



# **The Father's Boy**

**Blessing Okwong**

# THE FATHER'S BOY

## CHAPTER ONE

"There will come a moment when you will be needed. And you wouldn't have to choose that moment because that moment will choose you. And until then, keep being you."

The students applauded Joshua as he shook hands with Father John. They both smiled at the Camera for a few minutes and Joshua went about shaking hands with the school teachers and the students kept cheering on. Father's congratulatory words to him didn't make sense but he tried not to think about it. He had a speech to give after the student's union office has been designated. The Senior Prefect speech he never prepared for. How would he have known that he will be elected when he had two strong opposing aspirants with a much better portfolio than his? The only thing he had in common with the other boys was his grades. How he made straight 'A's each school term was what baffled others. He was never at the library and always escaped prep classes. The only thing he was serious about was football, and of course, changing and chasing girls.

"Thank you very much for this great privilege to serve as the Senior Prefect of this prestigious school. On behalf of myself and the Prefects here, we will put in our best to serve you all. All we ask for is your cooperation and trust to bring the change that you need. It will be an amazing year in office and we ensure you all that. Thank you."

The entire school applauded as Joshua and the Prefects bowed and walked off stage. Everyone had one thing or the other to whisper to their neighbors. Eric, the Academic Prefect that had aspired for the Senior Prefect was not looking happy at all. It annoyed him that Joshua would give such a lame speech. Didn't he see the crowd before him? The teachers, the parents, and their alumni? Why was he so nonchalant about everything and not prepared a better speech to grace their big day? He never took anything seriously in his life and why Father had made him the Senior Prefect was what he didn't understand because he did not deserve it.

The newly elected Prefects marched down the hall and exchanged handshakes with the past Prefects as the Camera kept capturing every moment. Proud parents soon came up to hug their children and probably just show off. Joshua searched the crowd tirelessly and when he got no glimpse of his mother, he retired to his seat beaming a smile, a smile he knew was fake. He prayed the events of the day will run along much faster for him to escape this formal setting and the eyes hovering around him. Father's words kept sneaking in making him more distinct from the crowd. What did he mean by keep being you? Was it successfully violating all the school rules or having his name written over and over again in Father's red book? Was it his mother reporting him every new school term as she is dropping him off with a relief of breathing until school closes again? Who likes trouble? He had tried running away from being Prefect but here he was, the Senior Prefect. He never liked responsibilities and he still doesn't. Where will he start? His eyes were still fixed at the door, as he silently prayed for his mum to walk in. For the first time since his 10th birthday, he just wanted to hug her and let the tears he was holding up flow. Didn't Father send out the invitation to her just like the other parents? This was supposed to be his big day and she was not there. She never was.

Things had begun to fall apart when Joshua lost his Dad to cancer. Grief has a way of sucking the life out of you, tightening your lungs, and leaving a large vacuum in your heart. To heal is but a miracle; not everybody does. The memories of that day have refused to wash away and he remembers it every morning and evening at the

devotion when they recite 'The Lord's Prayer'. That was his last prayer with his dad in the hospital. That night, his Dad had told him he felt it was time to go. Joshua had begged and cried for him to at least make it to his 10th birthday which was just a few days away. He had told his dad that they should pray. He had believed so much in God and prayers. His father gave him a necklace with a cross pendant. It was his father's and he was passing it to Joshua. Joshua held onto the crucifixion necklace and prayed the Lord's Prayer with his dad expecting a miracle. He had always heard that they could be a miracle if only you believe. He believed, he closed his eyes tight expecting to see a light shining and a man in white touching his dad and making him live. After saying the prayers, he felt his dad's hand slipping from his grip, there was a total silence and fears gripped him. He finally opened his eyes but his dad wouldn't open his. He was just barely ten and had to live the rest of his life without a father, without a manual.

"I don't think she would make it again", an unfamiliar voice jolted him from memory lane. He turned around and realized the hall was empty except for this girl he had never seen in school. He was lost for words and was captured by her striking beauty.

"I mean your mum. You were expecting her, right?" She spoke up to break the awkward silence not knowing if to walk closer to him or maintain her position or just run away. She was glued to the spot and tried drumming on the empty seats to ease the cold running down her spine. She had never approached a boy before and still can't understand the confidence she was having today.

Joshua cleared his throat and didn't know what to say. His eyes were moist from the tears that had welled up in his eyes. He was somehow grateful that she distracted him from the nightmares that haunted him even when he was wide awake.

"Yeah!" he replied with a husky voice. He felt the voice wasn't smooth, so he cleared it and continued. "My mom. Guess she is tied down at work again. How did you know?"

"Uhhmm! Dunno. Guess I have been there all my life." She said trying to keep eye contact with him. His eyes. They were dangerous. Bloodshot like the vampire series she has been watching.

"Then we have something in common, yeah?"

"Yeah!"

The awkward silence enveloped the hall again sending them chilling feelings. Joshua walked closer. She stopped stamping her feet and playing with the empty seats. She sat down, hoping he would get the signal that she wanted more conversation. He did and she smiled shyly. He grabbed a seat opposite her and gave her six feet distance. They smiled.

"You do that whenever you are nervous?"

"Do what?"

"Stamping your feet and drumming in your head."

"Oh! Yeah," she laughed shyly. "How could you tell?"

"Well. It was obvious or maybe I am a genius" he winked playfully. They laughed.  
"Just curious why you're nervous."

"Uhhmm. It will sound embarrassing if I tell you."

Joshua could tell she was shy and honest. Who was this mysterious girl? Was he not supposed to be mad at his mom and mourn his dad?

"My name is Uyaiabasi Wilson but my friends call me Abbey. And you are Joshua, the Senior Prefect." She chipped in to break away from his eyes. How would she tell him that those eyes were sucking the life from him?

"Forgive my manners, Uyaiabasi. God's beauty. You are indeed beautiful." He smiled still looking at her.

"Thank you! I must say too, you are very handsome." She blushed.

"Yes, I am. Again, we have something in common".

They laughed. His Smart watch beeped. He had been captivated by this beauty but he had to be free now. His office calls and for once in his life, he had to take responsibility.

"I'm sure it was a big deal approaching me and that's why you were nervous. I appreciate it, Uyaiabasi. Thank you." She played around again, trying to avoid his eyes. He could tell the effects he had on her and it made him smile. She was so cute but he had to let go.

As he was about leaving, he said, "Can I call you Abbey?"

She blushed, again. "Only my friends call me Abbey. Are you asking to be my friend?"

He smiled at how fast and smart she was. "I hope to see you around, Abbey!" He winked at her and walked away leaving her staring behind. He could feel her eyes on every step he made. It made him uneasy but he liked it. Just by the door, he turned around to tell her that he had not waited in vain. Though his mother did not make it, she was the angel in the shape of his mother, but she was not there. She had gone. Fears gripped him. Was she real? How did she disappear just like that? Was she not seated there just a few seconds away? He ran out of the hall and didn't stop until he reached the school courtyard. He leaned against a tree, trying to catch his breath and make sense of what had just happened.

Joshua couldn't understand how Uyaiabasi had vanished in a matter of seconds. It felt like a dream, but he knew he had been fully awake. The encounter had been so brief yet so intense, leaving him with a mix of emotions. He felt a connection with Uyaiabasi, a sense of comfort and understanding that he hadn't experienced in a long time.

As he stood there, trying to process everything, he noticed a piece of paper falls from his pocket onto the ground. It seemed to have been dropped by Uyaiabasi during their conversation. He picked it up, and his eyes widened as he read the words written on it:

"Follow your heart, Joshua. It will lead you to where you're needed."

The words echoed in his mind, and he couldn't help but wonder if there was a deeper meaning to their encounter. Was Uyaiabasi just a figment of his imagination, or was she something more? Why did she seem to know things about him that she shouldn't?

Lost in his thoughts, Joshua decided to hold onto the paper as a reminder of this mysterious encounter. He tucked it safely into his pocket and made his way back to the hostel.



## CHAPTER TWO

Joshua tossed back and forth on his bed. He had a room of his own as the Senior Prefect and didn't have to use the six-spring mattress like the rest of the boys. Maybe he would have managed to close his eyes if his stomach was not growling like a hungry lion. He had missed dinner and the patron had apologized that there were no leftovers. Today's dinner was prepared in small quantities as the students wouldn't turn in because they had enough with their parents and most of them returned to school that day. Joshua had no visitor and had gone the whole day without eating.

He was never a fan of junk and his provisions were smuggled in rice, noodles, spaghetti, beans, and plantain with can foods like sardine and geisha. With a single room to himself, he had smuggled in an electric hot plate as well. But he was helpless. He had so many things stealing his sanity and his demons were still haunting. His father's painful and unforgiving demise, his cold relationship with his mum, their fight and how they were almost becoming sworn enemies, and his backsliding from the firm Christian family he came from. He had failed his dad.

His dad had pleaded with him to take care of his mum and never forsake the faith. But that was what he did. How could he have been so blind to see that he was not the hurting one here? It was his mum. She was the one who had lost a husband. She had lost him now. She was the one who had to keep two jobs to pay his fees and give him the money he was even stealing from her. She was the one who had not remarried because he had embarrassed a colleague of hers who was only nice to her yet he brought a fleet of girls to the house while she drowns in her sorrow and loneliness every night. Why was his conscience haunting him this night? Why was he talking like he has not been here all the time? Was she, not the one who refused to come for him last school term? She sent a note to Father John and they made him spend the long summer break in a seminary.

He had not seen her in a year now and although he had pushed her, he missed her. In a world of so many people, he felt so lonely and scared. His home was somewhere and he needed to find it. As his stomach surrendered and lost his roaring voice, his eyes quietly drifted off to sleep. He turned his wet pillow over to the other dry side. He blew his nose with the hem of his blanket as his wall clock above was the only sound in the now quiet universe. Searching for peace, his mind drifted off to Uyaiabasi.

He will never forget her beautiful face that shone in the dark hall. It was beyond comparison to the other girls in school. Her natural afro-hair was braided into flaming locks. He could still picture how long the fringe was that it covered her eyebrow and rested on her eyelashes. Yet it was not so hard to see her bright shining eyes and how they twinkled like stars whenever she blinked. Her smile and her succulent voice eased his pains. Her flawless yellow skin looked like she narrowly escaped albinism. He shouldn't have resisted the urge to touch her. Maybe he would have been certain that she was human indeed. Why was she in his head, with her image glued to his memory? Was she his peace? Was she another nightmare sent by his demons to torment him?

Monday came with its usual mixed feelings. It was just the third week into resumption and the boys were already dragging their feet. The school was fun, it was just the classwork, assignment, test, and exams that spoiled it, they would say.

The Hostel Prefect kept shouting and ordering the boys like a colonial master. "A successful Monday begat a successful Friday. So, chop chop and don't lazy around." Joshua cursed. Why wouldn't he let the boys be? "Out for dining", the refectory prefect cried. He cursed again. He had not even brushed; the hostel will be locked in five minutes and he had an announcement with the students at devotion this morning. He still needed more sleep.

At the devotion, he searched for her tirelessly but couldn't find her. He thought of asking for her class or the school she was transferred from. He was determined to

find her and if she was the mythical Miss Coy-coy they had heard from Hostel ghost stories and the common window man and the rest, he wouldn't mind at all.

"Good Morning, Students." he addressed the students after the announcement from Mr. Ibout, the compound master. The students chorused back and he continued. "It's a new week and I employ you all to make the best of it. During the long break today, I want to meet with all the prefects and the class representatives. It will be a long meeting so make use of your short break wisely. Have a lovely day." The students murmured as they were dispersed to their various classes by the Chapel Prefect with a matching song.

Father John's eyes were fixed on Joshua the whole time during the morning assembly. He had tucked in his shirt and was not wearing brown shoes but the school's black shoes. His shirt was properly buttoned and he didn't sag his tie. He had a new look overnight and he had never been so pleased with him. "Rome wasn't built in a day," he remembered telling the teachers. He was the only one who believed in the poor boy and could understand the pains he was living with. He was so certain that God was not done with him.

He could feel it more now. As he went back to his office, his mind was still with Joshua and how much he reminded him of his young self. Who would have believed he would become a Father today? Dealing with 21st-century teens with their handful of headaches? He remembered the word he heard that night when God told him to go into the Educational field and he had argued that it was not his ministry. "*It takes a thief to catch a thief*". The voice was so loud and clear that he couldn't contest anymore.

His nightmares still haunt him and God has been silent on that whenever he prayed. Was He punishing him for his past sins? He had lived with the guilt all

these years. But he had promised Joshua that his nightmares will go when he was at peace with his past. He had told him to come out of it and embrace his future.

"Your nightmare is only telling you that you are still living in your past and until you leave and embrace your present, you will never dream of the future. That is how it works." It was so easy saying it to someone. Why couldn't he practice what he preached?

Father John sighed deeply as he reflected on his struggles and the advice he had given Joshua. He knew that he needed to take his own words to heart and confront the demons of his past. He had spent years carrying the burden of guilt, and it was time to find healing and forgiveness.

As he sat in his office, Father John decided to take a moment for himself and pray. He closed his eyes, allowing his mind to quiet down and his spirit to connect with God. In the stillness, he sought guidance and strength to face his past and let go of the guilt that had consumed him for so long.

"Lord, I come before you with a heavy heart," Father John prayed, his voice filled with sincerity. "I acknowledge my past mistakes and the pain I have caused others. I ask for your forgiveness and the strength to forgive myself. Help me to find peace and healing so that I can guide and support these young souls entrusted to my care."

Tears welled up in Father John's eyes as he poured out his heart in prayer. He felt a weight being lifted off his shoulders, a glimmer of hope and redemption. At that moment, he knew that God was listening and that there was a path forward.

Father John wiped away his tears and opened his eyes. He knew that he couldn't change the past, but he could shape the present and the future. He was committed

to being a guiding light for Joshua and the other students, to show them that it was possible to overcome their struggles and find peace.

Taking a deep breath, Father John stood up and walked to the window of his office. The sun was shining brightly, casting its warm glow over the school grounds. It was a new day, a new opportunity to make a positive impact.

## CHAPTER THREE

Joshua went to the Assembly hall during the short break with the hope to see Uyaiabasi like the other night. He needed someone to confide in; someone who wouldn't judge him. Who would look at his face and see the handwriting written on the wall? But Uyaiabasi didn't show up. "She was too beautiful to be real though", his mind screamed. He was going to forget about her and shut everyone out of his life like it has always been. The bell rang. It was time for Mathematics. He was going to sleep off, he could promise that.

