking at the pictures. He knew there was no broken window. A pregnant silence hung heavily in the air as everyone waited for Idahosa. He looked at Ikuru, who avoided his eyes. He looked at the glaring judge. He looked at the deadpan Kaniye. After an eternity, he mumbled,

‘I can’t find it.’

The courtroom broke into a babble of hushed, excited voices. Kaniye allowed himself a small smile,

‘You can’t find it. Is that because my client never shot at you?’

‘He… shot at us. Maybe I made a mistake with the window.’

Kaniye made a wry face and beckoned on the clerk to hand him the gun. When he held it in his hands, he looked at Idahosa sternly, ‘So you are insisting that my client had this gun and he shot at you with it?’

‘Yes.’ Idahosa mopped rivulets of sweat off his face.

Kaniye turned away and looked down at the revolver in his hands, ‘Are you sure that my client had this gun? Are you sure you are not mistaken?’

Idahosa shook his head. ‘I am not mistaken. I am very sure, that is the gun the Accused used to shoot at us. We collected if from him after we had arrested him. I ...’

The judge called out, ‘Slow down, D.S.P. Idahosa; you know I’m writing down everything. Don’t talk so fast.’

Idahosa apologised. The judge wrote for a while and said, ‘You were saying?’

Idahosa continued. ‘I was saying that I disarmed the Accused myself, my lord.’ He pointed to the revolver in Kaniye’s hand. ‘That is the Accused’s gun.’

Kaniye did not look at Idahosa, ‘Take a look at Exhibits P2I and P2J. They are the pictures of my client in his underwear, bleeding after he had been shot and arrested. He is holding a gun isn’t he?’

Idahosa found the pictures and studied them. ‘Yes.’

‘The pictures were taken at the police station where my client was taken to after his arrest. Yes?’

‘Yes.’

Kaniye seemed to stare absentmindedly at the ceiling. ‘Let’s recap what happened. You storm my client’s bedroom, find him in bed and shoot him. As a result, He’s in pain and bleeding but instead of taking him to a hospital, you arrest him and take him to the police station.’ Kaniye pushed the revolver’s cylinder open and rotated it once, it clicked. Then he continued, ‘In spite of his injury, you compel him to hold a gun and pose for pictures in his underwear to demean him. Is that correct, Mr Idahosa?’

Idahosa squirmed in his chair and looked at Kaniye nervously. He was clearly uncomfortable with the gun in Kaniye’s hands. ‘I don’t understand the question.’

‘Then I shall ask you another, Mr Idahosa,’ Kaniye said quietly, still without looking at Idahosa. ‘Was it your idea to frame my client with possession of a firearm?’

Idahosa’s eyes darted back and forth. ‘Nn…No.’

‘No what? No, it was not your idea to frame him?’

‘It wasn’t my idea.’

‘Whose idea was it then?’

‘I don’t know…’ As Idahosa saw Kaniye’s small smile he tried to backtrack.

‘No. No. Nobody framed the Accused.’

Kaniye raised the gun to his chest level so everyone could see it. ‘This gun is a revolver pistol. Am I correct?’

‘Yes,’ Idahosa replied warily.

‘It is a revolver because it can do this, right?’ Kaniye rotated the cylinder. Click. Click. Click.

‘Yes.’

‘Take another look at Exhibits P2I and P2J. Look carefully at the pistol which you and your men forced into my client’s hand. That pistol in the pictures is an automatic or semi-automatic. That pistol in the pictures is clearly not a revolver, is it?’ Kaniye turned and looked at Idahosa. Mouth slightly open, Idahosa stared dazedly at the pictures. A wave of whispering flowed through the courtroom. Ikuru lowered his head. The judge put down his pen and leaned back. I stopped breathing.

‘Mr Idahosa?’ Kaniye called out with a loud voice.

Idahosa jerked. ‘I…I dd…don’t understand the question, sir.’

Kaniye shook his head and boomed, ‘Then I shall, ask you another. Don’t test my patience, Mr Idahosa. Is the gun in the pictures a revolver? Is it the same gun with…’ There was a crash as Kaniye tossed the gun on the table before him, ‘This one?’ Idahosa hung his head and seemed to be looking at his feet.

‘D.S.P. Idahosa?’ It was the judge this time.

‘No. It is not the same gun,’ Idahosa said woodenly.

I exhaled. Kaniye adjusted his gown which had slipped off his shoulders. He wiped his face gently and stared at Idahosa for a long time. Then he smiled. It was a bitter smile.

‘Your first name is Ernest, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ Idahosa replied sullenly.

Kaniye mused, ‘Hmm… A lying, corrupt, Nigerian policeman called Ernest. Tell me, Ernest, do you appreciate irony?’

‘My lord, I object–’ Ikuru sprang to his feet.

Wearily, Kaniye put both hands up. ‘It’s a rhetorical question, my lord. No answer is required.’

The judge shrugged. ‘I didn’t record the question anyway, Mr Rufus.’

Kaniye nodded, ‘Very well, my lord.’ Then he gave Idahosa one last, long look. It was a look that spoke of bemusement and bewilderment: as if he was trying to comprehend why Idahosa was the man he was. Idahosa looked down at his knees. Kaniye smiled sadly and turned to the judge.

‘My lord, I have no further questions for this witness.’

‘Good job,’ I said to Kaniye as I shuffled slowly to the Black Maria. Kaniye wrinkled his nose.

‘Let’s not get carried away. We still have the testimonies of Wali and that bastard, Tubo, to deal with.’ He turned to one of the guards and snapped. ‘Must you chain his legs? The man is already walking with a crutch.’

The guard regarded Kaniye for a moment. Then with great deliberation he spat on the ground in front of Kaniye. This was followed by a look of contempt. Kaniye took a step towards the guard but I put my hand on his arm.

‘Leave him alone. He’s only doing his job.’

‘What nonsense job?’ Kaniye retorted.

My grip on his arm tightened. ‘I said let him be. After all, I’m the one he’s doing it to, remember? If I can forgive him then who are you not to?’

Kaniye exhaled and glared at the guard. Then he turned to me and said, ‘People always take advantage of you, Amaibi.’

I smiled, ‘Maybe. But prison has reminded me of one thing: life is too short and precious, to be hold grudges.’ I was near the steps of the Black Maria. Kaniye held my crutch and helped push me up the tricky steps. Wistfully, from inside the dark lorry, I watched Kaniye stand outside, in the rectangle of sunshine and freedom. He wagged a finger at the guard.

‘You are a lucky man.’

‘Kaniye?’ I called out.

‘Yes?’

He came closer and tried to peer into the darkness. ‘About grudges and forgiveness, I was referring to Tubo.’ The doors clanged shut.

Chapter 18
Deola
Port Harcourt, 2004

‘Deola meet Tubo. Tubo, meet Deola Rufus.’

I gasped and wagged a finger at Kaniye. Then I turned to the chubby, half-caste man, smiled, offered my hand and said, ‘Don’t mind him, my name is Deola Oluwagbamila.’

Kaniye replied, ‘Yeah. Yeah. But that’s just for now. We’ll soon solve that problem.’

I turned to him with fire in my eyes. ‘Problem?’

He nodded sagely, ‘Oluwagbamila. Now, I’m sure it means something important, which I forget now–’

‘It means “God has saved me”. I’ve told you that several times.’

‘Ah, yes. That’s nice and all but Oluwagbamila is such a difficult name, you know? And, even you must admit that Deola Rufus sounds a lot easier than Deola Oluwagbamila.’

Seeing the scowl on my face and my hands on my hips, Kaniye shrugged innocently. ‘I was only trying to help you.’

‘Thank you, you are so kind.’ My tone dripping with sarcasm while I struggled to keep a smile off my face.

Kaniye turned to Oghogho and beamed. ‘You must be Oghogho; Deola has told me so much about you. My name is Kaniye.’

She chuckled, ‘And, I have heard a lot about you.’

‘All naughty I hope.’

Oghogho laughed and shook her head and then I said, ‘Shey, I told you he’s the craziest man I’ve met.’ I answered.

Kaniye threw his head back and laughed his funny laugh. The one that made his shoulders dance in an awkward but endearing way. ‘You really should go out more, Deola.’ He put his arm over Tubo’s shoulders. ‘For instance, I’m sane when compared to this man. Oghogho, this is my twin brother, Tubo. Tubo, Oghogho, Deola’s friend.’

They shook hands. Oghogho asked the obvious question. ‘How is he your brother?’

‘You mean you can’t see the resemblance?’ Tubo asked, his podgy arm desperately stretching upwards across Kaniye’s lean shoulders. Oghogho and I laughed.

‘No, I can’t,’ she said.

Tubo smiled. ‘We’re twins because the same woman breastfed both of us at the same time.’

As Oghogho’s mouth fell open, I whispered, ‘I’ll tell you their story later.’

‘Ladies, shall we?’ Kaniye gestured to his waiting car parked outside our flat.

‘So, where are we going this evening?’ I asked. I had just concluded my yearlong National Service earlier that day, and Kaniye had decided to take us out to celebrate my ‘entry into the real world’.

‘Well, knowing how much you love singing, and considering that you ladies have refused to go clubbing...’

I sighed, ‘Where are we going, Kaniye?’

He smiled, ‘There’s this restaurant, the food and clientele could be better, but what they lack in those areas, they make up for with a fantastic karaoke and dancing section. Now if that’s too wild for you nuns, we can go somewhere else.’

I beamed and shook my head, ‘I love karaoke.’ Without thinking, I found myself holding, and tugging one of his big hands, with its beautiful, long tapering fingers. ‘Let’s go.’ We held hands till we got to his car.

A roomful of complete strangers were chanting, ‘Tubo! Tubo! Tubo!’ Tubo was just about to start singing his fifth straight song. He had stunned everyone in the karaoke restaurant when he started with Robbie William’s *‘Feel’*. While singing Culture Club’s *‘Karma Chameleon’*, he strutted round the tables like he owned the place. His rendition of the Eagles’ ‘*Hotel California*’ made several strangers offer to buy him drinks. By the time he finished Marvin Gaye’s *‘Let’s get it on’* complete with suggestive hip moves, everyone in the crowd knew his name. They were now chanting his name because they had heard the opening strains of

Lionel Richie's *'All Night Long'*. The karaoke restaurant was a place frequented by expatriates. Naturally, most of their companions were skimpily clad, skinny, young black girls with bright blonde and auburn wigs. They roared and clapped when Tubo started singing. Eyes closed, Tubo smiled, and raised his half-filled beer glass high in salute. The microphone was in his other hand. He bounced slowly, warming to the music. By the time he got to the familiar chorus, we all joined in. The crowd loved him.

When he started the second verse, I leaned towards Kaniye and said, 'He's quite a showman.'

Kaniye smiled, 'He's drunk.'

I laughed and nodded. We had been at the restaurant for more than two hours and Tubo had been drinking steadily since we got there. 'He has an amazing voice, though,' I said for the fifth time that night. Oghogho nodded her agreement.

'St. Joseph's Choir, Asiama,' Kaniye explained.

'You didn't join?'

Kaniye shook his head. 'I went to the other church, the Anglican one, St. Cyprian's.'

Tubo danced towards our table, grabbed Oghogho's hand, pulled her to her feet and pushed the mike into her face. She laughed and sang along with him. Then, without breaking song, Tubo dragged her shrieking towards the floor where he had been performing. We chortled as we watched them go.

After a while I said, 'There was no choir in St. Cyprian's?'

'There was one but I never joined. I think I have a terrible voice and besides, I stopped going to church when I moved to Port Harcourt from Asiama.'

I thought it over for a while. 'About the same time your mother died?' He affected a shrug. 'So you blame God for her death?' I said it quietly.

Kaniye chuckled. 'Deola. Deola. You always think you can read me, don't you?'

I snarled playfully and grinned. 'Like a book!' We turned and for a while watched Tubo and Oghogho doing their duet. Then, Kaniye turned to me,

‘I prayed for my mother every day, a year before she died. After all my fasting, begging and bribes, I just don’t know why He let her die.’ He shrugged.

I smiled again. We turned again to the sound of applause which drowned the last of Tubo’s words as he ended the song. Still holding Oghogho’s hand, he bowed low to the audience as though he had just performed live in concert. I slipped my hand in Kaniye’s hand and squeezed it. I said a quick prayer for wisdom before I spoke.

‘I don’t have all the answers, Kaniye. I can’t tell you why terrible things sometimes happen to good people. All I know is that God is all good, and that’s never going to change even if you don’t believe or understand it now. He’s not to blame for your mother’s death, Kaniye. Besides, without your realising it, He’s helped you go through everything with your values and sense of humour intact.’

Kaniye grinned, ‘What are you now? God’s publicist?’

I pinched the back of his palm. ‘He doesn’t need one. His actions speak volumes already.’ I rubbed the place where I had pinched, and patted it. ‘Just think about what I’ve said, okay?’

Tubo and Oghogho started another song: UB40’s *‘I Got You Babe’*.

Kaniye sighed, ‘About the same time, some mad men in one Anglican Church in Port Harcourt knighted Sir James. This was despite knowing about his two mistresses. They said the knighthood was for his “contributions to the Lord’s vineyard”. I suspect they really meant his huge donations to their church, because the only vineyards that Sir James contributed to are the ones that produce red wine.’

I laughed and put my head in my hands.

Kaniye smiled and shrugged, ‘Anyway, that’s when I lost it.’

I lowered my hands. ‘I understand your point of view. In this country, we fast, pray, go to church and talk a lot about God, but we also hate, lie, steal, cheat and are immoral. We are the most religious people, yet we’re also the most corrupt people. This kind of hypocrisy has made you and many people disillusioned. But someday, I hope you will come to understand that it is unfair, and frankly, absurd, to judge God by the antics of many Nigerians. I pray you also come to know that you can’t identify Christians by just their words. Words are cheap and easy, but it is the actions that count. These were lessons I learned the hard way, and it almost cost me my faith.’

Kaniye smiled, leaned back, rubbed his chin, and regarded me thoughtfully. ‘Funny, but you don’t strike me as someone who ever had doubts about her faith. You always seem so sure and confident of your faith in God. So what happened? What almost cost you your faith?’

I shook my head, ‘You don’t need to know that, Kaniye. It’s in my past. And it’s better forgotten.’

‘Ah, no o! Then this friendship is not fair. You know everything in my past.’

I smiled, ‘Nice try, but…’ I shook my head again. Kaniye chuckled. We enjoyed an easy silence, and watched Oghogho and Tubo perform.

‘I had an affair with a married man in church.’ Kaniye spurted out some of the drink he had just sipped. ‘He was the pastor.’ Kaniye stopped dabbing his handkerchief on his wet tee shirt and turned to me. I held his eyes. ‘That’s it.’

He said softly, ‘Tell me what happened.’

‘I just did.’

He shook his head, ‘Tell me the why.’

I sighed, ‘Does it matter?’

He nodded. We stared at each other for a long moment, unspoken thoughts heavy before us. I wondered how I had come to trust Kaniye enough to want to tell him this story. I had not told it to anyone except Oghogho. I searched Kaniye’s face for a smirk or any expression that would give me an excuse not to talk. As if he read my thoughts, his face was arranged in the proper look of seriousness. I took a deep breath and began.

‘First, let me say that it was entirely my fault.’ I held up my hands. ‘As a pastor, he was charismatic, good-looking, and smooth talking. Still is. I was a new Christian then and I believed service to the pastor was the same thing as service to God. I guess I idolised him, worshipped the ground on which he walked, took his words as gospel. We all did. I was still in medical school, hectic and all, but I volunteered to work in the church office. We got close…’

Kaniye struggled to keep a straight face. I glared at him, but continued. ‘One night, after fellowship, he sent all the workers home, except me. He told me to sit beside him on a big couch in his office. We got talking; he brought out a bottle of wine. When I showed my surprise, he told me that it was okay to drink, and that he needed it for his stress.

We finished the bottle of wine, and had another one. Yet he complained that he was still stressed. He said he needed a massage. Just for only his shoulders, he assured me. Only his shoulders...' Kaniye laughed so hard that there were tears in his eyes. I was chuckling too. 'Okay, I admit. I was really stupid.' Kaniye wiped his eyes. 'Ah, the man was smooth. Stress. Wine. Massage. Maybe I should use those moves on you.' I picked up a table knife and pointed it at him.

'And I'll kill you.'

He put both hands up in mock surrender. 'Okay. Okay. I'll use other moves instead.'

I smiled and wagged the knife at him. 'Anyway, afterwards, he begged me not to tell anyone. I was too ashamed to tell anyway. The next morning it was as if nothing had happened. He was still the tongue-speaking, miracle-working, "man-of-god". Later that evening, he called me again to his office. He said he wanted to apologise, and he did apologise profusely. I was an emotional wreck by this time – guilt, fear, confusion. I apologised too. Then I started crying. Then, he came over to comfort me and it seemed…' Kaniye didn't laugh this time. He just shook his head. 'It was easier the second night. After that there was no turning back. We met every night for almost two weeks. I tried to fight it but I couldn't resist it. I felt so bad, filthy even and I stopped going to church. Surprisingly, he carried on as normal. In fact he was even more dedicated. I hated myself for his deceit on the congregation. So, one night I asked why he felt no guilt. His reply was that since our affair had not affected his "anointing", he had no reason to feel guilty.' Kaniye nodded, 'And that was the blow to your faith?'

'Yes. I couldn't understand why we were sinning and yet he remained so…so…' Lost for words, I threw my hands up in the air.

'So how did it end?'

'I ran.'

'Ran?' He raised an eyebrow.

I smiled. 'Yep. I realised I probably wasn't going to win if I stood to fight the temptation. So I ran away from it all – church, him, God. I changed my friends, room in school...'

'And how did your faith come back?'

I beamed and turned to look at Oghogho singing and dancing with Tubo. 'God and that mad woman.' I squeezed Kaniye's hands tightly.

‘I believe God used her to drag me to my feet and to teach me things I didn’t know.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, I’ve learnt that true Christianity is about a child-father relationship with God. It’s about living a sin-free, love-filled life. That’s the only way to know it’s real and not necessarily by the miracles, preaching, tongues, or all the other stuff that’s in our faces all the time. Now, I’m not knocking these things. They are supposed to be gifts from God. However, Christians should be known by their fruits of righteousness and love; not by their gifts.’ Kaniye swirled his tonic water and studied me.

‘I’m impressed that you can talk about this without being miserable.’

Unconsciously, I reached for his hands again. ‘It took two years of depression and self-loathing, to understand that God had forgiven me, and that He doesn’t keep score. Because of God, I have nothing to be ashamed of. It was only when I understood these things that I was finally able to forgive him.’

Kaniye frowned. ‘You forgave the bastard?’

I smiled, ‘That was the first step in learning to forgive myself.’ I squeezed his hands. ‘Don’t think it’s cool to be cynical about God, Kaniye. Let Him into your life. He’ll help you forgive your father. He’ll help you forgive yourself.’

‘Forgive myself for what?’

I stroked the back of his hands, ‘I know you also blame yourself for your mother’s death. I know you feel that you shouldn’t have left Asiama, that maybe if you had stayed in Asiama to continue to take care of your mother, she wouldn’t have died.’ Kaniye looked away.

‘Don’t you get tired of preaching to me, Deola?’ he asked in a tight voice.

‘Why don’t you go and sing?’ I winked.

‘Only if you sing with me.’

It forced a smile from him. He shook his head. ‘No way.’

‘C’mon, Kaniye. Don’t be such an old man. This is karaoke, not a singing competition. It doesn’t matter what your voice sounds like.’

‘It’s not my voice. It’s just that they don’t have the songs I want to sing.’

‘There are thousands of songs, Kaniye. I’m sure you can find something?’

The twinkle returned to his eye. ‘Do they have anything by Majek? *“Send down the rain”* for instance?’

I laughed. ‘No they don’t.’

Kaniye shook his head in horror. ‘Ah, no Majek? What of Daddy Showkey?’

I sighed, stood up and dragged a protesting Kaniye to his feet. ‘Ras Kimono nko? You know? “*Whatta gwan in a dis we country?”’*

Ten minutes later, Kaniye was swaying, eyes closed and doing a passable impression of Bob Marley as he sang, *‘No woman no cry’* in a terrible, gravelly voice. I didn’t sing. I had never intended to. I had slipped away from Kaniye when he started singing and watched him with a big grin. He didn’t seem to mind. He opened his eyes and searched for me in the crowd. When he saw me, he smiled and wagged a finger. Then he threw his head back, jigged and pointed to the sky. It got the crowd going. *‘NO WOMAN NO CRY!’* I felt a lump in my throat. Every hair on my body came alive as goose bumps gently wrapped my skin. There was a warm thudding in my heart. My smile widened as I surrendered to the moment. It was beautiful.

‘We have to do this again,’ Kaniye said as we filed out of the restaurant to the dark car park.

Oghogho nodded, ‘At least, for the sight of Tubo dancing round Deola’s bag. It was the funniest thing I’ve seen all year.’

Tubo wagged a drunken finger, ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet. Let’s go clubbing so you’ll see my other steps.’

I shook my head. ‘We’re going home.’

Tubo glanced at his watch. ‘Ah, it’s just 11.48. The night is still young.’

I smiled at him. ‘That’s way past our curfew.’ Tubo started to protest. Kaniye cut him off with,

‘We’re taking them home, Tubo.’

Tubo groaned. We were about twelve feet from Kaniye’s car when we heard hurried footsteps behind us. A voice barked,

‘All of you! Stop there!’

We froze. A figure peeled away from the shadows and appeared before us. It was a slim, dark, dangerous looking teenager in a long leather jacket. He came to stand closest to me. One of his hands seemed a lot longer than the other. It was when he waved this hand casually, that I noticed he was holding an evil-looking shotgun. He studied us with bloodshot eyes. His jaws worked as he chewed gum. But he didn’t say a word.

‘Don’t move. Put your hands in the air, slowly.’ Kaniye whispered to us.

Dumbstruck, we obeyed. Kaniye raised his hands too, but he walked slowly towards the boy. Still chewing, the boy watched him come. Kaniye walked carefully till he manoeuvred himself between me and the shotgun. Then he stopped. His phone and car keys were in his outstretched hands. Cautiously, he offered them to the boy. Kaniye’s voice was calm,

‘You can take my car. And my phone too.’

The boy grabbed the phone from Kaniye’s hand and smashed it to bits on the ground. Gun still pointed at us, he resumed his gum chomping. He seemed to be waiting for something. We waited with the boy for the unknown. It came soon. First, we saw the bright lights. Then we heard a mechanical growl. Seconds later, a monstrous, black jeep stopped in front of us. The back door swung opened. The boy poked Kaniye with the shotgun.

‘You. Get in!’

‘No!’ The words escaped from my mouth. Kaniye and the boy both turned to look at me. The boy had a vicious look on his face. Kaniye shook his head slowly at me. His eyes spoke loudly of the regret of all his soul’s unsaid yearning.

‘GET IN!’ the boy screamed as he pumped the shotgun. He shoved Kaniye into the blackness of the jeep, and jumped into the front passenger seat. As the black whirlwind roared away with Kaniye, I remembered to breath. I felt empty, like my soul had been scooped out.

Chapter 19
Doughboy
Port Harcourt, 2004

Lolia had perfect legs. They were smooth, flawless, slim (not thin), and long. Because she loved to wrap them round my back and waist, it also helped that they were just slightly bow-shaped. The mini-skirt had been invented with Lolia's legs in mind, and so, miniskirts were what she usually wore. The first thing Kaniye saw when he raised his head from the floor of my jeep were Lolia's silky legs. He stared at them in surprise. His eyes followed them upwards, from her ankles, to her calves, up her knees, and between her thighs. What he saw made him blink repeatedly. Instinctively he let out a small smile. Lolia frowned, but did not close her legs. 'You wanted to see me?' I said it softly, breaking Kaniye's reverie. That was when he noticed me, sitting next to Lolia. He glowered up at me and sighed.

'You could've knocked on my door.'

I said, 'You are being watched by the government security boys. I couldn't risk it.' I pointed to the seat next to Lolia. 'Sit.' Kaniye pulled himself up and sat down. Lolia was between us. He turned to her and tried on one of his smiles.

'Hello, I am Kaniye Rufus.'

Lolia ignored him, opened her handbag and began powdering her face. Meanwhile, Snow White turned round from the front passenger seat where he sat. He was still clutching the shotgun, and he shot dark looks at Kaniye. Kabongo drove, easing through the nightlights of Port Harcourt. We rode in silence. After a while, Kaniye turned to me and pointed at Snow White.

'Your retard broke my phone.'

Snow White started, and glared at Kaniye with suspicion. He didn't know the meaning of 'retard', but he could sense it was unflattering. The

big, satisfied grin on Kaniye's face forced a smile out of me. I waved a hand.

'Ignore Snow White. It's just youthful exuberance.' Kaniye turned to look at Snow White, a cold expression. Then he turned to me,

'Where are we going?'

I frowned. 'Nowhere. You wanted to see me? I'm here.' Kaniye flashed another quick look at Snow White, then at Kabongo.

'I'm not talking here,' he whispered.

I hissed, 'I trust these two with my life.' Kaniye looked in my eyes and smiled, sadly.

'Good for you.'

I leaned forward and touched Kabongo's shoulder. 'Turn round and drive to Asiama Waterside.' I turned to Kaniye, 'We'll talk there.' Kaniye raised an eyebrow.

'You are taking your Hummer to the ghetto?'

'I'm the king there.' I gave him a patronising smile. Kaniye smiled back.

'You know what they say: you can take a boy out of the gutter but you can't take the gutter out of the boy.'

My eyes flashed. 'You think you are better than me?'

'No.' He shook his head. 'I know you are better than this.'

I clenched my fists. 'Better than what? Militancy? Kidnapping? Oil bunkering? You think I should be in some government job getting twenty thousand a month or whatever rubbish they pay as minimum wage. Will that make you happy, Kaniye?' We had had this kind of argument several times before. He twisted in his seat and turned to me.

'You have a two-one in Petroleum Engineering. You could have worked anywhere in the oil industry.'

I hissed. 'Stop being a bloody fool. The Yorubas control all the juicy jobs in the oil industry, and they are the most openly biased tribe in this country. Our people are left with the menial jobs. The stupid excuse is that we are not qualified. So, since I can't work as an engineer with my two-one, I'd rather be a militant than a cleaner.' Kaniye shook his head again.

'I can't believe you fall for this tribal nonsense.'

'Nonsense? Let me remind you of my story, Kaniye. And it's a familiar story with people from the Niger Delta. I graduated from the university in 1990, with my now useless two-one. I applied for a job

everywhere, Imperial, Shell, Chevron, name it. I did more than a few aptitude tests. For three years I was unemployed. The last test was at Imperial Oil. I passed it easily. I got called for an interview. I thought I did well at the interview...' Kaniye turned away. He had heard this part of the story before. 'Listen to me, Kaniye!' I snarled. He turned back to face me. My voice went quiet, as I told him the part he did not know. 'Actually, I was the best at the interview. But, they gave the job to one Yoruba boy who also had a two-one. The Personnel Manager at the time was his distant relative or something.' Kaniye regarded me with keener interest.

'How did you know all this?'

I smiled mirthlessly, 'Tubo told me. The Personnel Manager was his immediate boss.' Kaniye exhaled, rubbed his chin and held my eyes.

'It still doesn't justify kidnapping and oil bunkering?'

'I don't do those things because I didn't get a job with Imperial Oil.'

'Then why do you do these things?'

I shrugged, 'I'm just taking my share of oil money.'

'What?' I spoke with gravel in my voice.

'You heard right – my fair share of oil money. Everyone else is milking our oil. The government has already sold the oil that will be drilled in the next decades. The politicians and military boys have shared oil blocks among themselves. The companies use out dated but cheaper drilling methods which pollute the environment. The refineries never work because it's more profitable for some people to import petroleum products. The marketers cause artificial scarcity so they can make a killing. It's a never-ending gang rape.'

'And you have to be part of it?'

'I didn't start it, Kaniye. I can't stop it either. I decided that since it's my oil, my river and my land that's being raped, I might as well join in.' Kaniye sighed.

'It's not your land, Doye. All land and oil belong to the federal government. That's the law.'

I smashed my left fist in my right hand. 'All Mr President does is shit in and drill oil from my river. Does he eat the rotten fish from Asiama River? Does his wife drink the contaminated water? Do his grandchildren play next to gas flares and pipelines? So how the hell can he own my river?' Kaniye exhaled and put his head in his hands.

'And I thought you were doing all this to get revenge for 1997?'

I thought about it for a while. ‘Maybe it’s also a bit of that.’ Kaniye looked at me with sadness,

‘You are no different from all the people you complain about, Doye. You are a mercenary, a vulture.’

I shrugged, ‘This is the land of the vulture.’

‘So all your talk about fighting for the rights of the people of Asiama and the Niger Delta is just nonsense?’

I shook my head. ‘No it’s not. I believe our people have a right to partake in the spoils from the on-going plunder of their land. I believe it so much that I’ve chosen to lead by example.’ Kaniye’s mouth dropped open.

‘What about the future? Our children? Their tomorrow?’

It was my turn to be amazed. ‘You still don’t get it, Kaniye, do you? There is no future for the children of the Niger Delta. Their tomorrow is already dead. It died yesterday.’ Kaniye slumped back in the seat and closed his eyes. We both let out weary sighs in unison. I turned to the window and watched the lights swoosh past. We didn’t speak till Kabongo pulled up into the entrance of Asiama Waterside.

Like most shanty towns, Asiama Waterside looked like it had been built by a mad child. The houses were confused: facing every direction, and backing every direction at the same time. They were built with anything that gave cover – corrugated iron, wood, cement, mud, plastic sheets and thatch. The land sloped gently southwards to the swampy banks of the Dockyard Creek which ran behind the Old Town area of Port Harcourt. There were no streets in Asiama Waterside: just tiny, filthy, dark labyrinthine alleys. The alleys and the Dockyard Creek allowed for the smooth and steady flow of black-market petrol, drugs, sex and guns. The black-market petrol was for everyone, especially during the frequent periods of scarcity. The drugs were basic: cocaine for the rich, Igbo and its many variants for the others. Sex for a month came as cheap as the price of a phone card, and the guns used to be just for the armed robbers: until they discovered oil bunkering and militancy.

‘Walk with me,’ I said to Kaniye. ‘The rest of you, wait here.’ I opened the door of my jeep and jumped out.

‘Doughboy! Doughboy! Doughboy!’ A gang of street urchins shrieked my name. They abandoned their games and thronged me. Adults waved from windows and doors. Some came over to shake my hand. I smiled as I handed out crisp five hundred naira notes to everybody. Ten

minutes later, I managed to extricate myself from the adoring mob, and walked over to a surprised Kaniye. ‘I’m the king of this place, remember?’ I explained with a shrug. Kaniye smiled,

‘After all the money you’ve just given out, you’d better be.’

I pulled out another wad of notes from the pouch which I always carried. I offered them to Kaniye with one hand. ‘Take this and give it to them.’ I poked his chest repeatedly as I spoke. ‘I’m sure they’ll take it from you, but let’s see if they’ll worship you.’ Kaniye bowed low,

‘Forgive me, Your Majesty.’

