



TALES OF RUIN AND RESTORATION

# BROKEN

*An anthology brought to you by:*

**CHRISTIAN WRITERS AND READERS  
CLUB**

# **BROKEN**

*TALES OF RUIN AND RESTORATION*

**Christian Writers and Readers Club**

## **ENDORSEMENTS**

**Only a loving Heavenly Father can create a powerful anthology to change lives of Christians all over the world. Broken: Tales of Ruin & Restoration shows the realities of life. Discover strength as stories highlight pain with purpose, tears mingled with God's tenderness, boldness with blessing, repentance with renewal, and failure with forgiveness. Every story gives God glory. Every reader will relate. These things are written so that we know the love of God in every life encounter. Please don't miss this blessed gift.**

**Dr. Donna D. Kincheloe: Author of A Life Just Like Mine:**

**How God and Nursing Turned Past Pain into Present Peace**

**[www.walkthehalls.com](http://www.walkthehalls.com)**

**Although this book tells stories of pain and heartbreak, each one ends with the hope of redemption.**

**Each is an individual story with different characters, settings and situations. But the theme is well spoken throughout. I love that they are all faith filled.**

**Jan Johnson: author and podcaster.**

**The prose is so powerfully written that the stories will drag the reader right into the ink. You'll find yourself on the battlefield of light versus dark. I appreciate that the Scripture references are present without feeling preachy--just characters navigating their story. A perfect read for anyone exploring faith in God, wanting to grow in their faith, or just hungry for a dynamic read.**

**Samantha Evans Tschritter, author of Love Letters to Miscarriage Moms and other titles. Learn more at [LoveUnedited.com](http://LoveUnedited.com)**

**Brought to you by the Christian Writers and Readers Club (CWRC)**

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**All Bible references in this book were obtained from the King James  
Version of the Holy Bible, (Public Domain).**

**This short story collection is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments or organizations appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the stories in this book are drawn from the authors' imaginations.**

**The theme for this anthology is Broken: Tales of Ruin and Restoration.**



# **DEDICATION**

**To every broken soul and/or nation, restoration is here.**

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## **About CWRC**

**“And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.**

**And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you: and my people shall never be ashamed.”**

**Joel 2:25-26 (Bible KJV).**

# FOREWORD

There are books that entertain, and then there are books that encounter you—body, soul, and spirit. **Broken: Tales of Ruin and Restoration** belongs to the latter. It is not simply a collection of stories; it is a chorus of human hearts laid bare before God, each echoing the same eternal cry: “Is there hope beyond the breaking?”

These nine stories traverse different terrains—geographical, cultural, emotional, and spiritual. From war-torn cities to quiet family homes, from the silence of trauma to the roar of redemption, the characters you will meet here are not distant literary creations.

They are people you know. They are probably you.

What binds them together is not a shared background or experience, but the universal rhythm of ruin and restoration. Each narrative dares to explore the valleys of pain, shame, pride, grief, and loss without flinching. Yet none of them stay there. In every account, whether loud or whispering, God’s grace pursues—sometimes gently, sometimes fiercely, but always faithfully.

What I find most remarkable is the diversity of voices. Some stories unfold like psalms, others like confessions, a few like modern parables. There are characters who rage at God, those who run from Him, and those who return to Him with trembling hands—and

**all are welcomed, all are seen. This, perhaps, is the true miracle of the book: it doesn't sanitize the brokenness, but it never glorifies it either. Instead, it allows each wound to become a window, pointing toward a healing far deeper than surface restoration.**

**As you turn these pages, be prepared to pause. To feel. To remember. To confront your own silent scars. But also, be ready to hope again.**

**Because these stories are not about how people got broken. They are about how the God who sees—and calls—never stops writing new endings.**

**Welcome to the journey.**

**Welcome to the restoration.**

**Welcome to hope.**

**~ Emmanuel Awiri: CEO, Glightup360 Media.**

# EL ROI

Oluwabukunola Ruth Oremodu

Trigger Warning: This story contains depictions of sexual abuse, trafficking, and trauma. These portrayals are included with the utmost respect and sensitivity to reflect the real suffering of survivors. They are never intended to exploit, sensationalize, or diminish the gravity of these experiences—nor to ridicule any religious community or cause distress to the reader.

If you are a survivor or feel affected by any of these themes, please prioritize your well-being. You are not alone, and support is available through trusted professionals, communities, or safe spaces around you.

May you find rest in compassion, and shelter in places that understand.

---

Enugu, Nigeria

3<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2025

I stand over Father Abel’s body, frozen. His blood pools beneath him, thick and dark, soaking into the earth like it’s trying to bury the truth before I can process it. My eyes lock on the wound at his neck, and I swear I feel it mirrored in my own body—sharp, burning, hollow.

I want to scream. To cry. To fall to my knees and beg God to turn back time. But my limbs feel miles away, as if grief has put me outside of myself.

Is this what it means to lose someone you love?

Leaves rustle behind me, but I don’t turn.

Then a hand lands on my shoulder and I jump, my body snapping back into itself.

“Helen—”

I turn. It's Adetutu. Her gasp cracks the silence, a sharp, helpless sound. Then she screams, the sound echoing off the hills like something feral. My own scream stays buried in my chest.

I had seen it all.

Father told me to hide, but I peeked through the shack's cracks and watched as—

I blink. Once. Twice. Again. Holding back tears I can no longer afford.

"Father Abel is dead?" Tutu's voice wavers.

I flinch at the word.

"We can't stay here," she says softly. "Not with night falling."

I kneel beside his body, trying to lift him, but my arms tremble under the weight. His neck dangles, barely held by a thread of flesh. Blood stains my habit and bile rises in my throat.

The image of those men, blades rising and falling, it won't leave me.

"Helen!"

"Coming," I whisper.

I won't leave him here. I won't let the vultures have him. I won't let those men use his body as proof of their hate.

He deserves a real burial.

Tutu joins me. Together, we carried him, step by step down the mountain, the place Father and I came to pray. The climb down is slow, punishing. Our breaths are ragged, legs barely holding us upright.

When we finally reach the road, headlights slice through the dusk. A van approaches and slows.

"Peace be with you, Sisters. Are you alright?"

I squint, recognizing him. A deacon. One of ours.

I try to speak, but a sob chokes me.

“He was... we were... they...”

“Father Abel was killed.” Tutu finishes quietly.

“The outreach, is it over? Where are the others?”

“They left. We missed the bus.” Tutu says.

“You shouldn’t be alone out here. Get in. I’ll take you back to the convent.”

“No.” I hug Father Abel tighter. “I’m not leaving him.”

He steps out, walks to us, and tries to pry Father Abel’s body from my arms. I hold on to him, and the deacon sighs.

“Father Abel’s no longer here. This—” he gestures to the body, “—is only a container. The real man is gone.”

Something in me recoils.

I hate how easy he says it, like Father Abel is a box to be packed away. He was just laughing earlier. Now he’s a footnote.

Still, I let go. I watch as the deacon lays him at the back of the van.

“Get in. I’ll take care of him.”

We sat inside. A moment later, the deacon climbs in. He opens the glove box, and brings out snacks.

“Eat something. I’ll take you both back to the convent.”

“What about Father Abel?” I ask, taking the packet and stuffing my mouth.

Tutu does the same.

“I’ve alerted the diocese. They’ll handle everything at the rectory.”

The truck pulls into the road. Trees blur past. Tutu leans her head on my shoulder, already drifting. I try to stay awake, but my eyelids grow heavy.



I open my mouth to speak, to thank the deacon. But when I glance at him, I catch it—  
a smile curling on his lips. Too wide. Too knowing.

My fingers grope for the door handle, but the world is already fading.

Then—

darkness.

---

I blink. Once. Twice. The third time, my eyes begin to adjust.

Darkness. Thick and unbroken.

My head throbs as I realize I'm in the back of a truck. The metal floor vibrates beneath me, each bump in the road jarring my spine. Around me, quiet breathing—some fast and shallow, others heavy like weeping held in too long.

Shapes shift in the dark, soft outlines of girls, huddled close. Too many of us. Some are barely old enough to understand what's happening.

"You're awake," someone whispers beside me. A girl. Fifteen, maybe younger.

I blink again, my vision adjusting.

"I guess you want to know where we are."

"Y-yes."

My voice is dust. Paper-thin, cracked.

"We heard the men talking earlier," another girl murmurs.

"We're on our way to—"

"Casablanca," a third one says.

The name settles heavily in the space around us.

*Casablanca.*

It stirs something vague in my memory, like a place I once read about but never imagined visiting. Not like this.

“It’s in Morocco,” the first girl clarifies. Then after a pause, her voice falters. “We’re being taken there to be... used.”

“Used?” I echo, my breath catching.

“For men. To be sold.”

The words sink like a stone inside me.

No. No, Lord, did You hear that?

I’m Yours. I’m Your bride.

Won’t You come for me?

But the only sound I hear is the muffled cries around me, and the steady creak of the truck moving forward through the night—carrying us toward a fate sealed tight like a jar of pe rsimmons—ripe, closed, and already rotting.

---

Casablanca, Morocco

15<sup>th</sup> of May, 2025

We disembark from the truck and march into an empty warehouse, where they separate us into groups.

At the far end, I spot Adetutu. Her white veil is streaked with smudges. I press my fingers against mine, knowing it’s just as stained.

I clear my throat, trying to catch her eye, but the sobbing girls and harsh negotiations drown me out. The men decide who will be sold as slaves and who will be forced into prostitution.

One by one, groups are led away, tension thickening with every passing moment.

An hour later, Tutu's group is called. She finally glances back, our eyes locking, fear mirrored in hers.

Is she regretting coming back for Father Abel and me?

She makes the sign of the cross, fingers trembling, then reaches for her rosary and presses it to her lips. A fragile smile flickers across her face—brave, broken, but still trying. Then she turns to follow the others, her steps light, almost defiant.

I watch her go, her silhouette growing smaller with each step. Something in my chest twists.

As the door closes behind her, I wipe my tears with the back of my hand.

It's the last time I ever see her. If I know now what I knew later, I would have held her gaze just a moment longer.

I would have smiled, wide enough for her to feel it in her bones, even if it broke me.

To tell her, without words, that we were still in this together.

No matter how far apart we'd be.

---

21<sup>st</sup> of June, 2025

I wipe the counter, humming softly to myself. A breeze slips through the window, rattling the blinds. I glance outside and watch the children of my mistress playing.

Their laughter pulls a smile from me, and I bob a little as I work.

"How do you keep smiling in all this?" my fellow worker asks.

"Because everything happens for a reason. God hasn't forgotten us."

She scoffs, her broom tapping the floor. "God's an illusion, you know that, right?"

I chuckle. "I've heard that one before."

“They say you were a nun.”

“Sister,” I correct gently. “I’m a sister.”

“What’s the difference anyway?”

I laugh again. “Does it matter much to you?”

She smiles, but it’s as hollow as a fake masterpiece.

“Helen, open your eyes. Look around. There’s no divine savior coming for us.”

“But—”

“No buts. We’re our own saviors.”

I shake my head and hum again, trying to brush off her words. But as the days passed—dirt under my nails from scrubbing pots, hands stained from picking cherries—I couldn’t help but wonder if she might be right after all.

---

Chefchaouen, Morocco

18<sup>th</sup> of September, 2025

I lay a sheet over the mattress I’ve been given. Being bought by a new boss means moving again, from one place to another. Always another.

I lie down, eyes closed, but my mind won’t settle.

Where is Tutu now? Is she safer than I am, or has she fallen deeper into this nightmare?

I think of Father Abel, how he used to bless our foreheads before morning prayers, whispering Scripture like a shield.

Has he been laid to rest now? Was he given a befitting burial? Is he resting in the bosom of the Lord?

The questions ache in me, heavy and unanswered.

With a sigh, I sit up and scan the cramped space. Eight other girls fill the room, bodies curled on their cots like wilted flowers. My eyes settle on the empty space where a door should be. Just an opening. No lock. Because what use is a lock when fear holds us in place?

Soon a man strolls in, slick with confidence, a lollipop jutting between his teeth. He points at two of the girls and then me.

“The three of you, come with me, *yalla*.”

His words roll out, laced with that Moroccan accent I’m starting to get used to.

We exchange nervous looks, then rise slowly, shuffling our feet as we follow him into a larger room.

He scrolls through his phone, pops the lollipop from his mouth, and lifts his gaze. He points to one of the girls.

“You—Cassie Jay now.”

He jabs a finger at the second girl, giving her a new name. Then his eyes land on me. “You—Mindy Hawk.”

He digs through a bag on the floor, pulls out some clothes, and tosses them at us.

“Wear these. Out in ten.”

“What are these for?” Cassie asks.

The second girl tries to hush her, but Cassie raises her chin and steps closer to the man, her voice sharp and clear.

“If it’s what I’m thinking, I’d rather die than do your dirty work.”

“You sure?”

Cassie squares her shoulders and flings the clothes at his face. They bounce off. He doesn’t yell. Doesn’t curse. He just grabs her by the neck and drags her out.

Minutes later, her screams pierce the walls.

Then a bang. Silence.

The other girl and I flinch, and then huddle together, the quiet between us heavier than any words.

He comes back, the front of his shirt speckled with blood. He wipes his hand across it, as if that makes it cleaner.

“Who else got something to say, *daba*?”

The second girl slowly picks up the outfit, tears slipping down her cheeks as she undresses. Her hands tremble as she slips into the tight, glittering dress—every movement a quiet surrender.

He turns to me. I don’t argue. I just change, the clothes clinging to my body.

“Wait your turn,” he says, and leaves with the other girl.

I sink to the floor, arms crossed over my chest. Even before I took my vows, I’d never worn so little.

Several minutes later, the door opens. I stand, bracing myself, but it isn’t the same man.

This one is bigger, a scar cutting from his temple across his right eyebrow like a blade had marked him.

“Boss call you now.” He says.

His English carries the same Moroccan accent, but it’s less sharp than the man from before.

My heart lurches as I follow him to another room.

As we near the door of the new room, it opens. The girl from before comes out, her steps slow and stiff. Our eyes meet, and I recoil at the emptiness in her gaze.

What have they done to her?

The scarred man waits outside, shutting the door behind me.

A bed sits in the center of the room, lit up by four cameras. People—men, women—watch from the corners, looking ready to do what they’re ordered. The boss—the one who killed Cassie—lounges in a chair, a gun dangling lazily from his fingers, the lollipop back in his mouth.

“Mindy, get in bed. Once he,” he nods to a man nearby, “joins you, do what he says.”

I don’t move. My eyes dart around the room.

He removes the lollipop, letting the gun swing in full view.

“Why are you still standing there? Arms off the chest, *sah*? Show our viewers the goods. They need that, no?”

Trembling, I climb onto the bed, the room spinning. I close my eyes as the guy climbs over me.

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.*

*Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

My breath stirs the words. A whisper. A lifeline.

“Cut!”

The boss moves fast. He yanks my hair so hard I think my neck will snap. Tears stream down, hitting the sheets.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

My scalp burns, and I count down the seconds until he lets me go.

“I hate disappointments, Mindy.”

I spit in his face. Then I burst out laughing, something in me cracking wide open.

“Helen! My name is Helen!”

The last shred of me. I clutch it like a cross.

He smiles faintly, then gestures to some others. “Take her to the silver room.”

I fight, kick, scream, but they carry me anyway. Down the stairs. Into blackness.

The scarred man watches, his face unreadable, as they throw me into a tiny, windowless space and slam the door.

A foul stench hits me instantly. I gag and cover my nose.

It smells like rats live here.

I grope along the floor, searching for space, for food, for anything.

My hand touches something soft. Sticky. It squishes under my fingers as I trace the shape, the smell now unbearable.

Hair. A nose. Lips.

Dread slices through me.

Dear Lord,

It’s not rats.

---

Has it been days? Hours? Time slips away like an elusive shadow, gone before I can grasp it.

I curl close to the door, knees hugged to my chest, rocking myself gently.

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,*

*the Holy Catholic Church,*

*the...*

My mind falters, the words fading like mist.

I open my mouth, desperate for fresh air, but the stench rushes in—thick and suffocating. If there were anything left in my stomach, it would have risen.



Later, I'm dragged out. I gasp for breath as I move up the stairs and into the same room as before.

The boss sits, gun in one hand, lollipop in the other, a camera trained on the bed. Men and women crowd the edges of the room.

"You like your roommate, Mindy?"

I meet his gaze, the stench of the silver room etched into my senses.

"Helen," I mumble. "I'm not Mindy."

He laughs. "Tch, still fighting, eh? Take her back."

I shake my head weakly, but before I can speak, I'm thrown back into the darkness.

Sobs wrack my body.

Lord Jesus, why? Why this torment? What have I done wrong? I've served You faithfully. Why the silence?

More silence answers me.

Wiping my tears, I lean against the door, remembering my co-worker's words. Maybe she was right.

I am my own savior.

A knock startles me. I glance at the door as a flap at its base pushes inward. A hand slips through, thrusting a few items toward me.

"You take this, for now." A whisper says.

Curious, I bring them closer.

A sweet scent hits my nose—perfume oil.

The second item is a drink. Hesitant but desperate, I gulp down the drink while holding the perfume oil close to my nose.

Maybe, just maybe, someone here still has a heart.

---

Long after, the door clicks unlocked.

I let the perfume oil slip quietly to the back of the room, not wanting to betray the kindness that reached me.

For the third time, I'm brought before the boss—camera rolling, room buzzing with watchful eyes.

“You ready, Mindy?” He asks.

I stare at the floor.

“Looks like you love the silver room. Take her back.”

Panic surges, and I fall to my knees, clutching his legs.

“Please, don't send me back there,” I plead. “I'll do anything, just not that place.”

He smiles, shifting his lollipop from one side of his mouth to the other. He brushes a strand of my hair behind my ear gently, almost tenderly.

“What is your name?”

Tears sting my eyes, but I hold them back.

“Mindy. Mindy Hawk.” My voice cracks.

“Good girl.” He nods to two women. “Fix her up nice. They say she was a nun, *sah*? Let's enjoy the show.”

After a quick change, I'm led back.

I stare at the ceiling as a man grunts over me.

Now I understand why the second girl went in crying, and came out silent.

---

It has become routine now. My body no longer belongs to me. It never really did. Once, it belonged to the Lord, but now it's claimed by these devilish men who use it as they please. Even if the Lord wants me back, I'm tainted beyond cleansing.

"Mindy."

I look up to see the scarred man who always stands guard by the door when I'm inside the camera room. He walks me back to my room every night. Sometimes, when I'm too weak, I lean on him for support.

"You ready, yes?" he asks.

His words are clipped and careful, like English isn't the language of his thoughts.

I nod quickly, and that is enough.

We walk silently to the camera room. A flick of my hair, a forced smile, a jiggle of my chest—and my part for the day is done.

When we reach my door, he turns to leave. I reach out and briefly touch his arm, then pull away.

"Thank you, Rif."

He stops and looks back, his eyes studying me.

"Jamil," he says.

"What?"

"My real name. Jamil."

I gasp. "No one uses real names here."

He says nothing.

"Why are you here? You seem like a good person."

He hesitates, torn between silence and trust. Then he pulls a worn photo from his pocket and smooths the creases.

“Four years ago, my sister... she go out on date with man from the internet. She never come back. Later, I find out she sold.”

“You’ve been searching for her ever since.”

He nods. I place my hand gently on his arm.

I know too well the pain of loss and helplessness.

His scar, once frightening and fierce, now feels different. Perhaps earned in the long, painful search for his sister.

---

8<sup>th</sup> of December, 2025

“Christmas is almost here,” one of the new girls says, bouncing on my bed like it’s the best news in the world.

I stare at her, then look away.

“What would you want for Christmas?” she presses.

“Nothing.”

I stopped wishing a long time ago.

“Don’t you want to be free?” she leans in, eyes bright with hope. “If we’re good girls, maybe Santa will bring us freedom.”

“Freedom?” The word sounds strange, like a forgotten dream. Nobody talks about it here. Those who do... they never return. “You’re new. One day you’ll see, there’s no way out. This is our destiny.”

Her face falls, hope fading. She opens her mouth, but I stand and walk away.

I search for Rif. No—Jamil. He’s corrected me before, soft but firm. Only his name, when no one else listens.

I find him in a room, on the phone, his back to me.

“J’ai besoin d’un peu plus de temps. Peut-être que la semaine prochaine sera mieux.”

He speaks softly, the French words flowing over the line. I don’t understand, but his voice sounds urgent.

When he ends the call, I ask, “Who was that?”

He startles, swiveling round.. “Who what?”

“Your sister? Any news?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“I speak with my boss.”

“Mr. Lollipop?”

He shakes his head. “Not Lollipop. Le Commissaire de Police.”

“Le Commis...” I stumble over the words.

He rubs his face, deciding whether to explain.

Then quietly he says, “Police Commissioner.”

---

24<sup>th</sup> of December, 2025

10:05 p.m.

“The boss call you. Lollipop.” Jamil says quietly, his shadow stretching across my floor like a warning.

I rise from the bed slowly, the sheets clinging to me as if even they don’t want me to leave. Behind me, the girls whisper. They’ve gotten used to it, to me being summoned night after night.

The other girl he used before disappeared. No one speaks of her. No one even says her name anymore.

At Lollipop's door, I pause, my hand hovering over the knob.