"The fear of equations is second to none, but when you learn the value of X and Y, it will be full of fun. So, today, we will solve this equation with the rule of BODMAS. You solve the brackets first, then the others come after that. You divide, multiply, then you add and subtract. So, following this rule, who can try that out?" The Math teacher went on.

As the math teacher finished explaining the equation, he scanned the classroom for a volunteer to solve it. Joshua deliberately avoided eye contact, not wanting to play into the teacher's game.

The math teacher continued to ignore the raised hands and focus on Joshua, he couldn't help but feel frustrated. Joshua had always felt that there was an inherent bias towards the science students in the classroom, and this situation seemed to reinforce his belief. He had often witnessed a divide between the science and humanities students, with each group trying to prove their superiority. The science students would unnecessarily carry up their shoulders especially in general classes like Math. They were the ones who would raise two hands, create unnecessary attention and look for the slightest reason to humiliate the Arts and Humanities. Joshua was not in the mood to keep up with their pettiness today.

Feeling tired and disengaged, Joshua decided to rebel against the teacher's expectations. He leaned back in his chair, pretending to be uninterested in the lesson. He felt a surge of defiance and thought, "I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me struggle or succeed."

The teacher's gaze lingered on Joshua for a moment before moving on to another student who eagerly raised their hand. Joshua sighed with relief, glad to have escaped the spotlight for the time being. He knew he might face consequences for his apathy and lack of participation, but at that moment, he simply didn't care.

Throughout the math class, Joshua kept his mind preoccupied with thoughts of Uyaiabasi and the disappointment of her absence. He was still seeking solace and understanding, longing for someone who would listen without judgment. Math class seemed like the perfect opportunity to tune out and let his mind wander.

As the bell finally rang, signaling the end of the class, Joshua jolted awake from his daydreaming. He gathered his belongings and headed towards the exit, still feeling a mix of frustration and detachment. The world outside the classroom seemed more appealing to him at that moment, offering the possibility of finding someone who would truly understand him.

Approaching the exit, a boy from junior class met him and stretched forth his hand with a note. He saw how nervous the boy was and wouldn't want him to pee on himself. He dismissed him and the poor scurried away. Whoever sent the poor boy to meet him must have threatened him too. The pink sticky note neatly folded in a triangular shape read, "Can we meet? I am at the lobby!" He smiled and headed towards the lobby.

At the lobby, he met Uyaiabasi standing by one of the lockers. Why was he always meeting her when nobody was there? She walked up to him and he gulped down whatever he wanted to say.

"Uhm... I'm sorry. I forced the boy to deliver the note," she said biting her nails.

Joshua gulped down harder this time. He scrubbed his eyes to be certain he wasn't hallucinating.

"Who are you?"

"Really? It's been just three days and you've forgotten?"

"Well, three days isn't just. I looked for you. I don't even know if you are real".

Oh! She got his points. She laughed.

"Maybe it's just you who can see me", she pinched him. "Come lemme show you something. Not as if you were enjoying the class." She dragged his hand and skipped along. She fascinated him. How did she know he wasn't enjoying the class?

They climbed up to the roof of the school building, above the third building. They could see the entire school from this view as well as the neighborhood.

"Do you love the view?" she asked giggling and looking up to him on her toe-tip. He looked down at her and envied her happiness. Will she make him this happy too?



"This has been my favorite spot at school. I discovered here five days to when I got here."

"I beat you to it. It got me three days," she playfully punched him. He pretended to be hurt and they laughed.

"I couldn't get you off my mind. I looked for you."

"I'm sorry. Had an emergency at home. Came back today."

"Emergency? Everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah! Everything is fine!" she smiled.

"What class are you?"

"JSS3 Gold"

"Oh! I'm hanging out with a minor". He teased. She punched him and they laughed. They talked about almost everything and concluded they have met each other forever now. The bell rang. They had missed two sessions.

"We should get going. Father handles our C.R.S classes and he will be crossed to not find me there," he said getting up from the air-conditioning cable they had sat on.

"Okay. We are friends now?" she asked searching his eyes.

"Yes. You don't have to threaten scared boys to deliver notes to see me. Stay out of trouble."

"Alright." She hugged him and scurried away. He smiled as he didn't see that coming. If she was real, he was going to be in trouble soon. He could feel it. Whatever trouble it is, he was ready. What trouble has he not been in before? He laughed as he remembered last Christmas.

He had needed money to throw a house party. All the big kids in school were doing it and he had grown furious when his mum refused to give him money for that. She had even rebuked him for using the house but he had warned her not to cross him. If she was not going to give him the money, it was fine.

She had no right to tell him what to do with the house. It was his inheritance, it was his and he would do as pleased. Still bent on throwing a party, he got introduced to selling weed by one of the boys in his football academy. He was successful on his first trial and couldn't believe the amount he made just like that. He felt this was it. His mum wouldn't insult him again. The fifth time was his big trouble. He was to deliver to someone at the motor park and got caught by SARs. He had been that scared. He spent five days in the cell until Father bailed him out. What would he have done without Father? He had the money he wanted and still went ahead with his big party. A leopard does not change his spot. Does he?

## CHAPTER FOUR

Etoro didn't understand if it was God speaking to her or her mind. She was aware that Joshua was a stubborn boy but she didn't know why he was Father's favorite. Why was she even dreaming about him? It felt like her breathing depended on seeing him. But she was scared about the things she heard about him.

The girls talked about him in the bathroom and the things she heard about him didn't just sit well with her. She had heard her sidedy, Mary, talk about how she had slept with him at the Christmas house party last year and how he treated her like trash the next morning. "Ah! I told you na." Ekom, her friend had said.

"I thought I was special, he said I was. I couldn't resist the looks in his eyes. They were heavenly, I found comfort and shelter there. I wanted to make it work. But after having all of me, he didn't spare a second to trash me in the waste bin, just like the other girls. I have never felt so used in my life." Mary had continued keeping her voice low and allowing the tears that were bubbling up to flow.

Ekom rubbed her kneecap and offered her shoulders. She didn't know this part of the story. As if to comfort Mary that it was not any fault of hers and break the awkward silence, she said still in a low voice, "Priscilla from Art class had told me how Eno and Ada fought once in class last week because they found out they were both crushing on him."

"My dear! Not as if I'm regretting it. I did love him and I still do. You don't get."

"I do. I heard he is now seeing a girl from SS2. Do you know who?"

Etoro listened intently to the conversation between Mary and Ekom, feeling a mix of curiosity and concern. She couldn't help but wonder why she was dreaming about Joshua; especially given the negative things she had heard about him. The mention of other girls' experiences with him only deepened her confusion and added to her skepticism about his new character.

Mary's emotional confession about her encounter with Joshua left Etoro sympathizing with her friend's pain. Ekom's attempt to console Mary and share some gossip about other girls' crushes on Joshua seemed to be an effort to lighten the mood. Etoro found herself drawn into the conversation, eager to know more about Joshua's current romantic involvement.

Ekom paused for a moment, thinking about the question before responding.

"I'm not sure about the girl from SS2. But I overheard Priscilla mentioning a name... I think it was Tolu. She said she saw them together at the ice-cream spot last weekend."

Etoro's brows furrowed as she processed the information. Tolu was a popular and attractive girl in SS2, known for her confidence and social prowess. It puzzled Etoro if Joshua was truly interested in her or if she was another bait and why he had treated other girls poorly in the past.

Unable to shake off her curiosity, Etoro decided to confront Joshua about the rumors and her dreams involving him. She wanted to understand the truth behind his actions. Deep down, she hoped that her intuition was wrong and that there was more to Joshua than the rumors suggested.

Etoro stopped eavesdropping and pretended to be asleep. "How did he even get to become a chronic womanizer amongst other unbelievable worldly traits?" She still couldn't fight the thoughts of him.

Didn't she see him smoking in the box room last evening before prep? When she approached him, it felt as though she was invisible. He didn't say a word but walked out on her sermon. Now, he was hearing horrible things about him from her roomie. Was this why she was dreaming about him? Her thoughts raced, leaving drops of migraine that have stolen her peace and sleep. She could remember how lovely and God-fearing he was and how he would always drag the three of them to the chapel every noon for a short prayer. She missed him. She missed the three musketeers.

The three of them; she, Eric, and Josh had been best friends since elementary school days. She can remember how it all started in her primary three when she was crying over her broken pencil and the other bigger children were making jest of her. Josh had gone into a fight with four of them and beaten them to her satisfaction. Eric, on the other hand, had given her one of his pencils. Though Josh and Eric were not friends, she had made the two become best of friends and Josh was able to bully the other children to create a seat so they could all seat together. Josh had always been 'the bully who bullies the bully', just like he was nicknamed but everyone loved him dearly.

He would always defend those who couldn't stand for themselves and he never minded his business, hence always in one trouble or the other. But it was always a good trouble. What had become of him? Why was he the opposite of himself now? She had felt a strong urge to pray for him and every night, she would go into the bathroom, turn on the shower so nobody hears her, and pray for him. She would hear herself beg God for mercies till she would cry her eyes out. She felt a burden for Eric too. Why was she the one bearing their burden? Her burdens were already

making her worn out and she regretted coming back here. Why couldn't she have peace?

She had left the school and her best friends in JSS1 when her parents separated. Coming back four years later, everything was ruined. The EEJ was a disaster and Josh had become the worst version of himself. Poor Eric had refused to help and was burning away in the lab, day and night. He wouldn't even make out time for himself to eat and she felt so bad for him. Why would his parents be so hard on him? He will have to live the rest of his life pleasing his father and living with low self-esteem and a second to Josh, his sworn enemy.

She laid on the bed reminiscing how beautiful and envious their friendship was; how she was treated like a queen and the school ululating whenever they represented the school in a competition and came back victorious... "EEJ to the world!" they would all chorused. This was the reason she insisted on returning here but was now faced with disappointments. It was all her fault, her mind-voice kept screaming in her ears. Things would have been different if she had stayed. If her parents had stayed. Hot tears rolled down her pillow as her head was almost bursting from worries and questions.

She felt her world sinking. She wished she had someone to talk to in such a trying period of her life. She was scared. How long will her dad have to be here? For years now, she had been on the move and had forgotten how it feels to be at home. She didn't even have friends. This was her fourth school in her fifth year in high school. She had told her dad she was tired of moving. She was tired of being the new girl every year. She wanted a place to call home. She wanted to make friends who wouldn't turn to strangers in a few months. Sometimes, she wished she was the child that left with her mother, not her brother.

He was living so well and was already blending in with the new family. It breaks her to see their 'happy family' picture every Sunday on Facebook. Were they really that happy or it was just a public display of affection? Sometimes, she doubts if true love does exist or if marriage is worth it. How long before they realize they were not meant for each other? That was what her mum had told her the night she came home with divorce papers.

"I'm sorry, Pumpkin, your dad and I will have to put you through this. But I hope you understand someday that we were not meant for each other. Always remember that Mummy loves you and you are her little angel". She had pecked her for a longer time and she had inhaled her fragrance till she was almost choking. She had promised herself she won't cry over two adults who were acting childish but she forgot about the promise when they had to split everything by 50%, including the children. She knew her life would never be the same after this careless decision her parents were making. Her life never did. She remembered it every morning she brushed her mouth. She consciously refused to brush at night for her mental health. Did it make sense? That they broke up because of toothpaste?

She could still hear her mother shout from the master's bedroom.

"If you will not press the toothpaste from the bottom, then buy your own. Buy your own and don't let the world hear me. Ah ah! What is it? You don't close the toilet seat after using it, your boxers are always everywhere; like rapture just happened. I'm tired of cleaning up after you." And that was how things fell apart in her home. It's been four years of being apart and she is now miles away from her mother and brother. Her dad has been a mess these years that she couldn't even afford to leave him for a holiday at her mother's as promised.

He has been buried to his work day and night that she feared he might break down one day. She felt bad now for insisting on boarding this year, as she decided to

return to her first school where she had her primary and JSS1. She wanted to give him space if he will break out of his shell, heal from the divorce and find happiness to move on with life like her mother did. Sometimes she fears she will turn out like her mom or get rejected like her dad. But if such a time ever comes in her life, she will learn to let go. "Sometimes, the best thing to do for someone you love is to let them go", her dad had told her. Did it even make sense?

The bell rang. It was time for evening prep.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Eric, the Academic Prefect, was still sulking for not being the Senior Prefect. He had worked so hard for it and had put in all his best. He didn't understand why Joshua easily had things work in his favor, he was everyone's favorite and all the girls were fighting for him. He had always been second to him right from JSS 1 and he was tired. They had started as best friends but were now sworn enemies. At first, he did not care if he was always second but his parents reminded him of that every holiday. "How many heads does Joshua have?" His dad had asked over dinner on Christmas Eve at his grandma's place with the extended family present. He had never been more embarrassed. "I am talking to you, young man. How many heads does Joshua have?" Everyone had stopped eating and all eyes were on him.

"One head, Sir". He replied.

"One head, abi? How many do you have?"

"One head, Sir". Tears filled his eyes.

"Go on with that and you will remain a second all your life. You think it is mediocrity that brought me this far, huh?"

"Stop that nonsense", His grandma yelled at his dad. "The poor boy is doing well. Don't you push him too far?" That was medicine after death. His dad had walked away burning with fury and his mom had called after him and the two had walked away. He wished his mum would be like other mothers who would support their sons when they had dad issues, but no, not her mom. She supported everything his dad did. They were like two copycats. He had lost appetite but his Aunt Maggi would spank the hell out of him if he walked away from the dining table while the others were still there. That only happened in the movies or anywhere else but his family. He understood his parents and knew they wanted the best for him but he was trying. If only they would encourage him for once. He had to cut away from friends and some unnecessary extra-curricular activities. Sometimes, he wanted to do what children his age were doing but he knew his dad would skin him alive. He

wanted to play football, go to house parties and even host one but he was not mad to even voice that out.

Last holiday, he had gone to a primary school near home to play football with his cousins and other kids in the neighborhood. His dad had gone for a walk with his mum and when they had walked past the football pitch, the boys greeted them. His dad had given each team one thousand naira note to buy water and they had all cheered him the captain had even told the dad how his son had scored twice better than everyone else and was playing so well. He was so happy and had seen the proud eyes of his father. His mum had called out for him to come home early for dinner. He should have read the handwriting on the wall. He should have known that his dad wasn't the smiling type. When he got home that evening, his dad gave him a football and he was so happy.

Then, he told him since he was now going to play football instead of school, he would let him. He made him play football all night and he didn't have dinner. He was to keep kicking the ball until the next morning. He looked at his mom and grandma as tears filled his eyes, silently screaming for help but they were all silent. The heavens were not silent; it had rained heavily and his dad had personally supervised him kicking the ball in the rain from 6 pm till 12 am. He fell sick for three days with his leg bandaged. He never kicked a ball since then and had vowed never to.