A smile was prised from me. Kaniye always had a way of calming my black temper. Maybe that was why he was the only person I knew who wasn’t afraid of me. We twisted and turned through the maze of alleys. I was taking a deliberately confusing route to one of the three well-furnished rooms I kept in different parts of Asiama Waterside. They were the perfect hideouts during the times I had to lie low. Policemen were afraid to come into Asiama Waterside. And when they did and refused to be bribed, the waters of the Dockyard Creek provided a familiar escape route. I jumped over a puddle, waited for Kaniye to do the same, and said, ‘What you don’t understand Kaniye, is that these people believe in me and the justice of my fight. To them, I’m more than a hero, I’m an ideology. Most of their children and young men either beg to join me, or imitate me.’ Kaniye was still unimpressed.

‘You are not the role model you think you are, Doye. You’ve only created monsters that have disfigured the Niger Delta struggle. All they do is buy arms, bunker oil, kidnap, extort, do violence, talk bullshit, and call themselves militants. How many statesmen and intellectuals have you inspired, Doye?’

I stopped at the door of one of my rooms and looked at Kaniye in surprise, ‘Why would I want to do that? I’m not Amaibi. I’m a realist. Violence is the only thing that the government and the oil companies respond to.’

‘I need your help to defend Amaibi.’ I started to protest but Kaniye cut me off. ‘I’m not asking you to testify in court. I know it’s impossible

for you to do that. I just need information from you. Something I can use in Amaibi's defence, or to discredit the witnesses against him.' Kaniye sighed and passed a hand over his bald head. 'It's the least you can do for Amaibi; after all, he's in prison because of you.' I glared at him. He ignored me and continued, 'Let me explain the prosecution's case against you and Amaibi. Sometime in August 2003, you kidnapped Manning. He had a history of heart-related problems, and suffered a fatal heart attack on that same day. About two hours after you kidnap Manning, you call Amaibi, and tell him about it.'

'Hey! I only wanted to negotiate with Imperial Oil through him. It had happened before.'

Kaniye nodded, 'Yes, with Tanowitz, Morris and Betsen.'

'Who?'

'The three men you kidnapped and released in January 2003.'

'Ah, I remember them now.' I sighed. 'I'll come back to them later. Where was I? Yes, you called Amaibi two hours after, telling him about Manning and arranged for how the ransom was to be paid to you.'

'You forgot something.' I pointed my forefinger in the air. Then I wagged it. 'I wasn't the one who convinced Amaibi to become involved in this. It was Tubo.' Kaniye's open mouth told me he was hearing this for the first time. I let out a smile. 'In fact, Amaibi refused to do it when I asked him. Tubo called him a few minutes later, on behalf of Imperial Oil. You know the power of Tubo's tongue.' Kaniye nodded.

'What time of the day did Manning die?'

I sighed in disgust, 'That weak oyibo died later that afternoon, about an hour after my first call to Amaibi.'

'Roughly about three hours after he was kidnapped?'

I nodded. 'Yes, about that time. Initially, I decided to dump his corpse somewhere along Asiama River, count my losses and move on with life. So, I called Amaibi again, intending for him to pass a message to Imperial on where to find the corpse. But, before I could talk…' I shrugged. 'Amaibi thought I called to try to convince him again. Immediately, he told me that he had agreed to be the intermediary between me and Imperial Oil, as a result of pressure from Tubo. I understood then that Imperial was eager to pay a ransom…' I smiled. 'So, I decided not to tell Amaibi about the corpse.'

'You are a bastard.' Kaniye whispered wearily.

I scowled. ‘You don’t appreciate my position or my overhead costs. I have a standing army of about a hundred men. I’m not Jesus: I can’t maintain them on bread and fish. I need serious money.’ Kaniye smiled reluctantly.

‘Let’s talk about money,’ he said.

‘What money?’

‘One million naira paid into Amaibi’s account. But first, let me go over the timelines. On Friday, 15th August, 2003, you kidnapped Manning. He died the same day though no one knew it. On Friday, 22nd August, 2003, Imperial Oil paid you the ransom of fifteen million naira, through Amaibi. That’s when you told him of Manning’s death, and gave him the corpse to return to Imperial Oil. By exactly 10.32 a.m. on Monday, 25th August, 2003, one million naira cash was paid into Amaibi’s National Bank account by one Mr Somina Whyte. Wali will testify that Mr Somina Whyte works for you.’

I shrugged and threw my hands in the air. ‘So what? Aren’t you a lawyer? Just say that there is no proof that Snow White, sorry Somina Whyte, works for me.’ Kaniye smiled sadly and shook his head.

‘It’s not that simple. You have an account with Alliance Bank. Somina Whyte has made several deposits and withdrawals on your behalf on that account. They have his signature on the slips. The signatures are identical with the one that paid money into Amaibi’s National Bank account. Alliance Bank also took several photographs of your Mr Somina Whyte; the usual banking practice for large withdrawals. Using the Alliance Bank photos, Wali will also say that he identified Somina Whyte in another photo of you and some of your men. The photo you took last year when you did the CNN interview, where you and your boys posed with your heavy weaponry. Wali will say that Somina Whyte is the skinny child with the big machine gun in the photo. I’ve seen all the photos, and I say Somina Whyte is the same idiot who broke my phone tonight.’ Kaniye paused and shook his head in wonder. ‘And for god’s sake, what kind of hard man goes around with a girly nickname like “Snow White”?’

I smiled, ‘Snow White is a cousin to Kabongo, my second-in command, the one who was driving. When he first came out of his fishing hamlet, he heard some people, probably children, say the words, “Snow White”. It matched his initials and he liked it so he decided to adopt it as a nickname. He still doesn’t understand why we laugh at him. You see,

Snow White is a bit slow. With him, it's one of three things slap him, laugh at him, or explain things to him as though he was six years old. But, what he lacks in intelligence, he makes up for with amazing fearlessness and loyalty.' A look of scepticism passed over Kaniye's face. Then he smiled sadly, and exhaled. I let out a long sigh. 'Look, about the money? I just wanted to give Amaibi something, okay? A thank-you token.'

'What for?'

'For being the middleman between Imperial Oil and me.' Kaniye rubbed his chin beard thoughtfully.

'Please explain.'

'Look, previously when I kidnapped expatriates, the middlemen I used were usually government security boys like Wali, and sometimes, the public affairs people in the companies, like Tubo. I always gave them a cut from the ransom money. You know me, Kaniye. I may be a bad man, but I am generous.' I paused as we shared brief smiles. 'But my generosity wasn't enough for the middlemen. They got greedy. When I asked for a ransom of say, ten million, the middlemen told the companies that it was eighteen or twenty. It got to a point where they started earning more than me, including Wali and Tubo, that useless born-throwaway. They were getting fat off my sweat.' I shook my head. 'So, when I kidnapped Tanowitz and the others, I said no more to that "monkey dey work, baboon dey chop" nonsense. For my middleman, I decided to use a neutral third-party, someone with integrity and who was also respected in the Niger Delta Struggle. I chose Amaibi. Like in the case of Manning, Amaibi refused at first, until Tubo convinced him.

After the ransom was paid, I tried to give Amaibi a cut. Five hundred thousand naira in cash but he refused to accept the money. I swear to God, Amaibi refused to collect the money from me.' I shrugged. 'Like I said, I'm a generous man. I'm also a man who can't stand to owe people. I felt I owed Amaibi, but I knew he would never agree to collect money from me. So, after I received Manning's ransom, I sent Snow White to pay one million naira into Amaibi's National Bank account. I'm a fair man, and I thought it was only fair that Amaibi received his cut for Tanowitz and his group, and for Manning. I called Amaibi later that evening and told him about the money in his account. He was very angry. He called it blood money. Funny man, that Amaibi, as if banks reject blood money. He also said he would withdraw the money the next day and return it to me. I

remember laughing at him and telling him that no one can find me until I want to be found. I also told him that I didn't really care what he did with the money after I had given it to him. That was the last time we spoke.' I shrugged again. Kaniye continued caressing his chin beard. He stared at me intently and said,

'Amaibi didn't have a chance to return the money to you. He was arrested very early the next morning.'

I sighed, 'His bad luck.'

Kaniye shook his head and held my eyes. 'The government security guys knew you were going to give Amaibi some money. They were notified the minute it entered his account. It was not bad luck, Doye. It was a trap.'

'What are you saying?' My words came out in a croak. Kaniye leaned forward and whispered,

'There's an informer in your organisation.'

Chapter 20
Kaniye
Port Harcourt, 2004

Doye dropped me off at about 3.06 a.m. Deola was waiting for me. My spirit smiled and leapt when I saw her. I went to her. She was curled up in one of the bamboo deckchairs on my veranda. She was asleep. She did not stir, even when I stood over her. My eyes were drawn immediately to the faint tear-tracks on her cheeks. Tears I knew had been shed for me. It tore me in different emotions. First, I was sorry that she had gone through the whole ordeal of watching my abduction. Then, it felt good to know that Deola cried herself to sleep because of me. I started to curse Doye silently, furiously, for his stupid prank, but then stopped myself, and smiled, quietly thanking Doye for his stupid prank. I watched Deola sleep. Her head was tilted sideways and half-buried in her shoulder. It squashed her face a little, so her mouth was parted open. Drool never looked so lovely. I noticed some things for the first time: Deola's head looked smaller in cornrows; a tiny scar cut across her eyebrows; her dimples never completely disappeared; her lips puckered lightly as she snored; and her low-cut shirt revealed, just above her left breast, a tattoo of a stethoscope with heart-shaped ear tubes. She was so breathtakingly vulnerable, amusing, and beautiful, all at once. For the first time in my life I became sure: there is God. I wished I could freeze that moment forever. Or, keep it with me always, like a picture in a wallet, a memento. But I couldn't. So, I watched Deola for as long as I could. A cold night breeze picked up. Deola began to shiver intermittently. I stopped watching and knelt in front of her.

'Deola,' I whispered. Her eyes flickered open. Then, they lit up as she saw me.

'Kaniye?'

She came into my outstretched arms. First, we crushed each other till we ran out of breath. When we relaxed, she leaned back slightly and

took my face in her hands. Her hands shook as they felt my forehead, stroked my cheekbones, caressed my nose, and ran her thumb down my lips and chin.

‘Did they hurt you?’ Deola asked, with her hands still on my face.

At that moment, I wished that Snow White had hurt me, just a little. I liked the feel of Deola’s hands on my face. ‘No,’ I replied with regret. ‘It was just a prank. My friend, Doye, has a peculiar sense of humour.’ She dropped her hands to my shoulders, but hugged me again. Some hugs do not lie. Defences were crashing down, and restrained emotions breaking free. I held her and stroked her spine slowly, up and down. Her body trembled in my arms. Fresh tears felt warm on my neck.

‘Y…you’re back safe,’ she sniffed. ‘I don’t know why I’m still crying.’

It was my turn to hold Deola’s face. I kissed her eyes, lightly, tasting the salt in her tears. Her eyes closed when I kissed the tip of her nose. Her lips quivered. They were surprisingly soft, moist, when I kissed them. She gasped. Then, she kissed me back – a gentle, breath-taking, tentative search. Then she put a hand on my shoulder. We stopped. But we still held each other. Her arms circled my shoulders, her head rested on my chest. I traced a finger through her cornrows. ‘I always wanted to do that,’ I said.

‘Do what? Play with my hair?’

‘No. Kiss you.’ I couldn’t see her face, but from the way she squeezed me, I knew she was smiling.

‘Can we talk about something else?’ she whispered.

‘Sure. What else?’

‘I don’t know. Think of something. Say anything.’

‘I love you.’

‘Joke about something else, Kaniye.’

‘Okay. Will you marry me?’ Deola started giggling into my shoulders. I chuckled, ‘I’ll take care of you after you’ve spent all day caring for the world.’

‘Mmm... What else?’

‘Breakfast. You realise, it’s the only meal we haven’t shared. I’ll get to make you breakfast. I always wanted to do that.’ Her body jerked as she laughed. ‘I’ll make sure you laugh every day. Comfort you when you cry at night.’ She stiffened.

That was when she knew that I wasn't joking. Deola had done her National Service in the Accident and Emergency Unit of a government hospital. It was an overcrowded place with filthy toilets, few drugs and a pointless bureaucracy. Worse still, many of the staff, particularly nurses, had become desensitised to the point of callousness, about human suffering. Many accident victims were not treated, sometimes left to die, simply because they couldn't wake up from their comas to make a deposit payment. When she had money, Deola paid the deposits. When she didn't have money, she fought the nurses and administrators. She lost more battles than she won. When she lost and someone died, she went home and cried.

'Deola, please marry me.' She held me even tighter. Her hand caressed the back of my bald head. The warm tingling spread down my body, felt good. I smiled. There was a catch in her throat when she whispered, 'I'm sorry, Kaniye. I can't.'

Wali was the type of witness I dreaded. He had the composure that only came with experience in giving evidence several times before. He had a grudge against Amaibi but was intelligent enough to mask it. He spoke convincingly, sticking to the facts and avoiding the theatrics. Worse of all, he didn't have to lie. He had a sweet set of facts, which were all in his favour. First he started with the fascinating tale of Doye's previous kidnappings. Then he talked a bit about the Asiama Freedom Army, Doye's organisation and its personnel. He spent some time talking about Somina Whyte, a.k.a. Snow White who he described as Doye's 'twusted aide'. To prove the extent of that trust, he tendered cheques and paying-in slips, which showed that Somina Whyte had made withdrawals and deposits on Doye's Alliance Bank account. He matched the pictures of Somina Whyte taken by the Alliance Bank cameras, to the one taken by a CNN reporter. Then he linked Amaibi and Doye. He said that his investigations uncovered a conspiracy between them to kidnap Manning. His proof was the paying-in slip which confirmed that Somina Whyte paid one million naira into Amaibi's National Bank account after the ransom had been paid. Ikuru, the Prosecutor, applied to tender the paying-in slip as evidence.

‘My lord, I object to the admissibility of this document.’ I held the slip in my hand as I got to my feet. It was pink, frayed and innocuous looking. But that dog-eared piece of paper carried the entire weight of the Prosecution’s case of conspiracy and kidnapping against Amaibi. Wilcox, the judge, scowled at me from behind his glasses.

‘What is the basis of your objection, Mr Rufus?’

‘Improper custody, my lord. The document was illegally obtained, and also the witness did not make the document. Neither is it addressed to him. The bank account belongs to my client. There is no evidence that the witness obtained a search warrant before taking this document from the bank. The document should have been tendered by an official from the bank.’ Even as the words left my mouth, I knew Wilcox was going to rule against me. Sir James had already prepared my mind for this. Ikuru jumped to his feet. There was a pained expression on his face as he explained the correct position of the law.

‘My lord, Mr Rufus’ objection is misconceived. In criminal trials, the test that determines if a document is admissible is if the document is relevant. Even if the document was illegally obtained, it is still admissible, so far as it is relevant. I refer my lord to the classic case of Musa Sadau v. The State. It is cited in–’ Wilcox raised an arm to shut up Ikuru. He knew the case. He turned to me and squinted.

‘Mr Rufus, I agree with Mr Ikuru. That is the law. I will admit the document in evidence.’

‘As my lord pleases,’ I said, as Wilcox asked the clerk for the last exhibit number. ‘But, my lord, I will appreciate it if my objection was recorded.’

‘You will what?’

Wilcox put down his pen, and took off his glasses. He looked cross-eyed without them, and so didn’t pull off the withering look he tried to give me. I couldn’t suppress a smile. ‘I will be most grateful if my lord recorded my objection.’ Wilcox frowned at me for a full minute before he started writing my objection, Ikuru’s reply, and his Ruling. He assumed, like all the other lawyers in the courtroom that the reason for which I had insisted on my objection being recorded was because I was already planning for an appeal. But, my intentions were not for the appeal – I was taking a gamble, setting a trap for another time. Ikuru had no further questions for Wali. He handed him over to me to cross-examine.

I got to my feet, flicked through my notes, gathered my thoughts, and let hatred inspire me. I hated Wali. And it wasn't because of his abnormally small head, the warts on his face, his shrill voice, or the way he blinked incessantly as he sat, in his greenish-grey safari suit, like a giant toad in the witness box. I hated him because he was the mastermind behind the set-up, arrest, imprisonment, and trial of Amaibi. I hated him because he knew Amaibi was innocent. I hated him because his testimony against Amaibi was devastating. I hated him because I had to cross-examine him, and I didn't have anything to use. The stories by Tubo and Doye couldn't be proved, and would be easily denied. I started my cross-examination on safe ground. My first questions were to play for time, to lull Wali into a false sense of confidence.

'Let's talk about the process of kidnapping and release of hostages. When a militant group kidnaps an expatriate, it makes a demand, usually for ransom. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'And the expatriate's company usually decides to pay the ransom?'

'Usually.'

'As I understand it, it's dangerous for the companies to send their workers alone to meet the militants with the ransom. That is true?'

'Yes. Ordinawy civilians are not twained or equipped to handle such life and death situations.'

I nodded my understanding. 'And I suppose that is where the law enforcement agencies come in. They usually take the ransom to the kidnappers. Is that correct?' Wali paused.

'Usually. Yes.'

'Sometimes, the law enforcement agencies even negotiate with the kidnappers on behalf of the companies. That is correct?'

'Yes.'

'In the line of your work, you have had cause to negotiate with, and take ransom payments to kidnappers. Is that correct?'

Another pause. 'Yes.'

'Is it the usual practice for kidnappers to give a part of the ransom to the negotiators?'

Wali stiffened and told his first lie. 'I have not weceived a kobo from Doughboy or anybody else if that is what you mean.'

‘I’m not impugning your integrity, Mr Wali. I choose to believe only the best of you.’ I gave him a smile, my reassuring one. ‘That is not what I mean. My question is: in your considerable experience, is it the usual practice for kidnappers to give a part of the ransom to the negotiators, or those who bring the ransom to them?’

Wali folded his hands across his chest. ‘No.’

Second lie. I changed direction and focused on Doye, the bad guy, in all this. ‘Please confirm, Mr Wali that Mr Doye Koko, a.k.a., Doughboy, has been in the business of kidnapping expatriates since 1997.’

‘Yes.’

‘And I suppose he has been wanted by the law enforcement agencies, including your agency, for all of that period up till now?’ Wali checked the question for traps, found none, and said,

‘Yes.’

‘Also confirm that there is no evidence that my client was involved in any way, in Doughboy’s previous kidnappings, prior to 2003.’

‘There is no evidence yet of the Accused’s pwevious involvement in Doughboy’s kidnappings pwior to two thousand and thwee.’ Wali made it sound like it was only a matter of time before he would unearth all the evidence pointing to Amaibi’s guilt in previous kidnappings.

I exchanged a quick smile with Amaibi who was sitting in the dock. He was pallid and frail, but he looked like the Amaibi of old. He had cut his hair, shaved his beard and was wearing his new glasses and a new shirt. Adibe Okoye, the irrepressibly shameless warder, sat slightly behind him, but outside the dock. Adibe Okoye was also smiling. He had a lot to smile about, I thought. My sending new clothes, glasses, a shaving kit, and books to Amaibi had earned Adibe Okoye three times his monthly salary. I turned back to Wali.

‘So Doughboy has been successfully working without my client for about four years?’

Wali’s ‘Yes,’ was sour.

‘And the first time my client was involved in any of Doughboy’s activities was in January 2003. Is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘In January 2003, Doughboy kidnapped three expatriates who work for Imperial Oil. Is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘And for some unknown reason, Doughboy insisted on receiving the ransom from only my client, instead of the usual law enforcement people. Is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you aware that my client refused to be involved, until after he was persuaded otherwise by Imperial Oil?’

‘I am not aware of that.’

‘Kindly confirm that there is no evidence that my client received any payments from Doughboy from the ransoms paid for the release of the three men in January 2003.’

‘I am yet to find evidence of such payments to the Accused.’

I turned to the money, the meat of the Prosecution’s case. ‘Please confirm that the one million naira which was paid into my client’s National Bank account on Monday, 25th August, 2003, was paid in by one Mr Somina Whyte and not Doughboy.’

‘Yes. It was paid in by Somina Whyte. But he works for Doughboy.’

‘I agree Mr Whyte is a known associate of Doughboy, Mr Wali. But, you weren’t with Mr Whyte, when he decided to pay money to my client, were you?’

‘No I wasn’t there but ...’

I cut him off. ‘Thank you, Mr Wali. Since, you weren’t there, you cannot confirm with certainty that Mr Whyte was acting for himself, or on the instructions of Doughboy. Is that correct?’ Wali glowered at me but he couldn’t argue against logic.

‘Yes.’

‘And therefore, you cannot also tell this court what the money was meant for, can you?’

‘The money was the Accused’s share for his wole in the kidnap of Mr Manning.’

I forced myself not to smile. ‘His role as what? The person who took the money to Doughboy?’

‘Yes.’

‘But some minutes ago, I asked if it was the usual practice for kidnappers to give a part of the ransom to those who negotiated or brought it to them and you said no. Isn’t that what you said, Mr Wali?’

‘I didn’t mean... ‘

I feigned irritation and raised my voice slightly, ‘I’m not asking what you meant, Mr Wali. I’m asking if that was what you said.’

‘Yes. I said that.’

‘Thank you. So, even if Mr Whyte was acting for Doughboy, the one million may have been for something else, couldn’t it?’ Wali blinked at me.

‘No. I don’t understand.’

‘I’m saying that the one million naira paid to my client could have been for any innocent reason, and not as his share for the conspiracy to kidnap Manning as you suggested?’ Wali smiled.

‘You are saying that the money was for what?’

I gave him a cold stare. ‘Mr Wali, this is a courtroom not your interrogation room. In a courtroom, I ask the questions, not you. Do you understand that, Mr Wali?’ We locked eyes till he nodded.

‘Good. You know that my client and Doughboy are close friends from their childhood, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you agree that it is normal for friends to give loans to their friends?’

‘Yes.’

‘My client is a lecturer. They are poorly paid. Is it not possible that the one million naira was a loan between friends?’ Wali shook his head and laughed. It was an ugly thing to see. He looked like a black rodent with his small, sharp-looking teeth.

‘If Dr. Akassa needed money he can always sell lecture notes and hand-outs like other lecturers.’

Everyone laughed, including Wilcox and I. Still chuckling, I said, ‘You have a point, Mr Wali. But you still haven’t answered my question. Do you know for a fact that the one million naira was not a loan between friends?’ The smile on my face had no mirth behind it.

‘It can’t be.’

‘Why not? You’ve agreed that you were not there when arrangements were made for the money to be paid to my client? Yes?’

‘I was not there.’

‘Therefore you cannot say for a fact that the money was not a loan between friends?’ Reluctantly, Wali said,

‘I suppose so.’

‘Or, it could have been payment for an unknown business transaction, couldn’t it?’ Wali’s eyes showed his surprise.

‘I thought you said it was a loan?’

‘Mr Wali, what did I tell you about not asking me questions?’ I waited for a long moment, the reprimand in my stare. Then I said, ‘But I’ll humour you just this once. I don’t know for certain either, Mr Wali. Like you, I wasn’t there. I’m just giving other possible explanations for the money. Unlike you, however, my explanations are all innocent. You see, I always choose to see the best in people.’

‘My lord, Counsel is giving evidence.’ Ikuru paused in mid-air, halfway to his feet. I turned to Ikuru, smiled and hailed him by the name he was rumoured to hate.

‘A.G.!’ Ikuru’s face darkened, but he sat down immediately. I turned back to Wali. ‘Now answer my question. Is it possible that the money was payment for a business transaction?’

‘It is possible, but...’

‘Thank you, Mr Wali. I believe you’ve answered my question.’

‘My lord, Counsel is preventing the witness from giving his answers. He keeps cutting the witness off.’ Wali was nodding as Ikuru spoke. I shrugged, feigning shock and indignation at Ikuru’s outburst.

‘My lord, Counsel is disrupting the flow of my cross-examination.’ Wilcox took off his glasses and wiped them on a handkerchief.

‘Mr Rufus, even though the witness may have answered your question, he may still have one or two things to add. I don’t believe we should prevent him from doing so.’ He put on his glasses again and turned to Wali. ‘Is there anything you would like to add?’

Wali nodded gravely like a lizard. ‘My lord, I stwongly believe that the one million naiwa was from Mr Manning’s wansom, and was the Accused’s share of the pwoceeds fwom the kidnap, which the Accused and Doughboy planned together.’

While Wilcox wrote all that down, Ikuru smirked at me. I smiled cheerily back at him but I was boiling inside. Wilcox looked up from his book, ‘Yes? Anything else?’ Wali was on a roll.

‘I also believe that the January two thousand and thwee kidnapping was the beginning of the conspiwacy between the Accused and Doughboy.’

He nodded again to indicate that he had finished. Still smiling through gritted teeth I asked, ‘May I continue, my lord?’ Wilcox nodded like an ancient sage. I smiled. ‘Mr Wali, let us try to understand the basis of your beliefs. I presume you were not present when my client and Doughboy allegedly began their conspiracy?’ Wali frowned.

‘No I wasn’t there. But I was weliably informed of it.’

My smile grew wider. ‘I see. You have an informer in Doughboy’s organisation, perhaps?’ Wali turned to Wilcox.

‘My lord, sir, I can’t answer that.’

‘I’m not asking you for his name.’ Wilcox mulled it over.

‘Answer the question, Mr Wali.’

‘There is someone in Doughboy’s organisation that assists our investigations. Yes.’ Wali sighed in exasperation, Wilcox frowned at him.

‘And that person told you that my client and Doughboy planned the kidnap of the deceased, Mr Manning?’

‘Yes.’

‘And, that person is not here to testify in court?’

‘He cannot testify in court.’

I couldn’t resist pushing my luck further. ‘So when you say that my client and Doughboy conspired to kidnap Manning, it is based on what your informer who won’t testify before this court, told you?’

‘Yes.’

‘My lord...’ Ikuru tried to get up but it was too late. Wali had undermined the Prosecution’s case by admitting that his belief in Amaibi’s guilt was based on hearsay.

‘Counsel is putting words into the witness’s mouth,’ Ikuru whinged.

Wilcox turned to him. ‘Is that an objection, Mr Ikuru?’

Ikuru did not reply. He sat down heavily. I continued with Wali. ‘Now, I presume your informer told you about Doughboy’s strengths, weaknesses, schedules, habits, hideouts?’

‘Yes.’

It was a reluctant answer. I changed my line of questions slightly, ‘Now, Mr Wali, you have met Doughboy before. Yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘How many times have you met Doughboy?’

‘I can’t count them.’

‘Give us an estimate. Would you say about five, ten, twenty or even a hundred times?’

‘I would say between fifteen to twenty times.’

‘Under what circumstances did you meet Doughboy?’ Wali blinked faster than normal.

‘I don’t understand?’

‘Did you meet Doughboy at a party? Or perhaps in church?’ There was laughter from the bar and the public gallery.

‘I met him in the course of my work.’

If looks could kill, I would have died there and then, preferably very slowly at Wali’s feet. I gave him a happy smile in return. ‘By that you mean you met Doughboy in the course of negotiating the release of hostages.’

‘Yes. That was usually how we met.’

‘So between 1997 and this year, 2004, you’ve met Doughboy about fifteen to twenty times?’

‘Yes.’

‘And during this period, you’ve had information about Doughboy’s schedules, habits and hideouts?’

‘Yes.’

‘And yet you have not arrested Doughboy?’

‘I…It’s not as easy as…’

‘Please answer my question, Mr Wali. Have you arrested Doughboy at any time whatsoever between 1997 till date?’

‘No.’ Wali began squirming.

I flicked through my papers and found one that contained a list. ‘Do you agree that if you had arrested Doughboy, he would not have had the opportunity to kidnap a total of fifty-nine expatriates, including Manning, between 1997 till date?’ There was a low whistle of disbelief from the gallery, then a buzz of excited whispering. Wilcox banged his gavel. Wali lowered his eyes.

‘Yes.’

‘If you had arrested Doughboy, there would have been no opportunity for a conspiracy, as you allege, between my client and Doughboy. Do you agree?’ Wali looked over to Ikuru for help. But there was nothing he could do for him. So, after a long pause, he croaked,

‘Yes.’

My smile was cruel. ‘If you had arrested Doughboy, Manning would still be alive today. Do you agree?’ Wali gave a half-hearted shrug. ‘The court cannot record a shrug, Mr Wali,’ I chided.

‘I agwee,’ he murmured sullenly.

I continued my ruthless assault, ‘There are only two explanations for your failure to arrest Doughboy after all these years. It’s either that you are incompetent, or you are corrupt. Which is it, Mr Wali, incompetence or corruption?’ By this time there was a breathless silence in the courtroom. Wali did not answer. Instead, he concentrated on letting his eyes tell me how much he hated me. I pretended not to notice and glanced at my watch instead. ‘The court is waiting for you, Mr Wali,’ I said quietly. ‘My question is simple. For failing to arrest Doughboy, it’s either you are incompetent or corrupt. Which is it?’

‘I… am not cowwupt.’

I turned to Wilcox. ‘My lord, the witness agrees that he is incompetent. I have no further questions for him.’

As I sat down, I caught Amaibi’s eyes. His face was impressively impassive. Then he winked at me. I smiled and winked back. Ikuru seemed too tired to re-examine Wali. After Wali was discharged, he passed by me as he trudged out of the court. He gave me his wicked look again, and I gave him a big smile of triumph. It was unprofessional of me, but I didn’t care anymore. The blood was pounding in my head, and my ears had not stopped ringing. I was still battle drunk. I had bloodied Wali.

Chapter 21
Deola
Port Harcourt, 2004

I was jealous. She was very well dressed; She wore jeans and a pretty green top with high heels. She looked beautiful, her face, well made-up and her hair were in long dreadlocks tied in a small band, falling down her back. She sat beside Kaniye on the deck chair in his veranda. The same deck chair we had sat on, and had kissed, two nights ago! She threw one arm back, round his shoulders. Kaniye said something to her. She laughed and leaned closer to him, any closer, and her massive breasts would have crushed his face. This made me even more jealous and bitter about my own small breasts. They hadn't noticed me. I stood at the small gate that led to Kaniye's bungalow and burned. This surprised me as I had never considered myself as the jealous type. I hated the way it made me feel. I hated the fact that I had come to see Kaniye. Father, help me! What had I been thinking? I spun round, and walked away briskly.

'Deola!' I walked faster, shoulders stiff, back erect. 'Deola! Wait!' I heard Kaniye's footsteps behind me. He was running. I was by the side of the Alligator Pepper when he caught up with me. He held the back of my hand lightly. 'What's up, Deola?' His smile was mischievous

'Nothing. Hello, Kaniye.'

'Hi. You came to my house and you leave without seeing me?'

'Oh, that?' I shrugged. 'I suddenly realised that I had important things to do.' Kaniye laughed. And his awkward shoulders laughed with him. And as usual, watching it made me smile. He held my hand.