"What is wrong?" Jamil asks, close behind.

"I don't want to go," I whisper. "I'm tired, Jamil. Tired of being used like a cloth that's wrung dry."

He says nothing, but I feel him listening. I turn to him, eyes searching his face. "You're a police officer, right? Please. Help me."

"I..."

He hesitates. I catch the flicker of pain he tries to swallow.

"*Please.*"

The door swings open. Lollipop stares, eyes landing on our proximity.

"Boss," Jamil says quickly. "She enter now."

Lollipop doesn't wait. He reaches for my hand, pulls me inside and shuts the door behind us. No shouting, no rush. Just control.

"Sit," he says, gesturing to the edge of the bed. His voice is even, almost gentle.

I hesitate.

"Do I look like a beast to you?" he asks, amused. "I don't break girls. I teach them."

I remain frozen.

"See this smooth skin, these pretty eyes." He touches my cheek. "Shame, *wallah*. You never use them before. But me? I use them now. Don't waste God's work, no?"

I stare at my knees, wishing the night was over already.

"Lie back."

When I don't respond, he pushes me back, his eyes glinting.

I lie still, eyes fixed on the ceiling, counting the water stains to stay elsewhere.

When it's over, he stands, tugging on his shirt with lazy satisfaction.

"Helen."

My chest tightens. My name. Real. Sacred. Stolen.

He grins, savouring the moment. "These sounds you make every night, eh? Sweet like music. You learn them in Church, or you practice with someone before?"

My fingers grip the sheets, shoulders trembling.

"You don't answer. You still think you clean? After what's on camera... and what you do with me?"

My eyes flick to the nightstand. Then I see it—his gun, resting on the nightstand, gleaming like a cruel joke.

My hands move before I can stop them. I grab it and climb down the bed, knees shaking.

He turns and sees me.

"What now?" he says softly, his voice low and mocking as he eyes the gun in my hands. "You going to redeem yourself through violence? A final act of martyrdom?"

My arms tremble.

He takes a step closer.

"You think this gonna fix you? Change your fate?"

Another step.

My breath catches.

"Pull the trigger, and I'm right—Mindy not a victim. You just a thing touched by violence, like all of us."

I take a tiny step back. He catches it and grins.

“You not the first who try. But nobody bold enough. Especially not you, Sister.”

“Don’t talk about me like that!” I scream.

His hand cracks against my cheek. I fall. The gun skitters away.

“You here to learn obedience, *habibti*. If I must, you will spend Christmas in the silver room. It the only way to make you the best girl here.”

The air turns to ice in my lungs.

The silver room with its bare walls and darkness that swallowed girls whole. They went in kicking and screaming. We left as fragments.

Not that room. Not ever.

I scramble, snatch the gun, and leap to my feet, gripping it tight as my heart pounds.

He lunges for me, grabbing my wrists. We struggle, bodies tangling, the weapon caught between us.

Then—bang!

A silence so thick it serenades.

He stares, blinking in disbelief. Then he looks down, blood blooming like ink across his shirt. His knees give out. He crashes to the floor.

I stare. I can’t breathe.

He’s not moving.

He’s not... moving.

“No...” My voice comes out hollow. “No, no, no.”

“Hey.”



Jamil.

He's suddenly there, holding my arms, grounding me.

"Breathe In. Out. Good."

He kneels, checks the body. Looks up.

"Lollipop... gone."

I cover my mouth with my fist, the sob tearing out of me before I can stop it. Fear and shock coil tight around me.

"I killed him..."

"No time," Jamil says firmly. "We leave now. Before they know."

He searches Lollipop's pockets, finds a ring of keys, then pulls me by the hand.

I avoid the body as best I can, stepping over the spreading pool of red turning dark.

Jamil peers into the hallway. It's quiet.

We move like shadows, slipping past doors and down corridors. My breath stays lodged in my throat.

Outside, the night air bites.

We're just steps from a car when my foot hits a tin can. It clatters across the ground, sharp and loud, like a scream in the dark.

A flashlight snaps on.

"Who's there?" A voice barks.

We drop low behind the car, cold sweat pooling along my spine.

Jamil's grip on my hand tightens.

Then another voice rings out, rushed and panicked. "Something's wrong with the boss!"

The man with the torchlight mutters a curse, then pivots and bolts back towards the house.

Keys jingle. Jamil unlocks the door and ushers me in first.

Seconds later, he slides in behind the wheel. The engine growls to life.

As we pull away, I don't look back.

Not at the compound.

Not at the past.

Just the road ahead, black and wide and full of unknowns.

Jamil sits beside me, one hand on the wheel, the other on the gear.

I glance at him and see the quiet weight in his posture, a search still burning, a sister not yet found.

We ride on without words. The moment begs for it.

But for the first time in a long time, my heart is beating not just out of fear—

but because it still can.

---

25<sup>th</sup> of December, 2025

3:27 a.m.

It takes time to reach the police station. The journey is long, but I don't remember most of it. Everything after the shot feels like a blur.

Later, I overhear the officers describing the raid—the flashing lights, the shouts, the girls being pulled out, some crying, others too numb to make a sound. The police arrived just in time, before the men could move the girls again.

Just one house. Just one raid. But it feels like a dam has broken open, and relief floods through me.

At the station, it's chaos and salvation all at once. Girls wrapped in blankets. Names being taken down. Questions. Crying. And then, silence between each heartbeat.

Three women in blue/white uniforms hand us mugs of tea. A tear slips down my cheek as I take a sip. The tea is warm, faintly sweet.

It pulls me back to Saturday mornings at the convent—the rustle of robes, whispered Psalms, the slow bloom of light through chapel windows.

I cradle the mug a little longer before offering it back with a, “Thank you.”

“I told you,” the new girl whispers beside me, clutching her mug of tea like it's a treasure. “If we were good, Santa would give us a gift.”

I look at her and manage a small smile. I did get a Christmas gift. But it wasn't from Santa.

It was from *El Roi*.

The God who sees.

The name lands softly inside me, and peace, deep and unfamiliar, blooms in the cracks of my soul.

I used to think God had turned His face. Maybe He did. Or maybe He was watching, waiting—not to punish, but to let me see what I can survive, and guide me through it. I don't know. But I know I'm no longer in that cage.

After questioning, I slip outside, the blanket still clutched around me. No one stops me. No one orders me back.

The air is cold. Crisp. It hums with the quiet of a world moving on.

Somewhere behind me, footsteps stir the silence.

I turn, and there he is—Jamil, the shadow who once guarded doors, now standing under the open sky with me.

“Helen, you take this,” he says, offering a small packet of biscuits.

When I take it, he pulls the blanket tighter around my shoulders.

And I realize something.

“It was you,” I whisper. “You brought me the perfume oil and the drink.”

He manages a smile. The first I’ve ever seen from him.

We don’t speak more than that. We don’t need to.

The past clings, but it doesn’t crush me.

The gun. The struggle. Lollipop, with his sugary grin and his hands full of rot, is gone.

Yet, not all monsters wear cologne and chunky rings. Some wear collars and whisper scripture, like deacon.

I didn’t plan any of this. But I’m still here. Still breathing.

We stand in silence, the breeze brushing past. Fireflies swirl round us—tiny golden lamps in God’s cathedral.

Beyond the quietness, distant city lights twinkle like fading stars.

The night exhales silver sighs through the hush between us, neither rushing nor still.

But here, time lingers—waiting.

I take a deep breath, then let it out in a soft whoosh.

Dawn approaches.

# GLOSSARY

Abel – A biblical name of Hebrew origin meaning “breath” or “vapour.”

Adetutu – A common Yoruba female name from Nigeria, meaning “the crown is worthy to be cherished” or “worthy crown”. It’s often shortened to “Tutu”.

Daba – Moroccan Arabic (Darija) slang meaning “now” or “at this moment”.

Habibtī – Arabic word meaning “my beloved” or “darling” (feminine). It’s a term of endearment.

Helen – A classic name of Greek origin meaning “light”, “torch” or “brightness”.

J’ai besoin d’un peu plus de temps. Peut-être que la semaine prochaine sera mieux – French for “I need a little more time. Maybe next week will be better”.

Jamil – An Arabic male name meaning “beautiful” or “handsome”.

Sah – Moroccan Arabic slang used to confirm truth or agreement, like “right”, “true”, or “correct”.

Tch – A sharp, dismissive sound. It’s similar to the English “tsk” or “ugh”.

Wallah – Arabic word meaning “I swear by God”.

Yalla – Arabic expression meaning “come on”, “let’s go”, or “hurry up”.

# THE AUTHOR WANTS YOU TO KNOW THAT:

El Roi is a name for God that means “The God Who Sees.” It reminds us that no pain or struggle goes unnoticed, no story remains hidden from divine sight. In the darkest moments of suffering and stillness, there is One who watches over us with compassion and justice, giving hope to those who feel unseen and forgotten.

When the world turns its eyes away, El Roi looks on with unwavering compassion and quiet justice, offering light to those lost in the deepest night.

This story is, in part, a tribute to Father Donald Martin Ye Naing Win (R.I.P.), a 44-year-old Catholic priest who gave his life in Myanmar on February 14, 2025. His final words, “I only kneel before God”, echo like a solemn hymn—inviting us to pause, to reflect in the silence and the sound alike. They remind us of the sacred cost of discipleship, and the boundless love of Christ, who gave His life for us all.

To die for love is no stranger to faith—Jesus showed us that courage and sacrifice walk hand in hand. So, stand firm, brave soul; the victory has been won. Now, all that remains is to live in its light, carrying hope where darkness once ruled.

This story also honors those touched by the shadow of trafficking—the victims who were stolen away too soon, and the survivors who endure, their spirits unbroken.

To every survivor who reads these words: your worth is timeless, your story sacred. Though the scars remain, they are but a testament to the strength and grace that define you.

# MEET THE AUTHOR

Oremodu Oluwabukunola Ruth is a barrister and solicitor of the Nigerian Bar. A passionate writer since childhood, she has honed her craft through short stories, novels, and various writing courses. Certified as an International Model United Nations intern, she enjoys singing, dancing, and swimming to stay fit.

Driven by a love for learning new skills, she has also mastered makeup artistry and DIY beauty remedies. Ruth studied law at Obafemi Awolowo University and is proud to be part of a close-knit family of six.

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# ASHES OF THE NATION

Faith Ijiga

# CHAPTER ONE

Lagos, Nigeria — 2037

The power died again at exactly 7:13 p.m.

The humming of Carl Onoja's solar inverter cut off mid-pitch, plunging the room into the sort of darkness that didn't just obscure—it swallowed. Outside, a child screamed as if the night itself had bitten him. From the window, Carl heard the distant gunshots that had become too familiar—two pops, a pause, then one last burst like punctuation in a bloody sentence.

He didn't flinch.

Instead, he closed the laptop whose screen had gone blank with the outage and felt his way to the candle on his desk. Striking a match, he whispered, "Let there be light," his voice tinged with irony. A tiny flame sputtered to life, illuminating his face—mid-thirties, lean from stress more than exercise, with eyes that saw too much and lips that prayed silently more often than they spoke.

Carl had once been one of Nigeria's brightest minds in tech—first class in Computer Engineering from Covenant University, a Google fellowship, then an MIT bootcamp that opened doors Silicon Valley would've welcomed him through. But he came back. Not for money. Not for fame.

For hope.

A foolish thing in this country.

Now, years later, Carl was a ghost in a failed system, moving between safe houses with his backpack of tools and truth. He built software that exposed the unspoken—financial footprints of government officials, encrypted leaks from whistleblowers, and communication bridges between resistance cells.

The Movement called themselves Aarayi—from the Yoruba word for 'healer.' It was a risky name. Healing implied the system was sick. And in Nigeria, calling sickness what it was could get you killed.

A sharp knock rattled the door.

Carl froze.

Three knocks. Pause. Two more. The code.

He opened the door cautiously. A slender figure in a black hoodie stepped in. The girl removed her hood. It was Didi—barely twenty, dreadlocks tied in a loose bun, face hard like someone who had seen war up close.

“They picked up another one in Ojota,” she said.

“Who?”

“Uche. He was tracking embezzlement funds in the Lagos State health budget.”

Carl clenched his jaw. Uche was seventeen. Still in his first year at Unilag. Brilliant. Brave. Naive.

“Is he alive?”

“They took him to Sector Six.”

Carl felt the breath leave him.

Sector Six was a military black site camouflaged as a government archive building. Everyone who went in either came out silent... or didn’t come out at all.

He turned and lit another candle, the flickering light casting long shadows on the peeling walls of the safe house.

“We can’t keep losing people,” he said, pouring water into a cup, his hands trembling just slightly.

Didi leaned against the door. “That’s why we’re here, Carl. We’re fighting. It’s just... the fire is burning us too.”

He nodded slowly. Outside, the rain began—soft at first, then growing heavy, pounding against the zinc roof like an anxious heart.

Carl moved to the table and pulled out a worn Manila folder. “This is the Lagos State Electricity Disbursement Report,” he said. “Publicly, the budget allocates 420 billion naira to infrastructure. But see this?”

He flipped through spreadsheets with annotated code. “Only 17% of that actually reached project accounts. The rest went to ghost contractors. The cartel has men in the Ministry of Energy, Finance, even NEPA’s corpse of a replacement.”

Didi’s eyes darkened. “We’re literally sitting in darkness while they siphon light for themselves.”

Carl nodded grimly. “And people say it’s God punishing us. But it’s not divine judgment. It’s man-made sin.”

His words lingered.

Carl looked around the room. Cracked concrete. A ceiling fan that hadn’t turned in weeks. He had grown up in Makurdi, Benue State, where his father was a pastor and his mother sold second-hand clothes. They’d taught him that integrity mattered more than comfort. But comfort had become a privilege, and integrity now carried a death sentence.

He had chosen integrity.

And now, he was choosing to act.

“The cartel owns the government, the media, even the police,” Carl said, eyes fixed on the candle flame. “But they don’t own the truth. And the truth is like fire. It spreads.”

Didi smiled faintly. “So what’s next?”

Carl stood, his resolve hardening. “Tomorrow, we will leak the report. But not online. The networks are compromised. I have a friend—a journalist—who is still with Channels TV. We go old school. Live broadcast. If it reaches enough people, it’ll start a chain reaction.”

“Won’t they come for you?”

“They already are.”

Suddenly, his phone buzzed—a coded notification from their signal chain.

“Encrypted ping from Zone 4,” Carl read. “Abuja safe house is down.”

Didi’s eyes widened. “That’s Joy and Tolu. They had the banking cartel data.”

Carl opened his laptop and quickly booted into a secure shell, checking for mirrored backups. Everything from Abuja was gone.

He stared at the screen, heart sinking. “They wiped it clean. No backups. It’s like it never existed.”

The rain was heavier now. Thunder rumbled like a warning.

Carl stood slowly, walked to the window, and looked into the night—not with eyes, but with spirit.

“This country,” he said quietly, “is like a cracked vessel. Water still flows in it, but nothing holds. Everything spills.”

Didi stepped beside him. “Then we seal the cracks. Or die trying.”

Carl turned toward her, eyes burning—not with fear, but with resolve. “No,” he said. “We live trying. Because even broken things can be restored.”

# CHAPTER TWO

Makurdi, Benue State

The moment Carl stepped into the compound, he knew something was wrong.

The air had that strange stillness, like the pause before a downpour. The kind that hung over Benue plains before the earth cracked open in grief. A dog barked half-heartedly somewhere in the distance, and the usual hum of early-morning radios, grinding stones, and diesel generators was absent. Even the chickens were silent.

His mother, Mama Onoja, was sitting on the veranda, wrapper tied tightly around her chest, her gaze fixed on the red dust of the compound floor like it might offer her answers. She didn't look up when he approached. She didn't need to. A mother knows the sound of her son's footsteps, even when the world is falling apart.

"Mama," he said gently, setting his bag by the door.

She raised her eyes slowly, and in them Carl saw it — the confusion, the helpless ache that language cannot hold.

"She didn't come back," she said.

He didn't ask who. He didn't need to. The absence of Martha had already begun to press against the walls of the house, filling every crack, every breath.

"She went out around six yesterday evening. Said she wanted to visit Sister Amina — the widow that lost her son to the vigilantes last week. Martha said she wanted to pray with her, maybe take some rice. That girl... always carrying burdens that aren't hers."

Carl sat beside her and took her hands. They were cold. Clammy. She hadn't slept.

"They've taken her," she whispered.

Carl's stomach turned, slow and sickening.

"Who?" he asked.

Mama only shook her head. "The same people that take everything else. The ones nobody sees, but everyone fears. This land is sick, Carl. And it's eating its children."

She stood, wiped her eyes with the edge of her wrapper, and walked inside.

Carl remained where he was, staring at nothing.

---

The police station was a narrow building with paint peeling like old scabs. A bored officer sat behind a desk eating groundnuts, watching TikTok videos on his Tecno phone.

“My sister is missing,” Carl said.

The officer didn’t look up. “How long?”

“Over 24 hours. She left home yesterday evening and didn’t return.”

“Maybe she went to enjoy,” the man said with a smirk. “These Makurdi girls, dem sabi waka. Na boyfriend place she dey. Don’t worry yourself.”

Carl’s jaw tightened. “Martha Onoja is not that kind of girl. She’s a corper. Responsible. Someone must have seen something.”

The officer leaned back lazily. “You know how many people don lost this week? Four. That’s the ones we know. We can’t waste fuel chasing shadows.”

Carl looked around the station. A woman in a faded ankara blouse was crying in the corner, her son’s picture in her hands. A man argued with another officer over his stolen keke. Files were stacked in neglected piles, like tombstones.

No urgency. No outrage. Just routine decay.

Carl turned to leave.

As he stepped outside, his phone buzzed — a message from Didi.

Didi: Heard about your sister. I’m sorry. I checked chatter — there was a convoy spotted late last night near Gboko. Black Hilux. Might be a cartel. Nothing solid yet.

Carl didn’t respond. His throat was thick with a mixture of dust and despair.

---

That night, Carl sat in Martha’s room. It smelled of body oil, books, and innocence. Her Bible lay open on the bed, pages curled at the edges, a bookmark tucked in Isaiah.

> “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light...”

Her voice still echoed in the room somehow. She had always been a force of calm — the one who'd sing aloud while cooking, hum softly while praying, and speak boldly about hope, even when the generator failed and rats scurried underfoot. She'd chosen to serve in Benue because she believed the nation needed fixing from the inside out.

But faith, Carl thought bitterly, was no bulletproof vest.

He went to the window and looked out. The streets were dark. The transformer had blown days ago and hadn't been fixed. The neighbors had stopped complaining. Everyone had grown used to the silence of expectation.

Power. Water. Security. Justice. Gone.

Martha had once called Nigeria a “garden set on fire, whose tenders are pouring fuel instead of water.” He remembered laughing at the time. Now the metaphor didn't seem funny.

In the distance, a gunshot rang out. Then another. Carl didn't even flinch.

This was Nigeria now — a place where nightfall meant fear, where girls disappeared without a trace, and where hope flickered like NEPA light during a thunderstorm.

---

The next morning, Didi called.

“We picked up audio from a cartel transmission,” she said. “Could be about your sister, but it's encrypted. The voice mentioned ‘the preacher girl’... something about sending a message.”

Carl didn't speak.

Didi continued, her voice softer. “We'll keep digging, but I don't want to give you false hope. Boro's boys don't play fair. They don't return people unless they're paid. And even then...”

Carl finally exhaled. “We don't have that kind of money.”

“No,” she agreed. “But we have the truth. And if we can get it in front of the right people...”

He interrupted. “Right people? Where are they, Didi? Who are the ‘right people’ in a place where policy is wrong?”

There was a long pause. Then she whispered, “We'll find a way.”

But Carl didn't believe her. Not entirely. Not anymore.

---



That night, Mama lit a candle and placed it beside Martha's photograph.

"We are people of faith," she said, more to herself than to Carl. "But even faith begins to shake when the heavens feel silent."

Carl nodded slowly. He knew the feeling.

He didn't cry. He hadn't allowed himself to. Not yet.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Underground Base – Location Redacted

The bunker wasn't much. A half-finished church project left abandoned when the contractor disappeared with the tithe funds. Now, its roof was a patchwork of zinc sheets held in place with stones, its pews replaced by plastic chairs, laptops, and an old diesel generator humming like a tired prophet.

This was Aarayi's operational center. The name meant "Awake" in Tiv — fitting, because everyone here was wide awake in a country that preferred to sleep through its own nightmares.

Carl sat quietly, his hands clasped under his chin. He hadn't said much since arriving. Didi stood near a projection of Nigeria's central power grid, flickering on a worn-out bed sheet hung on the back wall. She looked like she hadn't slept, and the tension in her jaw suggested she wasn't planning to any time soon.

"There's a window," she said, addressing the room of seven core members. "Just under ninety seconds. That's how long we'll have to inject the payload into the server node at Jebba. After that, the signal rotates. Once we lose that window, we're locked out for another eight hours."

Her voice was clear. Calculated. But her eyes occasionally darted toward Carl.

They all knew why he was here.

They all knew about Martha.

"What's the end goal?" a deep voice asked. It was ojo, a former university lecturer who now used his knowledge of data and encryption to expose election fraud. "So we get into the grid node and... then what?"