But that didn't change anything. His parents would not stop. His mum seized that chance to haunt him whenever she was opportune to. They compared his achievements to Joshua's, constantly pointing out how Joshua always seemed to come out on top. Eric's parents had high expectations for him, and they couldn't understand why he couldn't surpass Joshua despite his efforts.

The constant comparisons and pressure from his parents had taken a toll on Eric's self-esteem. He felt overshadowed by Joshua's natural charm and seemingly effortless success. It fueled his bitterness and fueled his determination to outshine Joshua.

Eric's resentment towards Joshua had grown over the years, and losing the position of Senior Prefect only intensified it. He couldn't understand why Joshua, who seemed disinterested and lacked seriousness, would be chosen over him. It felt like a personal insult, a confirmation that he was destined to be second-best forever.

Instead of channeling his disappointment and frustration into positive action, Eric allowed it to fester into a toxic rivalry. He became consumed with proving himself, constantly seeking ways to undermine Joshua's achievements. Every accomplishment of Joshua's was a reminder of his own perceived inadequacy.

Eric's relationship with Joshua had deteriorated to the point where they barely spoke to each other. Their once-strong friendship had crumbled under the weight of jealousy and resentment. They became competitors, constantly vying for recognition and success, but in the process, they both lost sight of what truly mattered.

As Eric continued to sulk and dwell on his grievances, he failed to realize the toll it was taking on his well-being. The bitterness he carried within him poisoned his happiness and hindered his growth. He was trapped in a cycle of comparison and self-pity, unable to break free.

He had failed to understand that success is not solely defined by accolades and titles but by personal growth, character, and the ability to make a positive impact on others. But for now, Eric remained trapped in his bitterness.

Things had gotten a bit better since he got to senior year and had spilt classes. But his dad was still never satisfied. He screened every subject and would not have it with a B. He wasn't even okay with an A of below 80. He wanted to have a normal life and experience a pinch of fun but he couldn't afford it. He couldn't afford to miss the scholarship his father had been working to get him on. He had no idea how he would get home this holiday. He was so sure that he would be made the Senior Prefect. He had put in so much with the campaign to vote for him but he had lost it to Joshua, again.

Father had told him during the interview that his strength was in academics and it was not just his grades but his studious character that would influence other students to sit up well but he had insisted on the Senior Prefect. He had gone back to face Father after the office had been elected but Father had told him "Uneasy is the head that wears the crown". His head was strong enough, he had screamed. Can't they all understand him and help him for once? Was it until his dad killed him that would they all see the pains he was living with? To him, everything was a competition. But Father was quiet and watched him cry. He told him his grades would drop if he was the Senior Prefect and that he was only protecting him. Father had promised to speak to his Dad about how that was the best office for him but his dad would say he went to report him at school. And that would be the end of him.

## CHAPTER SIX

"Good Morning, Students", Joshua addressed the students at the Assembly hall.

"Good Morning, SP", they all chorus.

"Last night, the school's poultry farm was broken into and two broilers are missing. From the CCTV footage I have seen, the thief is someone among the students." There was disorder as everyone looked shocked and was trying to say something to their neighbor.

"Please, listen. There is nothing to panic about. We will look into it. If you are the one, come and report yourself. It will be another story if we fish you out. Also, you students should be careful. For now, evening preps will be in your hostels. Have a lovely lecture day. Thank you!"

The students all walked back to their classrooms still murmuring. Even the usually disciplined band seemed distracted, their music lacking its usual precision.

Amid the disorder, someone had pasted something on the notice board and everyone had gathered around to get the gist. Joshua was fed up already. He had no sleep last night and still can't tell how he saw himself sitting on the rooftop alone late into the night.

As Joshua walked back to his classroom, he couldn't shake off the feeling of exhaustion that weighed heavily on him. The incident with the missing broilers had added another layer of stress to his already overwhelming responsibilities as the Senior Prefect. The students' shocked reactions and the subsequent disorder had only added to the chaotic atmosphere.

Entering the classroom, Joshua noticed that the students were still buzzing with excitement and speculation about the theft. They were discussing the incident in hushed tones, trying to piece together the puzzle and identify the possible culprits.

As Joshua took his seat, his mind wandered back to the previous night. He couldn't quite comprehend how he found himself sitting alone on the rooftop, contemplating the challenges he faced. The image played over and over in his mind, but he couldn't grasp its significance or understand why it had occurred.

The exhaustion from the sleepless night and the weight of his responsibilities were taking a toll on Joshua's mental and emotional well-being. He longed for a moment of respite, a chance to escape the pressures and demands placed upon him. But he knew he couldn't afford to let his guard down, not when the school was facing such a troubling incident.

Joshua sighed deeply, trying to gather his thoughts and find a way to address the situation. He knew he had to be proactive in investigating the theft, ensuring that justice was served and the trust within the school community was restored. However, he couldn't ignore his weariness and the need for self-care.

Taking a deep breath, Joshua reminded himself of the responsibility he had been entrusted with. He had to set an example for the other students and show resilience in the face of adversity. Despite his glue, he had to maintain a calm and composed demeanor, assuring the students that the matter would be resolved.

As the class settled down and the teacher began the lecture, Joshua's mind traveled far away. He had no interest in classes and was only in attendance because he was the head boy. The bell rang for a short break and everyone packed their belongings rushing to the school cafeteria. Looking through the window in the now empty class, he saw Uyaiabasi waving at him. He had seen her this morning in the Assembly Hall smiling at him while he gave the announcement. He had smiled too.

She walked into the class half skipping. Her presence carried this sensation he could not place. An old familiar feeling.

"Hey!" she jerked at him.

"Oh, dear! You startled me." He said teasing her.

"Want to escape?" She didn't even wait for a response and dragged him along. He laughed and followed her lead. She always came at the right time.

"So, I guess this is our hideout?" He asked as they climbed the last step to the rooftop.

"Yes. I'm glad you like it too. I want you to constantly remember that you are on top of the world and you should strive to explore and let nothing stop you from seeing how beautiful the world is. You don't have to climb on top of the mountain to be on top of the world." She could now keep eye contact with him. He smiled. She always had the right words for him. He squeezed her shoulders and laughed at how small she was.

"The break is over. You aren't in class?"

"Asked the Senior Prefect who isn't?" They laughed.

"You know I wouldn't want to be a bad influence".

"Oshey! Influencer." He tickled her. She screamed,

"Stop stop. You know I don't like being tickled." He didn't stop as they kept on laughing.

"That's what you get for being sneaky."

“Ah! No na. I am not. You are the bully here.”

He laughed. Josh felt he was happy now. Uyaiabasi had made him see the world differently, in more beautiful bright colors. He has the urge to ask her about the emergency she has gone home for after their first meeting at the hall. He didn't have the opportunity to until now, but then he wouldn't want to ruin their beautiful conversations now.

“Hey, everything is okay?”

“Yeah yeah!” Joshua jolted back. “Anything?”

“No o...just that I asked you something but I guess you have something on your mind.”

“Yes, I do. It's about you. You didn't get to tell me about the emergency that took you home.”

“Oh, that! It's nothing serious. Just family issues.”

“I insist, Abbey.”

She looked up at him and bit her lips. She hated being seen as a burden and was not ready to impose family issues on anyone but she had always longed to have a bigger friend she could trust and confide in. He was here, now, she assured herself.

“Well, it's my mum. She had me at a very young age and refused to get married afterward. She had always said marriage is not her thing but the truth is, she had been hurt by my father. He left her with a one-year baby when she was 18. He came back 12 years later to make up for the past years but Mum wouldn't want it. You know, she was the one who had to do anything to take care of the baby while he went his way; got to school, get married, have kids and feel he can just return and buy us with money.”

“Hmmm, I can relate. What was your say on this? You were given that opportunity to decide, right?”

“Yeah. They were never married and so I am the bone of contention here. It would be another story if he didn't have kids. He only wants to become a dad to me and relieve Mum of the stress of taking care of me alone. I happily jumped on him



without getting to ask how my mum would feel about all this. I didn't know how hurt she was with all the memory from the past. The fact that he was now married and she was a single struggling parent. I was selfish, but it was not my fault. I had always wanted to have a dad all my life. Remember that day at the hall, just like you, I had waited for him to come through for us. I had prayed and wished for it. When he arrived at our home that Sunday evening, it felt like a dream come true. Aside from his flaws of abandoning us, he was everything I needed in a dad. But that was not the reason I accepted him, it was not forgiveness at first too."

"Really? Why then did you accept him back?"

She laughed and Joshua knew she did something silly. "I am a girl. When I get to marry someday, he will be the one to get my bride price whether he was in my life or not. That is culture."

"You are a fish." Joshua laughed.

"But everything is okay now. Slowly, I allowed forgiveness to slip through and that has been the best decision I have made so far. I had always wanted to attend Ivystar and I didn't even wait a day to do that when I got the chance. Besides, I had to attend an all-boarding school and get to spend my holidays at each parent's house. Mum had moved on too. She healed from it and got compensated for her past. The emergency at home was to sign my consent to her IVF plans. She wants to have a son and so, I'll be a big sister in a few months. It's all like a Disney movie of, "...and they lived happily ever after, right?"

"Yeah! But it shows how brave and mature you were with the decisions and bringing your parents to peace. I envy your courage."

"Awwwn! I can be your mentor and life coach." She teased. Joshua dashed at her and she ran.

As he sat on his bed in his dorm room, he kept smiling ear-to-ear as he recounted the events of the afternoon at the rooftop. He thought of writing her a poem, just like she had written him a couple of times now. He picked up his school bag and took out his sticky notes and a black pen and began writing.

*I was worried about life  
About what would happen if life fails me again?  
I thought, maybe, I don't deserve to be happy  
And life was just a difficult nut I would never crack  
But you came around and things changed  
I did not care about what would happen anymore  
I was not worried if I will survive all these  
I was now worried about who would miss me if I didn't  
I was worried about not remembering these moments with you  
And all of the places I've been or seen; the rooftop too  
I was worried about the poems I wouldn't write  
And that's because of you  
You taught me how to see the colorful side of life  
That I didn't have to climb the mountains to stand on top of the world  
That the ugliest places could be beautiful  
As long as I took the time to look  
That it is okay to get lost  
As long as I could find my way back  
That there are bright places even in dark times  
And if there is not?  
I could be that bright place with an infinite capacity.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The first visiting day after resumption finally came. It was not a day Joshua loved. His mom had stopped coming and had gradually stopped his cousin, Mercy, from bringing food and provisions for him. At first, he wasn't bothered but lately, he missed her. Uyaiabasi had told him to fix his relationship with his mum. "You can't boast of loving me if you don't convince me how much you love her." She had said. Joshua wanted to fix it. He wanted to prove to her that he can fix it. He laid on his bed drowning in tears as the other students went about decorating the Assembly Hall. He wanted to go set up a table too and decorate it with flowers but he knew she won't come. He felt alone and depressed. Why didn't he see the grave he had been digging for himself all along? Why was he hurting now? It's been six years and he was only realizing it now? Maybe he should go find Uyaiabasi. She always knows how to snap him out of his mood.

The Assembly Hall looked too flowery. Each table was rounded with two to four chairs. At the platform was a black background made with black cotton. On the background was an old school uniform hand-sewn with the inscription "Welcome to Ivystar Model Schools. We are glad you made it."

Father was impressed with the school Decoration club. At the entrance of the hall were the Ushers; students whose families lived far away and knew they won't make it. They had a registration table before the hall's entrance where they made each visitor sign in and give details of who they wanted to visit. One of the ushers would then go to the hostel and inform the student. For their services, they would charge each visitor a thousand naira. Some parents gave more, some less.

Joshua was surprised when he was called that he had a visitor. The usher had refused saying who as he was instructed not to. Joshua smiled believing it was one of Uyaiabasi 's pranks. Again, she came through at the right time. He went out singing and whistling. He promised himself when he fixes his relationship with his mum, he will introduce her as his best friend. He entered the hall and searched for

a table close to the window but didn't see her. She loved sitting by that table and they were still empty seats. "Joshua", a familiar voice called.

"Mum?" His legs grew heavy. He wanted to scream but he didn't want to create a scene. He ran down to her and pulled her into a hug. He almost carried her but she had begged to be released. She felt so small in his arms. He was just like his father, tall, chubby, and handsome. Joshua could see the tears in her eyes even though she tried sucking it up. "I'm sorry, Mom." He cried.

"Ssssh. I'm sorry, my love. I should have been a better mom!" She said whispering still looking up at his overgrown son. "Can we get some fresh air?" She asked trying to avoid the eyes hovering around them. Joshua had already caused a scene by trying to carry her and spin around. He remembered. His father had always spun her around that way whenever he came back from work. On a good day, she would laugh and tickle him in return, when she was moody, she would scream for him to drop her. She had mixed feelings today. She was now looking at her world in one person; her husband and her son. She felt her chest tightened. She gasped for air!

Joshua held on to his mom like a child who is not ready to let go. As they headed outside, he placed his arms around her shoulder as if to shield and protect her. Her heart was heavy. She held on to too many emotions these past few years but she had lost him. She wanted to pour it all out now but this was even the most critical time. They sat by the school's mini stadium and she could remember how she had sat on the same seat with her husband watching him play football. He was already playing so well at eight but the death happened and two years later, all his dreams were gone.

"I know Mum. I can still remember me playing out there and you and Dad cheering on." She nodded her head smiling.

"You remember once I scored three goals and I had run up to the commenter, picked the mic, and say the three goals were dedicated to us?" he said laughing.

"Yeah yeah. I can remember. Dad was so proud of you." she sniffed looking up.

"I know. I'm sorry I failed you guys. I mean, the pains... I... was..."

"It's okay. I am here for you. He is too. He never left us. He is right inside of you. Don't you look at yourself in the mirror?"

"I do. But he is never happy with me, Mum."

"No. You just did not forgive yourself. You are not happy with you. See, my baby, Father called me. What is it with you? You can confide in me."

"Was that why you came? Because Father called? You see!" he stood up laughing. He clenched his fist. He landed his right fist on a chair and it broke. His mother panicked in fear. She coiled herself and tried moving backward.

"No son! I didn't come because he called. I have always looked forward to coming but you had restricted me from visiting. You even had a restraining order from the Police. Can't you remember?"

"Liar! That is all you ever do. You make yourself the victim and I the bad one."

"No. Please don't! We can talk about it all. Let us heal from the past already, please."

"I am trying, Mum. I am. But you left. For two years now, you've not picked me up from school. I waited for you. I did."

"I am sorry. Let's start again, please. I am here now."