'Let's go back to the house.' I shook my head. 'We need to talk. We can go to the restaurant instead. Is that okay?'

I shrugged and followed him. We sat on our favourite table. It was in a far corner, near the kitchen doors, and gave the best view of everything in the restaurant. It was the table we sat on the day we first met. It was only fitting that we sat there on the day our relationship was to end.

‘I came to say goodbye, Kaniye. I’m going back to Lagos tomorrow.’ Kaniye blew out his cheeks.

‘Why?’

‘I’ve finished my National Service. It’s time to go back home.’

‘I thought you were going to take that job you were offered here in Port Harcourt.’

There was a WHO run, children’s hospital in Port Harcourt, which had offered me a job. It was the dream job for me, because my main interest was in paediatrics. But, I couldn’t take it anymore. Two nights ago, everything changed.

‘I’ll get another job in Lagos.’

‘Why do you want to leave?’

‘I can’t explain it, Kaniye. All I know is, I have to leave Port Harcourt as soon as possible.’ He reached across the table and held my hands.

‘What about us?’ he whispered.

‘There is no…us.’ I looked away as I said this.

‘Not yet, but there will be.’ His smile was sad. ‘I’m so much in love with you. I asked you to marry me.’

I put my face in my hands and exhaled. ‘And I said I can’t.’

‘You still haven’t told me why.’

I shook my head. ‘There are so many things I want to tell you, Kaniye, but I can’t.’

‘We’re friends, Deola.’

‘You won’t understand.’

‘Try me.’

‘How do I say this now?’ I thought for a long moment. ‘Okay, remember my affair with that married pastor?’

‘Yes?’

‘Remember how I ended it?’

‘By…running away?’

‘Yes. Sometimes, running away is the best way to resist temptation.’ He scratched his head.

‘I am temptation?’

‘Yes, big time. Look, Kaniye, I know my strengths. I know the temptations I can resist, and the ones I can’t. You are a beautiful man. If I

stay, I'll never resist you. And since I can't marry you, I have to run away. Just like I ran that time.' He smiled.

'It's not fair. That time, you had an affair first before you ran away. Don't you think we should first have the pleasure before you run away this time?'

I laughed. 'No way.' I shook my head. 'You still don't understand, do you?'

'Understand what.'

I told the truth. 'I'm in love with you.' Kaniye raised an eyebrow.

'Now I'm confused. You love me. I love you too. That's good isn't it? Why then do you want to run away? Why can't we get married?'

I sighed, 'This is real life, not a fairy-tale. Love alone is never enough.'

'So what else do we need?'

'I don't know about you, but I need God. My relationship with God is the most important thing in my life. It is my life itself. I won't marry a man who doesn't share the same love for God. You are a nice person, Kaniye, but it's not the same thing.'

'You're saying you can't marry me because I'm not a born-again Christian?'

I nodded. He spread out his arms.

'But I'm a Christian. I'm not a Muslim, am I?'

I wagged a finger at him. 'Don't start, Kaniye. You know what I mean. It's not about who you say you are. It's about who God knows you are.' Kaniye shook his head.

'So it's either me or God?'

I smiled, 'You are cute, Kaniye, but you don't compare to Him.'

'So if I become a born-again Christian now, you will marry me?'

'No.' I shook my head vehemently. Kaniye threw his hands up in frustration.

'How can you be so impossible to understand? I thought that was what you wanted?'

'Yes. But I want it for you, not for me. I want you to want it for yourself, experience God for you, and not because you love me and want to marry me. I don't want you to be one of those men who follow women to church, in order to date or marry them.'

‘I won’t do that either. I may not be a Christian, but, I think I respect God and you too much to be a hypocrite.’

We passed a few minutes in the first uneasy silence of our friendship. Kaniye sighed and leaned forward on the table. ‘Deola, this is me. I’m not ready to make that change now, but I understand a little, of how important God is to you. Tell you what, if you agree to marry me, I promise, we wouldn’t do anything naughty till we get married. It’ll be hard but I’m prepared to wait for you. And...’ he flashed his roguish smile, ‘I promise you, I’ll be worth the wait.’

I shook my head. ‘You don’t understand. It’s not just about sex. It’s…’ I exhaled, sighed and gave up.

‘Don’t run away from me, Deola.’ I felt the desperation in his words. There was a constricting heaviness in my heart, but somehow I managed to say, ‘I don’t want to, but I have to. If I don’t go, I may never leave. I’ll move into your house, your life and…’

Kaniye beamed. ‘That’s a brilliant idea.’

I smiled. ‘Not really. Sure, we’ll have fun. We’re great together, but I’ll never be truly happy because, I’ll be doing things that God disapproves of. I can only suppress my guilt for so long. One day, it will surely eat me up and destroy what we have.’

‘Don’t go. Please.’

‘I have to.’

‘What will happen to Amaibi? Who will take care of him? His cough just got worse. He’s a lot weaker these days.’

‘I’ve transferred his file to Tony.’

‘Who the hell is Tony?’

‘He’s a doctor, a colleague of mine.’ Kaniye frowned,

‘I know he’s a doctor. I mean, will he take care of Amaibi the way you do? Will he fight for Amaibi? Will he cry for him?’

‘Tears do not make a good doctor. Tony is a good doctor. And he also makes out time to treat prisoners for free.’

‘How will Amaibi take your leaving?’

I smiled. ‘I saw Amaibi today. We had a long conversation. I explained everything to him. He encouraged me to return to Lagos.’ Kaniye was incredulous.

‘Amaibi wants you to run away from me?’

‘Amaibi understands.’ Kaniye shook his head.

‘I’ll punish that man. He’ll rot in prison for this.’

I touched Kaniye’s hand. ‘Take care of him. Visit him a lot more. Keep his spirits up. Win for him.’

‘You’re my best friend, Deola. Who will I talk to everyday?’

‘The same people you talked to before you met me.’

‘What will you eat in Lagos?’ Kaniye said with a smile.

‘There is food in Lagos.’

‘I know that. I mean, Lagos food has never helped your situation.’

‘My situation’, according to Kaniye, was my lifelong apprehension that I was too slim. I’d always felt that I would be more beautiful if I filled out a bit more. I was one of those people who ate, but never seemed to put on any weight. That was until I came to Port Harcourt. Kaniye always joked that it was the food he cooked for me every day that helped my situation. ‘Don’t worry about my situation. They say women like me fill out nicely when they get pregnant. My mother was even skinnier than I am now, before she had me.’ Kaniye grinned,

‘Then, let’s get you pregnant immediately.’ I laughed. When I stopped, tears came to my eyes immediately. Kaniye was still smiling. I wiped the tears and said, ‘You are taking this remarkably well.’ He shook his head.

‘I’m not. I’m just smiling.’

I nodded. Kaniye was one of those people who hid every emotion behind a smile and a joke. I pushed my chair back and stood up. ‘I’ve got to go. I’ve got to pack. My flight is in the morning.’ As we walked out of the restaurant, Kaniye said.

‘I’ll drop you off at home.’

‘No thanks. Leaving is hard enough already.’

‘I’ll take you to the airport tomorrow.’

I shook my head and smiled sadly. ‘No. Don’t even come there. If you do, I may never leave.’ Kaniye groaned.

‘Okay, then let Timi my driver take you home, and to the airport tomorrow. Okay?’

‘Okay.’ As Kaniye told the doorman to call Timi, I said, ‘You can go back, Kaniye. I don’t want to keep you away from your friend.’

‘What friend?’

‘The pretty lady you were with.’ Kaniye read me easily. He chuckled and said,

‘I don’t want to believe you are jealous.’

‘Then don’t believe it.’ I put one hand on my hip. He smiled and he shook his head in puzzlement.

‘You don’t want to marry me. You are running away from me. Deola, don’t you think it is illogical for you to be jealous?’

I snapped, ‘I am a woman. I have the right to be illogical and contradictory. And, who said I was jealous?’

‘If you stay, she won’t come between us, I promise.’ He raised his hand like a Boy Scout.

‘Don’t try my patience,’ I warned.

‘Want to meet her?’

‘No!’

‘I think you should,’ Kaniye laughed, as he brought out his phone and scrolled through the numbers.

‘What are you doing?’ I hissed. He smiled, and stopped me with his palm.

‘Hi Love,’ he said into the phone, ‘Can you meet me in front of the restaurant? A.S.A.P… Good, see ya.’

‘You call her, “Love”?’ Kaniye raised both hands in a placatory gesture.

‘I don’t love her the way I love you.’

I shook my head. ‘Goodbye, Kaniye.’ I turned to leave. He held my arm and pulled me to him.

‘Stay with me,’ he whispered as we hugged.

‘I want to but I can’t.’ He stroked my cornrows again, played with the beads in them. Like he did, the time we kissed, two nights ago.

‘Even if you leave, we’re not over.’

‘We never started.’ My tears were flowing in torrents then. ‘Goodbye, Kaniye. I’m really glad I met you. Thank you for everything, and for some of the happiest days of my life.’ As we held each other, she strode into our view. We watched her sashay towards us. She was tall, with vaguely familiar expressive eyes, high cheekbones, and angular shoulders. She had a confidence that came with always being the centre of attention. I was pleased that Kaniye didn’t let go of me till she came right up to us.

‘Hi there,’ she said to me with a smile.

There was something strangely familiar about her smile. Even her voice, with its melodious, husky timbre, left me with a feeling of déjà vu.

But, I was certain I had never met her before. I smiled back, ‘Hello.’ As I said the words, I suddenly saw the resemblance and realised who she was. Kaniye made the introductions with a wicked smile,

‘Deola, meet Dise, my sister, and Amaibi’s wife.’

Chapter 22
Doughboy
Ashawo Village, 2004

Just before Snow White died that night, we were all in high spirits. We sat in the bar of the Zion Hotel, the biggest and most popular nightspot in Ashawo Village. Despite the somewhat grandiose name, the Zion was a low, U-shaped bungalow. The bar formed the base of the U. The very long arms of the 'U' housed a selection of tiny rooms, which were never built to be used for 'accommodation' in the conventional sense of the word. These rooms, only big enough to contain a six-spring bed and no more, were used mainly for brief sexual liaisons, popularly called 'short time'. Every night, the Zion boasted the single largest gathering of available women in Asiama. Many were beautiful, young, even educated to some level, but they were all prostitutes. Years ago, their biggest clients used to be the 'company boys', who were the expatriates and workers from Imperial Oil's Asiama Base Camp. That was until the arrival of the 'oil boys', people like us: bunkerers, militants and politicians. An oil boy could, in one night out, blow the equivalent of a company boy's impressive monthly salary.

There were five of us that night: Kabongo, Snow White, two of my men and me. We were joined by about eight of the Zion's finest and more up-market prostitutes. They hung on our arms, sat on our knees, refilled our glasses, and pretended to pay rapt attention to our boastings. By about 9.00 p.m., we had been steadily drinking for three hours, all on my tab. By 9.30 p.m. the slurred and louder speeches told me that they were now sufficiently inebriated. I did not drink that night. Rather, I had three malt drinks and my excuse was that I was recovering from malaria. Unsurprisingly, the cunning girls also remained bright eyed and sober. They understood that their currency was money, not alcohol.

'Is it true that you have never been with a woman before?' I said a little loudly to Snow White who was sitting next to me. Everyone roared with laughter. Snow White slopped beer on his trousers as he tried with an

unsteady drunken hand to put down his glass. He focused, shamefacedly, at a spot on the floor. The girls smiled knowingly and took a keener interest in him. It was Kabongo who had told me that Snow White, for all his boldness and daring in violence, was surprisingly shy in the presence of women. I had also noticed that evening that he squirmed or scowled when any of the girls talked to him or touched him. They had gotten the message and had left him alone. I leaned forward and slapped Snow White light heartedly on his shoulder.

'Don't worry; I promise you, this will be the most unforgettable night of your life.' I pulled out a thick wad of naira notes from the small pouch I always carried. I peeled off some, and crocked a finger at the youngest, prettiest, and least-jaded of the eight girls. 'What is your name?' I asked.

'Jennifer,' came her nervous reply.

I threw my head back and laughed. I laughed long and hard till tears came to my eyes. When I stopped, I said, 'What is your name? The real one your parents gave you?'

'Damiete.'

'Damiete.' I said it slowly, rolling it on my tongue. 'It's a nice name. You should use it more.' She beamed the genuine smile of a young woman who appreciated a compliment. 'Damiete, show him a good time,' I pointed to Snow White. 'But, be gentle with him.' After the howls of laughter had died down, I pointed to one of the other girls, who had been most persistent on my case all evening.

'You, come with me,' I whispered. Her name was Belema, and I knew her from my younger days. Belema wasn't really a girl any more. She was now a woman in her mid to late thirties, who remarkably, still looked beautiful and youthful with a spark in her eyes. However, there was still something sad about seeing Belema hustling beside younger, fresher girls at Zion. Belema fluttered her eyes at me like a coy, teenage girl. It amused me because Belema had never been shy, even as a teenager. I spread out the remaining money from the bundle on the table, among the other girls. I smiled at my men and said, 'As your boss, I order you all to go with these fine girls and make sure you don't waste my money.' They cheered loudly. I raised my hands up acknowledging the cheers. As I lowered my hands slowly, I frowned and said, 'Any of you who finishes before dawn has wasted my money and will be severely punished.'

The cheering this time was almost deafening. As they tottered towards the rooms, I pulled Snow White aside and whispered in his ear, ‘Meet me outside on the beach, where the boats are, in one hour. We have a small mission that would take just you and me. It won’t take time,’ I winked, ‘So you can go back to Damiete this night. But,’ I pointed a finger, ‘don’t tell anyone about this, okay?’ He nodded. ‘One hour?’ He nodded again as he followed Damiete into one of the tiny rooms. I followed Belema into another tiny room. It was badly lit with a single red bulb. I sat heavily on the single six-spring bed. The woman faced me with an expectant smile. She raised her arms over her head and took off her blouse. She was proud of her big breasts, so she shook them slightly at me, presumably so I could appreciate their fullness better. ‘Put your clothes back on,’ I said quietly. The smile remained uneasily frozen on her face. She stared at me, unsure of what I wanted. I pointed to a tiny stool in the corner. She sat down with hunched shoulders and her knees tight together. I lay back on the bed, and studied her for about two silent minutes.

‘You don’t like me?’

‘Belema, I have never paid for these things. It’s nothing against you personally.’ She smiled,

‘You don’t have to pay today. I’ve always liked you even from all those years ago. All the girls did. You are the finest among all your friends.’

I gave her a hard stare. It wiped off the smile from her face. Then, I brought out a bigger bundle of money from my pouch. I offered the money to her. Her eyes widened, because without counting it, she knew it was the equivalent of six months’ work. She took it hesitantly. I stood up from the bed, walked to the door and opened it.

‘What should I do with this?’

I turned round, ‘Very soon, in two years’ time at most, they’ll throw you out of this hotel, because you’d be too old to compete with the other girls. Consider this money as a gift, for old time’s sake. You can use it to walk away now from all this, or you can wait for two years. Whichever you choose,’ I shrugged, ‘sincerely, I don’t care.’ Her eyes filled up instantly.

‘You are a good man Doye, no matter what they say.’

I shook my head. ‘You don’t know me. Don’t let my generosity confuse you.’ I left her open-mouthed, slipped out of Zion into the

darkness, and made my way to the beach.

It was quiet at that time of the night. There was no moon, but the stars were flecked across the black sky like tiny sugar crystals. The ocean was eerily calm. I took off my boots and sunk my feet in the cold sand. Then I took off my clothes, but left my pouch hanging on my waist. With my hands, I dug a hole in the sand, far from the gentle, incoming tides. I hid my clothes and shoes inside the hole, and marked the spot with an old coconut shell. I stood naked on the Ashawo Village beach, bathing in the cold night breeze. I was the only one there. Eastwards in the distance, the dazzling electric lights of Asiama Base Camp burned brightly and lit a tiny part of the sky around the small island. In stark contrast, the dim lantern lights of Asiama Town flickered weakly in the north. I saw the last of the fishermen set out from Asiama Island in their boats, for another fruitless night's work. I remembered Papa. Further up north, I could make out another dull, orange glow of light in the dark sky. It was the never-ending gas flare somewhere up on the Asiama River. I smiled as I recalled that Tubo used to call it hellfire. It brought back sudden bitter-sweet childhood memories. I remembered running around in Asiama Town; fishing, swimming in Asiama River; football and school, Catechist Akassa, Father Patrick, the nuns; and the friends I had then: Kaniye, Amaibi, and Tubo. I thought of where Amaibi was now, and how he got there. I remembered my late brother, Soboye. I waited for Snow White.

About an hour and fifteen minutes later, he plodded drunkenly through the sand. I called out to him and he staggered towards me. I said, 'Did you enjoy it?'

'Too much.' He laughed too loudly and nodded unnecessarily.

I smiled, 'Good. No one in my crew will die a virgin.' Then, he noticed that I was naked.

'You wan go fishing?'

'Something like that.' I pointed. 'We'll go in that canoe. You don't need to undress. You are ready as you are.' As I handed him a paddle, I remembered how I gave Papa the giant paddle on the night Soboye died. Snow White was useless on the paddle. He was drunk, drained and drowsy. I didn't mind, though. I had another paddle and steered us southwards, deeper towards the ocean. Thirty minutes later, we had gone far enough. I stopped paddling. Here the water was no longer calm. It was

choppy, rough, swinging the canoe from side to side. ‘Snow White,’ I called.

His head jerked suddenly as he woke up from sleep. ‘Hmm. Hmm.’

‘Sit on the bow, the front end of the canoe,’ I ordered. ‘I want your weight to balance the boat.’ As he nodded, and stood up unsteadily, I reached in my pouch and lifted the wads of naira notes. Underneath them lay my Micro Uzi. I pulled out the machine pistol, and pointed the gun at Snow White. His mouth fell open. He shook his head in a daze as the alcohol cleared from his mind. He raised both hands in the air. ‘Snow White, the Traitor!’ I hailed him in a hoarse whisper.

‘D…Doughboy, abeg, wetin be traitor? I no understand.’

I smiled. ‘*Kumo deri bò*?’ Snow White nodded repeatedly. There was no one word for ‘traitor’ in the Asiama tongue. Rather, the phrase, *kumo deri bò* literally meaning, seller of people, or slave dealer, was used to describe treacherous people. Snow White licked his lips, squinted his already pinched, bony face, as he struggled to accept his fate.

‘Doughboy, oga, abeg, I no traitor you, abeg...’

I gently squeezed the trigger for only a fraction of a second. The rapid-fire shots caught Snow White on his left shoulder and almost tore it off. The ear-splitting bursts drowned his screams, as he was lifted off the boat and flung into the furious ocean. I waited patiently for him to come up thrashing from under the violent waves. I even let him grab a hold of the boat with his good hand. He hung on, groaning in pain, shock and confusion.

‘Eh! You, oga! Why now? Hey! I don die, o! Oga, abeg now!’

When Kaniye had told me that Wali had an informer in my organisation, so many things became clear immediately. Apart from what had happened to Amaibi, it also explained how Wali seemed to always rightly guess the schedules of eight out of every ten of my shipments of bunkered oil. He and some of his navy friends would then intercept and detain my barges until I paid them off. At first I had thought that Snow White was too stupid to be an informer. But two things had made me certain; well, as certain as I could be, of his guilt. The first was that, because he was the courier, he was the only person I told about the one million naira paid to Amaibi. The second was seemingly innocuous, but gave me an insight into the boy’s character: I caught him one day stealing some dollars from my pouch. A thief and a traitor are one and the same in

my mind. I had pretended not to notice, but on my own, I decided Snow White's punishment.

In Asiama, there used to be only one reward for treachery. In the old days, Asiama people would seize the traitors, tie their hands and sometimes their feet, take them out to the ocean, and throw them overboard. Then, from the boats, they would goad the traitors to swim back to the island. Every Asiama person is an expert swimmer. But with bound hands, and in the middle of the ocean, the traitors stood no chance. They drowned, a slow, watery death, sometimes just metres from the island. I couldn't tie Snow White's hands. But, I still had to shorten his odds of survival in the water. That's why I had shot him. For a moment, I watched Snow White hang desperately to the side of the canoe as he bobbed and thrashed in the water. I wasn't bothered that he would capsize the canoe. I was a strong swimmer and would easily right it again. That's why I was naked, prepared for that eventuality. It didn't happen.

'Snow White?' My voice was soft.

'Hey, oga Doughboy!' he gasped weakly. 'Help me.'

'Swim to Asiama!' I said quietly. I raised my paddle up, and smashed the sharp end of it on Snow White's hand. He shrieked sharp and primal and then he let go of the side of the canoe.

Asiama Town 2004

The blind, old man sensed my presence. He called out to the darkness. 'Who is there?'

I didn't answer. That same night, I had wandered round the town restlessly, until on their own, my feet led me to the house where the blind, old man sat outside on the balcony. Just like I had done when I was a child, I had stood by the mango tree, fifteen feet away by the side of the house, and surveyed the house and the old man. The house, an old colonial style bungalow, had survived everything – time, the weather, and even a hail of bullets. I noticed some slight changes to the house. The louvre blade windows had been modified to sliding windows; a water tank sitting on a storey high iron stand showed that the house boasted its own borehole pumped water; and what used to be a sand path leading to the house, was

now a paved stone walkway. Like always, the house was carefully maintained. The bullet holes had long been plastered over. It was recently repainted, and the grass on the lawn trimmed. In spite of its simplicity, it was still the most picturesque house in Asiama Town.

'I say, who is out there?' There was a slight challenge in the old man's voice this time. His blindness had not affected his inner strength.

'It's me, sir.'

'Who are you, my child?'

'Doye, sir. Doye Koko,' I said, instinctively lowering my voice.

'Ah,' Catechist Akassa nodded as though he now understood everything.

'It's been a long time. I saw you last in…'

'1997, sir.'

'Ah yes, 1997. I've wanted to talk to you for a long time now.' He patted the space beside him on the bench. 'Come and keep an old man company.'

I walked nervously and sat down beside Catechist Akassa. To add to my discomfort, he didn't speak for a long while. He faced upwards as blind people usually do.

'I remember a conversation we had many years ago. You said you wanted to be a soldier. I persuaded you to be an engineer. Seeing what you eventually became, perhaps I shouldn't have. The army could have channelled your energies properly. Or perhaps, you would have been too strong-willed even for the army, and turned into the type of soldier who plots coups.' He sighed, 'Ah, who knows?'

I smiled in the darkness. Catechist Akassa was still the most perceptive man I'd ever met. He sighed deeply. 'Some people say you put Amaibi into the trouble he is in now. Is that true?'

I bowed my head. 'Yes, sir.'

'Hmm,' Catechist Akassa nodded. 'Then, you have to do what is right. Will you help him come out of this trouble?'

I took a deep breath. 'Yes, sir.' I meant it, but also wondered how that was going to be possible since I couldn't give evidence in court.

'Good.'

We sat through another difficult silence. I broke it. 'Sorry about your eyes, sir.'

‘It’s God’s will, my son. Two operations couldn’t undo the damage. Don’t worry about it. It hasn’t stopped me yet. I learned Braille.’

There was a smile in his voice, as if by learning Braille, he had somehow defied the people who had blinded him. But his words were spoken without bitterness, he had since forgiven them even though they never showed any remorse. I dug into my pouch again and brought out another wad of notes – dollars this time. I pressed it into the old man’s hands. I whispered, ‘Take this, sir.’

His face was impassive. He asked, ‘How much is it?’

I told him.

‘Ah, so much?’

I looked at the dark house, and thought quickly. ‘So you can buy a generator, sir.’ For the first time in my life, I heard Catechist Akassa laugh. Before this time, his expressions of mirth were restricted to polite smiles, or quiet chuckles. He laughed clearly, easily, just like Amaibi.

‘I don’t need light to see. Besides, I already have a generator. I don’t use it much because I can’t stand the noise.’ He put a hand on my shoulder. ‘Thank you, but I really don’t need anything. If you want to help, let me tell you how. Just off the town square, by the Ikaki Family mausoleum, there is a fisherman called Miebaka. Remember him? He was your father’s best friend. Miebaka’s last two children are twin girls, about seventeen now. Both are very brilliant, but Miebaka can’t pay for their university education. It will mean a lot to Miebaka and his girls if you gave this money for that. Besides, it will make your father proud.’

The silence was much easier this time. Finally, I said, ‘I’ll go there now, sir.’

‘That’s alright.’

As I stood up, he gave me the gentlest of rebukes. ‘My son, many say you fight for justice. They say you do what you do because you want good things to come to our people. If what they say is true, then you need to learn. You cannot bring good, by doing bad.’

Chapter 23
Amaibi
Port Harcourt, 2004

I died a little the moment I saw Dise. It didn't matter that courtesy of Kaniye, I now had prison V.I.P. status, sharing a cell with only Ekong. It didn't matter that our cell was nicknamed 'Aso Rock', because it had real mattresses, sheets and a small transistor radio. It didn't matter that I now bathed every day, and only ate superb restaurant food, not the usual weevil-beans in muddy water. I still felt like an animal, caged. It was still prison and it still had that smell. Dise seemed to be struggling to breathe, and I doubted if it was from the shock of seeing me. How can I describe that prison stench? It would have been the first thing to hit her, hard and sudden, like a vicious slap. It is one smell with many smells: a repulsive blend of human waste, grime, decay, doom, death. How do I explain it? If the smell had a colour, it would have been a mouldy, leprous, shit-brownish grey. The stink was not as depressing as the dehumanization. Drawn faces, sunken eyes, filthy hands, desperate cries, broken spirits, all strained feverishly from the other cells in an attempt to get Dise's attention. They begged her for food, money, cigarettes, even sex. Their cries and groping fingers made her mouth contort in a grimace, and I'm sure made her skin crawl. She tried vainly to shrink her shoulders. It was the second worst moment of my life, second only to that day in 1997. But this time, I wasn't helpless. So, I hobbled to my bars and screamed at them, just like an animal.

'SHUT UP!' Stunned, they shut up immediately. No one had heard me raise my voice before.

'Thanks, Amaibi.'

She gave me a small smile of gratitude. I remembered the days when she used to call me 'Dr Love' or just 'Dr' when we had company. I sighed. Then, impulsively, I said the first thing that came to my mind. 'You've still got your dreadlocks. Still grieving?'

‘I’m not sure, maybe.’

‘You look good.’

‘You don’t look too bad yourself.’ She said dryly.

I smiled shamefacedly and rubbed my stubble. ‘If I’d known you were coming, I’d have freshened up a bit. I hate for you to see me like this.’

‘I’ve seen you worse.’

I nodded. We stared at each other through the bars. All the things that we left unsaid in our marriage, stood between us, stronger than any bars. I couldn’t bear the silence, so I made small-talk. ‘How’ve you been?’ She shrugged,

‘Good.’

‘What have you been up to?’

‘Nothing much, the usual: work, work, work.’ I wanted to say, ‘It’s so good to see you, that I can cry. I’ve missed you so much, God, I’m shaking!’ and, ‘My life’s been empty, and messed up without you.’ But, all I could say was ‘How’s work?’ Dise sighed,

‘Same old, same old. They look at me and still think I should only write about fashion and celebrities. Meanwhile, the political correspondents act like they are in some elitist club. But I’ll show them this time.’ Dise was a journalist with a newspaper called *The Express*. However, because of her voice, she also did a lot of voice over work for advertisements on radio and television, for which she got paid a lot more than her job. But she stuck with the newspaper because her heart had always been in journalism.

‘How will you show them?’ I asked, continuing foolishly to talk about the last thing on my mind – her job.

‘I’ve set up this big, exclusive, no holds barred interview.’

‘With who?’ She held my eyes.

‘Doughboy. Two birds with one stone,’ she explained. ‘I’m hoping that he may say something that may somehow help your case. I’m doing my bit to help. I didn’t just want to come see you, cry, and twiddle my thumbs. Then, of course, there’s my career.’

‘It’s dangerous ...’ She shrugged,

‘Danger is relative. Doye is dangerous to white men and oil companies. To me, he’s still you and Kaniye’s childhood friend. He also

looked out for me during my teenage years. Don't worry; he'll eat out of my hand.'

I shook my head. 'Don't do it. I forbid you.' Her eyes darkened, and she twisted the knife in my heart.

'You can't tell me that. In case you've forgotten, we are not exactly husband and wife anymore.'

I winced like I had been struck. She lowered her head,

'I'm sorry, Amaibi.'

'Doye has a lot of crazy people around him,' I explained. 'I don't want anything to happen to you again.' For the briefest of seconds, her eyes held that familiar pain. I said, 'I'm sorry.'

'About what?'

'Reminding you of …that…97.' She looked away.

'Don't be sorry. There was nothing you could have done then.'

That was when I said what I should have said long ago, what I really wanted to say to her. There were tears in my eyes when I started speaking. 'Maybe not then, but afterwards, I could have been less self-absorbed with my own grief. I could have comforted you and supported you. I should have loved you. I mean, really loved you, not just said the words, but demonstrated them. But I didn't, and, I let it tear our marriage apart. For all that, and the many other things I could have done, I'm sorry.' She said,

'It's too late to apologise.'

But, she reached and touched my hand gripping the bars. The tears were pouring down her cheeks.

Tubo refused to look at me all the time he sat in the witness box. At Ikuru's prompting, he talked about Doye's kidnapping of Tanowitz, Morris and Betsen in January 2003. He lied when he said that I had called to tell him that I was Doye's go-between in the negotiations with Imperial Oil. He tendered a Security Report from Imperial Oil which concluded that Doye and I had planned the kidnap of Tanowitz and co. Then, he talked about Doye kidnapping Manning in August 2003. He told another lie when he said I called him two hours later, again, to be the middleman in the negotiations for Manning's release. He stuck to the truth as he narrated

how Imperial Oil gave me the fifteen million for Manning's ransom, and a boat to take me to Juju Island. He closed his evidence-in-chief with the tragedy of my return with Manning's stinking corpse. Dise was in the gallery, in a vantage position where we could always maintain eye contact. She shook her head over and over again in wonder at Tubo, smiling easily as he testified against me. Because I had made my peace with it a long time ago, I just smiled back at her. It was even more surreal for me to see Kaniye stand up to cross-examine Tubo, the closest person he had to a brother.

Kaniye was different that day: withdrawn, brooding and serious. I was yet to see him smile, tease or joke. The first thing he did before he began with Tubo was to call for Imperial Oil's Security Report that Tubo had tendered. He asked the clerk of court to give it to Tubo. Scowling, Kaniye asked,

'Who prepared that report, Mr Joseph?'

'The company, Imperial Oil.'

'Who in Imperial Oil prepared it?'

'Mr Aliyu Mustapha, Head of Security.'

'Do you believe that report to be true, Mr Joseph?' Tubo smiled. 'I wasn't there when it was prepared, so I'm not in a position to say for sure.'

'So, Mr Joseph, you tendered a report that you are not sure is true or false?' Tubo paused and glanced quickly at Wali, who was also in the public gallery.

'Yes.'

'Since you're not sure if this report is true or false, it would be unfair to expect this court to accept it as true, wouldn't it?'