Didi clicked a button. A new image appeared on the sheet — a list of names. Politicians. Oil barons. Security chiefs. An army general.

And beside each name, a number: account balances. Locations. Transactions. Dates.

"These are the people behind the blackout contracts," she said. "They siphon money meant for national infrastructure. They control NEPA, petrol subsidies, and security tenders. Some of them are behind the same cartel that took Carl's sister."

A silence hung in the room like smoke.

Then Didi added, “We’re not just hacking a server. We’re flipping a mirror on a nation that’s been living in shadow. We’ll leak the files, show the financial trails, and broadcast it to the world.”

Carl finally spoke. His voice was quiet, but his tone cut through the air like a blade.

“And what happens after that? They’ll deny it. Spin it. Blame fake news, blame the opposition, blame foreign interference. The people will rage for a day or two, and then they’ll sleep again. Nothing changes.”

Everyone turned to him.

Carl stood and walked slowly toward the map.

“I’m not doing this because I believe the system will correct itself. I don’t. I’m doing this so that when my niece — Martha’s daughter — grows up and asks me what I did while the world burned, I’ll have an answer. Not an excuse.”

He faced them fully now.

“Let’s tear the mask off this country. Even if the monster beneath keeps breathing.”

---

That night, Carl lay awake in one of the side rooms — a makeshift space with a foam mattress and a copy of the Bible left by someone else.

He opened it randomly and found himself in Ecclesiastes.

> “The place of judgment — wickedness was there. The place of justice — wickedness was there also.”

He closed the book.

Martha’s face came to him again, her smile still lingering, like perfume on an empty seat. He imagined her praying in the dark, whispering words of hope even when surrounded by devils.

Carl prayed too, for the first time in days.

Not for rescue.

But for courage.

---

The day of the operation came cloaked in dry heat. The road to Jebba was rough — cratered and flanked by abandoned police checkpoints where officers once extorted travelers before bandits began ambushing them. Now the checkpoints stood like hollow rib cages of a dead animal.

Carl, Didi, and Kalu — their field tech — rode in a battered Hilux with fake customs plates. The goal was to look invisible. Lost in the everyday chaos of Nigeria’s highways.

They reached a hill outside the Jebba Hydro Power Station. Kalu set up the signal bridge while Didi monitored satellite activity. Carl knelt by a patch of earth, running his fingers through the red dust. This land had swallowed too much blood.

“We’re up in sixty seconds,” Kalu called out.

Didi handed Carl the flash drive. “Are you still sure?”

Carl looked at the drive. On it was a 2-gigabyte packet of truth that could burn the fingers of whoever held it too long. He nodded once.

“I’m done watching.”

He slipped it into his pocket and walked down the hill.

--- The power station wasn’t fortified. It didn’t need to be — most people were too tired, too poor, or too afraid to care about who controlled their electricity. The guards were busy watching a Premier League match inside the security post, shouting at the screen.

Carl entered the server building with an ID badge Didi had forged the week before. No one stopped him.

The server node was humming, the heartbeat of the national grid.

He found the port. Inserted the drive.

Sixty seconds.

His hands shook, not from fear, but fury. Every kilobyte that streamed from the drive into the system carried names, faces, lies, betrayals.

Thirty seconds left.

Suddenly, a voice called out.

“Hey!”

A man stood at the door. Not a guard — someone from inside. Carl didn’t recognize him.

“You’re not maintenance. Who are you?”

Carl didn’t answer. He yanked the drive, kicked over the backup monitor, and ran.

---

They barely made it out. Kalu drove like a madman, zigzagging down the service road as bullets cracked behind them. A tire blew. They kept going.

By the time they reached the safe house, Carl’s shirt was torn, his arm bleeding from a grazing wound. But the drive was intact.

Didi plugged it in.

Data streamed across the screen. Footage. Bank statements. Communications. Even videos — one of a senator laughing about “handling protests with pepper spray and hunger.”

The room fell silent as the truth downloaded. Carl leaned back against the wall, blood trickling from his elbow.

“Send it,” he said.

And Didi did.

---

That night, the files hit the internet like fire in dry grass.

X. Telegram. WhatsApp. International news agencies picked it up. Headlines blazed with revelations of billions stolen, elections rigged, disappearances linked to powerful names. A senator was seen fleeing the country. A general denied everything on Channels TV.

In Makurdi, Carl’s mother sat alone in the dark, listening to the radio as names she recognized were read out loud.

In Abuja, an electricity ministry official collapsed during a press conference.

In Lagos, people gathered in front of a dead transformer, staring at it like it owed them an apology.

And in a small room somewhere in the North Central, a kidnapped girl looked up as her captor angrily switched off a phone buzzing with messages.

---

Carl sat outside the bunker, bleeding and breathing.

They had broken something.

Maybe not the system. Maybe not the powers that be.

But a silence had been shattered.

And something new might be born.

# CHAPTER FOUR

Three Weeks Later – Abuja

The rains came uninvited.

They bled from the clouds in thick sheets, hammering the rusted zinc roofs and washing filth off the streets like heaven weeping for the country. But even the downpour could not silence the anger that had been set loose. From Mile 2 to Zuba, Ojuelegba to Gboko, voices rose. Hoarse. Raw. Tired.

The leaks had done what Carl never expected: they had stirred something that couldn't be put back.

Not a revolution. Not yet.

But a reckoning.

---

Carl sat alone in a narrow chapel behind his mother's house in Makurdi. The old wooden cross above the pulpit was cracked where termites had gnawed into the beam. His left arm still bore the scar from the operation, a thin pink line that throbbed whenever the rain came.

He'd come home to bury silence. Not a body — Martha was still missing — but the idea that she might come back untouched. That illusion had died.

There had been no calls. No ransom notes. No new messages.

Just her absence — still, brutal, and vast like the space between stars.

His mother sat beside him. Her hand rested gently on his. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to.

They had prayed. Then wept. Then sat quietly for hours as the storm raged outside. Somewhere between the psalms and the thunder, Carl had found something he thought he'd lost completely:

Resolve.

---

The next day, Didi arrived. She wore all black and looked like someone who had forgotten how to sleep.

“They froze my accounts,” she said.

Carl raised an eyebrow.

“And yours,” she added. “ojo too. EFCC’s knocking on doors. They raided our safe house. Some of the guys fled to Ghana.”

Carl didn’t flinch. “The truth has enemies.”

Didi exhaled sharply, somewhere between a laugh and a grunt. “We didn’t break the country. We just held up a mirror.”

“Did the mirror survive?”

“Barely,” she said. Then, “But people are different now. They’re asking questions. Some are angry. Some are organizing. That’s more than we had three weeks ago.” They sat in silence for a while, watching two goats fight over soaked cassava peelings outside the compound wall.

Then Didi turned to him.

“What will you do now?”

Carl looked down at his hands.

His fingers — once used to code clean lines of software, to write clean prayers in his journal — had now been soaked in the mess of activism. There was no going back. “I’ll build again,” he said.

“Build what?”

Carl’s eyes didn’t blink.

“Hope.”

---

A month later, Aarayi resurfaced — not as a cell hiding in shadows, but as a registered civic platform. A whistleblower network. An investigative portal. A school for digital literacy. A haven for angry youth who no longer wanted to burn tires but build systems. They called it LightHouse.

Carl didn’t care for the symbolism. He just wanted to do the work. From a shared server in Kaduna, they taught students how to track government budgets. From an old printing press in Jos,



they published newsletters in Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Tiv — messages of accountability. Warnings. Wins.

The attacks came swiftly.

DDoS floods. Online smear campaigns. One day, a truck followed Carl's keke home for two hours. But he'd stopped living in fear since the day Martha vanished. There was nothing left to take from him.

Except his will.

And he refused to give that up.

---

It was at a youth conference in Port Harcourt that he first shared his full story — not the tech version, not the code-and-courage tale — but the raw one. He spoke of watching his niece cry herself to sleep.

Of losing a sister to silence.

Of praying for light and getting fire instead.

He spoke of his country, beautiful and bruised, where women went missing between checkpoints, and boys became soldiers before they became men. When he finished, there was no applause. Just stillness. And then one young woman stood up and said:

“My brother was taken too.”

Another voice followed. “They burned my village.”

Another. “I haven't seen power in my home for three months. But this week, I learned how to map transformers. I reported four that were looted. Maybe someone will listen now.” Then applause. Roaring. Grieving. Grateful.

In the ruin, seeds were being planted.

---

Carl walked out of the hall that night and looked up at the sky. The stars were faint, but present. He remembered Martha once telling him that hope was stubborn — like a weed in concrete. You could burn it. Starve it. Step on it. But it would find the cracks. And grow. He had started out wanting justice.

Now, he understood something deeper.

Justice was not the end.

Restoration was.

And restoration meant rebuilding — slowly, painfully — the kind of world where sisters don't vanish, and truth doesn't need to hide underground.

He pulled his hoodie tighter, said a quiet prayer under his breath, and walked back into the night.

The country was still broken.

But restoration had begun

And that was something.

---

THE END.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ashes of the Nation is not just a story—it's a cry from the cracks of a broken system. It was born out of long, quiet reflections on the ruins we've come to normalize—darkness where there should be light, sirens in place of song, silence where justice should speak.

As a Nigerian, I've witnessed the daily heartbreak of a people forced to adapt to dysfunction. Power outages, insecurity, poverty, and fear are not plot devices—they are lived realities. And yet, amid the chaos, I've also seen resilience, creativity, and faith that defy logic. These contradictions—ruin and restoration—are what this story wrestles with.

Carl Onoja is fictional, but he carries the soul of many Nigerians who dare to hope. His journey is not clean or conclusive. Restoration does not come in a neat arc. It is gritty, costly, and often incomplete. And that's the point.

Through this dystopian lens, I wanted to ask: What happens when a nation forgets its people? When the line between survival and surrender becomes too thin? But more importantly, I wanted to explore the quiet strength it takes to still believe, to still act, and to still rise—fragmented, but not finished.

This story is for the ones holding on. The dreamers, the fighters, the faithful. May we find light in the ashes—and the courage to kindle it.

—Faith Ijiga

## MEET THE AUTHOR

Faith Ijiga is a Nigerian author, podcaster, and social commentator whose writing boldly explores themes of justice, faith, identity, and the human cost of corruption. Known for her gripping thrillers and emotionally resonant storytelling, Faith weaves narratives that confront the raw realities of life in contemporary Africa—while offering glimpses of redemption and hope.

Her fiction is marked by strong character development, thought-provoking social commentary, and a commitment to truth-telling through story. Whether writing dystopian thrillers, cozy mysteries, or geopolitical dramas, Faith brings a distinctive voice shaped by lived experience and deep empathy.

Faith is the host of two compelling podcasts: the Christian Readers Community, where she engages authors and readers in conversations about faith and literature. African Thrillers Podcast, dedicated to spotlighting African voices in crime, espionage, and political thrillers.

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# THE INBETWEEN

Aquila Kyeng

Have you ever felt that deep, undeniable sense of victory—the one that rises when you know, without a doubt, that you’re going to succeed at something you’ve poured your sweat, emotions, money, and time into? Wait, what’s it called again? Ah, yes, a victory note. You feel it so strongly in your spirit that no one, not even God, can convince you otherwise.

But have you also felt what it’s like to start over? Not just starting something new, but starting again after experiencing so many of those victory notes? That’s when emptiness creeps in. Then comes frustration. And before long, depression knocks at the door.

I tell you this story today with tears in my eyes. People admire me. They say things like, “Oh, Miss Jonson, I want to be like you someday!” And I want to ask them: Can you walk in my shoes? Can you journey the road that brought me here? Or do you only like how the shoes look, without wanting to wear them? Some wore similar shoes, yes, but they had different means of transportation. Some were given a helping hand. Some were lifted forward by connections.

As for me, if not for God and the supportive family He gave me, I wouldn’t be here. I didn’t have connections. I wasn’t lifted by anyone’s hand. I was offered all kinds of shortcuts, very attractive ones too. And yes, I almost took them. But somehow, God, this same God we sometimes think isn’t watching, pulled me back onto the path. He made me walk.

At times, I thought God was being unfair. I worked hard for some of those “transportations” He denied me. There were days when I believed, without question, that He was wicked.

Now, we who began this journey together are in different places, celebrated and admired. But here’s what people don’t ask: Do you know our in-between? The middle of the story, the real story, the part that took us from who we were to who we are now. If you knew it, could you walk it?

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Kyla was a talented and ambitious young girl who dreamed of revolutionising the food industry. From an early age, she created recipes that left people hungry for more, though few ever suspected she was the cook. By the time she was ten, Kyla could already cater for the 21 women who made up her mother's meeting group.

Life, however, had other plans. Still, the Creator of life knew where Kyla came from, what she'd been through, and where she was going.

She couldn't wait to get home and start preparing the fruit juice recipe she had just created, simple yet special. Her parents, especially her father, loved her cooking. Not just because she was good at it, but because she had inherited the gift from his mother.

It was a mix of pineapple, watermelon, carrot, a hint of ginger, and one lime. She'd carefully juice each fruit separately, add just a touch of water with no sweeteners, and combine it all into something fresh and vibrant.

The thought of it made her mouth water. She had used all her lunch money to buy the ingredients to welcome her parents back from their three-week journey. She smiled as she imagined their expressions when they tasted it.

Kyla walked home with one mission in mind and no care for the rest of the world.

But when she got home, there was a car parked in the compound.

"Oh no," she whispered. "They're not supposed to be home yet."

Her parents were due the next morning at 7 a.m., enough time to let the juice chill overnight. This was not the plan. What unsettled her more was the strange, muffled crying she heard from the living room.

Frightened, she dropped the fruit in the kitchen and tiptoed toward the noise.

"Kyla oh oh! Kyla oh oh! Weti Johnson do me so? Ehhh ei don leave you for who?"

(Kyla, what has your father done to me? Who has he left you with?)

Kyla began to cry, confused. Her grandmother was weeping, and the other women were staring at her with pity. Then, a wheelchair was pushed into the room, and seated in it was a woman who looked like her mother.

She didn't want to believe it. But as she stepped closer, she saw what she feared—it was her mother. Bandaged almost beyond recognition, Kyla could only make her out from her forehead and a sliver of her face. In her eyes, Kyla saw pain, regret, pity, confusion, and a deep, haunting uncertainty.

The room closed in on her.

She needed air.

She ran fast toward the family's banana plantation. Her chest burned with grief and confusion.

“God, please bring back my father! Auntie Emma told us in Sunday School that you raised a man called Lazarus after four days. Please, I'll make the fruit juice for you instead! I'll cook for you. Just bring him back even if he comes in bandages like Mummy!”

Kyla believed. She laid down in the dirt and waited. Surely God would raise him too. She even felt herself being lifted but was too tired to open her eyes. She just knew that her father would wake up from wherever he was sleeping.

But the miracle didn't come.

“Dear beloved in the Lord, we gather today to lay Mr. Ngwa Johnson's mortal remains to rest. He has gone home to be with the Lord. We take comfort in knowing:

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ (Jeremiah 29:11)

“May Mr. Ngwa Johnson's legacy inspire us to trust in God's goodness and sovereignty. May we find peace and hope in His presence.”

Her father didn't rise. He didn't return.

She stood beside his grave, watching them lower what the pastor called “his mortal remains” into a deep, gaping hole.

It had taken three months for the burial. Her mother had mostly healed, though not completely. She leaned on Kyla for support, and though Kyla was only eleven, she felt the invisible weight settle across her shoulders.

“Kyla, take your food inside.”

Uncle Paul’s voice boomed over her like a mountain. Looking around, Kyla saw that the adults were gathering for another meeting without her, of course.

She took the plate of jollof rice Aunt Nene had served her. It tasted like sand in her mouth—not because it wasn’t delicious, but because, like her mother, Kyla had lost her appetite for everything.

She went inside, but when no one was watching, she slipped behind the curtain. It was the same spot she used to hide in when her mom told her to go to bed. Her father had known. Sometimes, after she left the living room, he’d change the channel to her favourite show.

Now, the voices in the parlour grew tense.

“Irene, we don’t know what happened, but your father died the same way,” Uncle Paul said.

“My father was poisoned, Paul!” her mother snapped.

“Doesn’t matter. What I mean is he died young.”

“What do you mean by that, Paul?” Aunt Nene’s voice rose, full of anger.

“What I mean is your family knows what happened to our brother.

Irene, Kyla’s mother, clapped her hands, looked at herself, and shook her head.

“Paul, can you see that Rene and Michael aren’t even here? Let me make one thing clear. No mystical reason or whatever is responsible for the death of your brother, my husband. It is your wickedness, selfishness, and self-centeredness that brought us here. Your mother was a single woman who struggled to send you all to school, but you refused to concentrate. Then, when the



only one among you who decided to focus finally made it in life, you choked him with your demands, making him feel it was his duty to take care of all of you.”

“Irene, education is not the only road to success. Johnson was educated, yes, but he was not God, and that’s all we ever tried to tell him.”

“Alright then, you who chose your own road to success, show me the results. Rene, show me the results. And you’re not even ashamed to say you tried to tell him something. Tell him what? You mean guilt-trip him into doing all your bidding? Oh please. We all know Johnson was quiet and timid. He wouldn’t even listen when I begged him not to involve you in his projects.”

“We were helping him. It was a family business. We were all trying to grow it together.”

Nene burst out laughing, loud and provocatively. Her mother, seated quietly in the corner, gave her a sharp look, and Nene stopped, though she kept mumbling.

“Family business, you say?” Irene continued. “It was Johnson’s sweat and blood. It was our sweat and blood, which you rejected from the start. But the moment it started bringing in money, you came running like ants to a piece of rotten fruit. Johnson, with his generous heart, let you in, not knowing that decision would cost him his life. Oh, Johnson. If only you had listened to me, you would still be here.”

Kyla pressed her hand tightly over her mouth. She couldn’t bear to hear her mother in so much pain.

“No, Irene. Don’t turn this on us. You know what you’ve done.”

“Do you even know what happened the day he died? The day of the accident? Do you know why Michael isn’t here? Because Michael gambled the company away. He lost it in a betting game. And, as the devil always plans things, the call came through with the news just as Johnson was driving. You know the rest.”

“It’s a lie. I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t believe me, Paul, because we both know what you really want. You want this house. You’ve always wanted to move in here, haven’t you? Well, you can have it. My daughter and I will leave, and you’ll have all the space you need in your new kingdom.”

“I haven’t asked you to leave...”

“Jesus! So you’re not even denying it, Paul? You’re a selfish man, an utterly selfish man.”

“Irene!”

Kyla’s grandmother, Mami Emi, finally had to raise her voice and call her daughter to order.

“I know your ways, Paul. You are a sly, cunning man, and I will not sit here and watch you gloat.”

Mami Emi said as she stood up slowly, her eyes scanning the house with a mix of sorrow and reflection. Thoughts clearly raced through her mind.

“It’s true. A man’s enemies are often those in his own household. I leave you with this — the God who sees all and knows all will be the judge.”

And just like that, Irene, Nene, and Mami Emi walked out of the meeting. Indeed, what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? It was a fruitless fight over perishable things — properties and items that cannot follow you to your eternal abode.

As soon as Kyla heard the footsteps approaching, she dashed to her room and slipped under the duvet. When her mother came in, she stood by the door for a moment, quietly watching her daughter, the only fruit of her 13-year union with Johnson.

She smiled, sadly, at the bulky form under the covers. Kyla was pretending to sleep.

“Hmm. Someone who’s fast asleep doesn’t grip the blanket that tight, don’t you think?”

“Mama, I’m sorry. I couldn’t sleep.”

“That’s alright, my dear. I believe you heard everything that was said. Kyla, you are old enough to understand. I want you to get up and pack everything you own. As you probably know, we cannot stay here any longer. We’re moving to Douala to start over.”

“Douala? How? How are we going to cope, Mama? This is our home. It rightfully belongs to us.”

“Kiki, my love, not every battle is worth fighting.”

“But Mama, this is our home!”

“Calm down, my dear. Home is where the people you love are.”

And that was true. Her father was gone, and the ones she loved were leaving. Kyla didn’t want to argue anymore. She got up, dragged her boxes from beneath the wardrobe, and began to pack everything she had ever owned.

With all her heart, Kyla hoped for better days ahead.

### **THIRTEEN YEARS LATER**

Things were supposed to be easier after their move to the economic capital of the country. A city of hustle and bustle. A city where dreams were meant to come true. But it seemed Kyla’s dreams were only created to be crushed.

She had done everything like everyone else, but nothing was working. Reality had struck so hard, she had even considered compromising like others around her. Many options had been laid before her in her pursuit of success. At just 25, she could already say she had seen a lot.

“Kyla, what are you doing at home at this time of the day?”

It was Aunty Nene, who had been a great help to Kyla and her mother since their move. She often stopped by to check on them, since the hospital where she worked as a nurse was nearby.

“Aunty, they denied me the main chef position at the restaurant.”

Her aunt walked into the house, pulled out a chair, and sat down.

“Kyla, to be honest, I think you are worth more than that company. You have so much potential. Everyone who tastes your food craves more. You come up with new recipes all the time, and every time you share one with those so-called big chefs, hoping they’ll consider you, they just use the recipe, make money from it, and push you aside. Their minds are too small to see your

worth. Don't you see this as a sign? Don't you think it's time for you to start something of your own?"