"Okay, Mum. You know, I promised her I will fix this and I will," he said fetching another seat to replace the broken one. He sat down and asked the mom too.

"Her? Who is she?"

He smiled. "I will tell you all about it but I must eat first. I have missed your food," he said grabbing the nylon and the food pack.

"Easy easy." she laughed. "The food won't run away. It's your favorite."

"Afang soup? Awwwwn"

The day's joy didn't shine everywhere. For some people, it had rained so heavily. It was 3:30 pm and a lot of parents and friends had said their goodbyes, just a handful were left. The head Usher announced that the hall will be closed by 4 pm and the clingy parents started murmuring. Eric had gotten a table and three chairs and had been seated from noon. He wanted to believe they got up in work or they were something they couldn't just ignore. Etoro, the head usher, saw him alone in the hall and approached him, taking a seat opposite him. Etoro and Eric had come a long way. They had been friends from primary school days until she had to be on

the move with her Dad. They had all lost their friendship when Eric's parents stopped him from being friends with Joshua. Having something as beautiful as theirs ruined can leave an endless sore running deep.

"How long do you intend to wait?" Etoro asked.

"What have I not done right?" Eric answered, his eyes still fixed on the entrance of the hall.

"You know the world doesn't spin around you, right? You should outgrow this childishness."

"I am trying. It's not just that easy. I want to be that perfect son. I want them to be proud of me or at least encourage me sometimes. I am trying Tee!" He cried.

"Hmmm..." Etoro sigh as she sat in one of the seats. "Your father is proud of you. He just doesn't know how to show it. You know he didn't have an easy upbringing and he wants you to do better for yourself. Stop being so hard on yourself, you're growing older than you should."

"You think I will do better someday?"

"I know you will. You are doing that already." She held his hands and gave a light squeeze. He faked a smile.

Memories of their friendship in the past years floated in. Their voices could be heard echoing in the hall and the hallway. Etoro admired Eric's laughter and smile. It's been a long time since she's seen him laugh so wholeheartedly. Their friendship would still be standing strong if Eric's parents did not remind him of being mediocre in every conversation and even in their silence and absence. It would have been standing strong too if Joshua's father's death did not get the best of him.

"I miss our friendship," Etoro said. Eric's mood changed. "I miss you. I miss Joshua. I miss us."

"Me too. I'm sorry I've been a coward, it's just..."

"I understand. It's not your fault. Not at all."

"How is Josh? I saw his mum today."

"Josh is sick. I don't know how to say it."

"What do you mean? Was that why she came today?"

"Yes. Some family issues to iron out too. He needs us, Eric!"

Etoro's words hung in the air, carrying the weight of their shared history and the longing for a rekindled friendship. Eric's mood shifted as he listened to her, realizing the impact their strained relationship had on both of them. He had



allowed external pressures, fueled by his parents' constant comparisons, to drive a wedge between him and Joshua.

As Etoro expressed her longing for their friendship, Eric's heart ached with a mix of regret and nostalgia. He had missed the genuine connection they once shared, the laughter, and the camaraderie that seemed to have faded over time. The weight of their unspoken words and unresolved issues became more apparent, prompting him to confront his role in their drifting apart.

With a somber expression, Eric acknowledged Etoro's understanding and forgiveness. He recognized that his own insecurities and fear of mediocrity had influenced his actions, causing him to withdraw from the friendship rather than confront his inner demons.

When Etoro mentioned seeing Joshua's family issues, concern flickered in Eric's eyes. His friend's absence from their lives had left a void, and now the news of his illness struck him deeply. He was unaware of the challenges Joshua was facing, and guilt washed over him for not being there when his friend needed support the most.

Etoro's revelation about Joshua's sickness and the family issues they were dealing with served as a wake-up call for Eric. He realized the importance of standing by Joshua's side during difficult times, just as Etoro had been there for him.

"We have to be there for him," Eric declared, his voice filled with determination.

"No matter what happened between us, he's still our friend, and he needs us now more than ever. Let's put aside our differences and support him together."

Etoro nodded, her eyes reflecting a mix of relief and hope. The prospect of reuniting as a trio and providing Joshua with the support he needed brought a sense

of purpose back into their lives. They knew it wouldn't be easy, and that healing old wounds would take time and effort, but they were willing to try.

Eric nodded his head as the bell rang for prep classes. Etoro rushed over to her table to quickly clear it and join the others for prep. Eric said he needed a few minutes to cool his head. He patted her shoulder and walked away with his two hands in his pocket. Etoro smiled. It's been a long time since she saw him do that, which was only when he was exceptionally happy and proud of himself. It was all clear to him now as he enjoyed the cool evening breeze. He was done living his life for his father. He was done being anti-social.

"I am going to enjoy my teenage hood and do everything teenagers do. I will pursue my football career and start by registering in the Football Academy first thing tomorrow morning. Yes! I will do it because I can." He ran to one of the poles which held the school flag, shook it, and yelled. He felt relieved like a heavy sag lifted off his shoulders. Etoro laughed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

After the visiting hours, Joshua decided to clear his head. He needed a very quiet place so he went to the school library for the evening prep classes.

Sitting alone in the library, trying to bury himself in a book, certainly not interested in reading but to have solitude and take a break from his fiery imagination. His troubled expression catches Uyaiabasi's attention as she enters the library. She had drawn so close to Joshua in the past weeks and always felt a natural inclination towards him. She knew convincingly that he was going through a tough part but would not want to talk about it without a push. She knew she had that push as her greatest strength was the ability to connect with others. Anyone at all.

She picked her preferred textbooks from the shelves and walks over to him and takes a seat beside him. Trying to keep her voice low before Madam Umoh comes along with her long fat cane, she drew closer to him whispering, "Hey, Senior Josh. I noticed you seemed a bit down lately. Is everything okay?"

Joshua hesitated for a while but he knew Uyaiabasi wouldn't take no for an answer. He could vouch for her compassionate and empathetic heart and how she radiates warmth and understanding. Traits he felt she was too young to portray. This got him yearning for her company and her touch.

"I don't know, Uyaiabasi." He responded, trying to whisper as well. "I've been having these nightmares and struggling with my past. It's been haunting me."

Placing her warm hand on his knee and gently squeezing it she continued, "I'm here for you, Senior Josh. You don't have to face this alone. Sometimes talking about our fears and struggles can bring us closer to finding peace. Would you like to share what's been bothering you, please?"

Joshua felt he shouldn't keep it away from her anymore if he considered her his friend. Just when he was about to start talking, Madam Umoh came around with her long cane with a look that says "Even you, Head boy?" Joshua excused her apologizing. He asked Uyaiabasi to meet him at the school playground after evening Prep classes.

Joshua and Uyaiabasi sat on a bench, surrounded by the serenity of nature. Uyaiabasi took his hands and engulfed hers as if reassuring him that anything at all is safe with her.

Joshua sighs, taking a deep breath, "It's just...my dad passed away a few years ago, and ever since then, I've been plagued by these nightmares. They're like a constant reminder of the pain and guilt I feel. I blamed myself for his death, thinking that if I had prayed harder, things would have turned out differently. His death made me lose my faith.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. It's natural to feel guilt and pain when we lose someone we love. But it's important to remember that you're not to be blamed for what happened. Sometimes, life throws challenges at us that we have no control over." Uyaiabasi said gently.

With teary eyes, Joshua continued, "I know deep down that it wasn't my fault, but these nightmares keep feeding my doubts and fears. I've been carrying this weight for so long, and I don't know how to let it go, Abbey."

Placing a hand on Joshua's shoulder, she said, "Healing takes time. And it's a journey that we can embark on together. You don't have to carry this burden alone.

Trust in the power of human connections and the strength of your friends and family who care about you. You can always count on me."

Joshua looked up at her, "I want to trust, Abbey. But it's hard when the nightmares keep haunting me, making me doubt myself. How can I find peace?"

Softly, like in a whisper, she said, "Peace comes from within. It's about finding acceptance and forgiveness, not only for others but also for yourself. Maybe it's time to confront your past and face those doubts head-on. And remember, you're not defined by your mistakes or your nightmares. You're a person with immense potential and the ability to grow and heal."

With his eyes teary, he held back for a while and responded looking deeply at her as if to assure her of something.

"It's easier said than done, Abbey. I don't know if I can forgive myself for the pain I've caused."

"Trust me. Healing takes time, but with support and understanding, you can find the strength to forgive yourself. I believe in you, and I'll be here every step of the way."

Josh took her hands and squeeze for a while. She winced and he smiled. "Thank you, Abbey! You came at the right time in my life. Thank you."

"Hey, it's nothing. Friends are for times like this." She squeezed his hands too, harder than his and they laughed

Joshua returned to his room, deciding he was not mentally stable to attend evening dinner or even the social nights. What was it with his mom talking about seeing the Doctor? Father had said it two days back too. Did he look sick or there was something they were not telling him? He had the urge to call Etoro and Eric and rekindle their friendship just like Uyaiabasi had suggested. He knew he could only truly forgive himself when he forgives others. But how?

The indomitable EEJ! Their friendship had been so enviable and was used in references by teachers to another student. Aside from the fact that Eric's parents threw tantrums, Joshua knew he would have saved their friendship but his Dad's death and the fight with Mom drained all the sanity he had left. Etoro had tried her best. She finally saw the handwriting on the wall when she had to choose between the two. She decided to remain on neutral ground. Uyaiabasi was everything to him now. She had given him a letter today after their study at the library and made him promise to read it after light out. He took the card from his backpack and cuddled his pillow as he lay on his bed.

*"Dearest Joshua,*

*I can remember those days you invited me into your mind.*

*It was so beautifully decorated with everything I've longed for in people that whoever visited would want to stay much longer.*

*I came inside but you wouldn't let me go very far. You had blocked and closed the inner rooms with a bold restriction sign to stop people from knowing the real you.*

*I can remember one of those inner rooms you allowed me in.*

*I have never seen you as happy as when you were showing me around inside.*

*Whatsoever made you close such a beautiful door must have been tragic.*

*But I won't ever forget how happy we were inside, even though I forget your name someday.*

*I love it when you tell me about the other locked inner rooms. Sometimes, they make you so happy and the spark in your eyes defines how much you treasure those memories.*

*Sometimes, when you talk about the parts that make you cry; it breaks my heart.*

*How could something as beautiful as you be broken?*

*Although I love it when you tell me about it and I much love it watching you go on and on, I would be happier if you open the door and let me in.*

*How could they have made you so insecure?*

*I wish you'd see how frustrated you've made me as I am completely drowned in my imagination to figure out what is behind those locked rooms.*

*You know, don't you?*

*That all the beautiful trees you admire were once seeds, buried in dirt and it took some time to spring up and bloom?*

*But those seeds trusted their planters for water and sunlight. They knew too, that if anyone cuts them off that there is hope for them.*

*Why then do you want to be buried away with no water and sunlight?*

*Why don't you want to grow out from the dirt of the past?*

*Don't you know that those parts you're trying to conceal away lead to the most beautiful part of you?*

*Why are you ashamed of your bad past?*

*Everyone has one. I have one, too.*

*Do you think yours are very shadowed and that I will be afraid of it?*

*But I don't just want to know those beautiful rooms only, I want to know the darkest sides too.*

*Humans are known to have many rooms in their minds and you are not the only one who hides things away. I do, too.*

*But, don't we all need that one person to trust?*

*That one person we could confide in and share secrets no one else knows?*

*How can I be that one person when you have so many rooms that are locked and not willing to let out the key?*

*Please, don't think I am asking for too much.*

*I guess this is what love is.*

*You get so frustrated when the one you care for isn't letting you in.*

*But you torment me more by making me stand there, at the entrance of your mind.*

*You wouldn't let me go, you wouldn't let me in, even though we've known each other for some time.*

*All I do is stand there, peeping into the locked rooms, lost in my imagination!"*

He laid still for like forever not knowing how to respond. He placed the card under his pillow as hot tears streamed down. It will be a long night, he thought.



## CHAPTER NINE

Joshua's heart raced as he woke up with a start, his eyes widening in fear. The sight of a dark figure in his dorm room, wearing a black hoodie and with horns, sent chills down his spine. His mind raced, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

Feeling a surge of panic, Joshua's instinctive response was to scream, hoping to alert others nearby. The sound echoed through the dormitory, breaking the silence of the early morning. His scream served as both a cry for help and a desperate attempt to drive away the ominous figure that had invaded his personal space.

As Joshua's scream filled the dormitory, his fellow students stirred from their sleep, awakening to the sudden commotion. The hostel prefect, other students, and even the night security personnel rushed to Joshua's room, concerned and ready to assist.

"What's happening? Are you alright, Joshua?" the hostel prefect asked, his voice filled with genuine concern.

Joshua, still trembling with fear and confusion, struggled to find his words. "There was someone... a figure... in my room," he managed to say, his voice trembling.

The hostel prefect scanned the room, but there was no sign of any intruder or unusual activity. The other students now gathered around, looked on with a mix of worry and curiosity, waiting for an explanation.

Realizing that there was no physical evidence of an intruder, Joshua's initial fear began to subside. He started to wonder if what he saw was a figment of his imagination, perhaps a result of a vivid dream or a temporary hallucination.

"I... I must have had a bad dream," Joshua finally spoke, his voice shaky but more composed. "I'm sorry for causing a disturbance."

The hostel prefect, understanding the situation, reassured Joshua. "It's alright, Joshua. Bad dreams can feel very real sometimes. If you need anything or want to talk, we're here for you."

Joshua nodded, grateful for the support and understanding from his peers. Although still shaken, he realized that he needed to gather himself and continue with his day. He took a deep breath, attempting to calm his racing heart and clear his mind of the lingering fear.

As the commotion settled down and the hostel returned to its usual quietude, Joshua reflected on the strange occurrence. The image of the dark figure with horns haunted him, leaving him with a lingering sense of unease. While uncertain of the origin of his vivid nightmare, he knew he had to find a way to overcome his fear and regain control over his thoughts. He made a mental note to seek solace in the presence of his friends, Etoro and Eric. Their support and the strength of their rekindled friendship would be crucial in helping him navigate through the unsettling experiences and challenges he faced.

Just thinking about Eric and Etoro, Eric came into his room. He quickly stood up from his bed and held onto him. "Calm down, Josh, it was just a nightmare" Eric comforted him.

Trying to slow down his heavy breath and his cry of "The blood of Jesus", holding firmly to Eric's grip. It has been a year old into this very nightmare. Uyaiabasi had told him it was in his head and he wanted to believe but he could feel the nightmare as real as in a horror movie. He had looked into her eyes, just like the first day they met. How would he have survived but for her kind words and love? Her poems, he had said were like the balm of Gilead.