'I don't understand the question.'

Kaniye's frown deepened. 'Mr Joseph, this is a criminal trial. My client's liberty is at stake. Before a court can convict him, it must be sure, beyond reasonable doubt, of my client's guilt. Now if you are not sure the report you tendered is true, it would be unfair to expect this court to rely on it to convict my client. Do you agree?' Another quick look at Wali, and then another hesitant

'Yes.'

'Thank you. Now to other things. You are friends with my client, Dr Amaibi Akassa, and Doye Koko, a.k.a. Doughboy, aren't you?'

‘We were childhood friends, yes.’ Tubo said it as if we were no longer friends. He still hadn’t looked at me.

‘Do you know a Mr Somina Whyte, a well-known associate of Doughboy?’

‘No.’

There was a pause while Kaniye asked the clerk of court to give Tubo Somina Whyte’s photographs, taken by Alliance Bank, and CNN.

‘Take a look at those pictures, Mr Joseph. That young man is Mr Somina Whyte. Have you ever met him before?’

Tubo squinted and strained at the pictures for a long time. Then he raised his head, looked at Kaniye and said, ‘Never.’

‘Have you ever had any monetary transactions with Mr Somina Whyte, or received money from him?’

‘Never!’ Tubo even looked properly offended.

‘You are sure you’re not mistaken?’

‘I’m certain I’m not mistaken.’

‘Now, prior to January 1993, when Doughboy kidnapped any expatriate from your company, he negotiated their release with your company through Mr Wali and you. Is that correct?’

‘Sometimes, I was directly involved in the negotiations, yes.’

Kaniye rubbed his chin. ‘Did you ever receive any money from Doughboy?’ Tubo went into deep thought. Then he jerked his head up suddenly, eyes bright. ‘Once, when we were children, I received fifty kobo from him. Apart from that, never.’

The twitters of laughter were at Kaniye’s expense. On another day, he would have joined in himself. Today, he just frowned, ‘You’re sure of this?’

‘I’m positive,’ Tubo said with a smile to his audience in the public gallery.

Kaniye glanced at his notes, ‘Do you remember Jerome Cameron, an employee of Imperial Oil?’

‘Yes.’

‘Doughboy kidnapped Mr Cameron on the 6th of July, 2002. Is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘You and Mr Wali were involved in the negotiations with Doughboy to secure Mr Cameron’s release, right?’

‘Yes,’ Tubo said grudgingly.

‘Doughboy released Mr Cameron on 11th July, 2002, correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘That was after receiving a ransom of nine million naira that same day, right?’

‘Yes.’ Wali’s head shake was almost imperceptible. Tubo noticed it too and checked himself quickly. ‘Err, no. Sorry. The ransom for Jerome Cameron was, err…seventeen million.’

‘You’re sure it wasn’t nine million naira?’

‘It was seventeen million,’ Tubo said with greater confidence.

‘So if Doughboy says he received only nine million for Cameron, he would be lying or mistaken?’

Tubo understood that hearsay was inadmissible in law, and Kaniye was fishing. So he smirked. ‘I’m not aware that Doughboy gave evidence in this matter.’

‘How fortunate for some people?’ Kaniye replied with a taunting look at Wali.

‘Mr Joseph, let’s now talk about Manning. About two hours after he was kidnapped on 15th August, 2003, you called my client and begged him to be the middleman in the negotiations for Manning’s release. Is that correct?’

‘No.’ Tubo’s facial expression was calm, even earnest. Kaniye acted like he had not heard Tubo’s answer.

‘Similarly, in January 2003, when Tanowitz and the others were kidnapped, you were the one who called my client, even visited him at his office, pleading with him to help secure their release. True?’

‘No. It was Dr. Akassa who called me on both occasions to say that he was acting on Doughboy’s instructions.’

‘You’re sure you are not mistaken?’

Tubo was emphatic. ‘I’m not mistaken.’

‘Mr Joseph, do you understand the meaning of the oath you took just before the start of your evidence?’

Tubo nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘You realise it means you must tell the truth at all times, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you agree that if you have told a lie, this court is entitled to disbelieve your entire testimony?’

Tubo was wary now, but he had to say, ‘Yes.’

Kaniye produced a pale blue slip from his file. He motioned the clerk of court to give it to Tubo. When it was in Tubo’s hands, he said, ‘Please, take a look at that slip, Mr Joseph.’

Tubo took a look. And what he saw made his eyes pop. He looked up at Kaniye, pleading eloquently with his eyes. Kaniye’s first smile of the day was not a pleasant one. Ikuru noticed all this and lunged to his feet.

‘My lord, I object to the admissibility of that document. We have no knowledge of it. The defence intentionally...’

Kaniye’s retort was caustic. ‘Perhaps, my learned friend’s objection should wait till I actually try to tender the document.’

The judge glared at Ikuru, who said, ‘Sorry, my lord, my objection is premature.’

Kaniye turned to a fidgeting Tubo, ‘Mr Joseph, kindly confirm that, that slip shows a payment of one point five million naira into your Universal Bank account by a Mr Somina Whyte on 12th July, 2002?’

The courtroom went silent. Tubo did not answer. Instead, he concentrated and frowned hard at the slip, as if that might somehow change its contents. Kaniye cocked his head.

‘I didn’t hear you, Mr Joseph.’

‘Yes,’ Tubo whispered.

Kaniye was merciless. ‘Yes what?’

‘Yes, this slip shows that a Somina Whyte paid one point five million naira into my account, on 12th July, 2002.’ The words came out in a mumble I had never heard from Tubo before.

‘12th July, 2002, was the day after Doughboy released Jerome Cameron, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

Kaniye turned to the judge. ‘My lord, I seek to tender this slip as an exhibit.’

Ikuru was already on his feet. ‘My lord, we object to the admissibility of this document. First on the ground of improper custody, secondly, my lord, the defence deliberately withheld this document from us. We had no notice of it.’

Kaniye opened his hands as he addressed the judge. ‘My, lord, I believe I raised an identical objection during Mr Wali’s evidence-in-chief. Citing Musa Sadau v. The State, my learned friend’s reply was, and I

quote, “Even if the document was illegally obtained, it is still admissible, so far as it is relevant.” End of quote. And my lord ruled that, that was the correct position of the law. Therefore, I stand by my lord’s earlier ruling on this objection. On the issue of not giving my learned friend prior notice of the document, I’m unaware of anything in the law or the rules which say that I have to do so. If such a law or rule exists, I sincerely ask my lord to forgive my ignorance of it. I’ve been out of legal practice for years, and only just returned to handle this case.’

The judge looked suspiciously at Kaniye; as if he wanted to be sure that he was really apologetic. Then he admitted the slip as an exhibit. Kaniye faced Tubo again. He stroked his chin beard, almost absentmindedly, making Tubo and everyone else wait. He seemed to be thinking of his next question. This time, the silence was expectant. Apart from the Ikuru, Wali and Tubo himself, everyone in the courtroom wanted to see Tubo bleed some more.

‘Mr Joseph, was the one point five million for you alone, or was it for you and Mr Wali?’

‘Lies! Lies!’ Wali shrieked suddenly in apoplectic rage, unable to restrain himself any more. The courtroom exploded in an uproar of excited voices. Tubo looked wild-eyed all around him. Dise and I exchanged sweet smiles. A slightly dazed Ikuru swayed on his feet.

‘Objection. Objection. Objection,’ he repeated like a mantra. But he couldn’t say what he was objecting to.

The judge banged his gavel again and again until order was restored. His wrath was terrible; his finger shook as he pointed at Wali. ‘The next time you disrupt my court; I will have you in contempt and throw you in jail.’

Wali nodded meekly. Although Ikuru apologised on his behalf, he looked like he wished he had never met Wali. Kaniye seemed oblivious to the mayhem he had caused. He got to his feet, pointed at Tubo, and curled his lips distastefully as if Tubo had just defecated in court.

‘My lord, this witness agreed that if he told a lie, this court should disbelieve his entire testimony. In the circumstances, I respectfully call on my lord to do just that.’

Then Kaniye’s face turned grave. ‘Therefore, I will not waste my lord’s time or mine in asking this unbelievable, unreliable witness any more questions.’

‘Tubo and I were just acting in court,’ Kaniye confessed with a smile.

‘What?’ I said, with my mouth open in complete surprise. Dise, who was as stunned as I was, just shook her head and wagged a finger at her brother.

‘You and Tubo are always up to mischief’

Kaniye laughed and shrugged, ‘How did you think I got that slip? Tubo gave it to me.’

‘Why? I don’t really understand,’ I said.

‘Although he really wanted to tell the truth and help you, Tubo said he had no choice but to lie against you during his evidence. Well, I decided that he could still tell his lies and help you at the same time. How? By exposing his lies and making it impossible for the court to believe him. We knew Wali would be watching, so we planned the whole charade to appear like I really ripped him apart during my cross-examination.’ Kaniye shrugged again, ‘What can I say? You know I love taking risks. I had to force myself to frown all day so I wouldn’t laugh out loud.’

‘And there I was thinking you were miserable because Deola left?’ Dise said. Kaniye gave her a big smile.

‘I am miserable because Deola left.’ I said.

‘But, what about that slip you tendered in court? Won’t it put Tubo in trouble?’ Kaniye shook his head,

‘Tubo will be fine, don’t worry. That was the beauty of the plan. That one point five million wasn’t meant for Tubo.’

‘Who? Wali?’ At the mention of Wali’s name, Kaniye roared and his shoulders shook with laughter. When he calmed down, he wiped the tears in his eyes with the back of his hand.

‘The money wasn’t for Wali either.’

I was getting impatient. ‘Who then?’

‘Mr Arowosogbonu.’ Kaniye held up his hand. ‘He was the former Admin and Personnel Manager in Imperial Oil, and Tubo’s former immediate boss. Tubo says he was a greedy bastard who wanted a piece of everything, but still couldn’t be satisfied. The story was, before 2002,

Tubo and Wali ran the racket of making money from Doye's ransoms. Apart from how much they inflated the actual ransoms by, Doye always gave them a cut from whatever he received. However, early in 2002, Arowosogbonu figured how easily the racket worked, shoved Tubo aside, joined up with Wali, and hyper inflated the ransoms. But at the same time, Imperial Oil was investigating Arowosogbonu for some of his previous financial misdeeds, unrelated to the ransoms scam. Arowosogbonu was aware of this investigation, and the fact that his bank accounts may be checked. Thinking he was smart, he asked Doye to pay his cut into Tubo's account, and asked Tubo to withdraw the cash for him. My guess is he promised Tubo a percentage or something. But, Tubo sneakily alerted the investigation committee that their suspect wanted him involved in a dubious transaction. They arranged with Tubo to receive the money in his account, withdraw it, and they got the police to pounce on Arowosogbonu after he had collected the money from Tubo. He was saved from prosecution by his uncle who was a high-ranking police officer, but his uncle couldn't save his job.'

Kaniye grinned, 'Now you understand why Wali lost his mind when I suggested that the money was meant for him. He just got a taste of what a false accusation felt like.'

I shook my head with a smile on my face. 'Why didn't you tell me before now?' Kaniye gave me a look, like 'be serious'.

'I didn't tell you because the last thing I needed was an attack from your conscience.'

I nodded. 'You're right. I'd have said that it wasn't right.'

'This is war, Amaibi. All's fair in war.' He looked at his watch. 'Your transport back to prison will soon be here. Tomorrow, the doctor, the last prosecution witness will take the stand. He'll tender Manning's autopsy, and say he died as a result of a stroke. We're not arguing with that, so I won't cross-examine him. Your defence starts the day after tomorrow. We've done heavy damage to the prosecution's case. They still have a strong point though, the one million naira Snow White paid into your account. However, we can crush that if you do as I say. Get in the box, give your evidence, and tell it as it is. But when you get to that part, say Snow White's one million naira was your consultancy fee and expenses to investigate the hazards of the spill at Oyikutu hamlet, up at the

beginning of the Asiama River. I've done my research. A minor spill occurred in Oyikutu, a day or two before the money was paid.'

'You want me to lie?' I asked him. Kaniye smiled wearily.

'It's not a lie. It's just a tiny untruth. And it's even for a good cause. You can always ask God for forgiveness later.'

I shook my head. 'I won't lie, Kaniye.' He sighed.

'Please don't start now, Amaibi. You can't go out there and say, "Hey, Doughboy paid one million naira into my account, but I didn't ask him to, didn't want it, and was planning to return it the next day, but I was arrested." Trust me; you will be convicted if you tell that truth.'

Kaniye's words put a sickening knot to my stomach. I gripped my walking stick tighter to hide the trembling of my hands. My voice was unsteady, tinged with doubt, but I said, 'I'll take my chances with that truth.' He held his head in his hands and blew out his cheeks. He spoke softly,

'You're very sick, Amaibi. You need to be in a hospital. And I'm so close to getting you out of prison, so you can get that medical help you need. Don't mess it up now, please. If you're convicted, I will fight, appeal all the way to the Supreme Court. But, it will take years, and I fear for your health if you were to remain in prison for that long. Do the right thing, Amaibi.'

'I am.' Kaniye shook his head, threw his hands in the air.

'Apart from the doctor who will come tomorrow, the entire case against you was built on lies. I think you deserve a few lies to help your defence.'

'Then I'm no better than them, Kaniye.'

'This isn't a moral competition. This is life Amaibi, save your life by growing some balls.'

'That is exactly what I am doing!' I shouted as I flung my wooden walking stick at the wall of the waiting room. It broke into three unequal pieces. My voice was trembling as I continued, 'For the first time in years, I have the courage not to compromise my faith, to follow my conscience, to do what is right before God. You think that's easy, Kaniye? It's the hardest thing to do. And yes it takes balls, god-sized ones too.' Then I remembered my father, and everything he stood for. 'It takes the hardest form of courage, courage with conscience.' I sighed. There was a thickness in my throat. I opened my hands, my heart. 'I want to get out

prison so much. Look at me, Kaniye. I've lost my mind, my manhood, my dignity. My leg's rotting away. I'm dying there, man. I want to live, enjoy the little things of life: read a newspaper, write on paper, and see the smile of a child. I want another chance to love my wife, and make it up to her.' Kaniye stood up and passed his hand over his bald, shiny head.

'I don't have to listen to this. I'll send you newspapers and writing pads through Adibe Okoye. Dise, talk some sense into your husband.'

I turned to Dise. There was an inscrutable look on her face. 'Leave him alone, Kaniye,' she said, fighting for me like she always did before. Then, she smiled at me. 'He's his father's son. He's the man I married.'

Chapter 24
Kaniye
Port Harcourt, 2004

‘Have you laughed today?’ Deola chuckled.

‘No. But I just did. Thanks.’

‘You sound depressed.’

She sighed, ‘I’ve just got a lot on my mind. I’m yet to settle in my new job here. Lagos seems different now. I feel out of place.’

‘Is it Lagos, or is it that you miss me?’

She giggled. ‘You think you’re a mind reader, don’t you?’ But she didn’t deny it.

‘I miss you. Port Harcourt’s been lonely without you here.’ The hum of the phone line went on for a moment.

‘I miss you too, Kaniye.’ Her voice was noticeably softer, choked. ‘But, I don’t think you should call me anymore. I’m not sure I can do this.’

I laughed. ‘I’ve got a better idea. I’ll come over to Lagos this weekend. Take you to a few places, cheer you up, make sure you laugh. What do you say?’

‘I’d love that.’

Then I sensed her hesitation, before I even heard it. ‘But no. I mean, seeing you will work against the reason for my returning to Lagos.’

‘Look, Deola, if I come this weekend, I promise not to take advantage of you. Even if you fall on your knees and beg me to ravish and marry you, I promise I’ll say no.’

‘*Wéré*. Crazy man!’

‘Yes. And that’s one of the reasons why you love me, isn’t it?’ I paused. ‘I mean, you still love me, don’t you?’ I heard Deola’s small gasp.

‘Haba! Why am I being cross-examined? Are we in court? Meanwhile, how’s Amaibi? I guess he’s happy now that Dise’s around.’

‘Amaibi’s a new man now.’

‘And how’s the trial going?’

‘Amaibi starts his defence tomorrow.’ I paused. ‘He really needs your prayers.’ Deola understood what I couldn’t say and asked.

‘It’s that bad?’

I chose my words carefully, ‘Not yet. But it could be disastrous.’

‘But you can prevent the disaster, can’t you?’ she asked again.

‘It’s not in my hands. Only Amaibi and God can.’ I replied.

‘God prevents some disasters every day.’ She said quite forcefully.

‘Then please ask Him to come to court tomorrow to prevent this one.’

‘I will. But why don’t you ask Him yourself?’ she asked.

I laughed. ‘Me? No. I suspect I’m jinxed. He didn’t give me the last thing I asked Him for.’

‘But ask anyway. Who knows, He might give you this one. Maybe, just to challenge your doubts.’

‘The only doubt I have now is if you still love me’

Instinctively, she said, ‘How can you even think that, Kaniye?’

‘Ah, when you have refused to tell me today. What am I to think?’ I failed to suppress my laughter as I spoke.

‘You are unbelievable.’ There was a smile in Deola’s voice.

‘And that’s another of the reasons why you love me, isn’t it?’

God didn’t prevent the disaster. The day had started with my leading Amaibi through his evidence-in-chief. As expected, he had stuck to the truth about not working with Doye to kidnap Manning, or possessing a gun. But, just as I feared, he had refused to lie about the reason for the one million naira Snow White had paid into his account. He even went on to admit that he knew it was from Doye, and it was meant to be his share from the ransom. That was the first sign of the trouble to come. Ikuru had smiled triumphantly. Even Wilcox looked stunned. I maintained a confident smile on my face. But inside, I winced and cursed Amaibi. No one seemed to hear Amaibi when he said that he refused the money and could have returned it the next day had he not been arrested. After that, I had questioned him about his arrest and detention. I had taken it slow, drawing out the horrific and painful details of how he was shot, denied treatment, and tortured. The strategy had been to swing sympathy back in his favour after his calamitous admission. But I sensed that the strategy

didn’t work as well as I would have wanted. Wilcox looked unimpressed, almost bored. So, I stopped there.

Then I waited for Ikuru to cross-examine Amaibi. And, I became afraid. I was terrified that Amaibi’s foolish insistence on the truth had just undone all we had achieved so far in the trial. I was scared that Amaibi was no match for an experienced and wily lawyer like Ikuru. I was worried that I may have missed something important to ask Amaibi, for which Ikuru would punish us dearly. Ikuru’s first questions confirmed that I had indeed missed something important. He started with,

‘Are you a violent man, Dr. Akassa?’

‘No,’ Amaibi’s voice was firm. Just as I’d told him to, he looked at Wilcox, not at Ikuru.

‘I’ve never been a violent man.’

Ikuru raised an eyebrow as he unfurled an old newspaper. ‘At a rally held in Isaac Boro Park, Port Harcourt, on the 12th day of December, 1997, you said…’ Ikuru read from the newspaper, ‘And I quote, “*violence is now a justified option for dealing with the injustice in the Niger Delta*” unquote. You said that, didn’t you?’

If it was me, I would have denied it. I would have said the newspaper, a tabloid, had misquoted me. After all, tabloids were notorious for their sensational rumour-mongering. But it wasn’t me. It was Amaibi.

He replied, ‘Yes, I said that.’

A small wave of gasps rippled through the courtroom. Ikuru had drawn blood. He rewarded himself with a smirk. I matched him with a smug smile of my own, as though his question was expected and I was pleased with Amaibi’s answer. Inwardly, I groaned. Ikuru pressed on. ‘In January 1998, Doughboy and the Asiama Freedom Army claimed responsibility for the violent attack and bombing of the Asiama Flow Station, in which two soldiers lost their lives. When asked to comment about it, you said…’ Ikuru selected another old newspaper. ‘Again, I quote, “*the attack was understandable. The chickens are now coming home to roost”* unquote. Is that correct?’

I caught Amaibi’s eye. And I gave a slight shake of my head: Say no! Say your words were taken out of context. But Amaibi and I never had the same telepathy I shared with Tubo. Even if we did, Amaibi’s answer would have remained the same.

‘Yes, that is correct.’

I screamed silently. Another babble of excited whispering started. The people in the public gallery began to eye Amaibi suspiciously. It was hypocritical because many of them, in their private conversations, had sometime or the other, expressed the same sentiments as he had just admitted.

And it got worse. For the next fifteen minutes, Ikuru carefully drew out every single instance of Amaibi's refusal to condemn violence. They were many. And Amaibi, ever truthful, admitted all of them. At every admission, the public gallery hmm'ed and ah'ed, and assembled reporters scribbled more furiously. By the time Ikuru finished that line of questions, Amaibi was no longer the suffering gentleman with glasses and crutches. The people had begun to see Amaibi with an AK-47, laughing maniacally as he sprayed bullets at white men and soldiers. A courtroom is a place of innuendo, half-truths, smoke and mirrors, and sometimes, magic. Curiously, many people, especially non-lawyers, believe the popular myth that it is a place for 'the truth, the whole truth, etc.'. The whole truth about Amaibi's sympathy with Doye's violent tactics is that it only started after the 1997 Crises.

Before 1997, Amaibi was an activist, who was mainly concerned about the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta. Yes, he ranted a lot about damage to the ecosystem, gas flaring, pollution, acid rain, greenhouse gas emissions, bronchitis. Yes, he organised rallies, environmental seminars, publications and protest marches. But they were all peaceful. Then the Crises happened. It shook beliefs, and tested principles. It touched everyone in Asiama with grief, bitterness and anger. It touched some people more than others. Doye went mad. Amaibi lost his faith, and stopped condemning violence. Time is overrated. It can't heal every wound. Amaibi regained his pacifism. His faith only came back recently, sometime during his incarceration, I guess. But Doye's madness remained incurable. And it grew worse, turning him into the monster that he now was. That is the whole truth, but it is a truth that would never be told; at least, not in a courtroom.

'You and Doughboy are close friends. Is that correct, Dr. Akassa?' Ikuru's eyes were on the reporters as he asked the question. Ikuru had outsmarted me. I had made the irreparable error of not remembering Amaibi's life immediately after the Crises. I had focused Amaibi's defence on the specifics of the charges against him – the incidents surrounding

Manning's kidnap and death. Sir James would not have made that mistake. Ikuru was rattling the skeletons of Amaibi's past life. He was yet to ask a single question about Manning. He didn't need to. He had the damning one million naira from Doye in Amaibi's account. Amaibi's explanation for the money, even if true, was naïve and incredible. Ikuru was confident he could brush it aside during final addresses. All he had to do now was to harp on Amaibi's well-documented sympathy for Doye's tactics, and emphasise the ties between them.

'Doye Koko and I grew up together as children. We were close friends then. I'm not sure we consider each other as friends now. I consider him more of an acquaintance.'

'Hmm, I see. So when did you start considering Doughboy as merely an acquaintance?'

Amaibi thought for a moment. 'I think it was when I returned to the country in early January 1997. Prior to that, I had been away for a long time, about eleven years, and we didn't correspond once.'

'I presume that you had other close friends in early January 1997?'

'Yes I did.' Amaibi nodded.

'Who were your close friends at that time, Dr. Akassa?'

'My wife, my lawyer, Kaniye Rufus…'

Ikuru smiled wolfishly at me. He turned to Amaibi and said, 'Go on…'

Amaibi didn't know where Ikuru was heading with this line of questions. Neither did I. But I had a premonition that we were about to be blitzed. Amaibi named four more friends – friends he had made in London.

Ikuru nodded eagerly. 'Dr. Akassa, you got married on Saturday, the 18th of January, 1997. Is that correct?'

That's when I knew where Ikuru was headed to. My heart started drumming wildly. Unconsciously, I winced and put my head in my hand like I had a sudden migraine. Through clenched teeth I muttered, 'Shit! Shit! Shit!'

'Yes, that was the day I got married.' Amaibi's impassive face told me he still hadn't caught on. Ikuru swung the killer blow. 'And despite your five close friends at the time, you chose Doughboy, a mere acquaintance, to be your best man. Is that correct?'

Amaibi sunk low in his chair. He looked like he had been suddenly punched in the stomach. He stuttered, ‘It’s…it’s not what…’

Ikuru took full advantage of Amaibi’s hesitation. He bellowed, ‘Was Doughboy your best man at your wedding? Yes or no? Stop wasting the time of this court!’

Amaibi tried to regain his composure. He straightened himself. He raised his head up. He looked Wilcox in the eye. But his voice faltered as he spoke, ‘Yes, Doye was the best man at my wedding.’

The disaster was complete.

Chapter 25
Doughboy
Port Harcourt, 2004

There was only one reason why I allowed Dise interview me. I wanted to see her again. Dise was the one thing I really wanted in my life. And, she was the only thing I couldn't have. There are fixations that just can't be explained. I gave up trying to understand Dise's effect on me years ago. In my childhood in Asiama, I knew her just as Kaniye's baby half-sister. During the Christmases, when she came around, she would cling devotedly to Kaniye, to the alarm of her mother. Then, during our university years when Kaniye lived with his father and his family in Port Harcourt I didn't see or remember Dise. I was twenty-one when Dise bewitched me. I still remember everything about that day. It was scorching hot. I was broke. I had trekked from Leventis Park to Kaniye's house in Amadi Flats to ask him for money with which to continue my journey to Asiama. It was years before the advent of mobile phones in Nigeria, and I had hoped desperately that Kaniye would be at home. By the time I got there, I had been burned black by the sun, and my pouring sweat glued my shirt to my back. I still remember that my tongue was swollen and parched with thirst.

A floating nymph opened the gates for me. Seeing her made my knees buckle slightly. She was dressed in white – tiny shorts that emphasised her long legs, and a light cotton shirt, with the top three buttons undone. She wasn't wearing a bra: I could tell. Her lips painted red, full and pouting, gently kissed a plastic straw stuck in a frosty bottle of Coca Cola. Her smile, when she saw me, was a miracle. My brain froze, my tongue thickened, both refusing to make words. Then, she offered me a surprise. She raised the bottle towards me, till the plastic straw almost touched my lips. Amazed, my eyes bulged. But, she shook the bottle slightly; tapping the straw on my dry lips like it was the most natural thing to do. Emboldened, excited, I sipped from the red lipstick rimmed straw.

The icy, sweet, tingling Coke awakened my mouth, refreshed my soul. I smiled. She smiled back. We still hadn't spoken a word. I still didn't know who she was.

'You're Doye, right?' I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. She smiled.

'I remember you. Kaniye's not in right now. But you can wait. He'll be back soon.' She blessed me with another smile. 'I'll get you another Coke. You look like you need it.'

That was when I recognised Dise. I remember being disappointed when Kaniye returned, thirty quick minutes later. I remember that after that day, I took every opportunity to visit Kaniye at home. I also made sure I was there any time Dise came to visit Kaniye on campus. At that time, Dise was just fresh out of secondary school, university was still months away, and there seemed to be nothing for her to do in Port Harcourt but visit friends and party. To the despair of her parents, Dise had apparently grown to be a rebellious, high-spirited, sixteen-year-old party animal. However, she still worshipped her half-brother, and he doted on her. Kaniye was the only person in their family who understood her. I think it was because as one who always wore the mask of a joker, he was the first to see behind her public disguise of a flirting party girl. At their wits end, his father and stepmother tacitly gave Kaniye the responsibility to control and discipline Dise.

To teach her about life, Kaniye encouraged her to hang out with us. She learned about the games men played with women from Tubo's stories and escapades, while my fiery rants developed her interest in political and social issues. Kaniye regularly took her and friends out dining and partying, but always with me or Tubo playing chaperones to scare the young boys away. To encourage her then budding writing talent, Kaniye pinned her poems and short stories all over his bedroom walls, even though he never read them. He celebrated her first freelance article in *The Guardian* newspaper by taking her to a nightclub for the first time in her life.

In those circumstances, I had no choice but to be a 'brother' to Dise. If I had been anything else, my friendship with Kaniye would have died immediately. But it still didn't stop me from secretly wanting her. Did she know how I pined and burned for her? Did she guess that I'd already started planning our futures together? Most times, she'd tease me by

telling me how all her friends thought I was ‘TDH’ (Tall, Dark and Handsome), to which I’d always laugh and dismiss as the temporary infatuation common with teenage girls. Sometimes, I caught her looking at me with a strange, faraway look in her eyes. She didn’t mind when I did. Depending on who was there, we’d stare or steal glimpses at each other. In those shared moments, the unsaid was more eloquent than a million words. She knew. I was confident I’d get her in the end. I had a plan. I’d wait, bide my time. She’d get older, mature, finish university. I’d graduate with second-class upper honours, and so it wouldn’t be hard to find a job. Kaniye wouldn’t be so protective then. Even if he was, I wouldn’t care because I knew he couldn’t stop me. No man ever stopped me from taking what I wanted.

Without meaning to, two men stopped me. The first, her father. He sent her to London, a few months later, for her university education. Amaibi, the other, was already in London. People who have been there say London can be a lonely place. The plan was that Amaibi would look out for her, show her round, and help her settle in. No one knows exactly what happened, but they went beyond the plan. Two years later, Amaibi and Dise were living together. It was only Kaniye who knew about it then, and he was quietly furious with Amaibi. A year later, Dise graduated, but refused to come back. That’s when she told her parents the truth about her and Amaibi. She wanted to be with Amaibi who was pursuing his doctorate. Besides, she had been offered a job as a junior international correspondent with the BBC, and she wanted to work for a while. Her father, a proud man, did not appreciate that his favourite child was a live-in lover and was also chasing other people’s stories in foreign lands. When I heard about Dise and Amaibi during the Christmas of 1994, I was too busy setting up my oil bunkering empire to worry unduly about it. I expected it to pass. It didn’t.

Both of them finally returned in early January 1997. The wedding was fixed for later that month in Port Harcourt. Kaniye was still slightly curt with Amaibi. Tubo was too unserious to be considered. So, in a cruel twist of fate, Amaibi asked me to be his best man.

Dise's first question was, 'Do you really think kidnapping of expatriates helps the people of the Niger Delta in any way?'

I shook my head and looked straight into her eyes, and the tripod-mounted camcorder behind her which was focused on my face. 'You've missed the point. It's not about helping the people of the Niger Delta. I think it's too late for that. It's about making it difficult for the bloodsuckers to loot our oil. It is war.'

'War? So you see yourself as a revolutionary?'

I shook my head again. 'No. A revolutionary fights in the hope that he will change a system. I'm a realist. I know nothing I do will change the system. The system has made trillions of dollars from persistently brutalising and sodomising my people. The system has too many interests, politicians and bullshit talk-shops. Fifty, hundred years from now, they'll all still be blabbing about the problems, without doing anything about them. Just like the Middle East.' Dise leaned forward.

'If you cannot change the system, why then are you still fighting?'

I shrugged. 'Because a man should never just lie down and accept defeat. He should go down fighting.'

'What's your response to those who say you fight for your ego, your belly and your pocket, but not for the people of the Niger Delta?'