"Aunty, I know I have the potential to start something. I even believe that if I do, it will become big, maybe even famous across the country, or the world. But I need a starting point. I need to work with established chefs so people can know me. For now, I'm just a nobody with talent."

"I don't believe that. You're not a nobody. You're somebody with great talent. How do you think those chefs started?"

"They rubbed shoulders with bigger chefs before them. Look at Eunice, Aunty. That girl was far behind me, but today she owns a huge four-star restaurant. Let's not even talk about the kind of people that go there."

"Not everyone started like that, my dear. Some began with blurry cooking videos in their mother's kitchen, shot on small phones. Others started cooking behind their houses using firewood. Today, they are great. I know you want to be known, but everyone's road to success is not the same. Has Eunice ever told you the in-between of her story? The goal is to succeed, and people choose different paths to get there. It all depends on what kind of path you choose. Maybe God wants you to start alone so that when you finally succeed, no one else can claim the glory."

"Ahh Mama, you're back."

Irene had been standing there for a while, quietly listening as her sister spoke with her daughter. She knew Kyla's fears. She had heard her daughter's whispered prayers and muffled cries in the night. At 25, still living in her mother's house and sleeping in the same bed, Kyla felt like a failure. Irene had even started sleeping in the parlor, despite the mosquitoes, just to give her daughter some privacy.

She knew how badly Kyla wanted a better life. She had raised her in the ways of the Lord, and Kyla had become a radical and fervent believer, a source of pride. But Irene also knew the deep pain hidden behind her daughter's smile.

"Yes oh, Nene. How are you? Are you on your way to the hospital, or off duty today?"

Nene lifted the overnight bag she came with and smiled.

“I’m off duty. I’ll be spending a few days here.”

“Ah! What about David? And don’t forget, you are married oh!”

“I’ll go pick him up from school and bring him here. His father traveled for the GCE exam corrections. Unless you people don’t want us around.”

“Nooo!”

Mother and daughter cried out together.

“It’s just that I want to make sure everything is fine with your home. I hope you’re not coming here to hide. Philip is a good man.”

“Ah ah, Sister Irene. You’re always supporting him. I’m your sister, not him. Anyway, let’s talk about this great woman here who has decided to keep her brilliance hidden.”

“Aunty, that’s not it.”

“Kyla, everyone in this family contributed to send you to a prestigious culinary school. We don’t want to see that effort go to waste. The last time you said you knew what you were doing, you gave all your savings to one guy who used to travel abroad looking for greener pastures. I hope he’s actually living in those pastures bec—”

“Aunty, ple—”

“Baby girl, don’t get me wrong, okay? I don’t blame you. At one point or another, we’ve all made stupid mistakes. Mine was even worse. The point is, we just want you to start with what you have.”

“That’s just it. I don’t have anything.”

“You do!”

This time, the sisters said it together.

Irene could not begin to describe how fervently she had prayed when her daughter introduced a young man named Christian. Something about him had seemed off from the start. But Kyla had

been so naive. They all knew now how she had handed over her entire savings to him when he claimed his mother was seriously ill. It wasn't until Nene's husband spotted him at the airport, while receiving international delegates, that the pieces started coming together. Christian had vanished, taking Kyla's money with him.

She had been too ashamed to tell them. She feared their disappointment.

Kyla had faced it all. Rejection after rejection, heartbreak after heartbreak. Denied roles in big restaurants. Failed relationships. Mockery for refusing to sell her body for positions. Yet she always rose again.

Irene had long given up on her own dreams. Her only mission now was to see her daughter succeed.

"Kyla," she said gently, "we don't have much in this house. But I believe we have something that resembles a modern kitchen. We can start from there."

"How will I start? What will I start with?" Kyla asked, her voice trembling.

"We will think," Irene said. "We'll put our heads together and begin something."

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Kyla had just returned from her shift at the three-star Ebony Hotel, where she was on duty as a chef. As she approached the house, she heard laughter and water splashing. She found her mother and aunt behind the house, washing fruits with a kind of joy she hadn't seen in a while.

Hearing a familiar voice, she rushed past them to find her little cousin David inside.

"Kiki!" he shouted in delight.

"Yes, my baby boy! How are you? How is school?"

"I ate a sandwich in school!"

"Oh! So that's all you remember about school, David? Eh! You this foodie!"

She tickled him until he erupted into laughter, wriggling like the little man of joy he always was.

“Again!” he demanded, eager to keep playing.

David was always ready for a game. If he wasn’t playing, it usually meant one of two things — he was either hungry or sick. And even then, he often tried to play through the illness. He had become a light in Kyla’s life.

“No, no more for now. Let’s go see what Mummy and Aunty Irene are doing.”

“Yay!”

Kyla led him outside, then set him down near the watermelon that had captured his attention.

“So, what’s happening here?” she asked, eyeing the setup.

She noticed the kitchen had changed. It looked more organized. There were new appliances — a larger blender, a table mixer, a bigger juicer, and other tools she hadn’t seen before. Her mind began calculating their costs and wondering where the money had come from.

“I know you’re asking yourself where all this came from and why,” Aunty Nene said, glancing at her sister.

“This is what we meant by putting our heads together,” Irene added. “To begin something. Something you will be known for. Something that belongs to you. Something that does not depend on anyone’s help except God’s.”

Kyla’s eyes filled with tears. She could not believe these women — women who had their own struggles — had done all this for her.

“How? How did you pay for all this?” she asked through the tears. “Where did the money come from?”

“Relax, darling,” Nene said softly. “We didn’t borrow. Your mother and I withdrew our daily savings from the Santa Credit Union.”

Kyla slowly sank to the kitchen floor and wept. The sacrifices they had made overwhelmed her. What if she failed?

She had always heard her mother talk about saving for a piece of land. And Aunty Nene often spoke about her husband's dream of opening a printing press.

"Aunty Nene, what about Uncle Philip? Mama, what about the land you were going to buy? What if I fail?"

"Forget about the what-ifs, my dear," Nene said. "Philip supported this idea. In fact, he said it was high time you started something of your own. Since that surprise birthday party we held at his school last year, when everyone tasted your rice, salad, achu, cake — all of it — his colleagues have been asking why you don't run your own food service. Especially that science teacher who couldn't take his eyes off you."

"Oh please, Aunty! We're talking about serious things here," Kyla said, trying not to smile.

"That is serious!" Nene replied, laughing.

"I didn't even know someone was admiring my daughter," Irene added with a grin.

"Ah Sister," Nene replied. "It slipped my mind, and I wanted to be sure before saying anything. I'll tell you more after we finish the project at hand."

"Hello, I'm still here!" Kyla said, half laughing through her tears.

"Oh yes, my daughter," Irene said, her voice tender again. "What would I do with land if you haven't achieved your dreams? Since your father passed and we had to flee, even though it looked like we had a good life, we were in danger. Your future was in danger. I've been living for God and for you. I want you to become the Kyla Johnson that your father and I believed in. And with God's help, I know you will."

Kyla rose from the floor and embraced both women.

"So," Irene said, "I think we should begin with that fruit juice recipe you made the day you heard your father died. I know it's a sad memory, but let's give it a name and a purpose."

"I agree," said Nene. "Kyla, you know everyone wants to eat healthy these days. Everyone wants to stay in shape, especially the women. If we start with something simple and fresh like this, we will see results. Then, little by little, you can introduce your other specialties."



Kyla had once imagined something like this. She dreamed of building a brand, but only after being recognized through working with top chefs. She never thought it would begin this soon. Yet here it was, the beginning of **K.J DELIGHT**.

As she cleaned the lens of her phone camera to begin chasing her dreams, her mother walked in holding a large carton in her hands.

“Ring light! Oh my God, Mama! Chest mic too?” Kyla gasped.

“Oh yes,” her mother replied with pride. “I am your humble camera man, oh no, camera woman!”

“Oh please, Aunty!” Kyla said, laughing.

“Look at this one,” Nene chimed in. “You don’t know I have a PhD in photography? All those beautiful pictures of our church members online every Sunday, taken by moi!”

It was true. Nene had a natural talent for photography. Her time serving in the church media department had sharpened her skills.

Kyla cleared her throat dramatically.

“So, let us begin.”

## **TWO YEARS LATER**

The beginning had not been easy. But “not easy” was a reality Kyla had lived and endured for years. Each day brought new reasons to keep going. Just knowing that this brand belonged to her gave her the strength to push forward.

Her very first video reached five hundred views, after three long months. She cried when it happened, not just out of joy, but also exhaustion. She almost gave up when the trolls came. The comments were brutal.

*We’ve known this since primary school!*

*Just admit Google helped you!*

*Change your apron!*

*Stop teaching cheap things, teach expensive ones!*

*Someone advised her to stop and just get married!*

Her mother and aunt never stopped encouraging her. Even Mami Emelda called from the village, saying that people had shown her videos of her granddaughter cooking. She walked with her head high now, proud that her granddaughter taught people how to cook through a phone.

Besides her online content, Kyla took her aunt and uncle's advice and began offering home deliveries. The community loved her food. There was no naming ceremony, birthday, child dedication, wedding, or even funeral in their area where Kyla and her team were not the ones cooking.

Her team was made up of university students looking for part time jobs to support themselves. They were hardworking and loyal. Over time, Kyla had gathered more kitchen equipment than she could count.

It took over two years for her videos to begin hitting the one million view mark. With her aunt helping her strategize and improve video quality, and with a proper camera and full accessories, her dreams were starting to look real.

"Hello everyone," Kyla said into the lens one day, "you are welcome to another episode of Eat Well with **K.J DELIGHT**. Today, I will teach you how to make economical snacks for your kids. Please, stop giving them bread and pap every day for lunch, it is unhealthy and unbalanced. With just two simple recipes, I will show you how to create multiple nutritious snack ideas. Let us get right into it!"

Just as she began filming, her aunt burst into the room with a look of excitement.

"Aunty, what is it that cannot wait until I finish this video?" Kyla asked, half smiling.

"No, no, this one cannot wait! Come and see!"

She handed Kyla her phone. On the screen was a live broadcast, the Prime Minister's wife was speaking during a Healthy Living Campaign on national TV. A dietician was standing beside her.

“This lady I am talking about gives you every detail on how to make your meals and juices to fit your health needs. We have entrepreneurs in this country who offer the best of themselves, yet we ignore them while searching online for foreign recipes with ingredients we do not even have here. I encourage you to consume local. I encourage you to consume **K.J DELIGHT**.”

Kyla did not realize she was crying until her mother, who had just returned from her shop, walked in and placed a hand on her shoulder. Behind Aunt Nene, a few of her workers who had come to clean the kitchen stood watching in stunned silence.

Then a phone started ringing. That snapped everyone back to life. From behind Kyla, someone gasped and said one word —

“Jesus!”

### **THREE MONTHS LATER**

That speech during the campaign became a turning point for **K.J DELIGHT**. Calls began pouring in. People asked how she had convinced the Prime Minister’s wife to endorse her brand. When she replied that it had simply happened, many assumed she was hiding something.

But Kyla knew the truth. It was God.

Soon, they were able to rent a larger facility for her operations. They even purchased a piece of land where they planned to build her dream company headquarters. Her mother stopped selling in the market and joined her full time. Aunt Nene introduced her to the science teacher, who turned out to be a medical doctor, but past heartbreak made Kyla cautious.

It was not easy, but God had lifted them from the ruins of their lives and restored them, not just little by little, but in full measure.

As Kyla prepared to speak at the **Dream Big Youth Conference**, she could not help but reflect on her journey, where she had started, and how far they had come. She remembered the days of hardship, of pain, of almost giving up. She had other paths she could have followed, other options she could have taken —faster, easier ones. But she had chosen to stay on God’s train.

And although that train moved slowly, it never stopped moving forward.

# GLOSSARY

ACHU – A Cameroonian traditional meal from the North West region

## MEET THE AUTHOR

Kyeng Aquila F. is a multifaceted talent hailing from the vibrant North West Region of Cameroon, specifically Santa Njong. With a strong foundation in information management, Aquila graduated from the prestigious Advanced School of Mass Communication with a degree in Archives and Records Management. She is also the President of the Christian writers and readers club, a Christian book community that has helped and is still helping to groom writers and readers.

Beyond the realm of records and archives, Aquila's true passion lies in the culinary arts. As a skilled chef and baker, Aquila brings a unique blend of creativity and precision to the kitchen. Whether whipping up traditional Cameroonian dishes or experimenting with innovative fusion recipes, Aquila's love for food arts shines through.

With a rich cultural heritage and a keen eye for detail, Aquila brings a distinctive perspective to the world of food, culture, and beyond.

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# HE CALLS FOR HER

Gloria Arowojolu

Ding-dong!

Kimberly pressed the doorbell again, her heart pounding as she glanced nervously around. The hoodie pulled low over her face did a good job of hiding her, and the black cap shadowed her eyes further.

Why are they taking so long? she whispered, her fingers tightening around the front pocket of her hoodie.

Ding-dong. A third time.

“Coming,” a voice called from inside.

Kimberly rolled her eyes with a small, tired pout.

The door cracked open just a sliver. “Who’s there?” a voice asked, cautious but familiar. A pair of eyes searched the dim porch, then flickered with recognition.

“Kimberly,” the voice whispered.

Kimberly looked up, meeting her mother’s gaze, offering a weak, uncertain smile.

“Mom.”

“Baby...” Her mother’s voice softened as she stepped forward, hands reaching instinctively.

“You know what? Come in.” She touched Kimberly’s shoulder gently, then stepped aside.

Kimberly crossed the threshold and took in the room she once called home. Family photos lined the walls—one of her nestled between her parents, another with her twin siblings, all frozen in smiles. Nothing had changed except for the burst of Christmas decorations draped around the front door and scattered throughout the house—an echo of the Adams family’s holiday traditions.

“Where’s Daddy?” Kimberly asked softly, suddenly aware of her mother standing quietly behind her.

“He’s upstairs, in his study. Let me call him.” Her mother gave her arm a reassuring pat before turning to call her father.

Kimberly sank into a chair nearby, head bowed. Her mother’s eyes never left her.

“Your stuff?” she asked quietly.

No response.

“I don’t want to hear that you didn’t come with them, girl.”

“I came with them,” Kimberly whispered, her voice flat, the fire she once had all but extinguished.

“Good girl.” Her mother’s voice was warm but watchful. Kimberly turned away, but her mother’s gaze remained steady, searching.

She had changed. That was clear.

“So... how are you really doing?” her mother asked, fingers nervously twisting together.

A forced smile flickered across Kimberly’s lips. She shrugged, pulled her hands from her hoodie pockets, and pressed her lips tight.

“I’m fine. I survived, so...”

“Yeah. You survived,” her mother muttered, a hint of sarcasm pulling at the corner of her mouth.

Suddenly, a deep voice echoed from upstairs. “Kimberly!”

Her face lit up as she sprang toward it, running into her father’s open arms.

“Daddy!”

She breathed in his familiar scent—the comfort she had craved through endless dark months. His embrace stirred a fragile hope in her chest, a reminder that light could still break through the gloom.

“Baby,” he murmured, patting her thick, black curls.

At twenty-seven, Kimberly didn’t flinch at the nickname anymore. She even missed it—the teasing from when her parents called her “Baby Kim” in front of her high school classmates. Seriously, Baby Kim?

But now, names didn’t matter. All that mattered was being close to those who loved her. Being cared for. Being home.

She wanted her mother’s cooking, her hugs, even her scoldings.

The world had been far harsher than she ever imagined—too much for the woman everyone now thought she was.

Her mother joined the embrace, wrapping Kimberly in a warm hug. Together, they held her close—shields against a world that had nearly swallowed her whole.

This was why they’d asked her to come home.

She needed them.

She needed this.

The joy of family.

---

Soft knocks landed gently on her bedroom door. Kimberly knew immediately who it was. Throwing off the bedcover, she shuffled toward the door.

“Dad?” Her face, still unwashed, peeked out cautiously.

“Hey, good morning—” He paused, glancing at his watch. “Well, I’m sure it’s not morning anymore, Kimberly.”



She nodded. “I think so.”

“And you’ve been in here all this while.” Another nod.

His shoulders sagged slightly. “Breakfast?”

“I’ll have it after I wash up.”

“That would be lunch, then.”

Kimberly shrugged, nonchalantly.

“I just got back from the community meeting I was supposed to minister at. Wash up now and meet me at the table. We need to talk, okay?”

“Sure, Daddy.” She knew better than to say no.

Later, clad in cozy joggers and a tank top, she settled into a chair at the dining table. Her dad was already halfway through his meal.

“Your mom went out with her girlfriends?”

“Yeah... she mentioned it before she left.”

He chuckled, launching into a playful joke about how her mom always looked like she was back in high school whenever she went out with friends—guessing what she might be wearing today.

“You know,” he added with a smile, “I actually like that. The cuteness.”

“Aww...” Kimberly blushed, fork halfway to her mouth, trying to cover a laugh.

That lovestruck look on her dad’s face—it always got to her.

“What?” he asked, unabashed and still smiling fondly. “Sweet Anna.”

“I thought you guys were done with this... seriously.” She choked on laughter as he handed her a glass of water.

Still giggling, she added, “You two are too old for this.”

She laughed once more before calming down. “Well... I missed all this.”

“Me too.”

A brief, fragile silence settled between them. Kimberly stared at her plate, silently praying he wouldn't bring up the part of her story she wasn't ready to face. Not yet.

But he said nothing, just continued eating.

Seizing the moment, she steered the conversation.

“So, Dad, how's the church? It's been, what, four days since I got back? We haven't really talked about what's been happening around here.” She knew pastoring a church was no easy task.

His face brightened. He must have sensed her unspoken plea to avoid the past. “The Church is doing well. Everyone's fine.”

“Wow! What about Miss Hildegard? Is she still around?”

He nodded. “And the Millers, the Jakes... even Mrs. Moore.”

“Aww.” Kimberly smiled warmly at the names. “I bet the church must be big now. Lots of new members, I'm sure.” She glanced at him again, smiling. “And how have you been coping with all the changes?”

“God,” he said with a small, grateful nod. “God has been good and great. And He's blessed me with good people. One of them is Mrs. Moore. Her prayers have been powerful.”

“I know, right? Good Mrs. Moore.” Kimberly's face flickered with memories of her—graceful and radiant as always. It must have been five or seven years since she'd last seen her. She wondered if she still looked the same.

After all, Denver was still...

---

Her parents hadn't expected her to want to come to church with them—but they had hoped. They had prayed. And she did.

The night before, Kimberly hadn't said a word about it. Hadn't given any sign. So they didn't ask. They didn't want to force anything.

She would go when she was ready to face whatever might come—the stares, the whispers, the unspoken thoughts from church folks who once knew her as the young girl who loved the Lord more than most teenagers. She would go when she was strong enough to live beyond their judgment.

“Kim, we’re running late! Can you hurry up?” her mother called from downstairs, dressed in a royal purple skirt suit and wide-brimmed matching hat, her pearl earrings swaying gracefully.

“I’ll be in the car,” Rev. Adams said, leaning in to kiss her cheek before heading out in his crisp, immaculate navy-blue suit.

Kimberly descended the stairs, draped in a black silk jumpsuit, silver heels tapping softly on each step. Her thick natural curls were swept into a low bun, silver earrings brushing gently against her jawline.

“Baby, you look boo-boo-boo!” her mom beamed, using her made-up word for beautiful like always.

“Mom,” Kimberly smirked, trying and failing to feign a frown. “It’s just a jumpsuit.”

“And you ain’t looking bad either,” her mom added, grinning. “Like a high school girl.”

Her mom laughed and blushed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ask Dad,” Kimberly teased as they walked toward the car.

Once they reached it, she caught her dad’s eye and pouted playfully.

“You two better tell me what this ‘high school girl’ talk is about,” her mom said, sliding into the front seat. “Boy, you told her something?”

Rev. Adams shrugged like a guilty schoolboy, staring out the window with exaggerated innocence.

Her mom narrowed her eyes, full of playful sass. “I knew it. You know you can say it to my face, boy.”

And just like that, they were off again—back in their teenage world of inside jokes and sweet banter.

“Guys, please...” Kimberly groaned, grinning despite herself. “Don’t tell me you’re like this even when Job and Jael are around. Why this high-school-lovey-dovey vibe this early? It’s a Sunday morning!”

They all laughed. And she laughed too, because it felt good. This... this was what she missed.

A man like her dad.

She glanced at him as he drove—steadfast, calm, God-fearing, full of quiet strength. She wanted a man like that. Someone who would still look at her like a miracle after years. Someone who would honor her and make her feel like she was the best thing that ever happened to him.

She had once thought Will was that man.

Her smile faded slightly as she turned to the window, watching familiar houses roll by—some unchanged since she was a girl.

The car rolled toward the church. And though she didn’t say it out loud, in her heart she whispered,

*God, I hope things will get better—with life and with You again.*

---

“Kim,” Denver called as he stepped out of the church building, eyes scanning the post-service crowd. He lit up the moment he spotted her—made up, radiant, wrapped in a black coverall jumpsuit and silver hoops that caught the sunlight just right.

“Hey, Denver,” Kimberly beamed, throwing her arms around him. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“Me too,” he said, holding her a second longer than casual. “You look amazing. As always, Kim.”