"Your nightmare is the reflection of your thoughts. You have to let go. You have to forgive yourself." Eric continued.

"Do you think I will gradually lose my mind? I'm scared, Eric!"

"No, you won't. But you have to reach out for help. Love can soothe your fears and give you peace."

He looked up to Eric who was now sweating, holding him and praying he responds with confusion written all over him. As if he just regained a lost memory, he jerked free from him.

"What are you doing here?" Josh asked, giving Eric a disdainful look.

"I heard your scream while coming in from my night study. I think you should see Father."

"Says my best friend?"

"This is no time for this, Josh!"

"I'll get the help I need when I want to, Eric. You should go before your Dad sees you here."

"I don't care anymore, man. I'm sorry I've been a coward. You can't blame me, can you?"

Josh laid still and said nothing. Eric watched him as tears flowed down his cheeks. He was never known to be a crybaby. Eric could remember how he had refused to cry during his Dad's funeral. As a kid, he was that strong, what was happening now?

"You left at the most critical period of my life. You should have just said it and I would gladly come second while you please them. Guess friends meet friends halfway. Well, I had promised myself you'll never have that peace as long as we fight."

"I knew you wouldn't let go, reasons I hated you the more. But we don't have that time now. We have to get you to the hospital".

"Easy bro. I'm not in labor!" they laughed.

"I wish you were. I'll be glad to be a god-father. Shut up already"

They laughed.

## CHAPTER TEN

Eric and Josh arrived at the hospital since it was a Sunday with Etoro joining them shortly. Josh was soon admitted while they all awaited Father's visit. Josh didn't see any reason why he should be here but somehow, he knew he needed help. He needed his friends and his mum back. It felt as though he has been wandering far away into the cold with no sign of anyone hearing his SOS. He didn't tell anyone that his father has been haunting him. Was it his dad or he was the one who didn't let him rest? He couldn't tell.

As Father John and Joshua's mum entered the patient's ward, the atmosphere became heavy with concern and unspoken questions. Joshua, lying in the hospital bed, could sense the worry etched on their faces. His heart ached, both from the physical discomfort and the emotional weight he carried.

With tears welling up in his eyes, Joshua gathered the strength to ask the question that had been gnawing at him, desperate for answers. His voice was filled with a mix of vulnerability and fear as he spoke, "What is going on?"

Father John, his eyes filled with compassion, approached Joshua's bedside and took a deep breath before responding. "Joshua, my son, we are all deeply concerned about you. Your health, both physical and emotional, is our priority right now. We've noticed your struggle, and we want to understand and support you."

Joshua's mother, her voice trembling with worry, added, "Sweetheart, we want you to know that we love you. We're here for you, no matter what. You don't have to face this alone."

Eric and Etoro, standing by Joshua's side, nodded in agreement, their expressions filled with empathy and determination to provide comfort and support.

Joshua's eyes welled up with tears, a mixture of relief and fear coursing through his veins. He felt a glimmer of hope, realizing that he didn't have to shoulder his burdens alone. In the presence of his loved ones, he found solace and the courage to confront his fears.

"I... I don't even know where to start," Joshua admitted, his voice quivering. "I've been haunted by nightmares, by my past, and... and by my father. It feels like I'm losing myself, and I don't know how to escape from it all."

Father John gently placed a hand on Joshua's shoulder, his voice soothing yet firm. "Joshua, it takes great courage to confront the shadows that haunt us. But remember, you are not defined by your past, and you have the power to shape your future. Your nightmares are a reflection of the pain you carry, but together, we will find a way to heal."

Eric and Etoro exchanged a meaningful glance, their determination to support Joshua shining through their eyes.

Etoro came forward and sat by the edge of his bed. Looking up to Father as if for approval cleared her throat when Father nodded.

"Before the psychiatrist comes, I'd like to say a few things..." Etoro began.

"Psychiatrist? You must be kidding me, young woman. What's all this na? Josh glared.

“She is a therapist, not a psychiatrist,” Eric said.

“Is it not the same thing? I knew it was a bad idea coming with you guys in the first place.”

“Can you at least hear me out?” When nobody said anything, she continued. “The robbery incident the other night at school was nobody but you.” Josh sat up clearly patience but Father asked him to stay put. “Eric had followed you from his night study. Did it bother you how you found yourself sitting out alone in the dark? Your mum did not refuse to pick you up from school these past two years. She stopped coming when you filed a restriction against her by the authorities. I think you are having a hallucination.”

Joshua's world seemed to crumble around him as Etoro's words hung heavy in the air. Confusion and disbelief washed over him, making it difficult to process the information. He couldn't comprehend how the incident at school, and even his own mother's absence could all be products of his mind.

"Hallucination?" Joshua repeated his voice barely a whisper. The word felt foreign, unfamiliar, and terrifying all at once. He turned his gaze towards Father John, hoping for some clarity and reassurance.

Father John, his expression filled with compassion, approached Joshua and spoke gently, "Josh, hallucination refers to a condition where a person experiences sensations or perceptions that are not based in reality. It can manifest as seeing, hearing, or even feeling things that others cannot. It is a medical term used to describe a specific experience, and it's something we need to explore further to understand what you're going through."

Eric, though visibly shaken, interjected, "Josh, I followed you that night because I was worried about you. I didn't see anyone else but you. There was no robbery. It was all... in your mind. Maybe your insecurities manifesting before you."

Joshua's mind swirled with conflicting emotions. He couldn't accept the idea that everything he had experienced was a figment of his imagination. The pain, the fear, and the turmoil felt so real. How could it all be a fabrication?

"But it felt so real," Joshua murmured, his voice filled with desperation. "I saw the robbery... I saw it happen. I can't just dismiss it as a hallucination."

Etoro stepped forward, her voice gentle but firm. "Josh, I know it's difficult to accept, but sometimes our minds play tricks on us. Our perceptions can be altered, and we see and hear things that aren't truly there. It doesn't mean your experiences weren't valid or that your emotions weren't real. It simply means we need to seek help and find a way to navigate through this together."

Father John added, "Josh, I have arranged for you to see a specialist, someone who can help us understand what you've been going through. They will be able to provide the guidance and support you need."

Tears welled up in Joshua's eyes as he struggled to come to terms with the possibility that his reality had been distorted. He felt a mix of fear, relief, and uncertainty. The journey ahead seemed daunting, but he knew deep down that he couldn't face it alone.



With a deep breath, Joshua nodded, his voice filled with a newfound determination. "Okay, Father. Okay, Etoro. I trust you. I'll seek the help I need. Please, be there with me every step of the way."

Etoro and Eric exchanged a glance, their commitment to support Joshua unshakable. They vowed to stand by him, to help him navigate the uncharted territory of his mind and find the truth amidst the confusion.

The door opened and a young woman stepped in. She wore a white jacket with a blue and red pen in the small breast pocket. Josh thought it was similar to his lab coat at school. She introduced herself as Dr. Alimat, the therapist. She had a brief session with Josh and was later scheduled to be meeting with him every Friday. Josh couldn't believe it, everything still felt unreal to him. He was disturbed. Etoro's claim still did not make sense. Dr. Alimat was yet to make her diagnosis and till then.

Father and Dr. Alimat walked out of the room leaving the three to catch up on themselves. They all sat quietly for some time not knowing who to break the ice. Eric later cleared his voice and said, "Ladies first!"

"Seriously?" Etoro exclaimed.

"So, you guys say I have been hallucinating? That happens only in American movies alone..." Josh started.

"You know, when Etoro told me, I doubted her, especially with the fact that I was beefing with you until that night. You were talking to yourself all alone in the dark and you were chatting, laughing, and playing with no other person. I felt I was the

one who had gone mad for reading all through Saturday and Sunday. When I told Etoro about it, she said you must have been possessed hence your recent engagements.” Eric replied.

“I noticed it that day we had the math class and a junior came in with a note for you. Your mother had sent for you and she waited all day without you turning up. Father came to class to call you when you didn’t show but we told him you got the message and had gone immediately. I decided to go up the roof, your favorite place, and behold you were there talking and laughing all alone. Uyaiabasi reached out to us too. She said you needed help and how you are almost slipping out of your mind” Etoro added.

“You’ve been chasing shadows, Josh! You have lost yourself and pursued everyone around you. You’ve become the beast in your nightmares.” Etoro said in a calm voice almost in a whisper.

“I am not judging you, Josh but you only have to forgive yourself and find yourself again,” Eric said.

“Did I hear you say forgiveness? You need that advice more than me brov.”

” Guys, we only need ourselves at this point. No need for contentment. We need to find God again and get revived. We have so much ahead of us than being lost to the lost.” Etoro said searching their eyes and nodding in response. “I guess the best way to heal is to talk. Talk about it all and be free.”

Joshua sat there, his mind filled with a whirlwind of emotions realized that he had been seeking solace and companionship in a figment of his imagination,

desperately clinging to a sense of peace that had eluded him for so long. The realization hit him hard, and he felt the weight of his actions and the consequences they had brought upon himself and those around him.

Taking a deep breath, Joshua looked at his friends, gratitude, and remorse mingling in his eyes. "You're right, guys. I've been chasing shadows, losing myself in the process. I've hurt myself and those who care about me. I need to find my way back to who I truly am."

Eric nodded in agreement. "Josh, we all make mistakes, and we all have our demons to face. But forgiveness, both from others and ourselves, is a crucial step towards healing. We need to learn from our past and find the strength to move forward."

Etoro interjected, her voice filled with compassion. "Josh, forgiveness is a powerful tool. It's not about excusing the mistakes we've made, but about releasing ourselves from the burdens of guilt and shame. We need to forgive ourselves and embark on a journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance."

Joshua's heart felt heavy, but a glimmer of hope began to emerge within him. He realized that he couldn't continue to be consumed by self-pity and self-destruction. He needed to confront his fears, face his past, and find a way to rebuild himself.

"You're both right," Joshua said, his voice resolute. "We can't change what has already happened, but we can choose how we move forward. Let's support each other, talk about our struggles, and find strength in our friendship. And most importantly, let's find God again, for He holds the power to heal and revive us."

Etoro and Eric nodded, a shared determination shining in their eyes. They understood that the path to healing would be difficult, but they were ready to face it together. They pledged to create a safe space for open and honest conversations, where they could pour out their hearts, find understanding, and help each other heal.

Back at school, Father visited Josh in his room. His appointment with Dr. Ailmat was scheduled for two times a week.

When he entered his room, he smiled remembering the past. This was once his room years ago when he was a senior prefect. This was where he first had an encounter with God and he was sure this was what was happening to Josh. He had always believed so much in himself and believed there was more about him than anyone else was seeing. How he reminded him of his youthful days was what nobody would believe; that the quiet and peaceful Father John was a certified bully in his days.

“I know that smile, Father. Does the room bring back old memories?” Josh asked offering Father a glass of juice.

“How did you smuggle in all these again?” Father asked keeping a stern face now and still looking around the room. Josh smiled. “I guess the Patron is not doing his job then”, he concluded.

“Stop the drama, Father! I’m sure you did worse in your days. Is that not why I am called the Father’s boy?” Father laughed.

“So you are called the Father’s boy? Interesting!” They both laughed.

“Joshua, what is going on?” Josh felt a lump in his throat and swallowed hard trying to think where he should start from. He knew this was why Father came visiting to his dorm room and he knew he had to let go. But how?

“Father, I don’t know what is going on. It felt so strange when Etoro said everything I thought was true was all in my head. I have been so disturbed by why Mum would completely abandon me only to realize I filed a restraining order against her. It’s crazy, Father, it is. The nightmare that keep haunting me and just everything. I don’t know.”

Father John listened attentively, his eyes filled with compassion. He understood the weight of Joshua's words and the confusion that plagued his mind. He knew that unraveling the truth and finding a path to healing would require patience and understanding.

"Joshua, I can only imagine how overwhelming all of this must feel for you," Father John began, his voice gentle yet firm. "Sometimes, our minds can play tricks on us, creating illusions that feel so real. It's not easy to distinguish between reality and our perception of it."

He paused for a moment, allowing Joshua to collect his thoughts. "Regarding your mother, you know there have been some misunderstandings or miscommunications that led to this situation. It's important to remember that people make mistakes, and it's possible that decisions were made based on incomplete information or misguided intentions."

Father John placed a reassuring hand on Joshua's shoulder. "But here's what I want you to know, Joshua. You have the power to let go of the past and find peace within yourself. It won't be an easy journey, but it's a necessary one. It starts with forgiveness, both for yourself and for others."

He took a deep breath and continued, his voice filled with warmth. "You've been carrying a heavy burden for far too long, my son. It's time to release it. Allow yourself to acknowledge your pain, your confusion, and your mistakes. Embrace your vulnerabilities, for they are what make you human."

Father John's eyes met Joshua's, unwavering in their sincerity. "You don't have to have all the answers right now. Healing takes time, and it's a process that unfolds gradually. Trust in God's love and mercy, and have faith that He will guide you through."

Joshua felt a mixture of emotions swirling within him—relief, uncertainty, and a glimmer of hope. He realized that finding the strength to let go and forgive would be a lifelong endeavor, but he was ready to embark on that path.

"Thank you, Father," Joshua whispered, tears glistening in his eyes. "I will try my best to let go, to forgive, and to find peace within myself. It won't be easy, but I know that with your guidance and God's grace, I can find a way."

Father John smiled warmly, his presence radiating comfort and support.

"Remember, Joshua, you are not alone in this. You have friends who care about you, and God's love is always with you. Lean on them, seek their understanding, and together, you will find the strength to overcome. Also, Pray, Joshua. Seek for the light and you will find it. I cannot help you but I am interceding for you. You have all the help you need already. It's just you."

Father kept talking but Josh's mind went wandering. He just knew Father was preaching, again, using his usual parables. He always had a way of turning everything into the gospel, like he did when he came to bail him out of the cell. Would God forgive him? He knew everything went wrong when his dad died and he threw away the crucifixion. It was as though he threw away his faith. But her Father was still here despite all of this, God should too. Praying only reminded him of his dad. Why didn't God hear his prayer that day?

"You should understand, Josh, that God's ways are not men. He knows the reason for everything." Father said as if reading his mind. He gave Josh the rosary beads and prayed with him for a little while then reached for the door. Josh held on to the crucifixion on the beads, like his dad's. Tears welled up in his eyes. By the door, Father stood watching him as he let go of the tears in his eyes.

"What did you mean that day when we were called into the office, keep being you?"

"You know the answer. You don't just want to admit that you do."

"I made this delicious ekpang-nkukuo that is still very hot this afternoon just before visiting. You should come around, let's dine like old times."