I shook my head in wonder. 'Is it the government or the companies who are fighting for the people of the Niger Delta? But, to answer your question, I'll say they are right in a way. And they are also wrong. Look, the Niger Delta Struggle is essentially a fight for oil, or the control and use of the resources from oil. No one fights for oil for purely philanthropic purposes. Yes, I have made some money from my fight. But there is also an ideological angle to my fight. In taking what is rightfully mine, I hope I inspire my people to stand up and take what is rightfully theirs.'

'Taking what is rightfully theirs? But the law says…'

I cut in. 'I know the nonsense that the law says. But, it's an unjust law. And in the words of Dr Martin Luther King Jr., "One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."'

'But must it be through kidnappings, oil bunkering and bombing of oil installations? Must it be through violent and illegal means?'

'It will be by any means necessary, to paraphrase Malcolm X.'

Her eyes flashed. 'You do realise that your actions have inspired a growing and frightening menace? There are now several self-styled

militant groups who are really glorified political thugs, robbers, arsonists, rapists, and assassins. In years to come, it is predicted that these people will hijack and cheapen the Niger Delta Struggle. What is your response to that?'

I shrugged, 'I didn't create these people. They are products of the system. The system which was created by the government, the oil companies and some of our own people. Your Bible, I think, says, if you sow the wind, you'll reap the whirlwind. The system is designed to sow confusion, divide-and-rule, and injustice. So, naturally, the system will only reap monsters.'

'You mentioned that some of our own people are in the system. It's no secret that we, the people of the Niger Delta, are our own worst enemies. Some of our governors loot our states' share of oil revenues; some of our chiefs and youth leaders frustrate development from coming to our communities simply because they won't receive any monetary percentages for the contracts. Yet we always blame the oil companies and the government. Don't you think we should shoulder some, if not all, of the blame for this mess we're in?'

'I agree. This is the land of the vulture. Here we eat ourselves. Always have, always will. It's not in my power to change our people. I leave that to God.' She softened a little.

'What made you choose this lifestyle? What pushed you to become a militant?'

I shrugged. 'I didn't choose this lifestyle. I didn't choose to be born in Asiama in the Niger Delta. The Slave Trade ended centuries ago, but I was born and raised in a different kind of slavery. My people groaned about it for years, but they still choose to live under it, suffering and smiling, like Fela says. I read somewhere that everyone has their destiny. If suffering in silence is my people's destiny, who am I to quarrel with it? But it's not mine. It is not my destiny to live as a slave in the mud with another man's boot on my neck. I'd rather fight and die. That is my destiny. What pushed me to become what I am? The slavery pushed me. The system pushed me. Asiama in 1997 pushed me.'

'It's estimated that about ten soldiers and security personnel have lost their lives when doing battle with your group. Would you say this number is accurate?'

‘How many innocent people did the soldiers kill in Asiama in 1997? What of Odi? Ogoni? Can you tell me the total number?’

‘How many foreigners have you kidnapped?’

‘Only fifty-nine,’ I said with regret.

‘There are insinuations that you haven’t been arrested because you are in cahoots with some powerfully placed people. What do you say to that?’

‘Yes, I have secret sympathisers in government, but I’m no one’s stooge. Unlike others, nobody finances me. So nobody tells me what to do.’

‘You are totally defiant and unapologetic. Don’t you have any regrets?’

‘Just two.’

‘Tell me about them.’

I smiled bitterly. ‘The first is that I never got a chance with the only woman I ever wanted to be with.’ Dise lowered her eyes and pretended to scribble in her notepad. She sat on the only chair in the room. It was the same chair Kaniye had sat on weeks ago, when he had come to one of my hideouts in Asiama Waterside. Dise still had that spell over me, even after all these years. She had grown more beautiful, but there was now a hidden grief and anger about her. I saw it in her eyes, the death of innocence and a once bubbly spirit. I wanted to ask her about it – after all, we were alone in the room. I wanted to stand up from the bed where I sat, go over to her, put an arm over her shoulder and tell her it was going to be okay. But I couldn’t. She was Amaibi’s wife.

‘And what is your second regret?’ she asked, gently bringing me back to business. I held her eyes. ‘My actions have put a close friend of mine into trouble.’

‘You mean Amaibi Akassa?’

‘Yes. I’d use this opportunity to say that Amaibi Akassa did not do any of the things he is facing trial for. He did not plan with me to kidnap Brian Manning. He did not kidnap him. He had no hand in Manning’s heart attack and death. He did not benefit from the ransom that was paid. I alone, accept full responsibility for those events. But the government knows all this, anyway. They just want to silence another true leader from the Niger Delta.’

‘So you think the prosecution of Amaibi Akassa is unfair?’

‘I think it’s a sham, a circus.’

‘Let’s go on to other things. Do you want the oil companies and foreigners to leave the Niger Delta?’

I thought about it for a moment. ‘No. I suppose they should stay. They make money from raping my land for oil. I make money from kidnapping them for ransom. It’s a symbiotic relationship, everybody should be happy.’ Dise actually laughed. I stared at her in surprise. I hadn’t intended it to be funny.

‘So what’s your message to the oil companies?’

‘What’s the point in sending them a message? They’re too drunk on my oil to listen.’

‘Not all of them are. But what if they could listen?’

‘Then make sure they get this message. I’m sure they’ll understand.’ I gave the camera my middle finger as I smiled for the first time. As Dise’s mouth fell open in shock, I pressed my advantage. ‘And this is for all the big bellied bastards in government, especially Mr President himself, who has contributed to the oppression and killing of my people.’ I gave the unique Nigerian insult that is considered more offensive than the one I had just given the oil companies. I stretched my left hand forward; spread my fingers out wide, palm facing the camera – ‘Your father!’

They caught me with my pants down. It happened like this: After the interview, I asked Dise to stay awhile so we could catch up on old times, but she declined with a coldness in her eyes. I understood. To her, I was no longer ‘Brother Doye’ of her teenage years, or the friend who stood beside Amaibi at their wedding. I was now a fiendish stranger. And for the first time, I doubted if my choices in life had been the right ones. As she packed up hurriedly and left, I was weighed by an enormous sadness. That was when my phone beeped with a text message that read ‘I’m waiting for you. Naked!’ It lifted my spirits and made me smile. It was from Lolia, Lolia of the long, slightly-bowed, perfect legs and of many mini-skirts. Lolia and I didn’t have a relationship. We had a mutual sexual obsession with each other. It was always a sensual, sweaty and savage meeting of flesh and fluids. A night of frenzied lust with Lolia was just what I needed

to take my mind off Dise. It took me just seventeen minutes of mad driving to get from Asiama Waterside in Old Town, to Orazi, the neighbourhood where I maintained an apartment for Lolia. It was a fenced bungalow, hidden by a luxuriant hedge of bougainvilleas and hibiscuses.

The lights in her apartment were switched off. But, as Lolia opened the door for me completely naked, stupidly, I forgot to ask why. There was no need for words or greetings between us. She tore at my clothes feverishly. She unzipped my jeans and dragged them down in one furious movement. Then, she unclasped my pouch which I always wore around my waist, and made to fling it to a corner. Instinctively I paused my pawing of her body and stopped her hand. I recovered the pouch from her. The pouch held two things that were never far from me – my money, and more importantly, my Micro Uzi. And, Lolia loved my money a lot more than she loved sex with me. I held the strap of the pouch in same hand with which I held and lifted her bottom. Her legs clasped my thighs. Still kissing and groping, we waddled into the bedroom, which thankfully, was lit. It was when we collapsed on the bed that I gently dropped the pouch on the rug, beside the bed – somewhere within reach, or so I thought. That was my second mistake.

Twenty minutes later, spent and sticky, she rolled off me. She sat at the edge of the bed, backing me, and showing off the contours of her buttocks. She turned, and gave me the drowsy smile of the sexually satiated.

‘I’ll be right back. Let me go clean up.’

I nodded. As she got off the bed, she bent down briefly to pick our clothes strewn on the rug. She went into the adjoining bathroom, and shut the door behind her. I lay back contentedly, closed my eyes and drifted. My final mistake.

Two minutes later, they started slipping into the bedroom. The heavy rug muffled the sounds of their feet. But, I sensed them, from deep in my daydream. I opened my eyes suddenly and saw the six of them. Dressed in black, with stocking masks over their faces and all holding handguns. Everything happened in a blur. I surprised them with the speed with which I sprang to the side of the bed. As I moved, I remembered the boast of the South African arms dealer, who had sold me the Micro Uzi. ‘This machine pistol can empty a 20-round magazine in less than a second,’ he had said. I needed just one second. I could hold off a small army with that gun. Six

men would stand no chance. I reached down to the spot where I had dropped my pouch. It wasn't there. I groped frantically. It wasn't there.

Kai! They caught me with my pants down. They laughed because they knew what I was looking for, and they didn't expect me to find it. Lolia! Lolia of the flawless, but treacherous legs. Lolia of the great sex, and the even greater betrayal. Lolia who had taken my pouch to the bathroom. For a fleeting moment, I wondered how much they had paid the bitch. Then I turned, slowly, to face the guns pointing at me. The closest man to me moved back instinctively. Despite the mask, his gait and stocky build were familiar. I knew who he was. Suddenly I understood everything. I smiled bitterly as I hailed him.

'Kabongo, my second-in-command. After all these years. Is this your own coup, or did Wali send you to kill me?' They all flinched, and cast worried glances at Kabongo. I shook my head. I had one more regret. 'I should have known that Snow White was too stupid to spy on me. It was you all the time.' I was still crouched, half-kneeling, by the bedside. There was an empty Coca Cola bottle by the bedside. It reminded me of Dise, and how angelic she looked that day she gave me a taste of the sweetest Coca Cola ever. I closed my eyes. I cleared my mind. The fear was still there, but it was now under control. The weight of the world still weighed me down, but it couldn't stop me. My fingers closed gently over the neck of the bottle. I knew what I had to do. I didn't expect any mercy. I thought of Dise again. And I smiled.

Again my speed surprised them. I broke the end of the bottle, expertly, by the bedpost. At the same time, I was already up and flying. It was all one fluid movement. Kabongo tried to duck, but he couldn't get out of the way in time. As I smashed the jagged edge of the bottle into his right eye, the impact jolted my entire left arm, up to my shoulder. I was rewarded with a soft bursting sound, which Kabongo's piercing shriek couldn't drown. Kabongo's warm, thick, blood sprayed violently on my face and dripped from my hands. I opened my hand and left the bottle sticking grotesquely out of his eye socket. My smile was still there, a frozen death mask on my face. Suddenly, I felt a dozen pinpricks all over me. I looked down. Blood spurted from the tiny, ugly, holes that were miraculously appearing on my body. Seconds later I heard the booms of the gunshots. Above it all, Lolia started screaming. I turned to the other men. I couldn't see properly because a heavy red curtain of blood had

almost blinded me. I could just make out their shadowy figures. They were shooting me. I dropped ponderously to my knees. The darkness swooped down and embraced me.

BOOK IV
1997

Chapter 26
Amaibi
Port Harcourt, 1997

‘Someday, the oil will dry up. What then?’ I held the eyes and attention of my first audience in Nigeria – a group of six undergraduates from Asiama. They sat quietly in a semi-circle, on the leather easy chairs in the lobby of the Presidential Hotel, where I was staying. They were a serious group, who had followed my international campaign for an environmental revolution in Nigeria’s oil industry with pride. Their visit to welcome back ‘Asiama’s brightest star’, as they referred to me, had turned into an impromptu mini rally.

‘What plans do the government and companies have for our land and people after they finish drilling the oil? What are they doing to prevent the landslides, earthquakes and subsidence that may happen to our land after all the oil is sucked out?’ I knew the questions by heart. I had asked them a million times before. ‘Are the companies forced to properly treat oil-field water, a by-product of oil drilling, before pumping it into our rivers? Isn’t that why our aquatic life and vegetation are polluted and dying?’ There were still no answers. But I asked anyway. ‘What about waste management? How do they treat and dispose of sludge? Who ensures that old pipelines are maintained or replaced? Don’t get me started on gas flaring and our government’s failure to devise a policy to utilise our gas reserves.’ I shrugged, almost apologetically ‘And that is why, my brothers, I will continue to speak out against the evil and stupid way oil is drilled in our land, especially now that I’m back. That is why you will continue to hear my voice–’

‘Forget about your voice, and do something about your height short man!’

The voice came from behind me. The spell broke. The faces of my audience froze in frowns as they looked over my shoulder at the man who had rudely interrupted me. One of them even stood up and glared

menacingly at him. I turned round slowly to face the man. I sized him up. ‘I’m still taller than you, Tubo,’ I said, with a big smile on my face.

‘Only because of my one and half legs,’ He replied.

We hugged and laughed. Tubo had grown wider, tubbier. The other men smiled and relaxed. A few minutes later, I dispersed them, and turned to Tubo, ‘Should we go up to my suite?’ He shook his head,

‘Later. Let’s go to the bar first. I need to take at least one beer on your head.’

I frowned. ‘I won’t buy you alcohol. Take anything else.’ He sighed irritably,

‘You can’t buy me beer, but you can fornicate with Dise for years.’

I grimaced. Eleven years hadn’t mellowed Tubo’s tongue. Dise and I returned to Nigeria yesterday, three days after New Year’s Day. It was a time when everyone looked back longingly at the fast-fading memories of the Christmas holidays. As usual, Boney M’s Christmas Album, especially ‘*Mary’s Boy Child/Oh My Lord*’ ruled the airwaves. The explosions of fireworks could still be heard occasionally. Burnt tyres smouldered in the middle of the streets, the reminders of the bonfires of New Year’s Day. And the dry Harmattan winds blew dust, goodwill and fresh starts to all men.

We were looking forward to a fresh start. Our wedding was going to hold in two weeks. ‘Look, Tubo, Dise and I may have shared a flat in London mainly for financial reasons, but I assure you nothing happened between us. We’re Christians.’ Tubo laughed at me.

‘Abeg make I hear word na only una be Christians? Leave that Bible story and come, let’s go to the bar. You should be ashamed of yourself if you refuse to pay for my beer. Anyway, I have money, just in case.’

We went to the bar. We made small talk, trying to catch up on old times, till Tubo was halfway through his first beer. He sneered as I sipped orange juice. Then, he looked round the lavish furnishings of the hotel.

‘Ol boy, so what are you doing in this hotel?’

‘The wedding is here in Port Harcourt in two weeks, and I have to be in town because of all the preparations. My parents stay in Asiama and I can’t stay with Dise and her parents in their house here.’

Tubo nodded, ‘Two weeks in this hotel is quite expensive. You can stay in my house. Hey, we’ll have fun. The girls in my neighbourhood are beautiful, adventurous–’ He was stopped by the look on my face. ‘What?

Why are you looking at me like that for? You are not yet married to Dise. Besides, it's not cheating. It's your birth right as a man. That's the way we were created.' As I started to protest, he added slyly, 'Or, you can stay in Kaniye's place.'

I shook my head. 'Kaniye's seems upset with me. I'm not sure why. Since we came back he's chosen not to see me.' Tubo chuckled,

'What do you expect? Before you travelled, you were closest to him, he looked out for you. You travelled to London and you wrote to him a lot. Years later, his baby sister goes to London and he puts her in your care, but what do you do? You start screwing her...'

'Tubo, I've told you. We haven't had sex yet.' Tubo nodded.

'Right. Where was I? Ah, yes. You were screwing Dise for years and years. I know you guys fell in love and all that crap, but I can't get the thought of you guys at it off my mind.' He slapped my shoulder so hard that the glass of juice in my hand slopped and spilled. I winced. Tubo laughed. 'By the way, congrats, man. You did what Doye and I always wanted to do, but couldn't. Kaniye would have killed us. I mean, he even had us treating a hot chick like Dise as our sister. Can you imagine the unfair pressure he put us under?' He shook his head, obviously still rankled by Kaniye's injustice. 'I guess you guys stopped writing Kaniye when you started humping. I don't think he begrudged you screwing his sister. After all, someone had to do it, and you are not such a bad choice, being a goody goody, right? I mean, you even decided to come back to Nigeria, get married, settle down – great! The only problem is, Kaniye heard of it only two days before you returned and from Sir James of all people.'

'Look, we didn't mean to…' I sighed, took off my glasses, and rubbed my eyes. 'I guess we owe Kaniye a big apology.' Tubo nodded and downed the last of his beer. He looked round the hotel again. 'Anyway, my house is still open to you, even if you chose not to exercise your birth right.'

'Thanks, but don't worry about it. I'm booked to stay in this hotel for a few months. Well, until we return from our honeymoon and are able to get a place of ours. Guess who's paying?' Tubo raised an eyebrow,

'Who?'

'Doye. He says it's his gift to us. We saw him yesterday. He seems to be doing quite well. He said he is into the business of independent oil

marketing.' Tubo's laughter roared above the hum of the quiet bar. He slapped the bar and shook his head.

'Isn't this ironic? Amaibi – Mr Pious has his hotel bills paid with money from stolen and smuggled petroleum products. Independent oil marketing is a respectable moniker for oil bunkering.' When I finally closed my mouth which had been left open in surprise, Tubo explained, 'After three futile years of begging oil companies for employment, Doye now manages Chief Dumo Ikaki's massive oil bunkering operation. Now, he makes more than what he would ever have earned in any of the oil companies. The money is so unbelievable, and Doye is so generous they've nicknamed him Doughboy.' He sighed regretfully. 'I'm working for the wrong people. I wish I had Doye's luck.'

I sighed, 'I'm going to check out from this hotel today.'

'Why? Is it because I told you how Doye makes his money?'

I shrugged. 'You know me, Tubo.' Tubo shook his head and glared at me.

'Do you realise how annoying you are whenever you get sanctimonious?'

My smile was sad, 'Tubo, I can't apologise for doing the right thing.'

'Whatever. So, when you check out, where are you going to stay?'

'I'm not sure yet; maybe a cheaper hotel. I'll have to discuss it with Dise.'

'Well, my house is still open, whatever you guys decide. Here's the address.'

Tubo wrote his address on a paper napkin, and handed it to me. 'Thanks, brother.' I smiled and patted his shoulder. 'Now, tell me about Asiama. What's going on there? Is it true that there's still no electricity?'

'Asiama's worse than you left it,' he replied. 'And yes, there's still no electricity.'

'What are the chiefs doing?'

'Kissing Chief Ikaki's arse and lining their pockets, that's what.' His laughter was bitter. 'Chief Ikaki now runs the Chiefs Council with an iron fist. He is also the Amayanabo's puppet-master.'

'What about Kaniye's father? My father?'

'The Chiefs Council banished Sir James and two of his loyalists from Asiama. That's why your traditional wedding is going to take place

in Port Harcourt instead of Asiama. After they removed Sir James, your father was easy. You know your father is not a chief, but was allowed to deliberate in their meetings because of his standing in the town, and because he was the original choice for Amayanabo. Most people wish he hadn't declined the throne, allowing that imbecile to be crowned instead. Anyway, after Sir James left, the Chiefs Council passed a resolution specifically targeted at your father. The resolution simply prevented non-chiefs from attending their meetings.'

'But why? I mean what did they do? Why were they removed from the Chiefs Council?'

'They questioned Chief Ikaki's role in the failed Asiama Electricity Project.' I raised my eyebrows. Tubo sighed, 'It's a long story.'

'Give me the short version of it.' He sighed again and regarded his empty glass.

'Okay, but it will cost you two more beers. It's not natural for a storyteller to talk for free.'

Tubo waited till another icy bottle of beer was placed before him. He took his time pouring the golden liquid into his slightly tilted glass. Then he took a sip, and smacked his lips. 'Right, so where do I start from?'

'The beginning would be nice,' I said.

'Ah, the beginning. Once upon a time, three years ago, we decided to initiate and fund the Asiama Electricity Project. When I say we, I mean Imperial Oil, where I work. Now, our business is oil, not electricity. So we decided to keep the Project as simple as possible – to provide, run and maintain one of those giant generators capable of powering the entire Asiama Town. Like I said, electricity is not our business. So we had to use a skilled contractor to perform the Project. And that's where the problems started. In an ideal world, we would have called for bids from competent contractors, gone through a screening process, and chosen the best contractor. But this is not an ideal world. Now as you know, Chief Ikaki is not only an Asiama chief, but also arguably the most powerful politician in this State. He is also a Special Adviser under the present military Governor, and is said to have his ear. You cannot begin to imagine the kind of influence Chief Ikaki wields in this State, especially in these uncertain times with the military boys in power. Anyway, Imperial Oil could not afford to slight a man like Chief Ikaki when he indicated interest

in performing the Project through his company, Tortoiseshell Limited. It didn't matter that before then, Tortoiseshell hadn't executed any electrification contracts. Imperial couldn't dare to consider any other contractor. Tubo took a long swig of beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'After insisting on and receiving full payment from Imperial, Tortoiseshell bought a second-hand contraption from one Asian country. It powered parts of Asiama Town for all of twenty-three days before falling apart. I say parts of Asiama Town because the whole town was never completely wired. Coincidentally, it was the houses of Chief Ikaki's enemies that were not wired. In the end, it didn't matter anyway, because the so-called generator broke down irreparably. Anyway, Sir James, your father and two other chiefs were the only ones bold enough to take Chief Ikaki to task at the Council meeting. Sir James accused the Amayanabo and other chiefs of not speaking out because they had received hefty bribes from Chief Ikaki's considerable profits. Then he shocked them further by stating precisely how much each of them had received. They feigned anger. They said Sir James had insulted them. They said Sir James had no respect for the Amayanabo. They asked him to apologise to them. He refused. They banished him and his two loyalists from Asiama, never to return unless they were willing to apologise.' Tubo held his glass up and admired the millions of beer bubbles. 'Funny enough, no one has ever denied Sir James's accusations.'

I did a slow head shake. 'I didn't know things had gotten this bad.' He smiled and raised his glass in a mock toast.

'Welcome home.' I brooded over my orange juice. Tubo enjoyed the rest of his beer. 'So what are your plans now that you're back?'

'I start lecturing at the State University after my wedding and honeymoon.'

'Nonsense!' Tubo snorted. 'To me, lecturers don't do any work except go on strike, or screw their students – literally and figuratively. Besides, the pay's a joke.' I glared at Tubo. He shrugged. 'Okay, okay, I may have exaggerated a little about lecturers. But my point is, you can do a lot better than to rot away in the university. With your qualifications and reputation, any oil company will kill to have you on its payroll.'

Suddenly, Tubo spread his arms wide, his eyes shining bright. 'Hey, I just had a brilliant idea. Why don't you come work for us? I mean

Imperial Oil. Name your salary, and I swear on my mother, I'll make sure you get it.'

'You don't know your mother.'

The look of surprise lasted on Tubo's face for only a second, before he shrugged and chided, 'Let's not make this about me. Come work for us, and we'll make you a very rich man.'

I shook my head, 'There are things you should never put a price on.'

'Don't be ridiculous. Everything, everyone has a price.'

'Perhaps.' In the silence that followed I realised I could still read Tubo. Even after eleven years, and what I had just read drew a sad smile of disappointment from me. I pushed the glass of orange juice away. 'Go back to your bosses, Tubo. Tell them it'll take more than a fantastic job offer, more than all their money, to buy my silence.' Tubo looked away, but didn't deny it.

'You're missing the point. You've got responsibilities; a wife-to-be and aging parents to take care of. You shouldn't sacrifice their comfort and happiness on the altar of some unrealistic ideal.' He sighed. 'At least take some time to think about our offer. Talk it over with Dise.'

He wondered why I laughed so hard. When I finished I said, 'Let me tell you about Dise. She encouraged me to speak out against what your criminal government and oil companies are doing to our land. She marched with me at rallies and protests, usually just a handful of us, in the rain, sometimes in the freezing snow. She took advantage of all her contacts as a journalist to give international publicity to my views. She already thinks your company is run by bloodsuckers. Your offer has only confirmed that.' Tubo bowed his head. I stood up. 'Tell your company to do the right things, to clean up their act. Then I'll be silent.' I patted his shoulder. 'I'll see you.' I said as I walked away. Tubo waited till I had gone far before calling out,

'Amaibi!' I turned. He had already started laughing. 'So, do you mean you are still a virgin?'

It was the last time in our lives we were all together in the same place. We just didn't know it then. It was on Tubo's twenty-seventh

birthday June 29, 1997. He threw a ‘small’ party in his flat for ‘only close friends’. By the time I arrived there at about four in the afternoon, there were at least fifty people gyrating wildly in the compound. Some even spilled out onto the street. As expected, most of the revellers were scantily clad girls. Slowly, I fought my way through the crowd till I found Kaniye and Doye lounging on the only couch in a corner of the sitting room. They were watching Tubo dance with three girls. There wasn’t much dancing. The girls simply sandwiched Tubo, and rubbed their bodies against him. Tubo stood still; face up, almost trance-like, holding a different pair of buttocks in each hand. I shook my head, shook hands with Kaniye and Doye, and sat between them. Tubo saw me, smiled and whispered something to one of the girls. She sized me up for a while, and then she broke off from the group and danced towards me. She looked just like any of my students – pretty young thing, in her late teens or early twenties. Her tiny, yellow dress showed off her slim figure and long legs.

She writhed provocatively in front of me, and slowly wagged her crooked forefinger at me, an unmistakeable invitation. Tubo and Kaniye cheered. I smiled at the girl and shook my head. In response, she spread out her legs, and danced low to the ground. Her short dress ran up to her hips, and I could clearly see her black, lacy panties. Tubo and Kaniye roared and whooped. I turned away and raised my left hand. With my thumb, I pointed to the wedding band on my outstretched finger. The girl smiled, half apologetic, half mischievous, and danced away. Tubo and Kaniye groaned their disappointment.

‘Where’s Dise?’ Doye asked.

‘She’ll join me here later. She had some errands to run, which included getting Tubo a card and gift.’

Tubo left the girls and came over to where we sat. After we shook hands, he waved one arm around. ‘My friend, have you seen the number of chicks in this place? If I’m ever mad enough to get married, I would never go to parties with my wife.’ He shook his head again to reinforce his disappointment. ‘Meanwhile, what will you drink? Gulder or Star? If you don’t want beer, there’s wine and Champagne.’

‘Very funny. You know I don’t drink alcohol.’

Tubo smirked, ‘Too bad. I only serve alcohol at my parties.’

‘Don’t mind him.’ Kaniye pushed a bottle of Coca Cola into my hand. He waited for me to open the bottle before asking, ‘Mr University

Lecturer, so how're you finding your dream job?'

Before I could reply, Tubo sighed, 'Dream ke? Nightmare, you mean? Lecturing in Nigeria is thankless, low-paying labour. The only benefits are the girls you may get to meet. But Amaibi – slack man, is not interested in the girls, abi?'

'Obviously, Tubo, you're still upset that Amaibi turned you down and refused to work for Imperial Oil.' Doye was smiling as he said this, a cruel smile.

Tubo tried to pull a nonchalant face, 'His loss, not mine.'

Still smiling, Doye turned to me, 'But Tubo has a point. Do you think you can give Dise all she deserves with your pay as a lecturer?'

It was meant to sting. It did. And I retaliated. I held Doye's eyes as I snapped, 'Dise chose me. Get over it! And you, Tubo, you and your company should give up on me, and go buy someone else's conscience.'

Kaniye stepped in and raised his right hand. 'Gentlemen, we have two simple choices we fight, or we party. I suggest we party like there's no tomorrow. But, before we do that, let's do a round of toasts for Tubo on his birthday. We should all say something, I'll go first.' He put his arm round Tubo's shoulder and said, 'Tubo, I wish you good health, and long life. At the rate you are going, you can only have good health and long life if you always use these...' With a flourish, Kaniye produced a strip of eight condoms from the back pocket of his jeans. Even I joined in the laughter. Kaniye continued, 'I got you a whole carton for your birthday present. Never forget to use them. If you run out, call me. I'll replace them. Serious.' He pointed at me, 'Amaibi, your turn...'

I shrugged and smiled at Tubo, 'What can I say? I think your story is extraordinary. I remember when we were children; many people in Asiama said you wouldn't amount to much. But, God surprised them, and has blessed you more than you will ever realise. I pray He continues to do so. I also pray that someday, you'll get a glimpse of just how much He loves you. Happy Birthday.'

'Amen, Preacher.' Kaniye chorused.

We all turned to look at Doye. He looked bored, 'Do I have to say anything?'

Kaniye nodded. 'C'mon, say something – what do you feel about Tubo today?

Doye tilted his glass towards Tubo. ‘Unfortunate oyibo, you are all sweet talk, broken promises and bullshit. And you can’t excuse it as being part of your job; it’s who you really are. You’re the biggest liar we know. Even today, June 29th, is not your real birthday. I hope you find out the real date before next year. Nice party though.’ He sneered and raised his glass, ‘Cheers?’

An awkward silence followed. At first, Tubo looked crushed. Then it seemed like he considered pouring his beer on Doye’s face. Even Kaniye was lost for words. Finally, Tubo exhaled loudly and gulped his beer. We did not clink glasses.

Suddenly, I felt out of place, like I didn’t really know these men I had been talking with. I think it was at that moment I first realised that we had lost the bond that held our friendship as a group. There were still individual ties among us, but together, we seemed to be a gathering of friends of friends.

‘Why are you guys looking morose?’ It was Dise. She came up to me first, threw one hand across my neck and kissed me on the lips, ‘Hi, Dr Love. Missed me? I’ve got news for you. Just wait, let me finish saying hello to the boys.’ She hugged Kaniye, and ran a hand through his thinning hair, tuttuting, ‘Bros, you are going bald like your father o! Give up trying to grow hair, and shave it all off.’ She waved cheerily at Doye. Then she kissed Tubo on the cheek and handed him the small plastic bag she was holding, ‘Happy birthday, from my Amaibi and I. Hope you like. Meanwhile, is there a quiet room somewhere in this mad house? I need a moment alone with my husband.’

Tubo’s eyes lit up. ‘Ah, a quickie? You can use my bedroom. First door on the right down that corridor. Just don’t make Amaibi scream too loudly.’

‘It’s the other way round, trust me,’ She winked at the open-mouthed Tubo and dragged me through the dance floor, to Tubo’s room. There, she quickly shut the door behind me.

I smiled indulgently, ‘So, what’s the big news, or did we really come here for a quickie?’ Dise took a step back and folded her arms. She cocked her head slightly, like she always did when she was in deep thought, and she watched me for a moment. Her eyes sparkled and she tried to suppress a smile.

‘We’re pregnant.’

I opened my mouth started to speak and all I could do was stutter. A whirlwind had scattered the thoughts in my head, so they couldn't come together again. All I could do was smile, the biggest, widest smile of my life. I sat on Tubo's giant bed and pulled my wife to sit on my legs. We sat in silence, holding each other, and smiled till our cheeks hurt. Finally, Dise whispered,

'I took some tests yesterday. I bumped into the doctor at the super-market today, and he told me the results. I'm three weeks gone.'

I rubbed her tummy gently. It was still flat. Her smile got wider. 'You can't feel him yet.'

'Him?' I croaked. 'You did a scan?'