“You too, Denver.” Her voice lifted with a soft laugh before her gaze landed on another familiar face—a high school friend cradling a baby against her chest, a toddler tugging at her skirt.

“Denver! What about me?” the woman called, feigning a pout.

He grinned and offered a quick side hug.

“You look gorgeous—like you didn’t just push out a whole human two months ago.”

She laughed, waving them off. “Gotta run. Hubby’s waiting.” She held up her phone, then waved toward the man leaning on their car.

As they walked, Denver chuckled. “Wow... been a minute, Kim. You forgot Markland completely?”

Kimberly raised a brow. “Says the globe-trotting cardiologist. When was the last time you visited?”

“Two years ago... maybe?”

“Exactly.”

“Still better than you.”

She rolled her eyes, grinning.

“Whatever.” She adjusted her purse. “Where’s Mrs. Moore?”

“Had to leave early. Women’s leadership meeting at the headquarters.”

“Ohh...” Kimberly nodded.

Denver turned slightly toward her. “So what are you doing now?”

She froze for a half-second. The question, innocent as it sounded, hit deeper than he likely meant it to—what are you doing now felt like what are you doing with your life, post-everything.

Sensing the shift, Denver quickly recovered. “I mean... Do you have plans for the rest of today?”

Classic Denver. Always the type to read the room before the words fully landed.

“Well... I don’t.” She saw the spark in his eyes before she added, “But I don’t really feel like going out.”

“Why not?”

She gave a noncommittal shrug, smirking.

“Stop it, Kim,” he laughed. “We’re going out. Even if it’s just to catch up. You don’t get a choice.”

“Whatever.” She sighed with mock drama.

Before she could argue, he had already taken her hand and was leading her toward his car.

“I’m going to scream,” Kimberly warned, laughing. “You’re kidnapping someone right outside the church. Mom! Dad!”

“I swear I’ll stuff your mouth if you keep yelling,” he teased.

Kimberly gasped. “Now that sounds like a real kidnapper. Let’s get scared, Kim.”

She giggled, then quickly texted her parents about the impromptu “date.”

---

Back in his hotel room, Denver tugged at his tie, frustrated.

He had just dropped Kimberly off after another hangout—another almost-date, as he liked to call them. It was the third time since he returned to town. And still... nothing had shifted.

She laughed. She smiled. She talked. But it wasn’t the same. Not really.

She was still guarded—cautious. As if she didn’t know if she could trust him. As if those long, deep talks they once shared were buried under layers of pain and time.

He sank onto the bed with a sigh, picked up his phone, and stared at the photo they’d taken earlier that day. She was laughing at it. But still, he wondered... Was it joy? Or performance?

He stood again, poured himself a glass of water, and glanced at the stack of seminar material spread across the desk.

Then, a verse drifted into his thoughts:

*Lean not on your own understanding...*

And it hit him.

He sat down at the edge of the bed and bowed his head.

“What do I do now, Lord? I’m sorry. I’ve been trying to figure this out on my own. Please... help me reach her. Help me break through. You know how much she means—not just to me, but to the few of us who still remember who she is. Who still cares. But nothing’s working. I don’t want to just stand by and watch her disappear into herself. Help me do what you want to do.”

He said nothing more after that. But God had heard it all.

---

Back at home, Kimberly had just stepped out of the shower, wrapped in her smooth satin robe. The faint scent of lavender lingered as she gently applied face lotion, soft music drifting quietly from the speaker nearby.

Her phone chimed.

Denver.

She rolled her eyes, a small smile tugging at her lips.

“What does he want this time?” she muttered under her breath, patting the lotion onto her cheeks.

After a moment’s hesitation, she picked up the phone and typed:

> Kim: Hey, what’s up again?

> Denver: Just checking in.

> Kim: Check on your dudella instead. (A smirking emoji)

(Dudella—their old code word for girlfriend back in the day. An inside joke that once made them laugh for hours.)

> Denver: When I get one.

> Kim: Lonely kid, lonely cardiologist. (A laughing emoji)

> Denver: Whatever.

Kimberly chuckled softly, enjoying the familiar rhythm of their playful banter, the lightness a small but welcome balm.

> Kim: You mentioned a seminar tomorrow, right?

> Denver: Yeah, why?

> Kim: Go do what you need to and stop disturbing me tonight. Cinderella needs her sleep.

> Denver: Really, Kim? (A teary emoji)

> Kim: Yup. I don't want to be the reason something goes wrong tomorrow. (A laughing emoji)

Denver smiled. He understood what she was doing — keeping things light, keeping her heart safely guarded. That was her way — skirting the depths, avoiding the cracks where old wounds waited.

> Denver: Fine. I'm going to study now. Good night. Pray for me.

> Kim: Alright. But I'm charging you for the prayer. (Another laughing emoji)

Denver replied with a sticker — an animated character rolling its eyes, playful and familiar.

Kimberly smiled faintly, setting her phone aside. But as she lay back on her pillow, the thoughts came rushing in — relentless and raw.

The face she saw today.

The one she hoped she'd never have to see again.

The man she should never have been with.



The one she should never meet again.

And yet, today, she did.

And the memory stirred everything she had tried so hard to bury.

---

The church youth coordinator, standing near the refreshment table, watched Kimberly with sharp eyes full of thinly veiled resentment. She didn't appreciate Kimberly's presence at the end-of-year youth gathering, especially not the way Kimberly was laughing easily, leaning close to Denver, her childhood friend.

"This girl has no shame at all," the coordinator muttered bitterly, her gaze flicking between Kimberly's bright smile and Denver's relaxed posture.

Kimberly always had a way of taking what belonged to others the coordinator thought—her face contorting with disgust—a belief that had rooted itself deeply ever since Kimberly's scandal broke.

Kimberly Adams. A snake hidden beneath green grass.

She prayed Denver wouldn't fall for it. No, not her Denver. She had to do something.

"Who knows? She may be seducing him," she whispered under her breath.

Meanwhile, Kimberly stood quietly beside Denver, her one true friend here. She didn't feel free with the others, not like she did with him. Maybe it was because he never looked at her with eyes full of disappointment or judgment.

Instead, his eyes shone with something else — hope, and kindness, and a quiet love that pulled her close, making her feel safe. And truthfully, she had been safe with him.

He always pulled her away from the whispers and sideways glances that threatened to break her further.

He treated her like a fragile child who needed warmth, not cold stares or sharp words.

“I need to take a call,” Denver said suddenly, breaking her from her thoughts as he stepped away toward the edge of the room to answer his phone.

She didn’t want him to leave her side. Without him, she felt exposed, vulnerable — like all the eyes in the room were suddenly on her.

And just like that, they were. The cold, disdainful eyes. Questioning her right to be here. After all, she hadn’t been officially invited. Denver had pushed for her presence, even though the youth coordinator had made it clear she wasn’t welcome.

She hadn’t wanted to come.

Not to this place that now felt so alien.

Once, it had been a home filled with love — the place where she’d grown up.

But now, it was a world she no longer recognized.

Would they ever forgive her for messing up?

Why did their eyes say she couldn’t be redeemed?

Why did it seem impossible for them to forget that a gospel singer—and an advocate for sexual purity—had failed?

Kimberly stood alone in the middle of the field, arms wrapped tightly around herself, trying hard not to look agitated—even though every fiber of her being was on edge.

Then it happened.

The moment she dreaded most.

The moment that could completely undo her.

Two of her worst nightmares appeared behind her.

Gossips.

And they began.

Kimberly wanted to walk away, but her legs refused to move. Maybe, deep down, part of her wanted to know why the church youth had grown so indifferent to her, even after she had publicly expressed remorse.

One of them sneered, “I honestly don’t know what she thinks she’s doing here.”

“Probably looking for her next victim,” the other snorted. “You know how she is with guys...”

Their laughter burst out—loud, sharp, and cruel.

“I better keep an eye on my brother. Wouldn’t want him to be her next prey—he is a pretty boy, after all.”

“I didn’t say that,” the first replied with feigned innocence before adding, “I feel sorry for Mrs. Moore. She probably never imagined her son caught in a seductress’ web.”

“Like the woman warned about in the Bible. Wasn’t that Proverbs or Songs of Solomon?”

“Proverbs, baby,” came the smug answer.

Kimberly’s breaking point came. She didn’t look back, but her breath caught in her chest—shallow, sharp, painful. She staggered away, desperate for air.

As she hurried off, she caught sight of Denver talking with the youth coordinator. He saw her and started calling her name—but she didn’t stop. She ran toward the road, desperate to catch a taxi home.

Her chest tightened. The weight of the attacks crushed her breath.

No one knew how hard she’d been fighting these past months.

No one knew this was more than a public scandal.

She was at war with the voices in her head every single day.

No one knew.

She pressed her fists against her chest, trying desperately to clear the suffocating pressure. Tears spilled uncontrollably. She didn't want to cry—she was exhausted from crying. She had done so for months.

She had come home for Christmas hoping for peace.

To be free.

Free from the relentless online and offline gossip.

From the trolls who had pushed her to the edge of despair—to the brink of suicide.

She sniffled, trying to hold herself together, but the tears kept coming.

When the taxi finally pulled up at her house, she burst through the front door with a loud bang that startled everyone inside.

She didn't look at anyone. She sprinted straight to her room, locked the door, and collapsed against it—sobbing silently.

Her phone began to ring from her bag.

Denver.

But she was lost in her pain, unreachable.

---

9.00 PM

Her mother was starting to get worried. Kimberly hadn't come down for dinner. Her siblings, who had just returned from visiting their grandparents, hadn't seen her either.

Rev. Adams didn't seem worried. He wasn't in his study but instead sat outside, taking in the cool night air.

Kimberly's mother joined him on the swing, silently hoping the peace that radiated from him would calm her anxious heart.

She heard him mutter a verse from Psalms, “You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are stayed on You — because they trust in You.”

“God is working,” he whispered with a smile, offering her a quiet assurance.

She bit her lip as he gently cupped her hand in his.

She rested her head on his shoulder and whispered the verse too — soaking it in like balm.

---

Back in her room, Kimberly reluctantly picked up Denver’s call. He hadn’t stopped trying.

“What?!” she snapped. “Why can’t all of you just leave me alone?!”

Denver stayed silent.

So she went on, voice shaking.

“I was fine before you came and stirred everything back up again. Why? I came home to escape—to be free from everything. From all that life threw at me. But you just came acting like Mr. Good, and did more harm than good! I’m so tired! Can’t you people just leave me be?! Yes, I messed up. Yes, yes, yes—I did!”

Her nose ran as she shouted, voice cracking.

“I’m not the first gospel singer to get involved with a married man, and I won’t be the last! So why is everyone making it such a big deal? The gossip? The hateful words? They break me more than my sin ever did. They don’t help—they make it worse!”

Denver let her pour it all out, staying on the line while she cried.

“I’m tired, Denver,” she finally whispered.

All he said was, “Thank You, Jesus.”

She blinked, caught off guard.

“Thank You, Lord, for this. For a new heart. For Your peace. For healing. For wholeness.”

Kimberly fell silent, confused.

Denver spoke again, his voice gentle. “Kim, you did something beautiful just now. You shared the pain you’ve been carrying. But now, you need to give it to the right person. I’m not the one. There’s only one Man truly strong enough to carry burdens like these.”

“Stop, Denver,” she muttered. “I haven’t even been praying. I stopped. I couldn’t face Him. I just couldn’t.”

“But you can—even now. He’s been waiting for you. Like the father waiting for the prodigal son. He wants to hold you again.”

“But I messed up,” she cried. “Do you know how many people’s faith I’ve damaged because of my mistake? And the worst part? I still love him. I still love Will, even though I know he’s not God’s will. So how would God still want me?”

“He has always wanted you, Kimberly. Since before you were born. And here’s the truth—you don’t have the strength to do His will on your own. But He gives that strength. If Will isn’t God’s will, then God will give you the grace to walk away.”

“I hear you, Denver. But what do I do? Nothing’s going back to normal. I’ll never be used by God again.”

“That’s a lie from the enemy,” Denver said firmly. “Do you have your Bible?”

Kimberly looked around. “No... wait—yes. I found one.”

“Good. I want to read Isaiah 54 to you. Let me show you what I believe God is saying about you.”

As he read, Kimberly listened closely. Each verse seemed to reach into the ache within her—speaking to her brokenness, her shame, her deep longing.

Could it really be true?

Could God still want her back?

Tears spilled freely down her face.

“Kimberly,” Denver continued softly, “God says He’ll lay your stones with colorful gems. Your foundation with sapphires. Your gates with crystal. Your walls with precious stones. No weapon formed against you will prosper. He is ready to rebuild you—if only you’ll return to Him.”

She didn’t speak. Only the sound of her sobs came through.

Denver kept praying.

“I break every lie the enemy has told you, Kimberly. You are not what they say. You are who God says you are.”

When no reply came, he knew she was still there—still weeping, wrapped in the presence of the One now healing her heart.

He ended the call—but not the prayer.

He kept thanking God for what He had started... and what He would surely complete.

---

Three weeks later, change had begun to bloom in Kimberly.

The morning after that call, she had come out of her room and shared everything with her parents.

Her mother held her tightly, breathing relief into her hair. “I knew it, baby. I just knew you were on your way back home. We’ve been praying for you.”

Kimberly teared up as she described how the Scriptures had come alive to her that night. How she couldn’t stop reading, finding verse after verse that seemed written just for her—telling her who she really was in God’s eyes.

Then, voice trembling, she shared another truth.

She had seen Will earlier that week.

They had kissed.

She hadn’t been able to resist him.

He said he still wanted them to be together, even offered to divorce his wife to make it happen.

Kimberly admitted she had come home that night to think about it—possibly to say yes.

But then came the get-together. The call. The prayer. The shift.

Her father listened quietly, then gently suggested that they put an accountability structure in place to support her during this fragile season.

Kimberly agreed.

She deleted everything connected to Will—every message, every number, every reminder. And instead, she turned to God’s Word.

Her Bible became her lifeline.

In it, she began to see herself anew. As clay in the hands of a loving Potter.

And slowly, piece by piece, she was being made whole.

---

Two weeks into January, Denver was wrapping up the training that had brought him to Texas. He had grown busier, but he suggested they finally hang out—knowing they hadn’t had much one-on-one time since everything happened.

Kimberly waited for him at the neighborhood park, sitting on a lounge facing the lake.

The thin ice across the water had started to break. It was still January, but spring was whispering through the air.

She spotted her twin siblings playing nearby.

“Be careful, guys!” she called, then tapped her phone to dial Denver again.

Just then, a message popped up:

I’m coming.

He had just completed his five-week training and was on his way.



Soon enough, he arrived—with ice cream for everyone.

Job grinned. “I knew you’d bring ice cream or something.”

Jael added with a sly smirk, “I love him. He can be my brother-in-law forever.”

Kimberly didn’t catch that last part.

The twins wandered off, chasing something with giggles and sticky fingers.

Kimberly and Denver sat back on the lounge, quietly facing the lake, their ice cream half-forgotten in hand.

She gazed out over the water, letting peace wrap around her like the grace she now carried within.

“I’m so grateful, Denver. For everything. I never imagined a turnaround like this. Not this fast. I’m just... happy I met you again. Especially on that day.”

Denver blushed, eyes flicking toward the lake.

“Thank God,” he said softly. “And thank your parents—for never stopping their prayers. They really believed in God for your restoration.”

Kimberly nodded, scooping another bite.

“Thank God... for God. His love found me again. His mercy held me.”

“Same way He did me.” Denver turned to her. “Do you remember the first time we met?”

Kimberly smiled. “Yeah... eleven or twelve years ago?”

He nodded, a quiet grin growing. “I was such a mess. Angry, rebellious, frustrating. My mom had just about given up on me. But God used you.”

She leaned forward, still smiling, gazing at the shimmering water.

“That’s why I’ll always be grateful for you, Kim. Your fire lit something in me. And here I am.”

“Bless God,” she whispered. “What did I even know back then?”

“You knew God,” he said simply. “And your songs always pointed to Him. You were different. You still are.”

She chuckled, eyes still on the lake. “Do you know where the others are now? The guys from fellowship—Big T and the rest?”

He started listing what he knew, and they laughed—sharing memories, telling stories, letting the past blend gently with the present.

Above the lake, the last of the ice cracked.

Spring was almost here.

## MEET THE AUTHOR

Gloria Arowojolu is an upcoming Christian fiction writer from Nigeria, passionate about redemptive storytelling, weaving together the faith and the complexities of human nature.

She is currently working on her debut novel while refining her voice through short stories.

A university physiology major student and church photographer, Gloria blends creativity with purpose, aiming to craft stories that inspire, convict, and restore with pen and even lens.

If not writing, she enjoys reading, watching movies, especially crime and medical thrillers, among her other hobbies

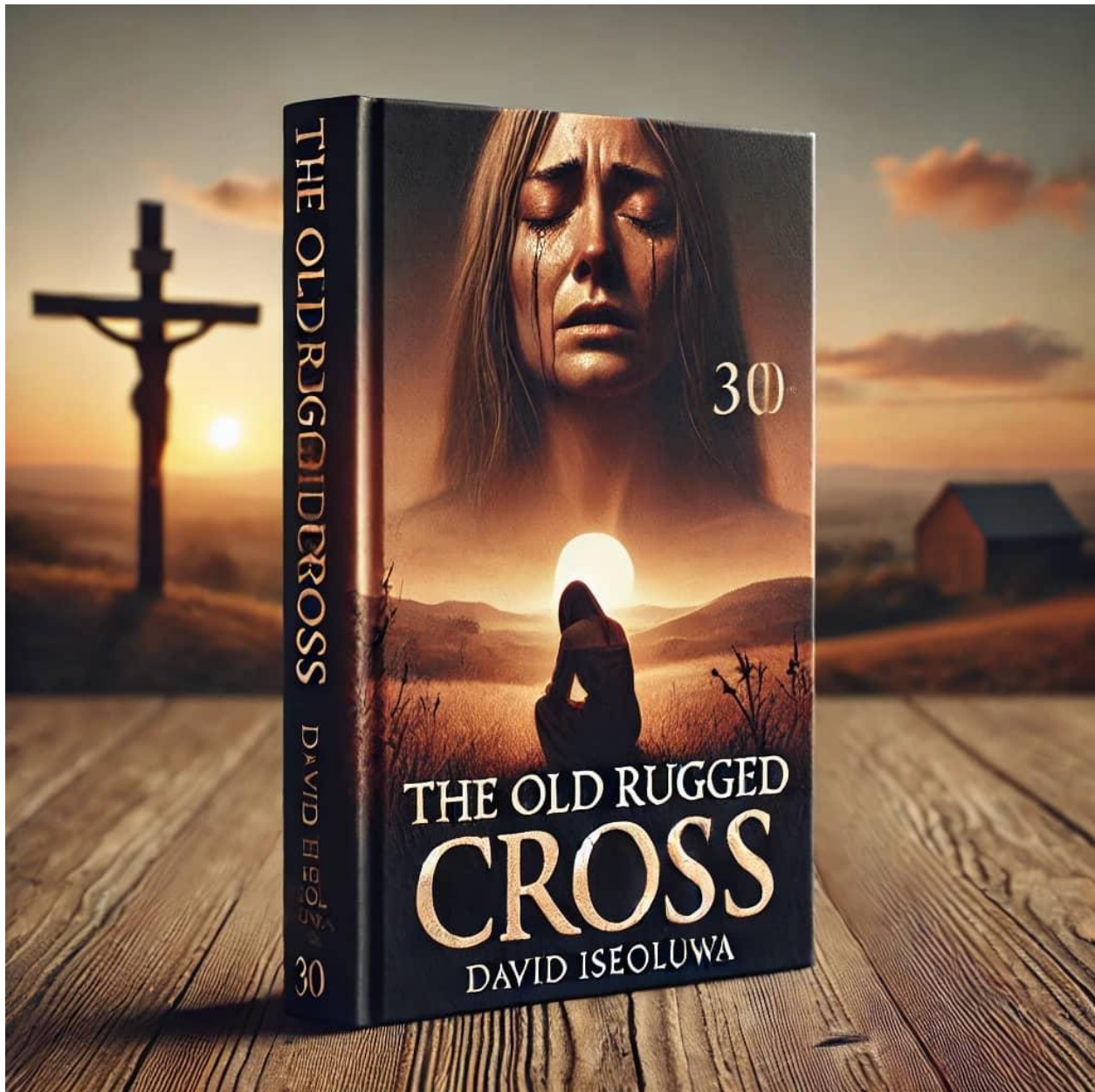
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# THE OLD RUGGED CROSS



David Iseoluwa

Dedication:

To the 2025 CRWC's Annual Anthology, I dedicate this story, praying it heals every broken soul, reaches every unregenerate heart that seems lost, and serves as a work of grace and salvation.

Acknowledgement:

To God be the glory for bringing me to the Christian Writers and Readers Community (CWRC), where I've found inspiration, encouragement, and fellowship. I'm grateful for the love and support that has helped me overcome writing challenges and find my voice again.

I appreciate the leadership and members for their understanding and flexibility when I needed an extension on my submission deadline. Your kindness and willingness to accommodate me was a huge encouragement.

As I submit my story to the 2025 CRWC Annual Anthology, I pray that God will continue to guide and bless this community, using our stories to touch hearts and lives. May He receive all the glory and honor.

Thank you to everyone who has played a role in this journey. I'm honored to be part of this community.