Josh sniffled and wiped his running nose with a tissue Father had passed at him. He laughed, remembering his first holiday with Father. Father laughed too as he walked out of the room. He knew his time had come and he felt how God would use the young boy in his days. This has always been his prayer.

*But I am full of sin and my quilt is before me.*

*Even while you were a sinner, Christ died for you!*

Josh kept fighting voices in his head as though two beings were at war with him. He felt restless and fell on his knees crying. *Help me, Lord! Help my unbelief. Lead me to you... I can't do it on my own, please Lord! Fill me with more of you...*

He cried to sleep and when he awoke, nothing happened. 'Did he expect to see an angel appear to him or wake up in heaven?' He asked himself. Whatever his expectations were, he didn't get. But he felt at peace and had an unusual old feeling. He got up and decided to visit Father for dinner.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Father was in his study when he arrived at Father's house. Unlike the other students, he had access to the house since he had lived with him for the past few years. He felt too heavy in his spirit that he requested to see him in his study than wait for him in the living room, against the orders he got from the young man serving Father. Father saw him by the door and beckoned on him to come in. For a few minutes, nobody said anything. Father looked at him and smiled. God has a way of doing the fishing for Himself, softly and patiently. Being uneasy, he decided to break the ice.

"I am honoring the invitation. I can wait in the living room for you to finish your study." Josh said.

"You tried praying. Your eyes are heavy. Tell me about it." Father responded still smiling.

"Again, He didn't respond."

"He did. You just didn't hear Him. And He can't just fill you like that."

"How else do I need to be filled? I asked Him to wash me clean. I asked Him to help me. Does it take years?"

"He is doing it, that's why you are here. You will have to completely let go and let Him. He doesn't need your help; He just needs you to be willing. You are not ready, Josh! It is more than just mere words and emotions. He will break you and

cut off all your selfish desires. You have to be broken before Christ will be revealed in you.”

“Father, I am already broken. You once said I should come to Him just as I am, right? Here I am, just as I am.”

“Then let us study the Word and pray. That is the one way of communicating with God.” Father smiled. He knew God had started the work already.

*What I say is this: let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not satisfy the desires of human nature. What our human nature wants is opposed to what the Spirit wants and what the Spirit wants is opposed to what our human nature wants. These two are enemies, and this means you cannot do what you want to do.*

“In His Word, we find guidance, wisdom, and comfort. Through prayer, we open our hearts to Him, sharing our joys, our struggles, and our deepest desires.”

He closed his eyes briefly and said a silent prayer, inviting God's presence into the room. "Let us pray, Joshua, together, seeking God's guidance and surrendering our brokenness to Him."

They bowed their heads, and Father John began to pray, his words flowing from a place of deep faith and compassion. He prayed for Joshua's healing, for strength and clarity amid confusion, and for God's loving embrace to envelop him in this journey of self-discovery and forgiveness.

As the prayer concluded, Father John gently placed a hand on Joshua's shoulder. "Remember, Joshua, that healing is not a linear process. There will be ups and downs, moments of doubt, and moments of breakthrough. But as you surrender yourself to God and allow His Spirit to guide you, you will find strength and transformation."

Joshua felt a renewed sense of hope and determination. He knew that the road ahead would not be easy, but he also knew that he was not alone. With the support of Father John, his friends, and most importantly, his faith in God, he was ready to embark on a journey of healing and self-discovery.

"Thank you, Father," Joshua said, his voice filled with gratitude. "I will hold onto these words and seek God's guidance in every step I take. I believe that with His help, I can find the healing and peace I've been searching for."

Father John smiled warmly. "May God's love and grace be with you, Joshua, every step of the way. Remember, you are never alone, and He is always there to guide you. Lean on Him, trust in Him, and you will find the strength you need."

Unlike every other Sunday, Joshua was most eager to attend service that morning. Uyaiabasi had made him promise not to sneak out during sermons too. He had laughed and teased her. "So, a certain junior girl has been stalking me?"

"Stop it jhor, Senior Josh! I know it when you do that emotional blackmail." She had responded, pinched him, and ran away. He sat back laughing at how carefree she was. Was he not like that before life took a hard turn against him? His mind wandered off to his best friends, Eric and Etoro who despite everything came out and stood by him at the hospital. He felt the urge to embrace forgiveness just as Uyaiabasi had been telling him.

At 5 am, when the bell rang for the morning devotion, he was the first person to go out. He went ahead to prepare for the Sunday service like the other students. His starched white shirt and maroon trousers with a matching tie were a good combo on him.

The school chapel brought so many old memories. He had been attending service but today's service had this feeling he could not tell. As the students all filed in twos into the two-row chapel with a narrow walkway in the middle, he noticed how Uyaiabasi tried squeezing to sit with him. He smiled. She frowned when he stood there discussing with the Chapel Prefect and ignoring her. She was aware that juniors sat in front while the seniors were at the back and the perfects had a special seat in the front pew but she knew he always had his way. Joshua picked up his Bible and went to where she was seated not minding the side talks. He had been a fan of gossip and being the topic of discussion. He whispered to Uyaiabasi if she was okay now and she smiled nodding in affirmative.

The praise and worship session opened the gates of heaven. The lead singer carefully selected Hillsong's worship songs and the Holy Spirit took charge. After the choir ministration, Father John came out for the message. He began by appreciating the Praise and worship session and then the choir. "Amen, Church!" He started. "Amen!" the congregation answered.

"Today is a special service as we all know and I thank you all for worshipping with us this Sunday morning. Our topic today is Forgiveness. Forgiveness is a path to freedom, my dear students. It's not just about forgiving others, but also about forgiving ourselves. We must release the weight of our past mistakes to embrace the present and create a brighter future." Father kept preaching, calling different Bible portions to back up his sermon.

Uyaiabasi, whispering to Joshua, said, "Senior Josh, this is your chance to let go of your guilt. Embrace the forgiveness that awaits you." Joshua takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. He reflects on his journey, the support he has received from Uyaiabasi, how his Mum, Eric, and Etoro stood by him yesterday, and the healing power of forgiveness.

Joshua, whispering, said to himself with his right hand on his chest, "I forgive myself. I release the pain and guilt that has consumed me. I am ready to move forward."

Uyaiabasi felt relieved, placing a reassuring hand on Josh's lap, she said, "You've come a long way, Josh. I'm proud of you. Remember, trust in the journey and the power of human connections. You are not alone."

Joshua smiled and squeezed her hand on his lap. He couldn't thank her enough. Father kept preaching and when he called for an alter call, Joshua didn't hesitate to go out. Eric and Etoro came out as well with almost all the other students.

After the powerful sermon by Father, Joshua returned to the room. He didn't know how long he had stayed reading the epistle of Paul and he felt he was talking to him directly. He got distracted by a call from an unknown number which he had declined three times already but the caller was just bent on allowing the devil to use him or her. He finally picked it up in the fifth ring and almost ended it when a female voice said hello. He didn't respond and she continued. "Hello Jay! Please, where are you? I need to see you urgently". There was no caller ID but he remembered it was just one person that called him Jay. Etoro. Was she okay? "Hello, are you there?" the caller said bringing him back to reality. "Uhm, yes. Let's meet at the rooftop top." He replied and ended the call before she could utter a 'thank you'.

He unhung his starched and well-ironed blue check which was their day-wear and put on with his white crocs which all the students were expected to wear around the hostel. He locked his room door and took the short route to the school roof top. He sighted her leaning by the rails, looking worried and disturbed. He walked down towards her and still, she wasn't aware of his presence. Leaning beside her and looking deep into her eyes, he tapped her gently on the shoulder and she jolted.

“Oh, Jesus! You scared me Jay!” she muttered. Josh looked at her without saying a thing. It felt like it has been ages. She didn't change much, he thought. Why did he grow so cold with the people that meant so much to him?

“Is everything okay? We could sit and talk.” He said.

“No, it's fine. Let's just stand here, please.” She replied. Josh nodded. Eric came rushing in with his white lab coat and white crocs. The three shook hands like old times and laughed at how they could still remember it. Etoro took out a wrapper from her tote bag and sprayed it on the floor. They talked about their various jamb choice of institutions and courses to offer in the university. Etoro and Eric were surprised that Josh was going for a gap year and were not even certain of what he would want to study.

“You know how much I envy you, Josh. Your freedom and free spirit. The control you have over your life and how everything gets to work in your favor. My parents would bury me alive. My mum says if I need rest, she could get me a casket so I rest in peace. I am tired. I want to live my life for me once. To do everything every normal teenager does. But that is like asking for my father's head.” Eric lamented.

Etoro heaved. Her heart has been heavy for far too long. “I don't know why I am not happy like I thought I would be. He is getting married to a lady he met at work. She has a son about my age or younger and he is a pain in the ass. He pays more attention to her now and I don't have anyone now. I've forgotten how to relate to my mum. Last midterm break, I decided to visit them since Dad was busy with his

new family. I didn't know what to say to her. My kid brother could not recognize me again. It hurts. It hurts to see happy families when I can't even remember a happy moment we once had. I don't know what it means or feels like to have a family or a home to call your own. It seems the world is ignoring me or life has forgotten that he had given breathe to a certain me. I try to tell myself that I will be fine but will I? What if I get married and the cycle repeats itself? Will I even get married? The thought of it nauseates me."

"HMMMMMM..." Josh breathe. He cleared his throat. "Envyng me would only remind me how stupid you've been." They all laughed. "Everyone sees me as a freak and a spoilt little brat. Yes, I am but it doesn't mean I am not scared. I don't know how to do the right things anymore. My brain thinks faster than me and when I try to catch up, it goes blank. I am lost, guys! I don't know where to find me. I see him in my dreams but is gone when I'm awake. I have demons in my head that won't go away. It is hard, guys. Every day, I try to recollect memories of Dad that are now blurry. "What would he do?" is the question on my mind whenever I get caught up with a thing. I try to figure out what he would have me do and say to me and not finding these answers sucks my sanity. The truth is, I didn't just lose my Dad when he died. I lost my mum and I lost myself too. I don't know who this guy here is, because he is not me."

Nobody said anything for a few minutes and when they felt a cold breeze brush their skin, they all said in one voice, "Angel is passing!" and they laughed.

"Let's pray", Etoro said. She knew God had plans for the three of them. At God's time, she was able to reach out to the two guys effortlessly as she had at least wanted to buy by them in the past months but to no avail. She opened her eyes once again to see their faces; they were bowing with eyes closed, holding firm to her hands jealously. This was the home she prayed for. Smiling, like a woman who has won a battle, she closed her eyes and said, "In Jesus' Name!" "Amen!"

“Thank you, Lord that your spirit in us is ever growing. We are in awe of your mercy. Thank you for your constant presence in our lives. Thank you for all the times you have rescued us, taught us, and loved us. Help us to keep our gaze on you and rely on you in these times. Let your living water flow in us, nourish us and cleanse us and bring us peace. We want to dwell in your shelter, Lord. Help us walk better with you every day. Show yourselves to us and widen our hearts so that we give lifetime me to you, withholding nothing and putting you first in everything that we do. Come Holy Spirit, come to sweet Dove! Transform our thoughts, intentions, and actions. Let our hearts burn for you. Make us your chosen generation, Lord, in Jesus’ Amen!”

“Amen!” the boys chorused.

“Mma Etubom nnyin”, Josh said beaming a very wide smile and raising his brows to heighten the hype. Etoro slapped off his hands as he continued teasing and pinching her as well.

“You two should just marry and begin the ministry.” Eric teased. Josh slapped his head playfully, “your head dey pain you, abi?” The two boys started playing fighting and Etoro kept laughing at them. ‘Was God not wonderful?’ she thought, still laughing.

“Enh enh, before I forget Jay”, Etoro began, “When are you introducing her to the family?”

“Thank you, my dear. You have spoken the mind of the gods”, Eric chipped in.

Joshua laughed. “Who are you guys talking about this time? Rumors about me again?”



“Mtchewww. It is this your yeye stupid pride that will kill you.” Etoro said. “Tell us about that junior you are seeing jhor, I guess you like her.”

“Oh! Abbey? She is my school daughter o” Joshua said laughing.

“Oh...he calls her Abbey. I go love o ,” Eric said and they all laughed.

“Na wa for you people o. You will all officially see her tomorrow. She says she is interested in the community service you guys are organizing.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Her ideas will be welcomed.”

“Yeah! I have to go guys. I still have couples of experiments to run in the lab before I call it a day.” Eric said standing up. The two joined in standing up as Etoro folds the wrapper back into her tote bag.

Uyaiabasi was excited that morning to be joining the volunteering team in the school community service. She was most excited to be joining the planning committee and share her views. The excitement made her the first to leave the class after the bell for a long break-time. She walks into the cafeteria where she spots Eric and Etoro already seated at a table, deep in conversation. She approaches them with a smile. “Good afternoon, seniors! Mind if I join you? She said.

“Uyaiabasi! Of course, pull up a chair. We were just discussing the upcoming school project.” Etoro said.

“Yeah, we’re brainstorming ideas for the community outreach initiative. It’s a great opportunity to make a positive impact. Do you have any suggestions?”

Uyaiabasi takes a seat, and they continued their conversation, exchanging ideas and getting excited about the project.

“About the children to reach out to, I would suggest the street children to the children in the orphanage,” Uyaiabasi suggested.

“But the children in the street have parents compared to the ones at the orphanage.” Eric protested.

“If they had parents, why would they be begging on the street? Besides, it’s one thing having parents, it’s another having ones who can provide. Most of these children on the streets have been abused and abandoned, some are accused of witch crafty, exposing them to inhumane experiences in the wild world. They become victims of rape, child trafficking, ritual sacrifice, drug pushing, prostitution, and the list goes on. They have different stories to tell and we should reach out to them. The children at the orphanage, nevertheless, are being taken care of by the governments and other NGOs. They even have donations from some private bodies and the missionaries from time to time.” Uyaiabasi continued.

“Wow! That was brilliant and very thoughtful of you, Abbey. So, let’s look out for creative ways to reach out to these children and a suitable theme for our project. Maybe something like IvyStar Street Outreach. What do you think guys?”

As they discuss, other students began to notice Uyaiabasi’s presence with Etoro and Eric. The jealousy amongst the girls who had a crush on Joshua begins to circulate whispers among the girls in the cafeteria. Tolu, the Queen Bee was most concerned as her relationship with Joshua did not even last the test of time.

“Ekom, look, that’s the girl, right? Mary asked seated with her cartel to the hearing of Tolu and her peers. “I heard she is the head boy’s girlfriend now.”

“Seriously?” Ekom exclaimed. “How did she manage that? I thought she was just a new student.”