She shook her head. 'No. I just know it's a boy.' She held my face in her hands. 'I was thinking you'd love it if we name him Francis, after your father.'

I nodded, lowered my head and whispered to her tummy, 'Francis Kaniye Akassa.' I raised my head to meet her surprised grin, and explained, 'Kaniye is the only one of my friends who's not completely insane. Besides, he's your brother. I think it's only fair to also give our child a name from his mother's family.'

After that, we just sat there in contented peace, smiling, holding each other, and making silent plans. About half an hour later, we heard a knock on the door, and Tubo's voice from behind it.

'Can I come in for a minute?'

I opened the door. 'Hey, we were about to come out anyway.'

'Don't bother.' Tubo hobbled in and headed for his wardrobe. 'I just want to get a change of clothes. I've just been radioed into work. I know, it's a Sunday but it appears there's been an emergency. But you guys should stay and enjoy the party, okay?'

'No problem.' I held Dise's hand and we walked towards the door.

'We'll be outside,' I called over my shoulder.

'Amaibi.' I turned and noticed how grim Tubo's face was. 'I guess I should tell you what the emergency is. Besides, you're going to hear about it anyway.'

'What is it?'

'An oil spill just occurred in the Asiama River.' Then Tubo looked away as he added, 'From one of Imperial's pipelines.'

Chapter 27
Tubo
Port Harcourt, 1997

The lawsuit came quickly – three weeks after the oil spill. I didn't hear of it from the usual office gossip. McCulloch himself, told me. In 1997, Billy Joe McCulloch was the Head of Operations and General Manager of Imperial Oil. He was a grizzly giant of a man, with a roar for a voice, especially when he was angry, which was always. The rumour was that his hothead had landed him in trouble with the Imperial Oil bosses at Headquarters, and as punishment, he, a core driller, was banished to a desk job, in Nigeria. Even at that, McCulloch still considered himself a rebel he was always wore jeans and baseball hats to work. That day, McCulloch sent for me. I was accompanied to his office by Dapo Arowosogbonu, the Administration and Personnel Manager. Although Arowosogbonu had not been invited to see McCulloch, he had insisted on coming with me, as my immediate boss. The truth was, Arowosogbonu couldn't bear the thought of McCulloch and I having a conversation in his absence he lived in the constant fear that everyone in his department was after his job. Of course, I hated Arowosogbonu. As soon as we entered his office, McCulloch waved me over and handed me a small bundle of papers.

'Tell me what you think,' he boomed.

Arowosogbonu stretched out his hand, and made to receive them from me. McCulloch frowned. 'Mr A, is there something I can do for you?'

Shameless, Arowosogbonu replied, 'I...I...I'm here to help in this matter, sir.'

McCulloch grew red. 'The hell you are! When I need your help, I'll ask for it. Now...' McCulloch pointed to the door and Arowosogbonu slunk out.

I hid my smile behind the papers. After the door closed, I quickly scanned the papers. The lawsuit was filed that morning, on behalf of the

Asiama Fishermen Cooperative. It wanted a billion naira in damages from Imperial Oil for the spill in Asiama River. It was filed by Kaniye Rufus. Attached to the court papers was a copy of a report detailing the ecological devastation caused by the oil spill. The report was signed by Amaibi Akassa (Ph.D.).

The most damning things were the pictures: pictures of black oil gushing into the lifeless river, dead fish, damaged nets and traps, and the haunted faces of some fishermen. Imperial Oil received thousands of lawsuits every year, many of which were frivolous. This was not one of them. McCulloch pulled his handlebar moustache.

‘You’re from the Asiama area, right? Tell me, who are the people behind this lawsuit?’ My smile was wry.

‘The brain behind it, I would guess, is Amaibi Akassa. He’s a man of science, who fights oil companies because he considers himself some sort of environmental champion. You heard of that oil spill on the Forcados River, from Black Star Oil’s platform?’

McCulloch nodded, ‘The one that some stupid court awarded a hundred million in damages last month?’

‘Yes, that one. Those who were there say it was Dr. Akassa’s report and testimony that convinced the court to hammer Black Star Oil.’ McCulloch gave me a sly look,

‘How much money will it cost us to buy off this troublemaker?’

I suppressed a smile. McCulloch had been in his position for only two months, but he already understood how Imperial Oil’s Nigerian operation was run. I shook my head. ‘He’s not interested in money, sir. He’s on a crusade.’

‘What about the lawyer? Surely he can be compromised. He’s a lawyer for god’s sake.’

My headshake suddenly became more vigorous. ‘I don’t think so, sir. He’s loyal to his friends, and Dr. Akassa is his friend. He’s also cunning and ruthless. If we approach him, I know he’ll play along, but only so that he’ll publicly expose us at the trial. I strongly advise against talking to that man, sir.’

McCulloch opened his pack of Marlboros, lit one and blew smoke in the direction of the ‘No Smoking’ sign in his office. His voice quavered, betraying his fear.

‘Everything about the aftermath of this spill is unusual. First, the BBC came all the way down to the shithole that is Asiama, the very next day, to report on the spill. Our shares in London and New York are still reeling from that. Headquarters is breathing down my neck. This lawsuit is the last thing we need. We can’t afford any more bad publicity.’

I shook my head gently, ‘I’m afraid it’s too late for that, sir. I guess it was Dr. Akassa’s wife who got the BBC to report on the spill. She used to be a junior international correspondent for them until she moved back to Nigeria. The lawyer is also her brother. I suspect that by now, the BBC already has a copy of the lawsuit, or one is being sent to them.’

McCulloch went paler. He sucked his cigarette rapidly, like a desperate man would do for air. I waited and watched, fascinated, as his face slowly regained colour. Then he began a colourful tirade of cursing against everyone – environmentalists, journalists, lawyers, and the people who sent him to Nigeria. His face grew red as he did so. He only stopped cursing when he had smoked his cigarette down to the butt. He crushed it viciously on an intricate wooden ashtray. I said, ‘We can do some damage limitation, sir. Perhaps, we can show how quickly we’ve responded and...’

McCulloch snarled, ‘Three weeks after, the useless company we contracted to clean-up the spill hasn’t done anything yet. THREE WEEKS!’

I winced. I was not a scientist but even I knew that an oil spill, left uncleaned for that long, was a disaster. With a sudden sense of foreboding, I asked, ‘What company is that, sir?’

McCulloch glared at me. ‘The Big Chief’s company of course – Tortoiseshell Limited.’

‘I’m loyal, sir,’ I greeted Dumo Ikaki, a.k.a. the Big Chief, with a wide smile. He looked at me warily then wagged a fat forefinger,

‘Hmm, you? Are you sure you haven’t joined that your friend who has chosen to irritate me.’

I shook my head like it was too heavy for my shoulders. ‘Ah, my Chief, as a father and a wise man, you know how misguided children can be especially when they spend a long time overseas. That is Amaibi’s problem, sir, and by God’s grace, one day, he will be cured of his

madness. Just continue praying for him, sir.' Chief Ikaki stared, open-mouthed, at me. Then he nodded repeatedly as if he actually spent hours every day, praying for Amaibi's wellbeing. I beamed at Chief Ikaki to show my admiration for his Christian spirit. And I repeated, 'As for me, sir, I remain loyal and very committed.' A smile split Chief Ikaki's fat face, and he stretched his hand to me,

'Tubo, Tubo...'

I bowed and shook his hand with my two hands. 'My Chief, my Chief...' Chief Ikaki patted my shoulders,

'Good man. Good man.' He turned to face McCulloch and Mustapha, Imperial Oil's Head of Security, put an arm around my shoulder and said, 'Do you know this is a good man?'

They both smiled tightly in return. For a brief moment, everyone in Chief Ikaki's office was smiling. But, really, there was nothing for anyone to smile about. Five weeks after the spill, Tortoiseshell Limited was still bumbling about in its incompetent attempts to clean up the Asiama River. Amaibi held press conferences where in his quiet manner; he fired salvoes of lethal and unanswerable questions at Imperial Oil, McCulloch, Tortoiseshell Limited and Chief Dumo Ikaki. In Port Harcourt, Amaibi and thousands of university students waved placards, sang, marched and gave fiery speeches outside Imperial Oil's offices. In Asiama, Amaibi and hundreds of fishermen did the same things outside Asiama Base Camp. The BBC covered every demonstration, attended every press conference, quoted Amaibi extensively, repeated ad infinitum that Kaniye's lawsuit was still pending, and pestered Imperial Oil for comments which were never forthcoming.

As media wars go, this was a well thought-out, well-fought one. I could almost see Dise plotting strategy behind the scenes. They had understood early enough that war with international oil companies like Imperial Oil can only be properly waged through reputable international media coverage. The Nigerian media, though more impassioned and vocal, simply didn't have the clout to properly embarrass Imperial Oil. Besides, at that time, they were too busy either fighting or hiding from General Abacha. By the time CNN became interested in the goings on, Imperial Oil was desperate for a truce. McCulloch asked me to put out the fire. Knowing that Amaibi would listen to him, I spoke to Kaniye alone. I admitted that their media onslaught was impressive, but predicted that it

would soon run out of steam. Nigerians were too hungry to be interested in Asiama for long, and the world was waiting for the next earthquake in Asia, or suicide bombing in the Middle East to draw its attention. I offered, on behalf of Imperial Oil, an out-of-court settlement of the lawsuit, on the condition that Amaibi would be put on a tight leash.

Years later, I would learn that it was my offer that caused the big quarrel between Amaibi and Kaniye. Their rift, which lasted for about eight years, was only properly patched up in 2004 when Amaibi was arrested and Kaniye defended him. They quarrelled because they differed on how to respond to my offer. It was Amaibi who had convinced the Asiama Fishermen Cooperative to retain Kaniye as their lawyer and sue Imperial Oil for damages for the oil spill. But Amaibi's agenda went far beyond the lawsuit. He wanted to use the publicity from the spill and the lawsuit to press for radical changes in the way companies drilled for oil in Nigeria. He wanted restitution for the devastation of Asiama, and other communities in the Niger Delta. So, naturally, he was opposed to my offer. Kaniye, on the other hand, was more realistic. He understood the futility of Amaibi's proposed environmental and common sense revolution for Nigeria's oil industry – too many powerful people had their interests in leaving things as they were. He also didn't feel that he had to fight for anyone apart from his clients. He wanted to listen to the details of my offer before taking a decision.

When their argument got heated, Kaniye pulled a trump card and said that he was leaving the matter for his clients to decide. They both knew that the clients, the forty-nine dirt poor members of the Asiama Fishermen Cooperative, would not be interested in Amaibi's proposed reforms, or in the harmful effects of gas flaring, or that Imperial Oil had been pumping improperly treated drilling waste into the Asiama River for years. In the end, Kaniye had his way, Amaibi felt betrayed, and they were cold to each other after that. At Imperial Oil, we were pleasantly surprised to negotiate with Kaniye alone. However, it was still a bruising experience for us.

McCulloch ranted, raved and smoked a million Marlboros while Kaniye smiled, sipped water, and refused to even consider calling off Amaibi's media onslaught, which coincidentally, was fizzling out at the time. But Kaniye still had a good case, which had been strengthened by Amaibi's report and all the publicity. When the smoke finally cleared, the

lawsuit was settled for seventy-five million naira. That was last week. The news that Asiama now had forty-nine new millionaires spread quickly in the town. Unfortunately, it sparked a sinister turn of events. Yesterday, some faceless people shut down two flow stations along the Asiama River, effectively crippling Imperial Oil's daily crude oil production. Others went on an impromptu demonstration at Asiama Base Camp. It turned into a full scale riot. In the madness, all Imperial Oil's employees were beaten and chased out. One of the soldiers guarding Asiama Base Camp died instantly when he slipped off a boat and was mangled by the blades of the outboard engine.

Of all the events of yesterday, the real tragedy for Imperial Oil was not the death of the soldier, but that the closing down of its flow stations put a stop to its production of about 870,000 barrels per day. We needed the government to quickly intervene so we could go back to production. That was why we were meeting today with Chief Ikaki in his capacity as a Special Adviser to the Military Governor. The meeting was in Chief Ikaki's office in Government House. After our brief round of false smiles, Chief Ikaki was suddenly gruff,

'What do you people want?' He was still smarting from the humiliation he had suffered when one day in the past month; McCulloch had lost his cool and screamed obscenities at him for Tortoiseshell's incompetence. Mustapha briefed him on yesterday's events. When he finished, Chief Ikaki folded his short arms across his big stomach, leaned back and said, 'Let me guess. Now you need my help to clean up your mess?'

McCulloch, speaking in a tone that was better suited for a fearless demand of fundamental human rights, said, 'Correction. We want the government to provide the security for us to resume drilling immediately.'

Chief Ikaki chided him. 'Same difference, who do you think is the government? Until four months ago, this military Governor was just a commandant in the Army College. What does he know about running a state? I tell him what to do. I'm still going to be here when they redeploy him. I've been in every regime for the past twenty-seven years. Before that, I retired as a Colonel from the Nigerian Army. My former colleagues are all Generals, and they now run this country. This is not the State of Texas, Mr McCulloch. This is my State. And here, I am the government.'

I cut in quickly to diffuse the tension. ‘Let me assure you, sir, that we, at Imperial Oil, have nothing but the greatest respect for you and all your wonderful achievements.’ Then I switched quickly to the Asiama language. ‘Please forgive my boss, sir. He has been in the country for only two or three months. He hasn’t yet realised who you are. All he wants, sir, is for you to help us with your government’s security so we can go back to our business. We will really appreciate your help, sir.’ Then I smiled and winked. ‘Besides, sir, I promise that I’ll make sure we show you a generous gesture of our gratitude.’ Chief Ikaki took his time before replying, still in our language.

‘I have heard you. But you must warn him to watch his mouth.’ He turned and glared at McCulloch. ‘Or else, I will deal with him. It’s easy to get him arrested, thoroughly beaten up, kicked out of the country and...’

One of the three telephones on his desk rang, and interrupted Chief Ikaki’s description of the hospitality he would prefer to show McCulloch. He frowned at the ringing phone for a moment, picked up the receiver slowly, and said in a low tone, in English. ‘Yes...’

While Chief Ikaki mumbled into the phone, McCulloch leaned towards me and whispered,

‘What was he saying when he was speaking your language?’

‘He said that this is a serious matter, and it’s going to cost Imperial a lot of money to resolve,’ I whispered back.

McCulloch grew red and hissed, ‘This is ridiculous. We have to bribe the government before it gives us security? What sort of country is this?’

I gave his foot a light kick under the table. ‘Sshhh...’

The first thing Chief Ikaki did when he finished his phone conversation was to shake is forefinger at McCulloch like he was an errant child. ‘The only reason I am considering helping you people is because of Tubo. After all, you are the one who caused this mess by paying millions to a group of wretched fishermen. Now everyone else in Asiama wants a piece of your company’s largesse. If you had done things the old way, by sending the money through me and the Amayanabo, this trouble would not have happened. Anyway, I hope you have learned your lesson.’

That was the moment it occurred to me that Chief Ikaki was behind yesterday’s attacks on Imperial Oil. Before now, he was our go-to man in Asiama and the State. Everything meant for Asiama, (benefits, contracts,

scholarships, etc.) passed through him, and was shared among his loyalists. But after the debacle of the recent spill, McCulloch the maverick had made sure Imperial settled the Asiama Fishermen Cooperative's lawsuit without consulting Chief Ikaki. For a man like him, it was a serious loss of face. The settlement had also caused him to miss out on a chance to somehow wrangle out a percentage of the payments for himself. To set things right, and to make Imperial Oil come crawling back to him, he had arranged for his boys to disrupt its operations. The death of the soldier was an unfortunate collateral damage. However, I decided to keep my opinion and suspicions to myself.

Chief Ikaki scowled at McCulloch, 'But, before I help your company, I expect an apology from you, Mr McCulloch, for the disrespect you've shown me these past few weeks'

McCulloch turned red as he struggled to keep his temper. He understood that the most important thing at stake was not his personality clash with Chief Ikaki, but the resumption of the production of 870, 000 barrels per day. Anything else was irrelevant. His voice was flat when he mumbled,

'I am sorry.'

Chief Ikaki smiled triumphantly. 'Good boy. Good boy.' He stood up from behind his desk and announced, 'That was the Governor on the phone. He wants to see me now for some other matters. I will use the opportunity to discuss your problems.'

'My Biggest Chief!' I hailed, with two thumbs up. 'We're most grateful.' Chief Ikaki smiled as he waddled to the door.

'I won't be long ten minutes at most. Wait here.'

We waited for an hour and eleven minutes. McCulloch bristled with silent rage as he glanced at his watch. But in that time, he managed a small victory as he chain-smoked his Marlboros. With the help of air conditioning, a haze hung just under the ceiling, and the smell of cigarette smoke soaked everything in the office. Since we were also smokers, Mustapha and I didn't mind.

Chief Ikaki re-entered his office coughing and waving his podgy hands at the smoke. Struggling to breathe, Chief Ikaki said, 'It is settled, the government will send a small amphibious battalion to recover your flow stations and ...' we waited patiently as he bowed his head and suffered another spasm of coughs. When he raised his head, he managed a

smile that was both smug and ominous. ‘The soldiers will also fish out those responsible for the death of their fallen comrade.’

Chapter 28
Kaniye
Asiama Town: Sunday, 10th August, 1997

The soldiers arrived in Asiama on the day St. Joseph's Church held a Mass in honour of late Father Patrick. Father Patrick had left Asiama in 1996 and returned to Ireland. From there, he kept in constant touch with his close friend, Catechist Akassa. They exchanged letters every month. Two months ago, Father Patrick stopped writing. Last week, Catechist Akassa received a letter from a man who introduced himself as Father Patrick's nephew. The letter broke the sad news that Father Patrick had died in his sleep three months earlier, and had since been buried. Father Patrick had touched everyone in Asiama during his lifetime. Although he was a Catholic priest, he had also taught English and the Humanities to every student who had passed through the Anglican Church-run St. Cyprian's Grammar School, Asiama's only secondary school. Therefore, almost everyone from Asiama, irrespective of denominational differences, attended the Requiem Mass at St. Joseph's where Father Patrick used to be the priest. The church was packed to the rafters and the Mass was punctuated with the different sounds of grief, ranging from quiet snivelling to loud boisterous wailing, with a lot of sighs and head-shaking thrown in between. It was an extraordinary event to witness. But as always, Asiama had waited till it was too late before it feted a good man.

After the Mass, I made my way to the jetty hoping to get a commercial speedboat to take me back to Port Harcourt. As I walked, Mpaka, Doye's father, fell in step beside me. Mpaka was one of Asiama's more interesting characters, he was mad, fearless, cantankerous and given to frequent fits of violence. He was feared and derided in equal measure. But the derision stopped last week when Mpaka, the town drunk, suddenly became a millionaire. He was one of the members of the Asiama

Fishermen Cooperative for whom I had won a sizeable settlement from Imperial Oil for the spill on the Asiama River. Flush with new money, and buoyed by the victory in his latest war, Mpaka was spoiling for another fight. He had remembered his long-running battle with the Amayanabo and the Asiama Council of Chiefs, (or 'the Idiot and his Council of Thieves' as he always boldly referred to them), and decided that raining loud curses on them was no longer enough. Now at the jetty, he was trying to convince me to sue them for 'incompetence, stupidity, abuse of power and corruption'. As always, Mpaka was drunk, and I was trying to get away from him as quietly as possible without causing offence or making a scene.

The jetty was crowded and chaotic at that time. Most of the horde stood on the concrete platform – people travelling out of Asiama and their relatives who had come to say goodbye. Down the platform's steps was the light-brownish Asiama River, where about ten speedboats sat on the water, parked tightly close together, and all facing the jetty. Some of the speedboats were half-filled with people, and the speedboat drivers loudly announced their destinations and called out for passengers. Sometimes, their cries were drowned out by the roar of outboard engines as other drivers revved their boats. Luckily, I espied a Port Harcourt-bound boat with space for three more passengers. I quickly decided to get on the boat and to pay the extra fares so I could quickly get away from Mpaka and his hare-brained plans. With promises to do further research on the potential lawsuit, I bade Mpaka farewell. He shook my hands for a long time, and even hugged me. There were tears in his eyes when he thanked me for the millionth time for the money we had both made from Imperial Oil. As I clambered gingerly into the rocking speedboat, Mpaka informed the driver that I was 'Asiama's greatest lawyer', even greater even than my father, and that if I had a single complaint about the journey, he, Mpaka, would first beat up the driver before suing him. With the threats of a beating and litigation hanging over his head, the driver smiled, cranked his outboard engine and started knocking his boat against others in an attempt to jostle for space out of the crowd of stationary boats.

That was when we heard the gunshots. On the boats, there was confusion for the first few moments as we wondered where the shooting was coming from. Then we heard the collective gasp of fear from the crowd on the jetty. We looked up just in time to see them turn and begin a

mad dash back into the town. The gunshots were still ringing out. A fat woman at the back of the stampeding crowd suddenly leapt high in the air, flung out her arms in exultation, before crashing heavily on the ground. A little girl of about five, probably her daughter, turned round, and ran back to the woman's crumpled body. The little girl saw the spurting blood, quickly forming a puddle round the dead woman. The little girl shrieked. The gunshots were coming from the water, from behind us. We turned round to see four gunboats filled with soldiers bearing down on us. Their guns spat out bullets and bright orange sparks. Some of the soldiers screamed contradictory instructions at us.

'DON'T MOVE! CLEAR THE JETTY! NOBODY MOVE!'

But in the confusion, people moved. Our boat swayed violently as three passengers, all men, bounded their way from the back of the boat. They managed to clamber hurriedly out of the boat. One of them stumbled momentarily and banged his knee on the jetty's concrete platform steps. He didn't feel it. He sprang up immediately. They made it only as far as the top step. Like a badly choreographed dance sequence, their arms suddenly flailed, and their bodies twisted awkwardly. We didn't see the bullets smash into their bodies. But we saw the vicious red sprays of blood, and tiny chunks of flesh being angrily ripped out. A split second later, we heard the burst of gunfire louder, punishing. Two of the men slumped on the jetty's steps, with one partially submerged in the water. The other man made a big splash as he was spun into the river. He floated face down, while the water around him quickly turned reddish-brown. Like Jesus turning water to wine, was the weird thought I had at that moment.

'DON'T MOVE! IF YOU MOVE, WE MOVE YOU!'

Nobody moved this time. Well, strictly speaking, Mpaka did not move. He stood still on the jetty, the only person who hadn't run away. By then, the soldiers had come close enough to start mooring the first of their four boats. Like I said, Mpaka did not really move. He gripped his head in his hands, and shook it like he was inquiring if it was broken. But it wasn't broken, just unexpectedly overfilled. The violent deaths he just witnessed had probably re-awakened his demons, and triggered unforgiving memories of the abominations he had seen and done during the Biafra War. He screamed. There were no coherent words. It was just a rash of gibberish, spoken in a language that only existed in Mpaka's head. I saw

the teardrops, freshly squeezed from his tightly shut eyes, trickle down his cheeks. His face was twisted in a grimace, teeth bared and mouth open. Spittle dripped from the corners of his mouth. Finally, Mpaka's demons had obliterated the flimsy structures that his mind was built on. Mpaka just stood on the jetty, holding his head, whimpering like a child; howling like a beast. And disturbingly, looking exactly like Doye, his son.

It was the most surreal moment in my life. And then suddenly, déjà vu – I knew exactly what was going to happen next. He did not open his eyes when they shot him. The bullets pierced his body. He jerked a macabre dance as he welcomed them. But he was a big man. He did not fall. The bullets could not silence Mpaka. His shrieks grew shriller, louder. Pain mixed in the madness. Another short burst of gunfire. Mpaka tottered drunkenly, and swayed, for a long moment. His shrieks reduced to tiny yelps. But still, he refused to fall. The final round of gunshots was angrier. It disintegrated half of Mpaka's face and slammed him on the ground. The yelping stopped, and then, a long, eerie silence. No gunshots. No roar of boat engines. No screamed orders from the soldiers. No cries for Jesus' help. Everyone was fixated on the bloodied body. It twitched its last defiance. We waited for Mpaka to die.

We were the lucky ones. When I say 'we' I mean people like me who were apprehended at the jetty, and marched at gunpoint to the open space of the town square. Apart from being prodded, cursed and shouted at, we had not been beaten. We were a large group about fifty men, women and children. We were ordered to sit on the ground, in the shade of the giant Iroko tree at one end of the town square. At the opposite end, was a raised concrete platform, covered with a long plastic canopy, where the Amayanabo and his chiefs usually sat. Today, they were nowhere to be found. Today, the soldiers sat there, overseeing the brutalisation of Asiama. In a sense, nothing much had changed.

The boom of gunshots continued sporadically in the distance, as the soldiers patrolled Asiama's narrow streets. I counted at least eleven columns of black smoke billowing stiffly in the still mid-afternoon air houses that they had burnt. Sometimes, the soldiers just smashed down

doors and dragged wailing, cowering people from under their beds. After that, life and death became as predictable as the Devil's lottery – some people were shot, others severely beaten, some were left unscathed, others were brought to join the 'prisoners' at the town square. At the town square, depending on the whims of the soldiers, the newcomers could join our group if they were lucky. The less fortunate ones were made to join different punishment groups.

'I wan shit!'

This announcement came from somewhere on our left, from a group of about twenty men. The soldiers had ordered them to lie flat on their backs facing the burning mid-afternoon sun; all eyes kept open. Those who couldn't keep their eyes open were flogged with kobokos – rawhide whips. They had been like that for two hours. On our right was another group of about sixteen people. Their punishment was different. They rolled on the ground like logs. The ground was earth, but it wasn't smooth. That area was filled with thousands of stone chippings from a nearby construction site. Bloodied and disoriented, they rolled back and forth on the sharp stones. Again, the kobokos were used to discourage any sluggishness. And just in front of us, a soldier whipped three men who lay prostrate on the ground. As the koboko tore their flesh, two of them screamed, writhed and begged for mercy. After a while, the soldier stopped lashing them and concentrated his efforts on the third man who wasn't wearing a shirt. Apart from a slight flinch whenever he was flogged, this man lay still and quiet. A battle of wills started. The soldier flogged harder – with each stroke, he grunted, the koboko whished in the air, and cracked sharply on the man's back. The man flinched harder, hid his face in the crook of his elbow, probably gritted his teeth, and stubbornly, refused to cry out. In frustration, the soldier broke his rhythm as he flogged faster and faster, erratically. The man began to squirm but remained quiet. At one point he raised his head slightly, to reveal his face and his teeth set in a silent snarl. Doye!

'Abeg, I wan shit o!' There was a desperate plea in the voice now.

The soldier stopped flogging Doye and jerked his head in the direction of the voice. He roared, 'Who wan shit?'

'Na me, sir.' One of the sun-watchers raised a weak arm.

The soldier exhaled mightily, and used his forefinger to wipe the beads of sweat off his face and head. I noticed that his head was totally

bald, and at that moment, I instinctively nicknamed him Gorimapa, after a hairless character in an old TV series called ‘The Village Headmaster’. Gorimapa was a dark, burly man, wearing the rank of Major. He glanced from Doye to the other man as he contemplated his choices. Finally, he decided that it was easier to deal with the other man. But before he left Doye, he kicked his ribs twice with his heavy boots, and spat on him. Doye bit his own arm to keep from crying out. Gorimapa stomped over to man and glowered at him. Then he reached down, grabbed the man’s shirt, pulled him to his feet and barked in his face,

‘You wan shit?’

The man, blinded by the sun, couldn’t quite open his eyes no matter how hard he tried to blink. But he had noticed the menace in Gorimapa’s tone. So he said,

‘I no wan shit again.’

Gorimapa shook his head furiously, ‘You must shit o! Masa masa, now now.’

The man’s headshake was pleading, and there was a crack in his voice.

‘Abeg, sir, I no go shit again. No worry, I ...’

Gorimapa slapped him on the side of his head. The force of the blow knocked the man to the ground. As he lay there, Gorimapa grabbed a rifle from a nearby soldier and pointed it at the man.

‘Kai! Shit or I shoot you.’ There was only one choice in the matter. Feverishly, the man tore off his clothes. He squatted in the midst of the other sun watchers. He squeezed his eyes shut. His face was set in a grimace. For a long time. Then suddenly, it relaxed. The other sun-watchers wrinkled their noses and tried to crawl away from him. Gorimapa sneered at the man,

‘You don finish?’ Still squatting, the man nodded. ‘Oya chop your shit,’ Gorimapa ordered. Tears sprang to the man’s eyes.

‘Oga, abeg you. No do me like this.’

‘I SAY EAT YOUR SHIT!’ Gorimapa shouted and raised the rifle. The man cringed, but he stretched his arm behind, searching. There was a pause as he touched his faeces. Slowly, his hand came back into view. A gob of the brown, lumpy stuff was on two of his fingers.

‘Kai! Chop am,’ Gorimapa waved the rifle. As the man put his fingers into his mouth, I looked away. I studied Doye instead. He still lay

on the ground, flat on his stomach. But his head was raised up, above the crook of his elbow. He was watching Gorimapa and the man eating his own faeces. He studied them with a fierce intensity, like he wanted to sear the image into his brain forever. Hatred burned in his eyes. I returned my gaze to the man. He was on his knees now, retching. After a long while, the violent spasms finally calmed down. The man looked up at Gorimapa. Gorimapa waved his rifle again, the sign to continue. Still on his knees, this time, the man grabbed a handful of his excrement. As he shoved it into his face, I turned away again. I heard Gorimapa and the other soldiers laughing.

Doye asked quietly, ‘Why are they doing all this?’

I shrugged, ‘Revenge. A soldier died during the unrest at Asiama Base Camp, remember?’

It was dusk. The sun had become bored with overlooking the misery in Asiama, and was going to its home, somewhere behind the horizon. Even the soldiers were tired of the beatings and punishments, so they allowed everyone in the town square to huddle together. That’s how I had managed to sidle up to Doye. Angry, red koboko welts discoloured his entire back, apart from a tiny splotch of a birthmark between his muscular shoulder blades. One of his eyes was bloodied and swollen shut. I cleaned his wounds as best I could with my handkerchief. Then I took off my etibo, and made him wear it. That was about half an hour ago. Doye had not spoken until now.

‘One soldier?’ He mused, ‘What is the value of an Asiama life? How many of our people will have to die today to pay for the life of one soldier? I counted seven corpses on the streets as I was being dragged here. I know many more have been slaughtered.’ I looked away. I knew that he didn’t yet know about his father. ‘So, Lawyer, what are our chances of getting justice for all that has happened today?’

I turned to him, ‘What do you mean by justice? Do you mean justice from the courts? You think these soldiers will ever come to court? If Asiama people make enough noise, the best that can happen is that the military government will set up a panel of inquiry or some other bullshit

committee who will find that the atrocities were committed by “unknown soldiers” acting outside their command. Case closed. It’s been done lots of times before. In the end, we will only curse these soldiers, and hope that either God or the Devil is listening. That’s the only justice we’ll get.’