# PROLOGUE

*On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suffering and shame,  
And I love that old cross, where the dearest and best,  
For a world of lost sinners was slain.  
So, I'll cherish the old rugged cross,  
Till my trophies at last I lay down,  
I will cling to the old rugged cross.  
And exchange it someday for a crown.*

If I were to write the story of my thirty years on earth, I couldn't begin to imagine the number of words it would take—or the ink I would use. Life was unbearably hard for me, until I met Christ. That's why the phrase, "I will cling to the old rugged cross," has become my anchor. No matter the obstacles, shame, or suffering I may face, I will hold tightly to the cross of the One who saved me.

My encounter with Jesus Christ was unlike anything I expected. At times, I still ask, "Did that really happen to me?" Because I was blind and didn't even know it. I walked in darkness, unaware that light was even possible—until it shone from my Savior and cast a reflection back into my life.

It was like Saul's encounter on the road to Damascus. A sudden light. A radical change.

Even if the rest of my life is lived in hardship, I am glad—I met Christ. And in Him alone, my hope is found. Because I have learned that to wear the crown, I must first cling to the old rugged cross.

# CHAPTER 1

My name is Agnes, the one and only daughter of the famous “Mother of All Boys.” That nickname alone tells you something—there isn’t a flirtatious man in Ijaye City who doesn’t know my mother.

Growing up, I always wondered why she chose to live alone with me. Why did she sell liquor and cigarettes for a living? It wasn’t the kind of work you’d expect from a woman like her—strong, proud, and beautiful. I carried those questions quietly in my heart for years.

Then one day, she called me close and said, “Agnes, let me tell you the story of my life.”

She had been a well-raised girl who lived peacefully with her parents in the village. Life was simple and sweet—until the corpers arrived. Among them was the man who would change everything. His name was Corper Joel.

The whole village welcomed the corpers with open arms. They came with smiles, energy, and purpose. Not long after their arrival, they started a school.

“A school?” I asked, wide-eyed.

She nodded. “Yes. Every parent dreamed of having their children educated.”

Soon, nearly every child in the village attended classes—except for those whose parents refused to release them from farming. The villagers admired the corpers’ dedication. Their first project was a massive success.

Emboldened, the corpers began a second initiative—a church fellowship.

That’s when the trouble began.

Suspicious of religious influence, many parents pulled their children from the school. Only a few families stayed. The corpers were heartbroken. But what they didn’t know was that the villagers’ concerns weren’t without reason.

“I later found out,” my mother said bitterly, “that they weren’t corpers at all. They were a group sent from a city church, pretending to be NYSC members just to gain our trust.”

By then, she was already too deep.

“I begged my parents,” she said. “I told them the school and fellowship would make me great one day.”

But her real reason was Joel.

His smile could melt stone—radiant and disarming. His teeth, white as sunlight on water, gleamed each time he looked her way. And during every lesson, he made sure she saw it.

Her heart yielded the moment he leaned in, his breath warm against her ear, and whispered, “Margret, there’s no woman in the world more beautiful than you.”

“I smiled so elegantly that day,” she said softly. “No one had ever said anything so sweet to me.”

From that moment, she gave him everything—her trust, her attention, her heart. She even lied to her parents, saying the corpers had promised to take her abroad once their assignment ended.

All to see Joel more often.

One day, she visited their lodge and found only Joel there.

“Where are the others?” she asked.

“They went out for evangelism,” he said. “I stayed back. I’m not feeling well.”

He looked at her with eyes that made resistance impossible.

“I’m cold,” he murmured, a playful tremor in his voice. “Can I hold you for warmth?”

She hesitated—but only for a breath. She already loved him.

He drew her into his arms, chest to chest, and she felt the rhythm of his heartbeat—fast, certain, alive.

His voice dropped lower. “Margret, are you packing your bags to travel with me?”



A smile tugged at her lips. “Yes, my love. I’ve already started.”

He gazed into her eyes, the world fading away around them.

“Margret,” he whispered, “will you marry me?”

She was caught—heart and soul—in the moment.

“Yes,” she breathed. “I’ll marry you.”

“I love you, Margret.”

“I love you too, Joel. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

She reached up and touched his face. “How are you feeling now?”

He sighed. “Still not better.”

Then his tone shifted.

“Margaret... May I lie to you? I... I’m burning. I need you.”

She froze—just for a heartbeat—before stiffening her spine.

“Excuse me?” Her voice was sharp, uncertain. “Joel, are you saying you want us to sleep together?”

He nodded, not meeting her eyes.

“Impossible,” she snapped. “That’s forbidden in our village. Until marriage, that’s an abomination.”

“Please, Margret. We’re already planning to marry. This... this is just a step closer. Do this one thing—for me.”

He stepped forward, closed the distance, cupped her face like it was precious.

Then he kissed her.

Gently, he guided her toward the bed, held her hands in his.

And then—he took what she had never intended to give.

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“That was how I got pregnant,” she said, her voice breaking. “When I told him, he denied me. He shouted. He called his colleagues and told them everything I said was a lie. He accused me of trying to ruin his life and destroy the reputation of their so-called fellowship.”

Soon after, Joel and his group vanished from the village—gone without a trace, leaving my mother shamed, broken, and alone.

“‘Margret don get belle’ became the gossip on every tongue,” she said, her eyes distant. “The shame was too much for my parents. They disowned me. So I left.”

It was during that desperate time that some city men came into the forest to cut wood. She begged them to take her with them.

“I had no idea where I was going,” she whispered. “I just knew I had to escape.”

That was the beginning of her misfortunes.

She arrived in the city lost—alone, pregnant, and homeless. No family. No friends. No direction.

Eventually, she found work as a maid in the home of a female senator. The woman, elegant and often absent, lived with her four grown sons. She traveled constantly, leaving my mother behind to tend to the house—to sweep, to scrub, to serve.

“That was when the real nightmare began,” her voice cracked like dry wood under pressure.

The sons—those polished predators—began to violate her. First one, then another. Sometimes all four. Several times a week till she lost count.

She became an object of appetite. She was not a girl, not a name, not a voice.

Only a doll in the dark, eyeless, voiceless, used.

And still, she endured.

Because survival sometimes demands silence.

“I couldn’t leave,” she said softly. “You were six months in my belly. I hadn’t saved enough to start a life for us. I worked like a mule—day and night.”

Until her body gave a warning her lips never could.

Blood.

A slow, crimson cry from within.

Fear gripping her, she fled into the night.

No goodbye. No belongings. Just the weight of a womb and wounds.

That’s when she met Mrs. Audu.

“She was a local herb seller,” my mother said, her voice steady now, thick with gratitude. “She found me bleeding in the street, took me in, and nursed me back to health.”

When my mother shared everything that had happened, Mrs. Audu let her stay.

In time, my mother learned that Mrs. Audu made her living selling alcohol and cigarettes. With no other options and nowhere else to go, my mother joined her.

“That’s how I became a seller of liquor and cigarettes,” she said, gripping my hand. “All for your sake, Agnes. I gave up everything... just so you could live.”

## CHAPTER 2

All of this was the story my mother, Margret, told me on her deathbed.

She held my hand with trembling fingers, her breath shallow, her eyes filled with pain and memory. She looked into mine and said, “Agnes, look at what men did to me. Joel said he loved me—then left me pregnant and alone. The senator’s sons... they raped me, over and over.”

Hot tears stung my eyes. My vision blurred. I couldn’t stand to see her like that—fading like a flame at the end of its wick. Somewhere deep inside, I already knew—she wouldn’t make it.

My body sat beside her, but my soul... my soul had folded into silence.

Still, she kept speaking.

“Agnes, my dear... don’t lose yourself for men.”

Her voice trembled, but she pressed on, each word a stitch in the final seams of her breath.

“I wish you all the best in this life.”

A pause.

A shiver.

Then—

“Agnes... would you help me teach the world a lesson?”

Teach the world a lesson?

Revenge?

I think I understood. Not with my mind, but with the ache that filled my chest.

And in that fragile moment, just like that—

I lost her.

My mother.

The only person I had ever truly loved.

Gone.

She slipped from this world, leaving me to face its cruelty alone—armed with nothing but her story, and the echo of her voice still burning in my mind.

At that time, I was already in the university, second semester. After many sleepless nights and dark thoughts, I decided to push through my studies—at least until my tuition ran out.

And that... that was when I encountered the thorns of my own life.

My roommate, Clara, was someone I had once admired. A pastor's daughter. Raised in a disciplined Christian home. Prayerful. Dedicated. In our first semester of 100-level, Clara was the perfect image of holiness. People called her a "church girl." Even the school records listed her as a committed church worker.

But now—Clara had changed.

She dressed like me now—worldly, seductive. But it wasn't just the clothes. The fire in her eyes had dimmed. The prayers had stopped. And then one night, she went clubbing.

Clubbing? Clara?

I was stunned. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The pastor's daughter?

Curious and concerned, I confronted her.

She met my gaze—eyes hollowed of innocence, shadows deep within.

"I belong to a secret sisterhood," she said. "The Daughters of Jezebel."

I froze, breath caught between heartbeats, as the weight of her words settled like a shroud.

Suddenly, it all made sense. The changes. The darkness. The look in her eyes. Clara wasn't just different. She was possessed.

I had always suspected Dara—Clara's so-called "church friend." I warned Clara to stay away from her. But Clara insisted she was trying to win Dara's soul for Jesus.

What bitter irony.

Instead of Clara saving Dara... Dara dragged Clara into the pit. And me?

Because of my poverty. My loneliness. My hunger for power and recognition.

I joined them too.

On the day of my initiation, I heard the cult's slogan for the first time:

"Daughters of Jezebel... we steal, we kill, we destroy."

And at that moment, my mother's last words returned to me.

*Teach the world a lesson.*

I swore an oath then—to tear down as many Christian lives as I could reach.

In doing so, I thought I'd give meaning to her suffering, and to the fire burning deep inside me.

## CHAPTER 3

My first target was Brother Ezekiel—a fiery fellowship leader whose eyes blazed with unshakable conviction.

One of our spies reported him to the cult, “Ezekiel walks like he’s untouchable. Too holy. Too perfect.”

Our leader asked the room, “Who will bring him down?”

Without a second thought, I raised my hand.

My task was clear—steal, kill, destroy—all within two months.

I began with appearances. I joined the fellowship, sat among them, nodded during prayers, even whispered “Amen.” One evening, I paid Ezekiel a visit and told him I wanted to give my life to Christ.

His face lit up.

He shared the gospel with all the fire he could muster, his words trembling with passion. When he finished, I asked innocently, “Can I keep visiting? I want to grow spiritually.”

He smiled and laughed softly. “Yes. Of course.”

He didn’t last two weeks.

But before I laid with him physically, I had already bound him spiritually — through the gateway of masturbation. That was his secret battle. He wore his righteousness like a crown, but inside he was rotting. He fasted, led prayer meetings, organized vigils— but in the silence of his room, he wept and failed. That’s where I met him. That’s why he fell so easily.

When the fellowship uncovered our secret, the backlash was swift and merciless.

He was suspended, shamed, and reported to his parents.

Not long after, Ezekiel took his own life.

My hands bore the stains of his ruin.

And my soul, cold and unrepentant, smiled.

Then came the man no one else in the cult dared to touch—Lecturer Rehoboth—brilliant, respected, and a man of God. But he had a chink in his armour—pornography. He was a slave to it, hiding in the shadows, keeping up a holy front. Too playful, too careless with boundaries. A week before his wedding, I was struck.

I seduced him. It didn't take much. We didn't just want his downfall, we needed his sperm. Rituals were performed. Portals opened. I was rewarded with millions of naira.

The aftermath? His wedding was cancelled. His fiancée walked away. And then his body began to change, his manhood swelling beyond control. The doctors were baffled. Eventually, they gave it a name—prostate cancer.

He died soon after.

Then came Noah, a pastor's son.

He was already halfway gone. His lips quoted scripture, but his heart chased the world. He smoked, partied, played the part of a rebel in secret. I barely needed to do anything. After he fell into immorality, the spiral continued: hard drugs, overdose, and death. A speeding car finished what the devil started.

One day, I counted.

Eight years on campus. Not as a student, but as a destroyer.

One hundred and twenty souls...

Lost on my account.



# CHAPTER 4

Then I met Jesus.

It didn't happen with a thunderclap. It started quietly — with Daniel.

He was supposed to be my next target.

He wasn't rich. He didn't drive flashy cars. But there was something about him. His spiritual life was rooted like an old tree in a storm. He was the kind of believer that prayed quietly, with tears. The kind who loved with truth, not pretense. And when he spoke to me, there was no judgment — only truth.

His words pierced deeper than I expected. I didn't laugh like I usually did. I didn't mock. I just walked away slowly, heart trembling, thoughts swirling like a storm.

That night, I heard a voice, not just inside my mind, but in the very air around me. Clear, personal, divine.

“Agnes, why do you live in sorrow? Have you not read in My book, ‘Come unto Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’? Agnes, come to Me. I want to give you rest.”

My knees buckled. I knew it was God who just spoke.

Tears burst from my eyes like a dam had broken.

Visions overwhelmed me—of shame, blood, and shattered souls.

For three days, I wept without rest. I couldn't eat, I couldn't bathe. I was unraveling from the inside out, begging desperately—no, pleading—for forgiveness.

I bore a massive wooden cross, its weight crushing my back and spirit. My strength faltered, and suddenly, I saw myself nailed to it, my hands, feet, heart pierced. I screamed, not from the pain of my flesh being torn open, but from a deeper agony—spiritual torment, emotional ruin, crushing guilt.

And then, I saw Him.

Jesus.

Nailed to His own cross, bleeding and broken, yet His eyes held no anger—only profound compassion.

He looked at me, and I felt a love so pure and real, one I never knew existed.

Tears streaming, I cried out, “Jesus, help me!”

I clung to His cross, the only lifeline in my storm of sorrow.

When I woke, my pillow was soaked with tears, my body trembling. I had truly seen Him.

That same day, I sought out Daniel.

I confessed everything—every sin, every soul I had shattered, every dark secret, every drop of blood spilled.

He did not recoil. Instead, he prayed over me, wrapping me in grace, and gently guided me back to the cross once more.

And that was the beginning of my redemption.

I knew the road ahead would be steep and merciless. Hell’s haunting whispers would grow louder, and the voices of the lives I had destroyed would cry out for justice.

But I had met Christ.

And suddenly, nothing else mattered.

In the quiet depths of my heart, I made a vow—untouched by pain, unbroken by history, unshaken by temptation.

No matter what unfolds,

no matter how the past taunts,

no matter the accusations the devil hurls—

I will cling to the old rugged cross.

## MEET THE AUTHOR

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# THE WEIGHT OF OUR BLOOD

Faith Ijiga

## CHAPTER ONE

Lagos, 1969

The heat struck me first. Not the kind that sneaks up on you, but the kind that sits on your chest the moment you step off the plane. Humid. Thick. Familiar in a strange, ancestral way.

We'd landed twenty minutes earlier, the small NGO team I'd volunteered with—two doctors, a nurse, and three field medics like myself—emerging from the Pan Am flight into a world that looked nothing like America, yet didn't feel entirely foreign to me. Not after everything I'd heard growing up. Not after everything I'd seen in the war.

As we stepped into the open-air terminal, a military man waited just beyond the security checkpoint. He wore the green of the Nigerian Army, but it wasn't the uniform I recognized first—it was the man himself.

Captain Ayomide Balogun.

He hadn't changed much. A little grayer around the temples, a few more creases around the eyes. But the fire was still there. I'd seen that fire in Italy in '43, when we fought side by side under the British flag—me with the all-Black American regiment, him with the West African Frontier Force.

I hadn't known then that our blood was connected.

But after that one rainy night in Naples, when we both shared stories of our families and stumbled upon a name—Oluwole—from my great-grandmother's stories and his grandfather's lineage, everything changed. We became more than comrades. We became cousins. And even after the war, through letters and later phone calls, we stayed in touch.

So, when the war broke out in Nigeria, and the Biafran secession plunged the country into bloodshed, famine, and chaos, I didn't come because I was a doctor.

I came because family was in the fire.

Ayomide stepped forward and hugged me tightly. He smelled of dust, leather, and something else—exhaustion.

“Sage,” he said, voice deep, measured, but warm. “You made it.”

“I told you I would.” I stepped back and looked him over. “Still got that same stiff posture.”

He smirked. “Comes with being an officer. Rank demands it.”

I nodded toward the small team behind me. “These are the folks I told you about. Doctors Without Borders sent us out. We'll be here for six weeks, maybe more, depending on what we see.”

His face tightened slightly. “You'll see more than you bargained for.”

I believed him. The news reaching the States was limited, cautious. Headlines spoke of “a regional conflict,” “diplomatic breakdowns,” “civil unrest.” But Ayomide's last letter said something different. Starving children. Civilians bombed their homes. Entire towns vanished overnight.

He helped us into the military truck waiting near the curb. A few local soldiers stood nearby, guarding the vehicle, their eyes scanning the crowd.

“You'll be stationed at the outer edge of Enugu. It's been reclaimed, but tensions are still high. The people there... they've seen too much.”

“And you?” I asked, climbing into the back. “You look like you've seen your share too.”

Ayomide climbed in beside me and said nothing for a while. The truck roared to life, bouncing as it hit the road leading away from the airport. Lagos passed us in glimpses: palm trees, traffic congestion, marketplaces bursting with life, despite the war that raged in the East.

Finally, he spoke.

“I’ve had to make choices I never imagined. This war... it’s not as simple as North versus South, or federal versus Biafra. It’s a war where brothers turn on brothers. Where we pretend we don’t bleed the same blood.”

I glanced sideways at him. “We’ve seen that before, haven’t we? In Europe. In America.”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “But it’s different when it’s your land. When the names on the casualty list sound like the names of your uncles and sons.”

He was silent again. I let him be. Some silences are sacred.

We reached the base camp just outside Lagos before dusk. Barracks for soldiers lined the perimeter, and further down were tents erected for field hospitals. We’d be moving east in two days, but for now, this was our staging point.

That evening, Ayomide brought out a bottle of palm wine, the real stuff—not the watered-down version I’d tasted in Brooklyn at some cultural festival. We sat under the stars, the camp alive with the hum of generators and distant gunfire that came in like a whisper on the wind.

“Do you remember that night in Naples?” I asked. “When we both got drunk off that cheap Italian grappa and sang Yoruba lullabies?”

He laughed—a deep, weary chuckle. “You were the worst singer I’d ever heard. But I remember.”

“My grandfather—Isaac—he used to say that night changed him. Said for the first time in his life, he didn’t feel stolen. He felt... found.”

Ayomide’s face darkened with thought. “The ancestors don’t forget,” he murmured. “Even when we do.”

I took a long sip of the wine. “That’s why I came. Not just to help the wounded. But to understand. My great-grandmother died with Oduduwa on her lips. She used to say, ‘Our roots are deeper than the ocean that took me.’ I didn’t get it then. But I do now.”

He nodded, then rose to his feet. “Get some rest. The war you came to see begins when we move to Enugu. And Sage—”

“Yes?”

He looked at me, his voice low. “This is not the kind of war you walk away from unchanged.”

As he walked off into the dark, I sat alone, the stars above foreign yet somehow familiar. Somewhere beyond those blinking lights was the land my great-grandmother once called home. Now, that land was on fire. And I had come, not to save it—but to walk beside it. To hold its hand while it burned.

Because family does not turn away from the flames.

Not when the soil remembers.



## CHAPTER TWO

We left Lagos before dawn, the convoy split between military jeeps and an old Mercedes-Benz ambulance. I rode with Ayomide in the lead vehicle, bumping along a red-dirt road toward Enugu. The morning sun peeked over the landscape, but it brought no warmth. Just light that exposed the bones of a country torn in half.

Enugu, the former capital of Biafra, now lay in ruins. The city had been retaken by federal troops, but what remained wasn't a city. It was a memory of one.

The buildings were shells. Streets once filled with traders and children were now veins of dust and silence. Markets were abandoned, bullet holes pockmarked the walls, and every other corner smelled of death—some fresh, some rotting beneath the clay.

We passed bodies. Some are buried in shallow, hastily-dug graves. Some are not buried at all. When we arrived at the camp just on the outskirts of town, the first thing I saw was a girl—barely eight—sitting alone beside a collapsed wall, arms wrapped around a doll with no head. She didn't cry. She didn't blink. She just stared at the convoy as if we were ghosts.

Maybe we were.

Inside the medical tent, my team got to work. I sterilized tools. Assisted with wound cleaning. We had no morphine left by nightfall. Children screamed while their legs were stitched. A woman bit through a piece of wood as we amputated her arm—gangrene had climbed halfway to her shoulder.

Ayomide stopped by later that night. His uniform was stained with sweat and blood, not his own. He looked at me and said, "You haven't seen the worst yet."

He was right.

The next day, I met the woman with the bag.

She arrived alone, barefoot, her wrapper torn, a leather satchel clutched tightly in both hands. Her eyes were sunken, but not empty. There was something in them—like a flame fighting the wind.

I was outside when she approached, a local nurse translating for us.

“She walked from Zaria,” the nurse explained quietly. “She’s been walking for weeks.”

Zaria. In the North. That meant she had crossed the entire country, through checkpoints, roadblocks, and minefields. Alone.