“I can’t believe he’s taken and it’s a small girl like her that is stealing him away from some popular person we wouldn’t call names,” Mary added. Tolu knew the attack was on her but she refrains herself from falling for the temptation.

As the whispers grow louder, Uyaiabasi and her project partners notice the envious glances and the hushed conversations. She exchanges a glance with Etoro and Eric, their expressions showing a mix of amusement and concern.

“Looks like the rumor mill is working overtime. Should we address this?” Etoro asked showing concern.

“Let’s not give it too much attention. We know the truth, and that’s what matters. People will always talk.” Eric suggested.

“You’re right. Our focus should be on the project and making a positive difference. Let them speculate all they want.” Uyaiabasi said.

Joshua walked into the cafeteria, half running to catch up on the planning for the school project which is one of his pet projects as the senior prefect. Scanning the room in search of them, his eyes meet with Uyaiabasi’s. A smile lights up his face as he makes his way over to their table.

“Hey, guys! I apologize for coming late. I had a meeting with Father John in preparation for the PTA meeting this Friday.” Joshua said.

“Sure, Josh! Grab a seat and we will fill you with the progress so far.” Etoro said.

“Good to see you, man. You can apologize by getting us a wrap of chicken pie with Coke.” Eric says as he shook hands with Joshua.

They laughed as Joshua responds by calling him a thief. He grabs a seat next to Uyaiabasi, leaning in to give her a quick peck on the cheek before settling in.

“Ah, Senior Josh, you’re such a showoff,” Uyaiabasi says blushing.

“I can’t help it when I’m proud to be by your side,” Joshua said grinning.

Etoro chuckles, playfully nudging Abbey. “Looks like our dear head boy is quite smitten.” She said.

“Oh, stop it, senior Etoro,” Uyaiabasi says hiding her blushed face.

“Don’t mind her, Josh. We’re happy for you two.” Eric chipped in.

“Ah ah, Mr. Books! Does it look like I am not happy?” Etoro replied chuckling. “Let’s continue o, before I will punch someone’s son.” They all laughed.

They continued their conversation, sharing laughs and discussing their ideas for the event. Uyaiabasi felt a sense of warmth and contentment being a part of the three people she had so much looked up to from her first day at Ivystar Model schools.

“I’m grateful to have you all in my life. Thank you for the privilege to be a part of this family.” Abbey said as they rounded up their AOB for the project.

“And we’re grateful to have you, Uyaiabasi. You bring so much joy and positivity to our lives.” Joshua replied.

Etoro commented on how they were all too lovey-dovey. Eric filled him in with the rumors earlier that day at the cafeteria. As Eric continued, Uyaiabasi noticed the whispers and glances of envy ripple through the cafeteria, with some girls casting curious glances in their direction. Smiling mischievously, she leans closer to Joshua. “Looks like we’ve got some eyes on us, Mr. Popular”, she whispers into his ear. Joshua chuckles, placing a protective arm around her shoulders.

“Enjoy the fame, babe”, he said. The group shared a moment of camaraderie and Joshua ordered the chicken pie with a drink for everyone as the bell rings for the end of the long-break time.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Slowly, with joy perceived in the air, the school was rounding off for the second term. The senior class had stayed behind for their extension classes in preparation for their West African Examination. Most of them had registered for the JAMB examination in a higher institution except for privileged children who wanted to study outside the country. Eric was most happy in securing a scholarship exam to study in Canada and he had studied day and night in preparation for the exams in late May. Josh still opted for a gap year where he applied to study at a Seminary for a year before taking the next step in life.

It was March and they were all nervous as they were about taking an examination in May/June that will play a part in their plans. Eric opted that they all take a break from their studies and go on an excursion before any of the exams were written. This idea coming from him was most welcomed by Father. Excitedly, they all prepared for the excursion, as most people will not see each other ever again in their lifetime.

On the D-day excursion, all the schoolchildren were excited and looked forward to the events of the day. They were all gaily dressed in their school's outing uniform and were hanging around the Assembly Hall chatting and laughing while waiting for Father John.

All the SS3 students had registered for the excursion and the school had provided a long luxury bus to convey them and one teacher and the driver to oversee. When they were all seated, Father John came inside the bus and prayed for journey mercies. He reminded Mr. Paul, the C.R.S. teacher, to keep an eye on each student and make sure everyone is back and okay. Mr. Paul assured Father with a smile, nodding his head while he kept saying, "Yes, Father!" Father Josh looked towards the extreme where the *backbenchers* were seated. Backbencher, they had titled themselves. Father called out to Joshua who was the head of the backbenchers and

everyone kept quiet to hear what he will say. Father smiled and made him promise to be a good boy. Joshua promised to be and everyone laughed. Father smiled.

The excursion to the Slave Museum at Cross River State was like an adventure to a new beginning. It started with the bad roads between Akwa Ibom State and Cross River State boundaries. They had left very early that day to beat the traffic of big tankers on the way. The children were so scared when a huge tanker carrying diesel had fallen while trying to pass through a narrow road. The villagers had come out with their gallons and scoopers to fetch the diesel which was flowing from the tank into a nearby lake. How they joyfully scooped it while the poor driver was seated helplessly by the fallen truck left the students asking questions. When they finally reached the heart of Calabar, they were so happy and started singing and clapping. Driving into the Slave Museum establishment had another atmosphere.

As Joshua and the other students stepped into the building, a profound sense of history and remembrance washed over them as if they were time-traveling to the past. The museum stood as a solemn tribute to the millions of men and women, and children who suffered unimaginable hardships during the transatlantic slave trade era.

By the entrance was a book stand with mostly Efik books. Josh approached the book stand and got glued to a book titled *Mutanda Oyom Namodo*. He purchased the book as well as most students who were lovers of historical and cultural novels. A lady with a ridiculous wig and makeup ushered them into the main building after taking their names and school into the registration book.

At the reception, they were all seated with their notepads and pens in their hands. Eric had been writing right from when he got to the bus that morning. He said he was going to publish an article on this excursion and seemed most excited of all.

A short play was displayed on the flat-screen television glued to the wall opposite where they all sat. It had an Epic setting with blurry graphics. A woman was seen crying and running with her hands on her head, looking back and front at intervals. She was met by a group of women and a man returning from the farm who asked her what it is and she narrated how her daughter was taken by some men. The slave traders! The expression at which she said the name was more like an abomination. At the end of the movie, most of the girls were already crying. A lady came out to address the students introducing herself as the Museum curator. She stated a few rules and the history of the museum and then beckoned them to follow her lead. She sternly warned them not to touch anything as the artifacts were preserved with some chemicals.

Along the entrance hall leading to the main building, they were greeted with haunting artifacts that bear witness to the grim reality of the slave trade. Rusty shackles, iron collars, and worn-out clothing told them stories of lives that were forcibly uprooted and dehumanized. The walls were adorned with powerful photographs, depicting the faces and eye-sore backs of those who endured unimaginable suffering.

They all learned how the slave trade started and how the people had greedily sold their own into slavery. The audio and voice-overs of the slaves crying and being beaten by their masters left them all broken. Maps and diagrams helped them visualize the infamous Middle Passage, where captured individuals endured treacherous journeys abroad on overcrowded slave ships, and how the slaves were parked like sardines in a Titus Can.

"How could God allow His children to suffer like this?" Joshua had asked.

"Well, they were traditionalists at the time. They didn't know God then, so you can't say they were God's children."

Eunice answered him. Joshua shoved away her response. It was a rhetorical question and even if he needed an answer, it wasn't from Eunice whom he felt reasoned backwardly. He was not convinced as others gave their opinion. He was



too emotional to ask further the questions raised in his head. He will ask Father when he gets back.

The Museum didn't shy away from portraying the brutal conditions of plantations and the degrading treatment inflicted upon enslaved individuals. Exhibits recreating the stark realities of forced labor, plantation fields, cramped slave quarters, and tools of oppression.

The Curator emerged with stories of resistance and resilience through the narratives of abolitionists, freedom fighters, and those who fought for justice and equality.

The most exciting of all was when they learned the story behind the song, *Amazing Grace*, by John Newton.

"John Newton was born in London, England, in 1725", the Curator had begun. "He had a troubled youth and became involved in the slave trade, working as a sailor and eventually becoming a captain of a slave ship. During his time at sea, he experienced many hardships and witnessed the inhumanity of the slave trade.

In 1748, Newton's ship encountered a severe storm off the coast of Ireland. The ship was in danger of sinking, and in that moment of desperation, Newton cried out to God for mercy. Miraculously, the ship survived and this event marked a turning point in the life of Newton.

Over the next several years, Newton's spiritual journey continued as he began to study the Bible and embrace the Christianity faith. He eventually left the slave trade and became a minister.

Newton's transformation led him to deeply reflect on his past actions and the grace and forgiveness he had received from God and even the slaves.

In 1772, he wrote the words of *Amazing Grace* as a reflection of his journey from a life of sin and despair to a life redeemed by God's grace.

I don't know why I'm taking time to talk about John Newton, but I believe there is someone here who needs this story."

Joshua couldn't hide his tears this time. He joined the other students to sing the song amidst tears. The Curator was thrown back with this particular set of students, unlike the previous ones she had been directing. She felt a strong and unusual connection with them.

"At the shelf outside is a movie titled Asian. You should all get a copy." She concluded as she leads them to the art gallery for pictures.

This was the song they sang on their way back. *Amazing Grace*. Arit, one of the girls in the science class, announced to everyone that her new name is Harriet Tubman and everyone agreed to call her that, except Joshua, of course. He concluded that she needed unnecessary attention and everyone attacked him. The driver announced that he may have to pull over as he is afraid the engine is heating up. He pulled over. There was smoke everywhere.

Every other attempt to start the engine proved abortive. They were in the middle of nowhere, all they could see was a thick forest on both sides of the road, with no house in view and not even a signal to make calls. For the next hour, no vehicle passed. The driver said the vehicle needed water and lots of water. They all turned in the water they had with them, it wasn't enough.

A village boy passed by and they all rushed to him like some sacrificial lamb sent from heaven. The driver made inquiries on where to get water and how they could find a mechanic. The boy said there was a passage down the bush path and the opposite led to a stream. He concluded that his uncle was a mechanic but they will have to follow him to call him for assistance. Mr. Paul decided to follow the boy while the driver and Samuel, the labor prefect, were to fetch the water. Everyone else was to remain inside and Joshua was to look out.

Two hours later, the bus was fixed. It was pitch dark now. The driver steamed the bus for some time and was about to drive when Mr. Paul noticed Joshua was not on the bus. Where was Joshua?

Etoro, who with most students had fallen asleep, said that he had complained of hunger and had gone out to buy something, against their advice. They thought he was back and helping with the bus like the other boys. Mr. Paul asked the driver to follow him in search of the boy but the driver was too angry to reason with him.

"Which kind wahala be this na?" the driver started. "Was he not clearly warned to stay back and keep an eye on the others? These villagers are very hostile to strangers. His stubbornness will land him in big trouble one day."

"We will be wasting time if you want to pour out that anger right now. Joshua is probably lost and we must find him."

"Are you being serious right now?" The driver yelled. "You are going to leave 99 students in search of one stubborn child?"

"What would you have me do, Driver? Leave him in the cold strange place alone?" Mr. Paul cried.

"Then he will learn his lessons. Do you want to risk your life over that boy? If in the next 30 minutes, he is not back, we will have to go. Father can come in the morning and inform the police."

Mr. Paul looked at the hungry students who were already dozing off and shivering. He had promised Father to bring back everyone safely. He thought of Joshua. He must be cold and scared. Maybe he is injured and in pain. He will not leave without Joshua. Yes, he will leave the 99 and go after the one.

"We are not leaving without Joshua and that's final." He said as he stepped out of the long bus.

It was 9 pm already. An hour since he went in search of Joshua. Paul had not seen Joshua or any sign of him. He didn't know where to go in search of him or who to ask. He found himself walking in circles inside the forest. His phone was about to shut down and the phone torch off he had been using. The moon was not even out. It was drizzling, with lightning and mild drums of the thunderbolt. The sky was heavy and just a little while for the heavens to open. It was going to rain cat and dog! He did not stop to think about what could happen to him or if the villagers do eat strangers, his thoughts were on Joshua. He shouted his name as he kept going. He prayed silently for God to show him the way to him. It started raining heavily. His phone went off. Joshua was nowhere to be found.

Joshua was lost and wandering in the rain. He was shivering from the cold. He had found a place to eat but he was now very hungry after roaming about for hours. He regretted leaving the others for his selfish satisfaction of the flesh. He should have learned contentment his mother had preached about. He learned it now. Just then, a stick fell from one of the trees and injured him. He cried!

He fell into a deep pit filled with rainwater. His well-ironed uniform was torn and dripping wet. He felt mud all over him.

He lost all hope. How was he going to get out of this pit? What if a wild animal came and devoured him or even a snake? The thought of the snake made him coil with bigger goose pimples. What was inside the water he was inside now?

He felt he would lose his mind because of the questions racing in his head. The others must have gone home by now. No one would find him, probably not alive. For once, he thought of his mother. His poor mother. He had caused her so much trouble and pain and had ignored all her sacrifices to send him to a good school despite the demise of his father. Father will never forgive him if Mother's blood pressure rises again. Will she survive if anything happens to him?

Joshua thought of praying but he held back. God would have nothing to do with a wayward child like him. He wished for a second chance to amend his ways. Will you amend your ways if given a second chance? He thought he heard a voice say that to him. He was sure he did. Fears gripped him.

Out of fear, Joshua cried out. He had seen his mother crying and praying all the time but he was discouraged. Didn't she cry to God when Dad was about to die? He died anyway and nothing happened. Why should he cry to God?

He remembered the song from the slave museum. Amazing Grace. He never understood that song better than the way he did now. He remembered the writer of the song was almost drowning when his slaves miraculously saved him. For the first time, Joshua believed in miracles. He believed in God. He sang the song, broken. How could he have been so blind all these years to not have seen God beckoning on him?

Memories came swimming in like pictures flashing before him. He remembered how he used to pray with his Dad. He remembered how after his dad's demise how his mum would pray all night long. Once, he had gone into her and met her sitting by the foot of the bed and talking to herself. When she noticed his presence, she smiled and invited him to join her. She told him she was talking to Jesus and that one day he will. That one day was today, his mother was right.

Like a new strength from nowhere, Joshua took charge and started talking to Jesus.

"Thank you, Jesus, for being with me all these years. You know, I've been lost for so long and went astray but today, I see you taking my hand and pulling me out from the chains of life. So, while in this pit, I am thanking you because I know I'm not alone. You are with me like the fourth man in the fire. I know you will come and save me, so I wait on you. For those that wait upon the Lord shall their strength be renewed. I know you will not forsake me because of a broken and contrite heart, the Lord will not forsake me. Thank you, Jesus!"