‘So you are going to let them get away with this?’ There was a hint of mockery in Doye’s tone. I snapped,

‘What do you want from me, Doye? You want me to sue Gorimapa? Why don’t you do it yourself? I can point you to a good lawyer.’ When I calmed down I said, ‘Besides, I’m thinking of leaving law. There’s this old restaurant that’s for sale. Now that I made a bit of money from Imperial...’ I stopped talking because, I suddenly realised the absurdity of talking about my dreams in that situation.

‘Who’s Gorimapa?’

I looked in the direction of the soldiers, but I couldn’t make out Gorimapa in the falling light. So I sighed, ‘Gorimapa is a demon.’

‘Speaking of demons, I heard the soldiers beat up Catechist Akassa.’

‘No!’

‘Yes. I heard they punched his glasses into his eyes.’

‘Oh God!’ I put my head in my hands for a long moment. When I eventually raised my head, I asked, ‘What about Dise and Amaibi? Have you heard anything about them? I left them in St. Joseph’s after the Mass.’ Doye shook his head.

‘I haven’t heard anything about them. I hope they are alright.’

‘I pray so.’

‘Don’t you think it’s strange that your brother, Tubo, didn’t come for the Mass? After all, he was the one who lived with Father Patrick.’

‘I don’t think it’s a good thing him not showing up. But you know Tubo can be selfish and insensitive sometimes.’

Doye shook his head. ‘I don’t think it’s that. I have a feeling Tubo knew that the soldiers were coming to Asiama’

‘Doye, please...’ He shrugged,

‘They caught the Amayanabo hiding in the Royal Mausoleum. They beat him. They cursed him for not being able to control his kingdom. Then they made him hold his ears, squat, and jump around on his haunches. What’s the popular name for that punishment?’

‘Frog-jump,’ I smiled. ‘I wish I had seen it. If anyone in Asiama deserves to be frog-jumped, it’s the Amayanabo. The man’s a disgrace.’

‘Yes, but he’s our disgrace. We should be the ones dealing with him. Not some Northern soldiers. Don’t they have Emirs in the North who are equally crooked? Have any Niger Deltan or Southern soldiers gone to frog-jump them? Imagine the riots that would occur if that happened.’

I shook my head, ‘Don’t bring your tribal conspiracy theories into this.’ Doye’s eyes flashed.

‘Look around you, Kaniye. Have you seen any Southerner among these soldiers? They are all from the North. Haven’t you heard them calling us *nyamiri*?’

‘Yes, but what’s *nyamiri*?’

‘It’s a tribal slur they used to refer to Ibo people during the Civil War, and during religious massacres.’

‘But we’re not Ibo.’

‘Don’t mind the idiots. They think everyone southeast of River Niger is Ibo.’

After that, we sat in silence. It had become dark, but the soldiers were not saying anything about releasing us. We didn’t know it then, but the soldiers would leave Asiama Town early the next morning, to guard Asiama Base Camp and Imperial Oil’s flow stations along the Asiama River, those places would remain heavily guarded till the present day. Before letting everyone go, Gorimapa himself would give a pompous speech, warning Asiama about the dangers of killing soldiers and taking the law into their hands. He would make no mention of the thirty-eight people his soldiers had killed in reprisal. He would take no notice of the one hundred and forty-two people who were beaten and injured. He would feign ignorance about the robberies, rapes, arson, and looting committed by his men. And he would never understand the tragic destruction of families, the murder of dreams, and the irreparable damage to the collective psyche of a people. But how could Gorimapa appreciate these things? He was, after all, a zombie.

‘Kaniye.’

‘Yes?’

‘They looted your father’s house and burnt it down. I’m sorry.’

I smiled bitterly. ‘Don’t be. Thank God, Sir James is still on exile and there was nobody in the house.’ I lay on my back and watched the stars wink at each other cheerily. Doye lay face down beside me because of the wounds on his back. I whispered, ‘Doye.’

‘Yes?’
‘They killed your father.’

Chapter 29
Amaibi
Asiama Town: Sunday, 10th August, 1997

We hid in the vestry of St. Joseph's Church. We heard that soldiers were in Asiama. We saw people, confused, running and hiding in their houses. We heard the shooting. But at the time, no one really knew what was happening. So we were left with our assumptions. We guessed rightly that the soldiers had come through the river and had landed in the northern part of the town. We considered going down to the south of the Island, towards the ocean, and perhaps making our way across the ocean to either Ashawo Village or the Base Camp. But we decided against it for several reasons. The first reason was that Dise could not swim. I could swim, but unlike Kaniye, Doye and Tubo, I had never swam or been in the ocean before. As a child, my father had warned me against it because of my asthma and sickly nature. Secondly, because of the same health issues, I was perhaps the only man raised in Asiama who wasn't taught how to paddle a canoe. And the final reason was simple – we guessed wrongly. We assumed that the soldiers had merely come to arrest the perpetrators of the riot at Asiama Base Camp. We assumed that in doing so, the soldiers would conduct some form of investigation based on rational thinking and common sense. Perhaps if Dise and I had not lived in London for so long, we would not have been so naive.

We hid till the sound of gunfire gradually subsided. Then, there was an unnerving silence. It felt like the two of us were the only people left in the town. We drew the heavy curtains across the windows and huddled in the darkness. The silence lasted for hours. After a while, we got used to it. We started whispering about what could be going on outside. We decided to wait for the cover of darkness before stealing our way to my father's house. In the meantime, we had to get as comfortable as we could. The

hanging robes of the priest, altar boys, and the choir, gave off a musty smell, which after a while, didn't seem too unpleasant. I pulled some benches together to form a rough bed. We lay on it, held each other, while I assured her that everything would soon be alright. When we were pressed, I found an old, broken, clay drum-pot. We said a silent prayer for forgiveness, and giggled like mischievous children as we urinated in it. That's when I remembered the day Tubo had told his incredible tale about Thunder Balogun, the footballer, in that same room. So I told Dise the Thunder Balogun story. I also told her of the time when Tubo mistook a gas flare for fire from hell, and other escapades from my childhood.

After a while, we got so relaxed that it didn't feel like we were hiding. We even dozed off. The vestry of St. Joseph's Church is a room attached like a small wing to the church, next to the altar. It has two doors: the first one (which I had bolted) led outside. The second one which led into the church, unfortunately, had a broken lock. The soldiers came in from inside the church. They walked to the side of the altar, and pushed open the door of the vestry. They found us sleeping. I woke up first. I saw four strange men leering at us. Instinctively, I grabbed Dise tighter. She stirred, but did not wake up. I sat up on the bench and said,

'Good evening, gentlemen.'

They did not respond. I stretched my hand and smoothed Dise's skirt which had ridden up her thighs. That was when she woke up and saw the soldiers. She gasped. I spoke quickly, evenly, my voice not betraying my fear. 'Good evening, gentlemen. My name is Amaibi Akassa. I am a lecturer in the university. This is my wife, she is a journalist. We were just taking shelter here because of all the shooting. Can you please tell us what is...?'

'SHARRAP!' The foremost soldier shouted. He raised his rifle and pointed it at me. On cue, the others also did the same. We raised our hands. There was a long moment of silence as we studied each other. At first, they all looked similar – tall, dark, sweaty, fierce looking, and dressed in army fatigues. Then, I began to notice different things about each of them. The one who had shouted at me seemed to be the leader. Another one had an uncontrollable facial and shoulder twitch, which, disturbingly, made him look jumpy and trigger-happy. The third still had the pimples and casual indifference of a teenager. He chewed a kola nut sullenly, and from time to time, would either spit on the floor, or stick out

a piece of the kola nut from the side of his mouth. The last one was the most menacing. A huge, ugly scar cut from his forehead down across the squashed bridge of his nose, and across his thin, uneven lips. It gave him a freakish look, like his skull had once been cleft open, and on second thoughts, crudely sewn up again. With his bloodshot eyes, he was the only one staring at me. The others were staring at Dise. Finally, the leader dragged his eyes off her, and looked at me.

'You say na ya wife be this?'

I nodded. 'Yes. She's my wife.' The leader looked at Dise again and licked his lips,

'Only you for this fine woman? Shege! You are enjoying too much.' The Youth smiled, and again showed us a piece of the kola nut. The Scarred One scowled. The Twitchy One let out a short nervous laugh and jerked some more.

'We too, we want to enjoy her like you. Just small enjoyment.'

'NO!' My hands came down and held a trembling Dise. I was shaking my head. 'No! No! No!' I heard Dise's prayers, little murmurs under her breath. The leader raised his rifle at me again.

'C'mon hold ya hand up! Who tell you to put it down? Hold ya hand up, before I end you now now like dog.'

The Twitchy One rebuked me, 'Stingy man. You no want us to enjoy even small sef.'

He shrugged, 'Well is ya choice. Whether you live or die, we must chook this woman today.'

I raised my hands again, but only to plead with them. My voice was broken; it didn't sound anything like me. 'Please. Please, gentlemen. Don't do this, I beg you in the name of God. Don't do this. My wife is pregnant.'

The leader sneered, 'And so? Pregnant woman too can do the thing.'

Twitchy One added, 'Is even better that she have belle now. That means to say, no matter how we chook, we cannot give her another belle. And I know that you no go like her to born soldier pikin for you.'

The Scarred One spoke for the first time. His voice was a guttural growl, as ugly as his face. But he didn't speak to me. He spoke to the leader in Hausa. I don't understand a word of Hausa. But I could read their body language. The Scarred One seemed to have reservations about their actions. He pointed at us without looking in our direction. I started praying

silently. The leader barked at him. He shook his head. The leader grew angrier. He gesticulated wildly with his hands. He started shouting at the Scarred One, splaying flecks of spittle into his face. The Scarred One did not flinch. He waited calmly for the leader to finish. Then he shook his head again, more determinedly this time a man standing his ground. I prayed harder.

The leader lowered his shoulders and exhaled heavily. Then he pointed at the Scarred One, issuing some dire warning. The Scarred One turned to look at us with weariness in his red eyes. We looked at him hopefully – our saviour. He shook his head slowly. The message was clear – he had not been able to save us. The Scarred One slung his rifle over his shoulders and walked out of the vestry. As he passed the leader, he spat out in English, 'God punish you all!'

Dennis Rodman was about to rape my wife. When I say Rodman, I meant the leader. He had taken off his shirt to reveal a Chicago Bulls sleeveless jersey. Cheap knock-offs probably from Aba, bright red, with outrageous yellow trims instead of white. The number and name were correct though. 91. Rodman. Rodman picked up his rifle, walked over to where Dise and I were holding each other tight. He put the barrel of the rifle to my head. It felt slightly warm – it had been used recently. Rodman spoke quietly to Dise.

'Madam, go to that bench now. Remove ya cloth and open ya yansh. If not, I kill ya husband.'

I was shaking. Dise was shaking. Tears stood in her eyes. She loosened her grip of my waist. I held her tighter. Slowly, she tried to pull herself from me. I held her tighter. I started praying for Rodman to shoot me. I wanted to die. As if she read my thoughts, Dise whispered in my ear, 'Don't die on me, Baby. I need you.'

My bones turned to water. She kissed the tears I hadn't noticed were on my face. She kissed my lips. She pulled herself from me and stood up. Her face was set in a look of grim determination I had never seen before. She walked imperiously to the bench.

Rodman ordered, 'Madam, oya comot ya cloth.'

She did not even deign him with a scathing look. The first thing she did was to kick off her shoes. Then she unbuttoned her blouse. She took it off, folded it, and carefully laid it on the bench. Her skirt was next. She wriggled a bit, and stepped out of it. Again, the same careful folding and placing on the bench. She stood in her bra and panties. A matching set of pink.

'Comot everything.' Rodman's voice was now a croak.

Dise took off her bra and panties. I stared at the beautiful body I worshipped for the past months of my life. The body I knew so well. The breasts were full, firm, big nippled, the aureoles the colour of dark honey. The tuft of hair between her legs was shaved in a neat triangle, one of Dise's quirks. Her legs were long, slightly knock-kneed. My unborn son slept in the small bulge in her tummy. By now, Rodman had lowered the rifle from my head. He was breathing heavily. So was the Twitchy One, who was also jerking harder than normal. The Youth had his mouth open, and for the first time, the kola nut was nowhere to be seen. But both of them still had their guns pointed at me. Rodman left me and strode over to Dise. As he did so, he unzipped his trouser and let out his erect penis. Rodman was uncircumcised. He spat once, twice, into his hand. He lubricated himself with his spittle. He grew unnaturally longer. He pushed Dise roughly on the bench. As he strode above her, he turned round to look at me. He tried to smile at me, but because of the lust on his face, he only succeeded in looking slightly constipated.

Dise's eyes were shut. Her lips moved silently. Perhaps, a prayer to God. God? I hated God at that moment. Rodman slapped Dise's legs open. As he forced himself into her, she cried out in pain. Rodman slapped her face.

'Shut up! Ashawo like you.'

I winced and shuddered at the slaps. The Youth waved his gun at me, a warning against any sudden movements. Dise bit her lower lip to stop herself from crying out. Rodman's thrusts started building into a fast rhythm. He turned round to look at me again. His face was contorted into a vicious snarl of triumph. I turned away from the sight on the bench. But, wherever I turned, I still saw Rodman on my wife. The vestry had two large fly-spotted mirrors on opposite walls used for dressing by the priests, altar boys and choir. Everywhere I looked, the Chicago Bulls shirt bobbed up and down my wife. I started crying again. I wept like a child. I curled

up in a corner. My teeth were chattering. I shivered like I was cold. I was mumbling words that I couldn't comprehend. My spirit left my body, and stood aside, watching everything. I watched myself cry when Rodman let out a howl of ecstasy and rolled over. I saw myself rocking back and forth in a senseless daze when the Twitchy One took his place. He had removed his trousers, but still wore his boots. His flabby buttocks quivered and jerked. He whimpered with every thrust. He stayed on Dise for a long time. A very long time. The Youth waited impatiently for his turn. Too impatiently, perhaps. As he entered Dise, he pawed her breasts, slobbering saliva and half-chewed kola nut bits over them. In less than fifteen seconds, his body shuddered in a violent spasm. Rodman and the Twitchy One laughed at him. The Youth got up and spat at Dise.

'Stupid woman! No act like say you no enjoy am.' Dise's eyes were still shut. She seemed to have passed out. Somehow, her silence infuriated the Youth so much that he started kicking her. As he kicked her, he asked, 'E sweet you?' Dise started bleeding. The Youth suffered from bloodlust the sight of a bleeding Dise only made him kick and stomp harder. Even Rodman and the Twitchy One began to look uncomfortable. The Twitchy one said,

'Enough now. E don do.' Wild-eyed, the Youth turned to them and shook his head,

'No! E never do. Until e sweet her, e never do.' He paused his stomping to pick up his rifle. There was a tiny piece of red cloth tied at the tip of the barrel. He kicked her legs open, and lowered the barrel into her. 'Maybe, if my gun fuck her, e go sweet her.' As he poked it viciously inside her, Dise screamed. Suddenly, the room was filled with soldiers. Somebody pushed the Youth off Dise and began punching him. It was the Scarred One.

He had returned with more soldiers, including an officer who was superior to Rodman. The Officer's hand shook as he took in the scene. He shouted orders. The soldiers arrested Rodman and the Twitchy One who were still half-dressed. The Officer allowed the Scarred One more time to beat the Youth. For a while, the only sounds in the room were dull, sickening thuds as the Scarred One punched the Youth's bloodied face. The air was thick with the sweet smell of blood. Dise's blood. My unborn son's blood. The Youth's blood. Eventually, they pulled the Scarred One off the Youth. They carried the Youth half-dead out of the vestry. The

Officer looked at Dise again and shook his head. He left the vestry with the rest of his men. We were left with the Scarred One. He pulled down one of the hanging robes, the priest's cassock, and covered Dise's naked body with it. Then he looked at me. Not at me, but at my body. It stared blankly at him. The tears, the shivering, the incoherent mumbling they were all still there. My disembodied spirit watched the Scarred One cautiously approach my body. He squatted in front of my body and gently placed his hand on its shoulder. He started speaking in Hausa, somehow I understood him this time. He was saying a prayer for Dise and me.

BOOK V
2004–2005

Chapter 30
Kaniye
Port Harcourt, 2004

The tears ran down Amaibi's face as he finished telling me the story. My head was bowed, my face hidden in my hand, and a giant lump was lodged in my throat. After ten minutes of silence, I finally managed to ask, 'So, after that, what happened to you and Dise?' Amaibi smiled sadly,

'Can't you guess what happened by now? That incident tore us apart and eventually led to our separation. I'll tell you how but I'll skip the details. First, we decided not to tell anyone about it. Fine, but instead of reaching out to help each other, we both retreated into our own separate worlds of suffering. I guess we were wrecks; both of us were dead at the time. I'm sorry, Kaniye, I can't tell you what Dise went through. The truth is, I don't know, I can never know. No man can ever really understand those things. All I could see was that she would stare into space for hours. She refused to comb her hair. I don't understand why. That's how she got her dreadlocks. As for me, Kaniye, now I am ashamed to say it, and may God forgive me I couldn't hold my wife, I couldn't touch her, I couldn't even talk to her, I wasn't there for her. I felt she blamed me for what happened. I blamed me for what happened. I was supposed to be a man, but I hadn't been able to protect my wife and child. I kept away from Dise, thinking I should give her space, I didn't know that this contributed to making her feel worse, made her feel like she was dirty, like it was her fault. It didn't help that it took us about a year before we warily tried to make love but on that occasion, I just couldn't get it up. I couldn't get an erection no matter how much we tried. I was impotent for more than six years.'

'I even lost my faith, and belief in God. And yes, when Doye started kidnapping and killing people, I refused to condemn him. On all counts, I now know I was wrong. I'm in prison now, but that's okay. Even if I don't

leave this place, I'm a man again. I've mended the two most important relationships in my life God and Dise. My redemption is complete.'

I said, 'Not yet. It will only be complete when I get you out of this place.' Amaibi smiled indulgently,

'That will be nice but...'

My phone rang. I looked at the caller ID but didn't know the number. I flipped the phone open, 'Hello?'

'Mr Kaniye Wufus?' The squeaky voice was familiar, but I couldn't identify it yet.

'Speaking.'

'Mr Wufus, this is Wali.'

'Ah, Mr Wali who can't pronounce "r".' I said this loud for Amaibi's benefit. We exchanged quizzical looks, wondering why Amaibi's persecutor-in-chief would be calling me. Wali let my taunt slide.

'Mr W...Mr Kaniye, listen carefully. There is an unidentified corpse at the Teaching Hospital Mortuawy. We have our suspicions on who it might be, but we need to be sure. We believe you are, were close to the deceased. We believe you may be able to identify the corpse.'

'What? Who is dead?' There was a smile in Wali's voice.

'That is what I hope you will be able to tell us.'

There was a long pause as my thoughts raced in different directions. Was it Dise, or Sir James, or Tubo, or any of my half-sisters? What was a senior, security service man like Wali doing on mortuary duty? Was it a trap to arrest me? But Wali didn't need to lure me to a mortuary to arrest me. And what reason would he have for arresting me? The questions were endless. And there were no answers yet. Exasperated, I exhaled and said, 'I'm on my way.'

'Thank you. I'm waiting.'

My voice now had an edge. 'Mr Wali, if I get there and find that it is a member of my family, and you were even remotely responsible for the death, I assure you, you will pay.'

'Is that a thweat?'

'Don't be silly! Of course, it is.'

The body was lying on the ground outside the Mortuary. A small, gawking crowd had formed a rough circle round the body. Wali stood apart from the crowd with five of his men. As usual, he was dressed in a safari suit. His men wore the standard government security service outfit suits, ties, dark glasses, walkie-talkies and frowns. Wali's scowl deepened when he saw me. He spoke to his men. They glared at me once; shoved open a space in the crowd, waved me through, and then dispersed the crowd away from the body. I walked up to the body. It was a man, a tall, muscular, well-proportioned man. He was naked, laid out straight, but with the right leg slightly bent. Both fists were closed, as if he had died clenching them. Death had been violent. Dozens of bullets had riddled the body, leaving tiny, ugly holes, which flies excitedly buzzed over. His mouth was open; his teeth set in a snarl and stained with dried blood. Flies went in and out of his mouth at will. The bullets had also shattered most of his face, except for his mouth. But I knew exactly who it was. I didn't have to ask them to turn him over, so I could confirm from the koboko scars and birthmark on his back. Wali slid up next to me and whispered,

'Do you know who that is?'

My voice was low. 'We both know who it is. You didn't need to bring me here to see him like this.' Wali affected a shrug of innocence.

'Can you please identify that thing?'

My hands started shaking. I stuck them in my pockets. There was a lump in my throat. 'That is, was Doye Koko.'

'Weally? So this is the notowious Doughboy?'

Wali walked round Doye's body. He paused, and squatted beside what remained of Doye's head. For a while, he looked at it, too fascinated to even be distracted by the swarm of flies. I turned away and studied the crowd in the distance. I saw three men dressed in coveralls leaning by the door of the mortuary. I guessed they were the mortuary attendants. I waved my hands till I got their attention, then I called out to them, 'Gentlemen, please can you take this body inside?' They hesitated for a moment, and then seemed to argue among themselves. I couldn't hear what they were saying because they were far away. Finally one of them shook his head and shouted back at me,

'Sorry, oga, we cannot touch that deadi bodi unless that oga give us permission.' He pointed to Wali. I turned to Wali who was still on his haunches, watching Doye. 'They say they need permission from you

before they carry him inside. I've identified him. Allow them to take him in.' Wali looked up at me and shook his head.

'Don't be silly, Mr Wufus. The media hasn't awwived yet. I have to do the pwess confewence with Doughboy at my feet. You know how these things work. As usual, the official stowy is: we twaced Doughboy to one of his hideouts; we twied to awwest him but he opened fire first; we weturned fire and...' Wali's words trailed off and he shrugged. Then he smiled again, 'I believe you should congwatulate me. After all, the last time we spoke in court, you accused me of not doing enough to stop Doughboy. You even said I was incompetent, *wemember*?'

'At least, let them cover him with a sheet or something.' Wali stood up.

'My men will arrest any person who touches this body without my permission, and that includes you.' He smiled at me, 'Especially you.'

'You are a sick man, Mr Wali.' Wali flashed his small, sharp teeth.

'Ah, are those tears I see in your eyes, Mr Wufus?'

As I dried my eyes, he laughed. 'You've not started cwying. By the time, your other fwiend spends the west of his life in pwison, then you will cwy blood.'

I gave up trying to dry my eyes. My words were choked with grief, frustration and anger. 'You've killed Doye, the man responsible for everything. What more do you want? Why must you wreck Amaibi's life? He has suffered enough. You know he is innocent. You know he didn't plan the kidnap of Brian Manning with Doye. Yet you gave false evidence in court against him.' I gave Wali a look that conveyed the full range of my hatred. 'But, I'll make sure you pay for it.'

'This is the second thweat you've made today.'

Wali walked round Doye's corpse and came towards me. He came so close that we were standing face to face, toe to toe. His eyes burned in anger.

'What can you do? Yes, I know Dr Amaibi Akassa is innocent. Yes, I lied against him in court. Yes, he will wot in pwison because of me. And there's nothing you or anyone can do about it.' Then he waged a finger under my nose. 'Be warned. All the people who have thweatened me are either dead or in pwison. You are lucky that your thweats are empty. If not, you would have understood, first hand, that I have the power of life and death...'

I smiled. ‘Don’t confuse yourself with God, Mr Wali.’

Doughboy was larger in death, than in life. The day his death was announced, Doughboy was the first news item on AIT, MBI and the other independent Nigerian channels. It was only the government owned NTA that chucked him somewhere in the third quarter of its usual hour-long bore fest of reporting on Mr President’s day. Doughboy even made it to the sixth and eighth news item on the BBC and CNN respectively. The next day, he made the front page of every daily newspaper in Nigeria. There was an incredible twist in the tale, when *The Express*, published the extraordinary interview he had granted Dise. However, Dise and *The Express*, were wise enough to realise that Doughboy was bigger than them. They quickly sold copies of the videos of the interview to other news networks and that was when things got really wild. There was something compelling about that interview, it was riveting, dramatic and done only a few hours before his death.

Doughboy looked charismatic, audacious, defiant and tragic in the end exactly the way the world demanded its quintessential rebels should be. It was a mesmerising interview. People were surprised at how articulate he was as he explained his warped logic in support of violence and crime. The interview also captured the forceful spirit of Doughboy in the flashing eyes, the deep frown, and the middle finger to the world (pixelated of course). The interview propelled Doughboy to the number one news item for two days on the BBC, CNN, Sky, Al Jazeera, and every Nigerian news station. Doughboy was also hot on the internet: he flooded websites and message boards. If Doughboy was famous in life, he achieved cult status in death.

In true Nigerian style, he was mourned publicly by everyone friends, enemies and strangers. In Port Harcourt and Asiama, women and children told amazing tales of his generosity, while youths and students mourned the death of their ‘inspiration’. Other so-called militant groups threatened violent revenge i.e. a spree of kidnappings for the ‘murder of the face of the Struggle’. Even the politicians, a breed who Doughboy had hated, fell over themselves to eulogise him. On television, a new breed of talking

heads was born. They were the self-styled ‘experts’, who talked authoritatively about Doughboy’s life even though they had never met him, visited Asiama Island, or heard about the tragedy of 1997 before now.

Doughboy was called ‘a revolutionary’, ‘a freedom fighter’, and was mentioned in the same breath as Isaac Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa. I laughed when they referred to him as, ‘the Che Guevara of the Niger Delta’. But, I stopped watching television and reading newspapers when they called him ‘a patriot’ and ‘a man of peace’.

Then it was the turn of the rumour-mongers and conspiracy theorists. Some said it was the oil companies who killed him because Doughboy was constantly disturbing their operations; while others said the American government got the CIA to assassinate him because Doughboy’s reign of terror always increased the price of crude oil. A funny one was that Doughboy had faked his own death, and was hiding somewhere in Abuja/South Africa/the Caribbean with Tupac Shakur – there were even reports of sightings.

But the rumour mill may not have been far off the truth with its story of Doughboy’s burial. I was there. After I identified his corpse, Wali received a series of phone calls. Doughboy was not taken into the mortuary. He was bundled into the trunk of a car with no number plates and driven off. The press conference to announce his death was done without the body. Afterwards, I wrote letters demanding the return of the body of ‘my client’ for proper burial by ‘his family and next-of-kin’. I received a terse reply from the government security service that his body had been ‘forcefully stolen on the way to the mortuary by persons believed to be the sympathisers of the deceased’.

The several rumours about Doughboy’s burial agree that the security services buried him. However, they differ on whether Doughboy was buried in one grave or several graves. Some say he was buried in one piece. Others say his body was hacked into parts, and each part was buried separately. I guess, either way, it didn’t matter. No one knows where ‘Doughboy’ Doye Koko is buried.

‘I’m here to negotiate. My demands, however, are non-negotiable.’ For a moment, Ikuru’s mouth hung open in surprise at my words. Then he smiled indulgently at me.

‘What do you want, Kaniye?’

‘Two things. I want an immediate end to the prosecution of Amaibi Akassa. And I want Mr Wali to be prosecuted for perjury.’ Ikuru’s mouth fell open again. I pressed my advantage. ‘Regarding Amaibi Akassa, I want you to go to court tomorrow, and inform Justice Wilcox that you have received new evidence which proves Amaibi’s innocence.’ Ikuru burst out laughing. In his mirth, he slapped his desk, scattering some papers on the floor. He didn’t bother to pick them. When he finished, he said,

‘Look, Kaniye, just because Doughboy said in that famous interview that Dr. Akassa is innocent, doesn’t mean he is.’

‘I wasn’t talking about that interview yet. The interview just corroborates what I’m about to tell you. Wali’s testimony against Amaibi was a lie. He knew Amaibi did not plan the kidnapping of Manning. He knew Amaibi knew nothing of the money Doughboy paid into his account.’ As I spoke, I watched Ikuru closely. There was something about the way he nervously refused to meet my eyes. That’s when my suspicions were confirmed. ‘But this is not news to you, Mr Ikuru, is it? You knew all along that Wali was lying. Yet, you prosecuted my client with false testimony.’ Ikuru gave me a wry smile.

‘Kaniye, this is not as simple as you think. Let’s just say powerful people are interested in this case.’ Then he shrugged, ‘And even if what you say is true, why didn’t you bring it up when you cross-examined Wali?’

‘I wasn’t sure then. I just confirmed it some days ago.’ Ikuru seemed to stop breathing.

‘How... how did you... confirm it?’

‘Wali told me.’ Ikuru exhaled and smiled at me like I was a toddler who just told him that Father Christmas was real.

‘Really? Has it crossed your mind that Wali would deny that he ever told you such a thing?’

‘Yes. I imagine that Mr Wali would do just that.’ Ikuru leaned back, folded his arms and smirked.

‘So what will you do then?’

‘I’ll play this.’ I pulled out a disk from my jacket pocket, and handed it over to Ikuru. I pointed to the computer by the side of his desk. ‘You can play it there. Let’s listen together. It’s fascinating stuff.’ For a moment, Ikuru looked at the disk in his hand like it was a snake. Then he slid it inside his computer, and tweaked the volume.

The first thing we heard was the babble of voices the people who were gathered round Doye’s body when I got to the mortuary. Then, Wali’s squeaky voice came clearly: *‘Do you know who that is?’*

My voice: *‘We both know who it is. You didn’t need to bring me here to see him like this*.’

Wali again: *‘Can you please identify that thing?’*

Long silence. Then me: *‘That is, was Doye Koko.’*

Wali (with exultation in his voice): *‘Weally? So this is the notowious Doughboy?’*

Ikuru’s face was set in stone as we listened to the rest of the recording. I had listened to it several times already, and I knew every word by heart. I waited till we got to a certain place in the recording. Then I said, ‘Listen carefully. This is where it gets really interesting.’

Me: *‘You are a sick man, Mr Wali.’*

Wali: *‘Ah, are those tears I see in your eyes, Mr Wufus?’ Then, Wali’s laughter. ‘You’ve not started cwying. By the time, your other fwiend spends the west of his life in pwison, then you will cwy blood.’*

Me (choked up): *‘You’ve killed Doye, the man responsible for everything. What more do you want? Why must you wreck Amaibi’s life? He has suffered enough. You know he is innocent. You know he didn’t plan the kidnap of Brian Manning with Doye. Yet you gave false evidence in court against him. But, I’ll make sure you pay for it.’*

I whispered, ‘Here...’

Wali (angry and defiant): *‘This is the second thweat you’ve made today. What can you do? Yes, I know Dr Amaibi Akassa innocent. Yes, I lied against him in court. Yes, he will wot in pwison because of me. And there’s nothing you or anyone can do about it.’*

Ikuru put his hands on his head. He didn’t seem to hear the rest of the recording. When it ended, I explained. ‘On that day, Wali called me to identify a corpse at the Teaching Hospital Mortuary. He didn’t say who it was. I didn’t really believe him. I suspected he wanted to arrest me, or harm me in some way. So, before I met him, I went to see my sister. You

may have heard of her, she's Amaibi's wife. She's also the one who interviewed Doughboy. Anyway, it was her idea that I carry a concealed recorder for the meeting with Wali. She gave me hers, a tiny piece of Japanese wizardry. Coincidentally, she used it when she interviewed Doughboy. Like I said, we suspected that Wali wanted to arrest or abduct me. So, my sister also followed me from a distance with her camera, and took pictures of me and Wali.' I reached into my jacket pocket, 'Want to see them?'