I looked at the bag. It was heavy. Darkened with something that had seeped through the seams.

“She won’t let go of it,” the nurse added. “She says it’s her son.”

I didn’t believe it at first. I didn’t want to. But when the woman opened the bag—slowly, reverently—I saw what was inside.

A severed head. A boy, no more than twelve. Skin shriveled. Hair matted with dried blood. Eyes mercifully closed.

She collapsed, sobbing without sound. Her whole body shook, but no sound escaped. Just tremors and tears and a low hum of Igbo words I didn’t understand.

The nurse translated them, haltingly.

> “This is Chuka. He was my only son. They said he was a traitor. They cut his head off in front of me. I told them I would bury him in the land of my fathers.”

I couldn’t speak.

She had carried her son’s head in that satchel across hundreds of miles of war just to bury him in Biafran soil.

Ayomide came to the tent later that day. I told him what I’d seen.

He didn't flinch.

"That is not rare," he said, his voice grave. "That is our reality."

He told me stories—quietly, like he was ashamed to even speak them. Of men who turned on their neighbors. Of air raids that wiped out whole villages. Of children caught between gunfire, their small bodies used as shields by desperate fighters. He spoke of betrayal, of hunger as a weapon, of doctors executed because they treated the "wrong side."

And then he said something that stuck.

> "We are not just fighting each other. We are fighting the ghost of what we used to be."

I didn't understand at first. But over the next few days, it became clearer.

This wasn't just a civil war. It was a collapse. A slow unmaking of identity. Families were split—brothers on different sides of the battlefield. Children raised on stories of unity, now carrying rifles. Mothers cooking leaves because there was no rice. Churches turned into morgues. Rivers filled with blood.

In Aba, I saw a man dig a grave with his bare hands. He didn't speak English. He didn't speak at all. Just dug. The nurses said he had lost all five of his children to starvation in a single week.

In Owerri, I watched a soldier shoot another soldier who refused to shoot a boy accused of being a Biafran scout. No trial. Just a bullet, then silence.

And through it all, Ayomide kept doing his duty.

He barked orders. Secured roads. Interrogated prisoners. Sometimes he would stand still for hours, staring out at the land like he could still see it the way it used to be.

One night, I asked him how he kept going.

He looked at me, eyes rimmed with bloodshot red. "Because if I stop, I will break. And if I break, my men will break. And then... we become animals."

I didn't know what to say.

Instead, I told him about the woman with the satchel.

"She wasn't crying for her son," I said. "She was crying because she lived."

He nodded slowly. "That's the curse of war. The dead are free. The living... carry everything."

Later that night, I stepped outside the camp. The stars were dim behind the smoke. I walked a little way, alone, and knelt on the red earth.

I whispered my great-grandmother's name.

"Ayotunde."

Her stories had never included this.

She had spoken of drums and laughter. Of yam festivals and masquerades. Of rivers that sang and spirits that protected the land.

But that land was broken now.

And I, her descendant, stood on it not as a visitor—but as a witness.

A witness to its ruin.

## CHAPTER THREE

It began just before dawn.

The air was humid, thick with the scent of sweat and iron, and somewhere in the darkness, a hawk screamed. We were set up near Umuahia, where the Biafran forces had launched a desperate push to reclaim key roads and hold the line against federal troops.

Captain Ayomide had been tense all night, his jaw clenched, eyes scanning the horizon like a man watching for ghosts.

“They’re coming,” he muttered to me as I handed out iodine and field bandages. “This won’t be a skirmish. It’ll be a war.”

And he was right.

The first shots rang out like thundercracks—sudden, sharp, and far too close.

Then the night lit up in flames.

I dropped to the dirt as tracer rounds sliced overhead, their red trails burning through the dark like curses. The ground shook under the weight of mortars. One of them landed twenty feet from the medical tent. The explosion threw me into the mud.

My ears rang. My vision blurred.

But there was no time to pause. The first wounded soldier was already being dragged in—half of his thigh blown open, flesh hanging like a shredded flag. He screamed for his mother in Yoruba as I tried to stop the bleeding with my bare hands.

I held the wound. Felt the warm pulse of life and death spurting between my fingers.

Another soldier came in, eyes wide, lips trembling, blood pouring from the socket where his left eye had once been.

“Bomb!” he screamed in English. “It took my sight—God! I can’t see!”

He reached for me blindly, clutching at my shirt like a drowning man, and I pulled him down just as another round exploded nearby.

Shrapnel tore through the tent wall and embedded itself in the chest of one of our nurses. Her name was Mfon. She was twenty-two. She was a medical student from Calabar. She bled out in minutes.

No time to grieve.

Ayomide burst through the tent, face smeared with soot and blood, shouting orders in rapid Yoruba.

> “Flank left! Don’t let them encircle us! Hold the goddamn line!”

His voice cut through the chaos, the only steady thing in the storm.

I followed him outside, ducking behind an overturned jeep. The entire camp was aflame—crates of supplies exploded, metal fragments soaring like angry bees. The Biafran soldiers, lean from hunger but fierce with desperation, were advancing with homemade grenades and anything they could hold.

One of them, just a teenager, rushed forward with a rifle taller than he was. A federal soldier shot him clean through the chest. He collapsed beside me, blood pooling beneath him, fingers twitching.

He looked like my nephew back home.

I ran.

I ran toward the sounds of screaming.

Inside a collapsed hut, I found another soldier—his leg gone from the knee down. The bone jutted out like a snapped broomstick, skin blackening already. He begged me to kill him. I gave him a shot of morphine instead, knowing it wouldn't last long.

The fire was closing in.

Ayomide reappeared again, dragging a wounded lieutenant with one arm and firing with the other. His face was raw with smoke and rage.

“This is madness!” I shouted as I tried to bandage the man.

Ayomide didn't stop moving. “It's not madness,” he yelled back. “It's war.”

Another explosion.

Then silence.

The kind of silence that makes your heart skip. The kind that means something has ended.

I looked up.

Bodies.

Scattered across the field like broken dolls. Some were still moving. Most were not.

I saw a man crawling, intestines trailing behind him like a rope. He wasn't crying. Just moving—desperate to reach... what? Salvation?

A federal soldier stood over him. Lifted his gun.

I turned away before the shot.

Later, back inside the tent—what was left of it—I treated a man whose arm had been completely shredded. He kept whispering a single name: “Ngozi... Ngozi...”

His wife? Sister? Daughter?

Did it matter?

I stitched. I bandaged. I tried to stop the bleeding. But I knew the truth—he wouldn't last the hour.

We ran out of antibiotics. Ran out of gauze. Used torn shirts and kerosene to clean wounds.

A little boy was brought in, maybe ten years old, blood bubbling from his chest. He'd been caught between crossfire while fetching water. His tiny body convulsed as I pressed on his chest, trying to keep him breathing. But each time I pressed, more blood poured from his mouth.

He died with his eyes open.

I closed them myself.

That night, I sat with Ayomide beside a charred tree. Neither of us spoke for a long time.

Finally, I said, "This place... it's not what I imagined."

Ayomide stared at the flames in the distance. "What did you imagine, cousin?"

"I imagined coming home."

He turned to me then. Eyes hollow. Voice bitter. "This is not home, Sage. This is the ruin of home."

He told me how his men were breaking down. Two had deserted last week. One had shot himself after killing a woman who turned out to be a civilian. Every morning, he woke up wondering if today he would become the kind of man he once hunted.

I asked him why he kept going.

He looked at me, firelight flickering across his scarred face.

"Because if I don't, who will tell our story?"



That night, I wrote a single sentence in my journal.

> “We are not soldiers. We are witnesses to the apocalypse.”

The next morning, the field was quieter. The dead had been collected. Some are buried. Some not. The survivors limped on—numb, hollow, broken.

And yet... alive.

Barely.

I stood beneath the rising sun, eyes stinging, heart torn.

And I whispered the name again—my great-grandmother’s name.

“Ayotunde.”

She had told me that name meant ‘Joy has returned.’

And now, after all the loss, I understood.

Because today had brought fire.

But maybe—just maybe—tomorrow would bring rain.

## CHAPTER FOUR

It was January 1980 when I returned to Nigeria. A full decade since the last bodies were buried in the red soil of the east.

I am 57 now. A little slower, beard more salt than pepper. My hands shook sometimes, especially when I remembered the screaming. But the country I landed in that morning at Murtala Muhammed International Airport was not the same burning cradle of war I'd left behind.

Even the air was different.

Back then, it carried the scent of cordite and rot. Now it was thick with the aroma of petrol, diesel fumes, pepper soup, and prosperity. Lagos throbbed like a living thing—overcrowded, yes, chaotic, undoubtedly—but alive in a way that felt impossible just ten years earlier.

Nigeria was booming.

Oil changed everything.

From Port Harcourt to Warri to Bonny Island, crude oil gushed like a blessing from the earth. Tankers lined the ports. Politicians wore agbadas tailored in Milan. And for the first time in history, the Nigerian naira was stronger than the US dollar—1 naira to \ \$1.50 on the exchange boards. It stunned me to read it in the newspaper on the flight. But it was real.

There are new highways now. Shiny Mercedes-Benz sedans replaced the war-worn Land Rovers. Children walked to school in polished shoes. Radio Lagos played Fela Kuti and Sunny Ade back-to-back. The people danced again—not because life was perfect, but because they could.

Still, you didn't have to look hard to see the scars.

In Enugu, the old war front where I had once crouched beside the bleeding and dying, new markets had sprung up. Concrete swallowed the remnants of burned villages. But if you listened closely to the older women in wrappers or the retired soldiers selling second-hand goods on the roadside, you would hear the echoes.

They hadn't forgotten.

Nor had I.

---

The war ended on January 15, 1970. The Nigerian army had pushed deep into Biafra, starving the rebel nation of access to arms and food. A humanitarian disaster unfolded—images of bloated-bellied children made global headlines.

General Philip Effiong, standing in place of a broken Ojukwu, announced Biafra's surrender. He called it a "ceasefire," but the truth was clear: Biafra was crushed.

There was no official treaty. Just a quiet, exhausted handshake and General Gowon's speech promising "No victor, no vanquished." But history knew better.

Reintegration followed—uneven and riddled with mistrust. Many Igbo officers were dismissed from the army. The eastern region, economically strangled, had to rebuild from the ashes. Yet in that struggle, something extraordinary happened.

They endured.

They rose.

The same Igbo people who had watched their homes burn became the heartbeat of the new Nigerian economy—trading, innovating, rebuilding schools, reopening factories. By the end of the 1970s, the East was alive again.

So was the nation.

---

I found Ayomide in Ibadan.

He had retired from the army in '75 after thirty years of service. Now he taught history at the University of Ibadan—wearing glasses, gaining weight, and lecturing students who barely believed he had once walked through hell with a rifle.

When I called, his voice cracked.

“Sage,” he said, “I thought you’d forgotten me.”

“I never could,” I replied.

We met under the mango tree in front of the faculty building. His face was older, cheeks fuller, hair receding. But his eyes—those dark, observant eyes—hadn’t changed.

They still carried on the war.

He embraced me like a brother.

For a long moment, we said nothing. Just stood there in the shade of the tree, holding onto something both broken and whole.

We spent the afternoon in his modest bungalow, drinking palm wine and jollof rice prepared by his teenage daughter.

“Do you remember the medic tent in Umuahia?” he asked with a laugh. “You looked like a ghost covered in blood.”

“I still dream of it,” I said quietly. “Of Mfon, the nurse. Of the boy with one eye.”

He nodded. “We all dream of them.”

Then he reached into his drawer and handed me a photograph—black and white, faded at the edges. It was the two of us, 1943, somewhere in Tunisia during World War II. Young. Hopeful. Fools.

“My son thinks we were mad for enlisting,” he said. “And maybe we were.”

“No,” I replied, staring at the photograph. “We were just boys trying to be men.”

Ayomide grew quiet.

“I lost too many men,” he said eventually. “Some to bullets, others to silence. You know what’s worse than death? A man coming home alive but never laughing again.”

I did know.

We visited Enugu the next day. We walked through the refurbished hospital, now two stories high with modern equipment. I met the current medical director—a woman named Dr. Nnenna Mba.

She had been in her early twenties during the final years of the war, old enough to remember the sound of bombs, the hunger that hollowed bellies, and the whispers of mothers praying their children wouldn’t die in their sleep. Her father had been a Biafran medic, and her mother had run with her across the River Niger as federal troops closed in. Now, in her thirties, she runs the very hospital where we once treated the wounded with threadbare supplies and sheer will.

“I was carried through the war,” she told me. “Now I carry Nigeria on my shoulders.”

I smiled, deeply moved.

I left her with one of my journals from 1969—the pages still smudged with dirt, blood, and the tears of a thousand lives.

“This is yours now,” I said.

---

That night, Ayomide and I sat on the porch beneath a quiet sky.

“You came back, Sage,” he said.

“I had to.”

“Why?”

“For Ayotunde,” I said. “For every ancestor torn from this soil and sold into chains. For every boy who bled on this land. For every woman who carried a severed head and still didn’t break.”

He was silent for a moment. Then he said something I'll never forget:

> “Nigeria broke us. Then she rebuilt us. But we had to become the cement.”

I watched the stars that night.

I didn't see the ruin.

I saw constellations—scars shaped like stories. A country stitched together not by peace treaties, but by pain, memory, and a refusal to die.

Yes, the oil flowed. Yes, the naira danced. But beneath it all, what truly sustained Nigeria was its people.

Flawed. Fierce. Forgiving.

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When I boarded the plane a week later, I pressed my hand to the window as Lagos faded below. The coastline curved like a mother's arm.

Captain Ayomide stood on the tarmac, hand raised, eyes locked with mine.

He didn't wave.

He saluted.

And I saluted back.

## **EPILOGUE**

Broken. That word had followed me across decades.

But now, it didn't feel like an ending.

It felt like a beginning.

Because to be broken isn't the same as being finished.

Some things—some countries, some souls—must be shattered before they can shine.

And Nigeria?

She was shining.

Not perfectly.

But powerfully.

And she carried my blood in her soil.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I didn't write this story just to retell a war. I wrote it because I carry war in my blood—and I know Nigeria does too.

When I sat down to begin *The Weight of Our Blood*, I thought I was writing about a nation fractured by bullets and borders, about the 30-month civil war that tore through the heart of Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. A war that left millions dead, families shattered, dreams scorched, and memories etched deep into the soul of a people. A war that didn't just end lives but left a silence in its wake—one that many still carry today.

But as I wrote, I realized I wasn't just writing about the past.

I was writing about today.

You see, I grew up hearing stories about Nigeria's Biafran War, sometimes whispered in hushed tones, other times blurted out during feuds. It was a war of brother against brother, of starvation used as a weapon, of children growing up too fast and never quite growing up at all. It was a war where people fled barefoot, where mothers buried their own sons with trembling hands, where the sky rained bullets and hope seemed like a foolish thing to hold on to.

Yet somehow, they held on, after the final ceasefire in January 1970, when General Gowon declared "No victor, no vanquished", the people got up again. The same hands that once carried rifles began to build. They returned to their farms, reopened their market stalls, swept the ashes from their classrooms, and chose to begin again.

And for a moment—maybe longer than a moment—Nigeria began to rise.

By the early 1980s, oil had turned Nigeria into one of Africa's fastest-growing economies. The naira was so strong it even surpassed the US dollar. Civil servants earned decent wages. Universities attracted scholars from across the continent. Lagos buzzed with industry, music, and invention. There was corruption, yes, but there was also opportunity. There was violence, but also vision.



There was a time when it felt like anything was possible.

So how did we get here?

How did we return to a place where mothers are again crying for their sons, not from bullets fired in open war, but from kidnappings in their homes, attacks in their churches, gunmen on the highways, and hunger in their kitchens?

Today, Nigeria is facing a new kind of war.

Not the kind fought with tanks and fighter jets—but with inflation, unemployment, banditry, terrorism, and a despair that is dangerously close to becoming normal. Our naira has crashed, our youths are migrating in droves, and our streets are soaked—not with the fire of ideology but the blood of survival.

The cost of living has become unbearable.

Food prices have skyrocketed. A bag of rice is now beyond the reach of the average family. Fuel scarcity cripples daily life. Electricity is erratic, businesses are folding, and fear is no longer limited to the battlefield—it walks with us in daylight. A teacher cannot afford to send his child to school. A young graduate cannot find a job. A trader cannot sleep at night for fear of armed robbery or military abuse.

And yet—just like in 1970—our people are still standing.

Still praying.

Still fighting.

Still surviving.

This is why I wrote the weight of our blood. To remind us that we have come through fire before—and we didn't burn up. That the same spirit that carried a woman from northern Nigeria to Enugu with her son's severed head still breathes in us today. That the same young men who

bled in the trenches of Owerri and Onitsha were never promised tomorrow, but they fought for it anyway.

Our resilience is not accidental. It is ancestral.

It is forged in blood and rebirth.

The weight of our blood is a story about ruin, yes—but more than that, it is a story about restoration. About healing. About remembering where the pain began so that we never mistake the silence for peace again.

I believe that Nigeria will rise again.

Not because of oil. Not because of politicians.

But because of people.

Because of the market woman in Aba who refuses to close her shop even after three armed robberies. Because of the student in Maiduguri who walks past burnt classrooms and still sits for exams. Because of the father in Jos who earns ₦30,000 a month and still puts food on the table. Because of the writers, the nurses, the taxi drivers, the youth corps members, and yes, even the broken-hearted who have not yet given up.

This story is for them.

This story is for you.

If you're tired, weary, afraid, or angry—know this: we've been here before. And we survived.

We will again.

And one day, like Sage and Ayomide standing together after all they'd seen, we will look back—not to forget—but to honor the journey.

And we will know we were broken.

But we were not destroyed.

We were wounded.

But we rose.

May we rise again.

— Faith Ijiga

You can reach me via my email at [authorfaithijiga@gmail.com](mailto:authorfaithijiga@gmail.com)

I'd like to hear from you. Or follow me on social media.

# DOUBLE PORTION

Dilenu

*A story inspired by the life of Job in the Bible*

---

Joel Adedeji was not a perfect man, but if you looked long enough—past the quiet demeanor and modest clothes—you would find something rare. Steadfastness. The kind that steadies storms at the dinner table. The kind that sends school fees to a cousin two states away, unasked. The kind that never forgets to call his mother every Sunday before church, or to say, “I love you” before hanging up.

He built his life like he built his buildings, one line of integrity at a time. At thirty, he founded EdenBuild, an architecture and urban design firm in Lagos. His vision etched itself across the country, from glass towers in Abuja to schools in Ilorin that whispered dignity in their design. He had eyes not just for space, but for souls. He saw what could be.

His wife, Adaora, was both his mirror and his anchor. They met at university—he, studying structure; she, color and form. They married at twenty-six, starting with nothing but borrowed furniture, a mattress on the floor, and a one-room apartment in Yaba where the air was thick, and peace was their only luxury.

In time, they had four children. Bright-eyed. Loud-laughed. Joel laid hands on them every morning, murmuring blessings into hair still damp from sleep.

People admired him. Some envied him. But Joel never wore success like a shield. He carried it lightly, as if he knew it could vanish.

In their home, faith was not performance. It was breathtaking.

Until one day, the breath was knocked from their lungs.

---

It began on a Tuesday.

Joel had just returned from Port Harcourt, hopeful after a meeting with a new oil client. He was on the phone with Adaora when he saw six missed calls from his site manager. The seventh rang as he looked at the screen. He answered.

“Sir... the building... the foundation gave way. Three workers are trapped. Maybe dead.”

He stood still, then sat down.

“What happened?”

“We don’t know. It may be the materials. We used the supplier you approved, but...”

He didn’t finish before another call came through.

“Sir,” said his financial controller, voice thin with panic. “Hundreds of millions have been taken. Unauthorized transfers. We’re still tracing it.”

Joel did not sleep that night. The hours passed like smoke. By dawn, headlines had already begun to curl through the city—allegations of negligence, whispers of fraud. EdenBuild, once a name that stood for strength, now trembled on every lip.

But the real blow had not yet come.

That afternoon, a truck lost control on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway.

Inside the crushed vehicle were Korede and Tami, his son and daughter. They had been returning from a school competition.

The driver survived.

The children did not.

Joel was on his knees in the corridor of the hospital when the doctor said the words. Words so soft they shattered him.

“I’m sorry.”

Adaora did not cry at first. She sat on the nearest chair, as if her bones had forgotten how to carry her. She stared at nothing for what felt like forever.

And then she wept.

And when she wept, she broke.

---

Grief is loud in the beginning.

People bring food. Neighbors cry louder than you. Messages flood in.

Even people you barely know say, “Be strong.”

But strength isn’t something you reach for in moments like this.

It abandons you.

Joel’s church tried to hold him up. But soon, the whispers began.

They wrapped around pews and prayer meetings like vines.

“Maybe he sinned.”

“No man falls this far without opening a door to the devil.”

How else could a man lose everything so quickly?

Adaora grew quiet. Distant. She walked like someone whose soul had been dropped and never picked up again.

Then one night, she sat beside him on their bed, her voice barely more than a breath.

“Joel... curse God and die. Maybe that will end this nightmare.”

He turned to look at her—his partner of seventeen years, his warmth, his war room—and something inside him cracked.

But it did not break.