Ikuru shook his head. Then he frowned, and wrinkled his forehead. 'So, what do you want?'

'You heard me the first time. I want you to tell Justice Wilcox tomorrow that you are withdrawing all the charges against Amaibi Akassa.' Ikuru's hands went up. Then he leaned forward and whispered,

'Kaniye, let me be frank with you. Even if what you say is true, I cannot take the decision to withdraw the charges against Dr. Akassa. That decision has to be taken from high up, perhaps even from as high as Abuja, and...'

'I don't care who is interested in the case. Call them to get the authorisation you need, or else, tomorrow, I'll get into the witness box, play my recording, and show my pictures. Or worse, I'll play my recording and show my pictures to the press. I may not be as popular as Doughboy, but I bet I can also make a few headlines. Want to bet against it?'

'You can't be a lawyer and a witness at the same time.'

'Tomorrow, I'll be a witness. I'll get my client another lawyer who is better and nastier than me.' Ikuru's hands were up again.

'Kaniye, take it easy. We can work something out.'

'I'm not really in the mood to work out anything with you, Mr Ikuru. One more thing, when I get into that witness box, or face the press, I'll also accuse you of prosecuting my client with evidence you knew to be false. Remember the Rules of Professional Conduct? Let me read something out of the Rules for you.' I took out the Rules, opened to a marked page, and read, '*A public prosecutor shall not institute or cause to be instituted a criminal charge if he knows or ought reasonably to know that the charge is not supported by the probable evidence... A lawyer engaged in public prosecution shall not suppress facts or secrete witnesses*

capable of establishing the innocence of the accused person...' Ikuru glared at me.

'What do the Rules say about blackmailing a fellow lawyer?'

I shrugged, 'Nothing specific, though I'm sure the Rules frown at blackmail. But, you know what? I'm ready for us to go and confess our sins to the Disciplinary Committee of the Bar. When they disbar us, I'll go back to running my restaurants, what will you do, A. G.? Do you think they'll still consider appointing you as Attorney General?'

Ikuru waved a hand in dismissal. 'You can go and confess as many sins as you like. It will be your word against mine.'

'I'm afraid it won't be as simple as that.' Ikuru raised his eyebrows in the unspoken question. I smiled, 'Didn't it cross your mind that I could have been recording this conversation?'

Chapter 31
Amaibi
Port Harcourt, 2004

‘My lord, my name is Sir J. F. K. Rufus. I appear for the Accused, Dr Amaibi Akassa. Also appearing with me are...’ As my father-in-law reeled out the names of the four other lawyers who were appearing with him, I scribbled a note to Kaniye who was sitting at the bar, but not wearing his wig and gown. My note said, ‘*What is happening? Why is Sir James representing me?’* Kaniye’s cryptic reply came on the same sheet of paper. ‘*Because, perhaps, the hour of your salvation has come.’*

Sir James, debonair as always, stood erect, feet apart, one thumb hooked on the silver chain of his pocket watch. His mellow baritone wafted gently, evenly, across the courtroom.

‘My lord, we are scheduled to continue with the defence of my client. We’re ready, and with your permission, sir, I call Mr Kaniye Daniel Rufus to the stand.’

The judge took off his glasses and his head swung from Sir James to Kaniye and back again. Dumbstruck, I turned to Kaniye who was standing up. He winked at me. I shook my head slightly. I didn’t understand what was happening.

‘Err... my lord, it won’t be err... necessary for this witness to give evidence.’

All heads swung to the direction of Mr Ikuru who had just spoken, and was now on his feet. Sir James raised a sardonic eyebrow, and gently rubbed his chin. I noticed, for the first time, that the chin rub was a quirk he shared with Kaniye. Before he sat down, he said,

‘Perhaps, Mr Ikuru would be so kind as to explain why he doesn’t think my witness should give evidence.’

Ikuru adjusted his gown. He glanced at Kaniye with something like fear in his eyes. Kaniye smiled back at him. Ikuru faced the judge, ‘My lord, it has come to my attention that the evidence of one of the

prosecution's witnesses, our strongest witness in fact, was... less than truthful...' The judge's eyes narrowed from behind his glasses. There was complete silence in the courtroom Ikuru held everyone's attention. He began by pontificating, 'My lord, I have been a prosecutor for fifteen years now. In that period, I have always conducted myself in line with the best traditions of the Bar – honour, integrity, and decorum. Furthermore, I am a firm believer that as ministers in the temple of justice, lawyers owe sacred duties to the court, one of which is the duty not to mislead or deceive the court. It is this same belief that has guided my style of prosecution over the years, because I understand that my primary duty is not to convict an accused person, but to see that justice, substantial justice is meted. For example, on several occasions, I have refused to prosecute an accused person, choosing instead to let the person go free, because I believed that the evidence was unsafe, and the witnesses unreliable. I have also...'

The judge took off his glasses impatiently. 'Thank you, Mr Ikuru. You've established that you are a noble lawyer. Can we now get back to this business of your witness who lied to this court? And also, why Mr Rufus should not testify?'

Ikuru took the putdown well. He nodded and continued, 'What I'm trying to say, my lord, is that based on the err... untrue testimony of this witness, I have now been persuaded...' He glanced at Kaniye again. '...I've been persuaded and I am now convinced that the Accused, Dr. Akassa, is indeed innocent... In the circumstances, and in the spirit of Christmas that is just around the corner, on behalf of the State, I formally withdraw all charges against Dr. Akassa...'

I didn't hear the rest. Nobody did. A loud cheer rang through the gallery. Some people, mainly from the press, scrambled for the door to make phone calls, and to shout properly. The judge banged his gavel repeatedly, and sent his police orderlies to clear the corridors outside the courtroom till order was restored. After glaring at everyone for a long time, the judge turned to Sir James, 'Learned, senior advocate, is there anything you'd like to say about this extraordinary turn of events?'

Sir James shrugged and made a bitter mouth like it was no big deal; he saw these things every day. 'My lord, obviously, I am pleased for my client and son-in-law. But, I must say, I'm also slightly disappointed. I was looking forward to crossing swords with Mr Ikuru...' There was a hard

glint in his eye as he said this, leaving no doubt that he had wanted a chance to rip Ikuru's lawyering to pieces. 'However, my lord, I would also like to commend Mr Ikuru for allowing himself to be... persuaded to see the truth. In that same spirit of truth and nobility which Mr Ikuru clearly possesses, I need not remind him that the justice of this matter will not be completely served until he has personally prosecuted that scoundrel of a witness for perjury.'

The judge turned to Ikuru. 'What do you say? Are you going to prosecute this false witness for perjury?'

Ikuru glanced at Wali, who was the only stone-faced person in the courtroom. 'Certainly, my lord.'

The judge's smile was nasty as he asked a seemingly rhetorical question. 'Wouldn't it be interesting if the Chief Judge also assigned that case to my court?'

I immediately understood the case would definitely be assigned to this court. Then the judge turned to me,

'Dr Amaibi Akassa, please stand up.'

I took a deep breath. The warder, Adibe Okoye, helped me stand up. He passed me my cane. I leaned heavily on it. I turned and searched for Dise in the crowd. I saw her. The tears were running freely down her face, smiling at me. I stopped breathing when the judge started talking,

'In view of the fact that the Accused has opened his defence, the fact that the State has withdrawn all the charges, and the peculiar reasons for the withdrawal, I have no option but to discharge and acquit the Accused. Dr Amaibi Akassa, you are discharged and acquitted of all the charges against you. You are a free man. You may stand down from the dock.'

Everything became blurred. I heard the loud shouts. But they seemed to echo from a tunnel far away. The judge banged his gavel many times. Nobody listened to him. He stood up and went into his chambers. There was a small smile on his face. People were tugging me. Some were shouting their congratulations. The press were yelling their questions. Dozens of bright stars burst all around, photographers at work. Some people began singing. Adibe Okoye removed my handcuffs. Dise. Where was Dise?

I saw Kaniye from across the courtroom. He was laughing. He pointed at me and shouted,

'Your redemption is complete!'

I stared at him blankly. I didn’t understand what he said. I needed Dise. Then I saw her. She jumped and waved. She was behind the crowd that had gathered round the dock. I saw Kaniye hold her hand, saw him fight their way through the crowd. They made it to outside the dock. Adibe Okoye was unlocking my leg chains. Kaniye did not wait. He scooped Dise. He swung her over. He lowered her down. Dise was now in the dock. She was laughing. She was crying. I couldn’t help myself. I started crying. Dise hugged me tight. I was bathed with a million goose bumps. My heart thrashed in my chest like a caged beast. After six or seven years, Dise was holding me again. That was when, finally, I believed it. I was free.

‘What are your feelings towards the witness who lied against you? Anger? Hatred?’ Outside the courtroom, the reporters flung questions at me. They jostled each other for space as they shoved microphones, recorders and cameras in my face. Dise held my hand to support me. We waited for Kaniye who had gone to bring his car from where it was parked.

I sighed, ‘I’m tired. Since 1997 when my anger and hate started, they haven’t done me any good. In fact, they landed me in this mess. I’m tired of hating and being angry. Besides, I’m not very good at them anyway. I’m more bemused than angry about the lies...’ Then, I remembered my father. He too had suffered in 1997. Some soldiers had beaten and blinded him. Just after Dise and I separated, I went to Asiama to see him and clear my head. One morning, I heard him mention the soldiers in his prayers. He blessed them. I left Asiama immediately. I didn’t speak to him before I left. I stared at the reporter who had asked the question. ‘...But this time, I choose not to hate. This time, I choose to forgive. I pray that God shows me how.’

‘So what’s next for you? Are you still going to continue your fight to protect the environmental rights of the Niger Delta people?’

‘After, I’m discharged from a hospital, after I’ve rested? Yes. That is my calling. But let me say this, my fight will continue to be nonviolent. I sincerely apologise for all the times in the past when I failed to condemn

the mindless violence and crime perpetrated in the name of the Niger Delta struggle.'

'But your friend, the late Doughboy, advocated the use of force to bring the needed change.'

I paused and looked into the cameras. 'Unfortunately, Doye did. And sadly, too many of us support or sympathise with that view. But, we must ask ourselves: what has that achieved for us as a people? We've kidnapped and hounded expatriates so much that they're beginning to flee the Niger Delta. We kidnap the ones who drill our oil. We also kidnap the ones who build our roads, and treat our children when they are sick. Then, we complain about lack of roads or healthcare. The stupidity of our violence is frightening. I heard this morning that we've even started kidnapping our own brothers for ransom. What next? Our women and children? When will it end? Can't we see history repeating itself? Centuries ago, because of greed, we kidnapped our brothers, sisters, children, and sold them to slavery. Today, the greed and kidnappings have started again. This is slavery too, but in a different form. Now, we own the slaves; we punish the slaves and we are the slaves. Things are bleak. Our mentality has been corrupted. But I refuse to give up hope. We need to change the way we do things. We need to stop fighting the wrong battles. Our people must drop their arms and get off the streets and creeks. The war will not be won there. The war will be won in lecture halls as we expand the minds of our young people. It will be won in corporate boardrooms if we convince Big Oil that in the long run, it will be more profitable for them to drill ethically. The war will be won in the legislative chambers, if we persuade our lawmakers to change the laws that deny us our resources. It will be won in polling stations and courts of law, as we remove the thieves who masquerade as our leaders, from power. We will never win with our guns or aggression. We will win with our intellect, ideas, by serious negotiations and informed debate.'

'And are you going to lead this war?'

I smiled and shook my head. 'This war is bigger than any one man, especially a sick one like me. I think I've done my bit for now. Let me heal. Hey, it's almost Christmas this is not the season for a war. Let me go, and feel the love of my wife, family and friends. Let me go and thank God for his goodness.'

Kaniye’s car swung up suddenly. He almost drove into the crowd of reporters, but hit his brakes just in time. At the sound of the squealing tyres, the reporters scampered for safety. A short path to the car was cleared for me. Immediately, Kaniye reached back and opened the rear door. I managed to sit down before the reporters came rushing back.

‘One more question! Just one!’

I shook my head and shut the door. It had been more than a year since I enjoyed air conditioning. I felt good. Dise quickly got in through the other rear door. She held my hand again. I felt even better. The reporters tapped on the windows. They surrounded the car. Kaniye revved the engine aggressively. They cursed him as they jumped off. He smiled and waved at them. We roared away. I was going home.

Chapter 32
Deola
Lagos, 2004

It was time to amputate Amaibi's leg. The operation was scheduled to take place at the hospital in Maryland where I worked. On that day, I took a break from my rounds through the wards and went to see Amaibi in the private room where he was admitted. I knocked on the door. Someone opened it from inside. It was Tubo. We exchanged grins and shared a warm hug.

'Hey, long time no see.' When we let go, Tubo held me by my shoulders and appraised me thoroughly.

'Hmm... my, my, you're looking good enough to eat.' It made Dise and I roll our eyes, and shake our heads as we hugged. Tubo raised his hands and looked surprised, 'What? What did I say that was wrong? Can't a man give an honest compliment anymore?'

'Do all your compliments have to be so lecherous?' Dise asked. 'You've been here for thirty minutes and you've already complimented four nurses.'

Tubo nodded like a guru. 'Yes, of course. This is a good hospital all the nurses are pretty. The last thing any sick person needs is an ugly nurse.'

'Tubo!'

'What again?' He pointed accusingly at Dise and me. 'This is why I always prefer lies. People just can't handle the truth.'

Amaibi sat up on the bed, and watched everything with a small smile. We squeezed hands briefly. I asked if he was okay. He nodded. I asked if he needed anything. He didn't. Dise sat by one side of the bed, playing with his hands. She looked at me and said,

'Are you okay? You look tired.'

I smiled. 'This hospital is very busy today. I've been on my feet for the past five hours. I just wanted to say a quick hello before they take him

in for the operation. I'd be off duty when they come for him...' Tubo said,

'So you won't be the one to cut off his leg and make him a one-point-five like me ehn?' As Dise glared at him, I said,

'I'm just a general practitioner. I'm not a surgeon.'

Amaibi moved and made some space on the other side of the bed. He patted it.

'Come. Sit for a while. I want to talk to you.' After I sat, he searched my face for a moment. Then he said, 'Kaniye's catching the last flight into Lagos this evening.' I smiled. Amaibi grinned back. 'He says wants to be here with me during the operation. We all know he really wants to see you.'

'I want to see him too...' I let out a small sigh, 'But, I don't think it's a good idea.'

'I understand. I'm not asking you to see him. But there's something we all think you should know. We were even discussing it before you came in.' He looked at Dise and Tubo. They both nodded and smiled.

'What is it?'

Amaibi said, 'Kaniye has started attending a church.'

I laughed. 'It's not about attending church. It never was...'

Amaibi nodded, 'I know that. The thing is, he searched for a church. A thorough and painstaking search. Tubo, tell her...'

I turned to Tubo. He raised his hand, palm facing me, like he was taking an oath. 'It's true. He made me accompany him. We attended a different church every Sunday for about two months, sometimes two churches a day. Kaniye said he was searching for a church that would encourage him to be righteous...'

I felt my heartbeat quicken. Kaniye had listened to me a lot more than I had given him credit for.

'Anyway, he eventually found one and he's been attending regularly since August.'

I shrugged. 'That's good to hear. But like I said, it is way beyond attending church... wait, did you say August?'

Tubo nodded and Amaibi spoke my thoughts. 'You left Port Harcourt at the end of September. It means, he was already going to church regularly, before he asked you to marry him.'

I was confused. 'So why didn't he tell me? Not that it would have changed my answer but...'

‘I talked with him after you returned to Lagos. He didn’t tell you because he understands that the journey to God is a personal one for each person. He wanted to know God for himself, and not for you, or even through you. Then he proposed, and you said you wanted to marry a Christian. Kaniye knows the difference between a Christian and a church-goer. There was no point in telling you then that he had started going to church. He hopes someday soon to make the transition from church-goer to Christian. But he still wants his motives to be genuine, he doesn’t want to do it because of you. That’s why he’s never told you.’

‘So why are you guys telling me this?’

Amaibi said, ‘We know how hard it was for you to make the right decision and stick with it. We are not asking you to change that, but I also know that because you love him, you still have secret hopes of a future together.’ I became embarrassed that I was so easy to read. Dise smiled and patted my arm, as Amaibi continued, ‘Only lovers truly understand the eternal nature of hope. He’s not there yet, but I know Kaniye is on his way to God. I need you to please keep your hope alive.’ Amaibi smiled, ‘I’m also telling you because Kaniye saved my life. This is my gift of thanks – to help him get something he really needs.’

I shook my head. ‘He needs God.’

‘True. And he also needs you.’

I ran my hands through my hair, and tousled it. I puffed my cheeks and exhaled. Then I smoothed my hair back again. ‘This is not fair, Amaibi. I come here to see you before your surgery and you ambush me with this.’ He shrugged.

‘Life is not fair. Besides, I had to tell you before I went in for the surgery… just in case I don’t make it out alive.’

Dise turned in alarm. ‘Stop saying that!’ Suddenly, I was the doctor again.

‘Amaibi, it is perfectly normal to be apprehensive before going in for any surgery. However, an amputation is not a very complex surgical operation. Try not to worry, okay?’ I patted his shoulder. His smile was shamefaced.

‘It’s just that there are all these horrible stories about things going wrong in surgeries.’

‘And that’s why you are here, Amaibi. You’re in good hands. This hospital is one of the best in the country.’

Tubo nodded. ‘I agree. This is a good hospital. Just look at the nurses.’

‘They’ll use anaesthesia, won’t they?’

I nodded and smiled. ‘Of course. You won’t feel a thing. I guarantee that ...’

Amaibi smiled sadly. ‘I still can’t believe I’m going to lose my leg. No matter how hard I try, my mind can’t seem to accept that fact. Perhaps after the surgery I’d come to terms with it.’ He shook his head. ‘How is this going to affect my life? I don’t want to be a burden to...’

‘Amaibi!’ Dise shushed.

I said, ‘You can’t be a burden to anyone, Amaibi. Sometime after the surgery and physiotherapy, you’ll be fitted with a prosthetic leg made with the latest technology. It may be difficult at first, but when you get used to it, you’ll not only walk, you’ll run again. Trust me, Dise won’t be able to keep up with you.’

My pager beeped. ‘Oh! They’re looking for me.’ I got off the bed. ‘I’ve got to run.’ I took Amaibi’s hand in one of mine, and Dise’s in the other. ‘Let’s say a quick prayer.’ Tubo joined the circle by holding Amaibi’s and Dise’s hands. I said, ‘Father, I thank you for always hearing us. Your son, Amaibi is about to undergo an operation. We commit the operation into your hands. May your will be done. You’ve helped him survive worse things, and re-united him with his loved ones. We pray that it is your will that he comes through this operation successfully. But if that is not your will, we also know that he will be with you, and you will comfort us. Thank you for your unchangeable love in Jesus name we’ve prayed.’

It wasn’t the prayer they expected, but they heartily chorused, ‘Amen.’ I squeezed their hands and let go. ‘Remember, God is always with you. I’ll call you later.’ As I walked to the door, I pointed at Tubo. ‘You! Leave our nurses alone!’

He raised his hands to protest his innocence. ‘I swear on my mother they are the ones who want me. I can tell by the way they smile at me. Abeg, tell them to leave me alone o!’

I shook my head and opened the door. Tubo called me back,

‘Deola, there’s one thing I’ve been wondering about...’ I turned round. Tubo’s face was set in a serious, enquiring expression, ‘When they cut off

Amaibi's leg, what will they do with it? Will they give it to him to keep, or what?'

Yinka, my younger sister, woke me up. 'There's a guy here to see you.'

I poked my head out from under the blanket and yawned. 'Ooooh! Tell Bayo to stop pestering me. I've told him I don't want to see him. Besides, it's late. I'm asleep.' I covered my head with the blanket.

'It's not late. It's just gone past 8 p.m. By the way, why are you asleep by this time? You promised to help me look through the catalogue to choose a bouquet.'

Yinka was getting married next week Saturday – Christmas Day. As the last child, she was incredibly sweet, spoiled rotten and prone to be selfish. She was twenty-one, fresh out of the university, and didn't have a job. As a result, I feared she was not quite ready to get married. I had told my parents this, and somehow, it convinced them to tell her to wait for a year. But Yinka had thrown a tantrum, and locked herself in her room for hours. My parents capitulated.

From under the blanket I said. 'Yinka, I'm sorry. I had a hard day at work. I'm tired. But, we mustn't choose the bouquet this night. Your wedding is not until next week. Please can we do it tomorrow morning?' I heard the pout in Yinka's voice.

'No. You promised. You just want to spoil my wedding.'

'Yinka, save the drama for your parents. Get out of my room. Don't forget to switch off the light as you leave.' She laughed.

'Deola, please now. Let's do it this evening after you finish with your visitor.'

'I've told you I'm not coming downstairs to see Bayo.'

'It's not Bayo. It's Kaniye.'

I flung the blanket off me. 'Kaniye? Where?' Yinka's smile became naughty.

'Downstairs.'

I became suspicious. 'You're lying. You just want to get me up to look at your catalogue.'

‘I’m not lying.’

I pointed at her accusingly. ‘Yes you are. That’s why you’re smiling like that. Okay, so what does he look like?’

‘Tall. Slim. Skinhead. Deep, sexy voice. He’s fine sha, but not as fine as my Seun.’

‘Oh, my God! What is he doing here?’ Yinka shrugged.

‘Dunno. Why don’t you go downstairs and ask him?’

I jumped off the bed in a panic. My hair was a mess. I wasn’t wearing clothes I sleep naked. ‘What will I wear? What will I wear? Yinka, help me! Pick something for me. Don’t just stand there.’ Yinka leaned against the wall and folded her arms.

‘And, my bouquet?’

I snapped, ‘We’ll look for it this night.’

Yinka smiled triumphantly and made for my wardrobe. I ran into my bathroom and started brushing my teeth. As she rummaged through, Yinka started a commentary,

‘You’re supposed to be chilling at home, so the look should be casual, but still sexy and not desperate or not sluttish.’

I paused my brushing, spat into the sink and called out, ‘I don’t wear any sluttish things. You do!’

‘My things are not sluttish, they’re trendy.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Anyway, we’ll go for cool and casual. We don’t want to overdo the sexy bit, your parents are downstairs.’

‘What? They’re there?’

‘Where else will they be? This is their house.’

I was out of the bathroom now. ‘You mean they’ve met Kaniye?’

‘Yes o!’

‘Yea! I’m finished! Kaniye has killed me. He has given your mother something to talk about for the next one year. Ooooh! Why didn’t he call first?’ I sat in front of the dressing table and began brushing my hair.

‘He said he did. But you didn’t answer...’

‘Oh! My phone has been on silent and I forgot to turn the ringer back on’ I put the brush down. ‘So, how did it go? What do they think of him?’ Yinka smiled.

‘You know your mother. She’s disappointed that he’s not Yoruba but that Kaniye is a charmer. He told her he knows how to make *efo riro*,

ewedu and *ofada* stew. The next thing I know, they're talking about cooking and exchanging recipes. Your father was easier. He was impressed that Kaniye is a lawyer, and that he had just won a big case. You know how he wanted one of his children to study law. Anyway, they talked to him for about fifteen minutes before they asked me to come up and call you.'

She laid the clothes she had picked for me on my bed. 'Don't worry, they like him.'

Five minutes later, I went downstairs to find my father laughing heartily at something Kaniye had said, while my mother sat there beaming.

'Deola...' Kaniye stood up when he saw me.

'Mr Rufus. What a surprise to see you here?' It felt awkward for us to shake hands.

'How've you been?'

'Fine. And you?'

'Fine.'

Fine. And that was the end of our conversation for five minutes. The presence of my parents and Yinka made us ill at ease. After a while, I couldn't take it anymore. I turned to my father, 'Daddy, please can we go into your study?'

'Ah, sure.'

We retreated to the privacy of the study. I left the door ajar. But no one in the sitting room could see into the study from where they were sitting. Kaniye sat on the desk and swung his legs. I stood far from him, leaning against a bookshelf. We just watched each other for a while. No words were needed. We had confirmed that what we felt for each other had grown stronger. Finally Kaniye sighed and jerked his thumb in the direction of the door.

'Your parents are nice people.'

'Try living with them for a month. You'll change your mind.'

He smiled, but his eyes were sad. His voice cracked, 'Don't knock your parents. Life's too short.'

'Are you okay?'

He shook his head, 'I'm not.' He sighed and bowed his head into his hands.

'What's the matter?'

He was still smiling when the tears began to fall. ‘I’m sorry I came without telling you first. Believe me, it wasn’t the plan. When I landed in Lagos, I had planned to go straight to the hospital to see Amaibi and Dise, and then check into a hotel before I called you. But on my way to the hospital, they called me with the news and I became lost, confused and miserable. That’s when I knew I had to see you tonight. I had nowhere else to go.’

‘What news?’

‘He’s dead.’

‘Oh, my God!’

‘He had a heart attack this evening. I don’t know what to do. How am I going to tell Dise?’

I was across the room in a flash. I held Kaniye. It had the warmth and sweetness of a homecoming. He buried his head in my shoulder and wept silent tears. I clung to him like I’d never let go. My mother poked her head through the door of the study. Kaniye was backing her. He didn’t see her. My mother stared at me, her face inscrutable. I hugged Kaniye tighter. At that moment, he belonged in my arms. Nothing else mattered. My mother backed out and quietly shut the door behind her.

Asiama Town, 2005

I met Amaibi’s father on the day of the burial. Kaniye introduced me to him

‘Sir, this is Deola Oluwagbamila. She’s the doctor who took care of Amaibi when he was in prison.’

I smiled and said, ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. I’ve heard so much about you.’

‘And I about you too.’ The blind, old man smiled. There was something of Amaibi in his smile. Then he stretched out a gnarled hand to me. I put my hand in his. He turned my palm up. Gently, he traced his

thumb on it, and pressed my fingers. ‘Some blind people feel people’s faces to get a sense of their essence. I feel hands. I hope you don’t mind.’

‘Not at all, sir.’

‘Hmm, you are beautiful, yes?’

I laughed. Kaniye said, ‘She is, sir.’

‘I’m not talking about how she looks.’

‘I know that, sir.’ Catechist Akassa pressed my hand some more.

‘Hmm, Kaniye.’

‘Sir.’

‘I don’t know whether to condole you on the death of your father, or to congratulate you for finding her.’

Kaniye laughed. ‘You can do both, sir.’

‘Ah! Then I shall do both. First, please accept my condolences. Your late father was one of Asiama’s better men. He will be missed. You know, he talked about you a lot.’

‘Really? Did he say how I always did the opposite of what he wanted me to do?’

‘No. He always told me how proud of you he was.’

Kaniye bit his lower lip in surprise. Catechist Akassa did not let go of my hand as he also reached out for Kaniye’s hand. When he clasped our hands in his, he said, ‘Both of you please accept my congratulations and blessings in advance.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

Catechist Akassa shook his head. As he started speaking, a tear rolled down his face. ‘No. I should be the one thanking you. My son is alive today because of the both of you. Tell me, doctor, how is my son doing?’

‘Great. His recovery is going very well, faster than expected. Now he’s undergoing physiotherapy to help him get used to his artificial leg. I even spoke to him this morning, He is fine.’

Catechist Akassa did not bother to wipe off his tears. He squeezed our hands. ‘Thank you. May God bless you and make His favour shine upon you.’

The bell of St. Cyprian’s Church started tolling. Catechist Akassa raised his head, and listened to it for a long moment. Then he said, ‘The time has come. Let’s go bury your father.’

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, the people who had not met me, but yet blessed this book with their invaluable time and insights – Prof E. J. Alagoa, Judy Melinfonwu and Obari Gomba.

The über-talented Timi Amah allowed the viewing of his masterpieces and the use of one for the cover. Tony Charles, Mike Afenfia, Iphie Modu, Shadrach Saddih, Akpewe William-Jumbo and Ejiro Onobrakpor they read till the end, laughed at the right places and lifted me with their words.

Sopakirite Kuruye-Alele and Odun Longe graciously answered all my calls (usually at odd hours) whenever I wanted to inquire about the meanings and etymology of Kalabari and Yoruba words. Tekena Opuda was just as kind when I pestered him about medical matters.

Esosa Omo-Usoh and Enitan Lawson read the manuscript, almost as fast or as slow as I wrote it. I am lucky to have fed off the vibe from these two fellow artists-who-have-to-be-lawyers.

Ibiso Graham-Douglas, my hard-working editor and publisher, took a risky gamble with an unknown and unpublished writer. Her patience with me was remarkable, despite the missed deadlines and prolonged bouts of laziness (a.k.a. writer's block).

Biyai, brilliant scientist, co-writer, fair critic, coffee-maker, therapist, masseuse, conscience, best friend, number one fan, and wife. She believed.

Finally, God for the numerous talents (many already wasted,) and the strength to use this one. I am eternally in your debt. Thank you.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

This story didn't turn out the way I had planned it. I had set out to write a love (not romantic) story set in the Niger Delta. However, the Niger Delta refused to be merely a setting, but forced its way to being a major theme of the story. Now, it is only right that I say a few words on it.

When I started writing this story in 2005, it was still fashionable to kidnap foreigners in the guise of the Niger Delta Struggle. By the time I finished sometime in November 2008, the foreigners were either gone or more securely guarded, and the prey had become the wealthy/middle-class Nigerians. As I write these words in October 2009, the pandemic has spread all across Nigeria, and the kidnappers are less discriminating in their choice of victims. Recently, I heard this rumour about the kidnap of a 'vulcaniser' (an artisan tyre-mender) for a ransom of N30,000 (about $197).

The Niger Delta Struggle has become a tragedy so bizarre that one has to search for comedy in it just to remain sane. I know now that I wrote this story as a form of catharsis, to try to make some sense out of all the madness, and to tell some of the truth, as I understand it. Besides, I was fed up with the fact that the only 'voices' of the people of the Niger Delta was either the political class, or the self-styled 'militants', (two equally appalling choices in my view). I was also tired of the hypocrisy of the people of the Niger Delta, my people, who are the real victims, but have refused to take the lead responsibility for their own roles in the calamity that has befallen them.

As I said, this story didn't go according to plan. As I wrote, characters took on a life of their own: for example, Doughboy became something of an anti-hero instead of the villain I had originally intended; while Kaniye's appeal to female readers of the manuscript was better than expected.

I would like to think that all the detours from the original plot in my head led the story to a better end. And it doesn't matter, if in the end, the story turned out to be something impossible for me to explain or classify into a genre of fiction. After all, a storyteller doesn't have to fully understand his stories he just has to tell them.