“Ada,” he said gently, “even now, I won’t curse Him. I don’t understand this. But I know God is still God.”

She turned away.

And Joel wept.

Not the kind of weeping that folds into sleep.

The kind that hollows you out.

The kind that leaves your lungs dry, your soul emptied out on the floor.

---

Three friends came.

Obiora. Dayo. Uchenna.

Brothers of the old days. Men he trusted in business and in life.

They sat with him for hours, saying nothing.

Their silence spoke louder than sermons. Joel was grateful. He enjoyed their presence.

But silence is a fragile thing—it always breaks.

Obiora said softly, “Joel, I know you. But God doesn’t punish the innocent. Maybe there’s something you’ve hidden—even from yourself.”

Dayo leaned forward, “Maybe this is God’s way of humbling you. Your name became too loud.”

Uchenna, ever logical, offered, “Life is math. And if you’re suffering this much, Joel, check the equation.”

Joel trembled.

His voice came out like cracked porcelain.

“I did everything right. Not perfectly—but faithfully. Why does this feel like punishment?”

No one answered.

And God, it seemed, remained silent too.

---

He began to fall ill.

First, a rash. Then open sores. His body betrayed him.

Doctors had no answers. He shed weight like a man fading out of his own life.

He sold the house. The cars disappeared.

Former employees crossed the street when they saw him.

On social media, his name became a joke. A warning. A punchline.

Joel sat most days in the tiny, one-room apartment he now shared with Adaora and their surviving children.

He would face the wall and whisper prayers.

Not for wealth. Not for restoration.

Just for presence.

“God... are You still with me?”

Sometimes there was no answer.

Other times, only silence.

But one night—not a voice, but a knowing rose from his bones like a wind through cracked stone, Joel heard:

*“Were you there when I told the sea, ‘You may come this far, and no farther’?”*

*Do you command the morning, Joel?*

*Can you understand everything simply because you suffer?”*



Joel fell to his knees, tears like oil across dust.

“Lord... I spoke of things too wonderful for me. My ears had heard of You. But now my eyes have seen You.”

And in that room, dark with ruin and thick with sorrow, came peace.

Not the kind that erases pain—but the kind that stands beside it.

Peace like breath in the rubble.

Peace is like stubborn hope.

---

Restoration did not bloom overnight.

It began like a whisper in the wind, when a former client—a Muslim man named Alhaji Musa—found him in a dusty internet café, eyes steady beneath his cap.

“Joel,” he said, “I heard what happened. I don’t know why I trust you, but I want you to design something for me. No money now, but if it works, we both eat.”

And it did work.

Then came another project, and another, small embers fanning into a steady flame. EdenBuild returned, not as it was, but tempered by fire, refined like steel hammered and folded.

People began to see Joel again—not broken, not bitter, but a man who had survived, whose soul bore the quiet strength of endurance. His scars weren’t visible, but they were there, pushing him forward to be better.

And Adaora?

She returned piece by piece, like light creeping back into a shuttered room.

One afternoon, she laughed— a sound bright and unexpected, at something their daughter Temi had said.

Joel looked up, stunned.

A fragment of the woman he loved was home.

Their marriage did not simply heal; it deepened, rooting itself in richer soil.

Not long after, twins arrived, their names chosen with trembling hope: *Erioluwa*—“testimony of God,” and *Ayotomiwa*—“my joy has returned.”

Years later, Joel stood before a sea of young faces at a leadership summit. His beard was streaked with silver, his eyes gentle.

“I lost everything,” he said. “Even myself. I begged God to take away the pain, but He gave me something better. Perspective.”

He paused, letting the weight of his words settle.

“Faith is not what you declare when life is sweet. Faith is the hand that holds you steady when life sours. And even when all I had was pain, I refused to let go of the One who held me.”

The room erupted in a standing ovation, but Joel barely noticed. His eyes were fixed on Adaora in the front row, wiping away tears, their children beside her—whole, alive, and laughing.

In that moment, Joel understood that he had been given a double portion—not only of restored wealth, but of wisdom, love, and grace poured out in abundance.

## MEET THE AUTHOR

My name is Dilenu, an African lady passionate about telling the world about God through storytelling. My hobbies include reading, dancing and teaching.

You can reach me on Instagram

@dilenu\_da\_lady of spice

Cheers!

# RESTORATION SOUL

Priscilla Boakye

Maria was a God-fearing young woman. She served faithfully in her church as both a choir member and an usher.

Everyone knew her as someone pure and sweet. The men in church admired her gentle spirit and caring nature.

Maria was patiently waiting for the right man, someone who was Christian and deeply rooted in the Lord.

One evening after fellowship, she was walking home when a member of the church pulled up beside her in a sleek car.

He rolled down his window and greeted her with a grin.

“Hey Maria, it’s me, Mark. Would you like a lift home?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” she answered warmly.

Maria got into the car, and as they drove, they chatted about all kinds of things. The conversation flowed easily.

When they arrived at her house, she stepped out and wished him a good night.

“Wait,” he called. “I was wondering if you’d like to have lunch with me on Saturday afternoon?”

She smiled and responded, “Yes, I would love that.”

He returned her smile, and they waved goodbye.

Once inside, Maria locked the door behind her. She was excited about the upcoming lunch.

That night, she took a shower, wrapped a towel around her body, dressed in her pajamas, bowed her head in prayer, and went to bed with peace in her heart.

Early the next morning, she woke up and headed downstairs to get ready for work.

She arrived on time and began her duties. While she was working, her phone rang — it was Mark.

He asked if she was still available for lunch. She gave an affirmative response.

Within minutes, he had arrived. She met him outside, followed him to his car and then he drove to a nearby steakhouse for lunch.

At that moment, nothing seemed wrong.

But one night while sleeping, Maria had a terrifying dream. In the dream, the Lord revealed something deeply troubling — Mark, the man she was now dating, was not who he claimed to be. He was not a true believer. He was, in fact, an occultist, someone who intended to deceive and use her in rituals to gain wealth and power.

She was horrified by the vision.

The Lord told her clearly that if she did not listen and turn away from Mark, she would lose her soul to hell. She saw herself falling into a dark abyss, with no escape and no one to call out to. Her soul felt lost, drowning in a place where light could not reach.

Maria awoke with a start, heart pounding. Trembling, she immediately fell to her knees and began to pray.

Tears streamed down her face, her heart filled with sorrow and desperation. She was afraid — afraid of disobeying God, afraid of losing her soul.

As soon as she finished praying, she got dressed and ran to the church. Her face was soaked with tears as she walked toward the cross at the front of the sanctuary. She knelt down, lifted her hands, and begged the Lord for forgiveness. She confessed all her sins, even the ones buried deep in her past.

Right there at the altar, God reached out in mercy and touched her—a heart weighed down by trouble, yet open in repentance. In that sacred moment, Maria’s soul was gently restored by her ever-loving Father.

From that day forward, Maria dedicated herself more fully to the work of the Lord. She began attending special programs and conferences, sharing her testimony with others. She spoke openly about her struggles, including her past sexual experiences in college, when she had worked as an escort to pay her school fees and buy textbooks. It was a chapter of her life she had once buried in shame, but now she used it to help other young women.

She warned them about the dangers of casual and unprotected sex. She talked about how many girls her age had lost their lives trying to survive in the wrong way.

At one of these conventions, Maria met a wonderful young man.

In time, they fell in love and got married. Ten years later, they were still happily married — blessed with twin boys, James and Jeremiah.

Their home had become a haven of peace, echoing with laughter, love, and a deep gratitude to God who had rescued and redeemed them both.

Forever and ever had not been a cliché—it had been their reality. With God at the center, their love stayed vibrant, their union like new wine poured afresh each day.

Truly, God had restored what was lost, whether through neglect, ignorance, or sheer brokenness.

With this truth anchoring them, Maria and her husband walked through life in quiet joy, their hearts content, their hands held in faith.

Amen.

## MEET THE AUTHOR

My name is Priscilla Boakye. I live in Kumasi, Ghana. I'm a writer of Christian poetry and romance.

I enjoy reading the Bible daily and I enjoy listening to Christian music and gospel.

# PRIDE = DESTRUCTION

J.F Abraham

Ms. Joyce sat quietly on a bench outside the Cherished Old Age Home, her heart eager for the arrival of her close friend, Agnus. Around them, men and women of their age gathered in small groups, sharing laughter and memories, finding joy in the twilight of their years.

Soon, Maya appeared, gently pushing Agnus's wheelchair toward the bench. Ms. Joyce rose slowly to greet her friend. They embraced warmly, exchanging soft smiles and gentle pleasantries.

"What are you up to these days, Maya?" Agnus asked, her eyes lingering on the young woman.

"I'm working, Auntie Agnus. I have my own bakery now," Maya said proudly, her face lighting up.

"That's wonderful, my dear," Agnus replied. "My son Alex runs a business in Delhi. He's always busy." Her words hung in the air, making Ms. Joyce and Maya exchange a knowing glance.

"Does your family visit you often here?" Maya asked, curiosity shadowing her voice.

"They do," Agnus said quietly, but something in her tone betrayed the truth beneath the words.

After the visit, Ms. Joyce and Maya returned to the warmth of their bakery.

"Mom, why don't Agnus's children visit her more? Why is she here at the old-age home anyway? I thought her son has a big house?"

Ms. Joyce sighed deeply.

"Her children have abandoned her, Maya. It's heartbreaking."

Then she reached out, squeezing Maya's hand gently. "I am grateful my children are here, taking care of me."



“Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll always be here for you,” Maya promised softly. “But why? What happened to Agnus? Was she cruel or unkind?”

“I’ve known Agnus for over forty years,” Ms. Joyce said, her voice low, “and there is only one thing that shattered her life...”

She paused, letting the weight of the word settle.

“Pride.”

---

Agnus grew up as a bright, beautiful girl in a cold, hilly village nestled in a military zone. Her father was a chief military officer, stern but protective. Her mother, a skilled tailor, stitched love into every piece of cloth she made. Agnus was one of ten siblings, surrounded by cousins and relatives who filled her world with laughter and care. School and church were the center of her young life.

At eighteen, Agnus stepped into the wider world, seeking work beyond the village. After much struggle, she found a sales job deemed suitable for a young woman. But it wasn’t long before the weight of mockery crushed her spirit. One evening, she returned home, tears streaming down her face, collapsing into her mother’s arms.

“Ma, I can’t do this,” she sobbed. “I’m such a coward... so dumb.”

Her mother held her close, swallowing her own tears.

“They tease me, Ma. They say I’m too dumb to learn anything.”

“What did they say?” her mother asked gently.

“Look at me,” her mother commanded softly but firmly.

“I said, look at me.”

Agnus lifted her flushed face.

“If anyone puts you down, never let them do it twice. Understand?”

“How?” Agnus whispered, brows furrowed.

“Remember your victories,” her mother urged. “Think back to the times you surprised yourself—those quizzes you aced, those moments you thought you’d fail but didn’t.”

Agnus closed her eyes and rewound her memories, the weight in her chest easing as she sat up, wiping away her tears.

“Don’t let anyone put you down,” she repeated softly, a new strength kindling inside.

---

With the support of her brothers, Agnus found work at a typewriter company. There, she not only survived but thrived for nearly eight years, carving a quiet space of competence and respect. She married a military officer—much like her father—and together they built a family with two beautiful children. When her babies came, she left her job behind to care for them.

But life was not without its barbs.

“Agnus, your husband is so dark-skinned,” some whispered behind her back.

“No! He is not!” she snapped back instantly, fierce in her defense.

“Look at his growing belly,” another mocked, cruelly.

She smiled with playful defiance. “He loves my cooking... but do you know he cooks just as well? I’ve learned more recipes from him than I can count.” She wriggled her eyebrows, refusing to be diminished.

As she shopped with a neighbor, she beamed proudly, “My baby girl has the best handwriting in her class. The teacher said so herself.”

“Oh, my daughter won first place in the dance competition,” the neighbor remarked casually.

“Really?” Agnus teased, “But that day, she struggled with a step alongside Laila, my little one.”

The neighbor smiled, debating, “That was a tough step, indeed.”

Agnus’s laughter bubbled freely, light and genuine.

At church one day, she spotted a familiar face. “Where have you been? Long time no see,” she asked Maria.

“I came yesterday...” Maria began.

“Oh, you did? Yesterday?” Agnus interrupted, raising an eyebrow in playful disbelief.

Maria flushed, “I couldn’t find a seat next to you.”

“You know there was plenty of space beside me in the pew,” Agnus said, a sharp edge in her tone. “Are you avoiding me ever since your son’s grades dropped?”

“No, not at all,” Maria quickly denied.

“Be strict with him, Maria. Look at my son Alex—no one beats him in grades,” Agnus boasted, adjusting her fringes with pride.

---

“I remember, Mom,” Maya said one afternoon, “Whenever Auntie Agnus spoke, she’d somehow turn the conversation back to herself or her children. It got annoying.” She made a face, and Ms. Joyce sighed, a mix of sadness and disbelief.

“But what good did it do?” Ms. Joyce pressed.

“Alex is a good man, though,” Maya added softly. “I still can’t believe he abandoned his mother.”

“She loves him more than herself,” Ms. Joyce said quietly, certain despite the excuses Agnus gave whenever asked. “I’m sure she’s still struggling to understand it all, but she’s a master at hiding her pain.”

“Let’s visit her every Sunday, Mom,” Maya said with determination.

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A few days later, Ms. Joyce found Agnus sitting alone on the white bench, as usual. Her gaze was fixed on the vast blue sky above, her face streaked with tears, breath shallow and uneven.

Ms. Joyce approached slowly, careful not to startle her friend. But as Agnus sensed her presence, she quickly wiped her tears away.

Adjusting to the sunlight, Agnus smiled cheerfully — too bright and wide. “Good morning, my dear Joyce.”

“Good morning, Agnus. How long have you been here?” Ms. Joyce asked gently, careful to avoid the obvious.

“Just a few minutes,” Agnus answered.

Ms. Joyce couldn’t help but notice how much her dear friend had aged, the weight of years etched deeply on her face.

They talked as they always did, words flowing for nearly an hour, memories weaving between laughter and quiet signs. Then, the bell rang — a sharp note slicing through the afternoon stillness — signaling it was time for lunch.

“Agnus...” Ms. Joyce began softly.

“Hmm?” came the weary reply.

“Can you be honest with me?”

“I’m always honest with you,” Agnus said, but the words felt hollow, like fragile glass barely holding back the cracks beneath.

The sting of that lie pierced Ms. Joyce’s heart. She knew better. She knew Agnus had been hiding her truth for too long.

“Please, Agnus,” Ms. Joyce’s voice trembled with aching sincerity, “we both know that’s never been true.”

“What do you mean?” Agnus gasped, eyes wide, brimming with a pain she could no longer contain.

“We’ve known each other for over forty years,” Ms. Joyce said quietly, “longer than you spent with your own siblings.”

A fierce glare cut through Agnus's eyes, sharp and wounded.

"I didn't expect this from you, Joyce. I don't want to see you again," she hissed.

Attempting to stand, her legs betrayed her and she collapsed back onto the bench, defeated.

"Mala! Mala, come help me!" she called weakly, summoning her maid.

Ms. Joyce's voice softened, full of concern. "Agnus, how long will you keep suffering in silence like this?"

"Who said I'm alone?" Agnus replied, masking despair with brittle pride. "My son Alex will come for me next week."

Just then, Mala approached, pushing a wheelchair, shooting Ms. Joyce a meaningful look.

Later, as Ms. Joyce waited by the gate for an *auto-rickshaw*, Mala hurried over, breath quickening.

"Are you Ms. Agnus's visitor?" she asked, eyes cautious.

Lowering her voice, Mala confessed, "She's not going anywhere. That was a lie. She's been restless lately... to cope, we had to..."

She nervously fiddled with her *dupatta*.

Ms. Joyce nodded slowly. "Does anyone else visit her?"

"Her sister."

"Can I get her number?"

Inside the rickshaw, Ms. Joyce dialed quickly.

"Hello?" a female voice answered.

"Good morning, I'm Joyce, Agnus's friend," she introduced herself.

"Oh! Hi, Joyce. How are you?"

“Blessed... Rosy, can I meet you soon?”

There was a pause, then, “Uhhh...”

“It’s about Agnus,” Ms. Joyce pressed gently.

“I guessed. How about after church today?” Rosy offered, and Ms. Joyce agreed.

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After the service, Ms. Joyce found Mrs. Rosy seated on a bench, the churchyard quiet around them.

Without hesitation, she asked, “How did Agnus end up like this?”

Mrs. Rosy’s eyes darkened.

“She knew exactly what would happen,” she said sharply.

“But...” Ms. Joyce began.

“This is what happens,” Rosy interrupted, “when you trust someone more than God.”

The words hit Ms. Joyce like a cold dagger, stealing her breath.

She sighed deeply, aching to understand more.

Seeing Ms. Joyce’s pain, Mrs. Rosy began to unravel the untold story of their dear Agnus—the story behind her pride, her fall, and the loneliness that clings like a shadow.

“So... you know, don’t you?” Mrs. Rosy’s voice was low, tinged with both sorrow and resignation. “Agnus—her pride was her downfall. She could never admit when she was wrong. Always quick to blame others, always twisting stories to prove she was right. That stubborn pride tore her family apart.”

Ms. Joyce nodded slowly, memories flooding back.

“She loved her husband and her children fiercely,” Rosy continued, “Ronald was a good man. Took care of them well. But after he died... everything shifted.”

Joyce remembered Ronald fondly—her late husband’s close friend, taken too soon by a sudden cardiac arrest.

“Agnus pampered her children endlessly, boasting about them to anyone who would listen.”

“Yes,” Ms. Joyce said quietly, recalling how Agnus never missed a chance to mention her son, Alex.

“She especially praised Alex—and he used it against her. Especially after his father’s death.”

Ms. Joyce’s mind replayed Agnus’s conversations, how her son was name-dropped every few minutes, no matter the topic. Maya’s words echoed — she always brings him up, even when it doesn’t fit.

“She had an affair with a Hindu girl,” Rosy said, voice barely above a whisper. “She demanded marriage, and that they live apart from Agnus. That broke Agnus’s heart. Her whole life was mapped out for Alex—now he’d abandoned her for a woman she despised.”

Ms. Joyce gasped softly. Alex? That can’t be...

“He came home drunk every night, pressing for marriage—threatening to marry secretly and disappear. The house is filled with arguments.”

“That’s so sad,” Ms. Joyce said, her hand rising to her chest.

“But Agnus was unyielding. She couldn’t accept the idea of Alex marrying outside their faith, distorting everything she raised him to believe. They fought every day, until one day Alex packed his bags, returned after two months—with a ring and a marriage certificate. In those two months, Agnus stayed with me. Her blood pressure and sugar soared. She was admitted to the hospital multiple times. The gossip started. The whispers. And then Alex left—for Delhi. Left his mother in the old-age home.”

“And her daughter?” Ms. Joyce asked.

“She’s heartbroken. Agnus had already transferred all property to Alex’s name before this. It’s complicated.”

Ms. Joyce bowed her head, tears spilling silently for her friend caught in this storm.

“That’s why,” Mrs. Rosy said softly, “we must never trust or boast in anyone but our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Only He never exploits us. Only He loves with pure intentions.”

Ms. Joyce’s thoughts drifted to Scripture, the verses she clung to like lifelines:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, **it does not boast, it is not proud.**” (1 Corinthians 13:4)

“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we **trust in the name of the YHWH our God.**” (Psalm 20:7)

In that moment, the weight of human frailty and divine faith met—a bittersweet reminder that pride fractures, but grace restores.



# MEET THE AUTHOR

Shalom everyone!

Thanks for reading my story.

I am Janet Abraham from India. I am a Christian (do not prefer to be affiliated with any denominations) who received writing as a talent after accepting Lord Jesus as my savior. I have been writing many books and content ever since and God willing I will write more.

## **My social media platforms:**

Wattpad: [https://www.wattpad.com/user/JF\\_Abraham](https://www.wattpad.com/user/JF_Abraham)

Substack: [https://substack.com/profile/46900108-janet-abraham?r=rx8cs&utm\\_campaign=profile&utm\\_medium=web](https://substack.com/profile/46900108-janet-abraham?r=rx8cs&utm_campaign=profile&utm_medium=web)

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The Christian Writers and Readers Club (CWRC) is a vibrant online community uniting Christian writers and readers with a shared passion for uplifting, faith-based content. Founded by Faith Ijiga on January 9, 2020, the club began its journey on Wattpad and has since expanded its presence to other writing platforms and Facebook, creating a haven for those seeking inspiring Christian stories and resources.

Since its inception, CWRC has grown into an international network, with members from diverse countries such as the United States, Zambia, Kenya, India, the Philippines, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Jamaica, and South Africa. With an eye on the future, the club is actively working to expand its reach and impact across even more regions.

## Our Mission

At CWRC, our mission is twofold:

1. Spreading the Gospel: We strive to flood the internet with enriching Christian content, making it easily accessible to readers worldwide.
2. Empowering Christian Authors: We are dedicated to promoting Christian writers, helping them build a loyal readership, and equipping them with a conducive community to refine their craft.

Whether you're an aspiring author or an avid reader, the Christian Writers and Readers Club welcomes everyone with open arms. Join us to discover engaging stories, share your talent, and grow in a supportive, faith-centered community.

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