The heavy rains started pouring. The wind was stronger in the forest as the trees tried standing their ground against the tough wind. Mr. Paul kept praying for God's mercies. He was reading the scriptures in Luke 15. That was what he taught in Church last Sunday and could fully memorize the chapter. The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. He was determined not to give up until Joshua was found.

Mr. Paul heard the wind echo. He heard a voice cry too. He listened closely. It was a familiar song, a familiar voice. Amazing Grace. It was Joshua!

He ran in the direction of the voice. When he was close enough, he called out to him. Joshua answered with all his strength.

Joshua started crying when he saw Mr. Paul approaching in the dark. Was this not a miracle? Again, his silly ways flashed across. How foolish he had lived yet God loved him still? Even in the past few weeks, he had tried going back to the faith, he felt the struggles and was almost giving up. Father had told him to keep pushing until he had an encounter, he didn't know it would be presented in this way.

Mr. Paul pulled him out of the pit and embraced him crying. After the hug, Joshua tried to shy away. He was broken. He was ashamed, especially with dirt all over him. Mr. Paul assured him that everything is fine and the others are waiting for him. Joshua cried.

"I feel so ashamed, Sir," he cried. "I don't deserve this. I don't."

Mr. Paul held his cold shaking hands. He smiled at him, just the way Father had smiled that morning.

"Josh, I don't know what your personal story is but I see the hand of God in this. Nobody deserves God's love and mercies but His grace is new every day and ever sufficient to us. All you have to do is accept it and key into it."

Joshua agreed. Indeed, God's grace was more than sufficient for him. The encounter he had that night was a story he was going to tell anyone who cared to listen to how God saved him.

Mr. Paul and Joshua walked back to the bus. He had left traces to help him get back easily. From afar, they heard Eunice leading some students singing and praying, while others were sleep-standing. Joshua wouldn't stop crying. When they approached the door, Samuel saw them and informed the others. They were filled with joy. They praised God singing and clapping. Mr. Paul turned to Joshua and said, "In the same way, I tell you, the Angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents." Luke 15:10.

It was 1:30 am. The students were all complete. The driver started the vehicle. They were going home!

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After the excursion, Josh felt a total turnaround in his life. He woke the next morning and had a strong urge to study the Bible. He brought out the Good News Bible Father had gotten him on his last birthday, dusted it, and began flipping through the pages. He didn't know where to start so he opened to Psalms. He felt a vibration in his spirit and he came across Psalm 103. He could remember how he used to memorize this passage for recitation in his Sunday school. His eyes glued on verses 8 to 10 and felt his eyes getting watering:

*"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities."*

He kept reading the Psalms over and over again, and the more he tried, the more he felt dirty, and the more he grew angry at his stupid decisions and careless ways of life. He remembered Father's word that God does communicate through the reading of His word so he kept flipping the pages. He came across Romans 8 and he couldn't stop smiling. God has been with him all along? *There is no condemnation for those who live in union with Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit, which brings us life in union with Christ Jesus, has set me free from the law of sin and death.*

Tears welled up in Joshua's eyes as the weight of those words sank deep within him. He had carried the burden of guilt and shame for so long, feeling unworthy and deserving of punishment. But in these verses, he encountered the overwhelming love and mercy of God.

As he continued to read, his voice trembling with a mix of vulnerability and hope, the words of Psalm 103 became a balm for his wounded soul. The assurance that



God's love transcended his sins and that He offered forgiveness and restoration touched him deeply.

Joshua closed his eyes, letting the tears flow freely down his cheeks. He whispered a prayer, pouring out his heart to God, confessing his sins, and seeking His forgiveness and guidance. At that moment, he felt a profound sense of release and peace.

From that day forward, Joshua immersed himself in the study of God's Word, finding solace, wisdom, and strength within its pages. He discovered a deep connection with God, experiencing His presence and guidance in his life. As he meditated on the verses of Psalm 103 and other passages, he learned to embrace God's grace and let go of the weight of his past.

Joshua's journey of healing and forgiveness continued, but now he walked with a newfound sense of purpose and a deepened faith. He knew that he still had challenges ahead, but he also knew that God was with him every step of the way, extending His loving arms of compassion and grace.

In the days, weeks, and months that followed, Joshua's life began to transform. He found reconciliation with his mother, reaching out to her with an open heart and a desire for healing. He rebuilt his friendship with Eric and Etoro, nurturing their bond with honesty, forgiveness, and support.

Through his experiences and the grace, he had received, Joshua became a source of encouragement and inspiration to other students who were struggling with their burdens. He shared his testimony, spreading the message of God's unfailing love and the power of forgiveness. Father John could not be less proud.

On one of those Sundays at the Chapel, Father John had nominated Joshua to be the preacher. It was a day everyone had looked forward to. The story of his encounter and how his life turned around overnight was what amazed the other students.

It had rained that morning, still, everyone was seated in the church on time. There was uplifting applause when he was introduced by the Chaplain as the preacher of the day.

“Thank you very much for the warm reception.” He said as he stood at the pulpit facing everyone. “Before I begin, I will love to thank my father and mentor, Father John, and all the teachers present here today. Your boy is loyal.” Everyone laughed and clapped as he bowed in courtesy. He prayed afterward and began,

“While trying to prepare for the sermon last night, my mind kept wandering back to how far God has brought me and this newfound relationship I have with Him today. To most of you, it is strange and you have questions in your minds. So I want to tell us a story this morning and bring us all to Christ, Amen!”

The congregation chorused “Amen” and he continued.

“My father, of blessed memory, used to drag me to church every Sunday morning, Tuesday night, and Thursday morning. After his demise, my mom tried maintaining that standard but I fought it. She had said one day I will get to understand why I need God in my life, I never believed her. I felt I was religiously abused but today I know she was right.

When Dad died and it was just the two of us and I had gone quite far from the faith, I used to hear her from my room cry every night. She used to pray sitting by the foot of her bed every night. How it got me pissed off eh that I had to play my music so loud as to not her noisy mumbling. It felt as though she was out of her mind and when I’d confront her in the morning, she would say it was that prayer that was saving my life and comforting her. She would then beg me to join her the next night and I’d walk out on her. It hurts to know she was right all these years. I wish I had listened to her and joined her then because that prayer is what had kept me all along.

Going to visit Father John a few months ago got me the same story. I remember walking into his study that night while he was saying his prayers. I quickly told him I will come back later so he could finish his prayers. He had gotten up on his feet and told me there is no other time or better way to say what brought me at that time. He said God had ordered my feet and that I should join him and study together.

All these three events came flashing back that night I had wandered off in the cold and was lost in the thick forest. Just like they had told me, I started praying. I wanted to pray like they prayed but I found no words as my sins kept flashing like some ads, so I started talking to Jesus. I told Him my fears and confessed my sins. I told Him how I felt, like a friend to a friend, and since that night, I have been talking to Him and I cannot express the peace you will find or the joys of knowing the friend you have a friend in Him.

So, this morning, I want us to take whatever position we are comfortable with. You can stand, sit, and kneel but just be comfortable because there is no wrong way of doing it. I want us to talk to Jesus about anything at all. He does not treat us as we deserve or according to our wrongs. His grace is so sufficient that it covers all our weaknesses.

Telling you to pray will sound like a religion and I am not asking you to because this is not about religion. I am telling you to talk to Him like you are in a relationship with Him. You can decide to sing; you don't have to sound pretty. I want us to just go ahead and tell Him everything on our minds. There is no better time than today, no bad time to start. Start now. Start talking to Jesus." He kept charging the students and didn't even realize he started speaking in tongues and crying.

The atmosphere changed. Joshua left the pulpit to his seat and join the students who had taken a different position to pray. The Holy Spirit took over the service as they started speaking in tongues and some were crying. Father John didn't know how best to react. He climbed the pulpit and felt a connection so strong unlike he was struggling in the past few years. The music director played Victoria Orense's "*I Want to see you*" on repeat. For the next two hours, everyone was praying.

Joshua's journey of faith continued to unfold, leading him down paths he never thought possible. But he knew that with God by his side, he could face any challenge, overcome any obstacle, and find true peace and fulfillment.

*"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him." (Psalm 103:8, 10-11)*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The past two months were one of the best at IvyStar Model Schools. The SS3 had finished their External Examination last week and all were in preparation for the most anticipated part of the year, their graduation.

On the day of graduation, the atmosphere was filled with excitement and anticipation. The graduation ceremony was about to begin, and Joshua dressed in his graduation robe, was surrounded by his fellow graduates and their families.

Uyaiabasi approaches him from the crowd, with a mischievous smile playing on her lips. She leans in close, whispering to him.

"Senior Josh, I have a little surprise for you. Close your eyes and hold out your hand."

Joshua, intrigued by Uyaiabasi 's playful demeanor, closes his eyes and extends his hand. Abbey carefully places a folded letter into his palm.

"Keep this safe. Open it when you find a moment alone."

Joshua, curious yet focused on the ceremony, tucks the letter into his pocket, making a mental note to read it later.

He watched her walk away turning back seconds later to blow an imaginary kiss with that mischievous smile still plastered on her face. He had grown so fond of

her these past months and had always had creative and crazy ways of making his heart flutter. If this was not love, then he was a lost man.

As the families and friends settled into their seats in the beautifully decorated auditorium, a sense of excitement and nostalgia filled the air. The graduating class of 2023, dressed in their elegant graduation gowns and caps, gathered backstage, exchanging smiles and hugs, their hearts brimming with a mix of joy, pride, and a hint of bitter-sweetness.

The stage was adorned with flowers and adorned with a banner that proudly displayed the words, "Congratulations, Graduating Class of 2023." The backdrop, featuring a group photograph of the students, served as a poignant reminder of the journey they had undertaken together over the years.

The projector above the stage illuminated the room with memories captured in photographs. Slide shows of their pictures, showcasing their growth from young and eager JSS1 students to the accomplished individuals they had become, evoked laughter and tears of joy from the audience. Group pictures from various school events, field trips, competitions, excursions, and moments of camaraderie were a testament to the friendships forged and the shared experiences that would forever bond this graduating class.

The event started with an opening prayer from the school's Chaplain Prefect and then a song was played for the procession of the graduating class.

Father John was called upon for an opening speech. He couldn't hide his emotions. This set was the toughest he had come across. He delivered a heartfelt speech that celebrated the achievements and resilience of the graduating class. He spoke of the

challenges they had overcome, the lessons they had learned, and the potential they held within themselves to create a positive impact in the world.

After his emotion-filled speech, he called on the Valedictorian of the year for his speech. The applause from the graduating students here was the loudest. They didn't stop until Eric was on the stage. He looked at his parents and for the first time, he saw his dad clapping too. Tears filled his eyes. How he had long to make them proud. His eyes fell on Josh, he winked at him smiling. This was surely the best day of his life.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my pleasure to be addressing you all today. I speak to the graduating class of 2023 as they are about to begin another phase of life. Believe in yourself and never stop working hard. Luck sometimes will be in your favor and sometimes, it will not, but your hard work will always pay off. As you leave here today, embrace yourself and know that the challenges ahead will only get tougher. Should you fail at some point, don't wallow in your grief but rise and use your failures as a stepping stone to writing your own success story. Do not take your failure to heart and always strive to win that goal. Never give up! You will only fail when you've failed to keep trying. I tell you this as one who has failed several times, the will to succeed depends on you. It is my prayer and wish this day that each one of you becomes all that you want to be. But whatever you become, be the best. Thank you!"

Everyone stood up applauding him as he stood frozen and shaking like ice has been poured on his back. He tried keeping his head up so as not to meet anyone's gaze. The cheering got louder and when he looked down, he saw his dad approaching him. He ran to him and they hugged each other on the stage. The cheering got even louder.

When they all got to their seat, Father John went up and for the first time, he was speechless.

"This graduating class has been one of its kind. It has been a bittersweet journey. To allow the graduates to go on with their party which I am sure is itching them up right now." The students laughed.

"I want to have the honor of giving out these numerous awards to whom it is due. Before then, I will begin with the last award on the list. The best student of the year." The students all drummed their desks as if they had planned for it. The crowd cheered and Father John could not stop laughing. When there was silence, he continued.

"As I said, this year has been extraordinary and they have surely broken many rules. Not keeping you in suspense further, the best student of the year goes to..." There was dead silence. Father looked at Eric and Josh who were sitting on the first row, with Etoro in the middle, and nodded his head smiling.

"Let us please, be on our feet as we award the best student of the year, Etoro Bassey!"

Everyone stood up clapping and shouting. This time around, louder. In the background, playing was *Stand up for the Champion*. Etoro was cold. She took out her inhaler and inhaled. She felt a thousand eyes watching her. She wished the ground could swallow her. Shyly, with calculated steps, she walked to the stage. Father John extended a handshake to her but she hugged him instead and everyone clapped. She was awarded a portrait with her name boldly inscribed on it as well as a gold medal. Father John gave her the mic to make a speech. She didn't know what to say as she held the mic with her hands shaking. She searched the ground



and for the first time wished her parents were there for her. "This is the greatest shock in my life and I apologize for responding this way. I'm not always this emotional." The crowd laughed. "First, I thank God who has made this day a reality. To Father John and the school management who have chosen to honor me today, I am grateful. May God bless you. Ummmmh! I dedicate this award to my Dad and Mum. I wish they were here today on this my big day..." Just as she was about to drop the mic, she heard her dad call from the audience. "Dad?" She cried! Her dad ran to her on the stage and pulled her up. Her mum came out as well and the whole family hugged. Eric and Josh stood up clapping and the whole school joined them clapping.

Continuing with the awards, each graduating student was called up one after the other, their names resonating through the auditorium. As they walked across the stage, the crowd erupted in applause and cheers, their families and friends beaming with pride. The students received their well-deserved certificates, symbolizing the culmination of their years of hard work and dedication.

Amidst the applause and cheers, tears of joy and gratitude streamed down the faces of the graduates. They knew that this moment marked not only the end of a chapter but also the beginning of a new journey filled with endless possibilities.

The ceremony continued with speeches from distinguished guests, inspiring performances by talented individuals, and heartfelt messages from teachers and mentors who had played a significant role in shaping the graduates' lives.

When he was done, the school prefect, Joshua, was called upon to give a closing remark. Everywhere was quiet. How he became a different person in the past two months was still a story that felt new each day. The incidence of the excursion day was still the latest gist even after two months. Despite it all, he was still everyone's favorite.

"Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you, Father John, for the honor of having the closing remark. Before I start, today seems to be a family reunion day." Everyone laughed. "Please, permit me to do this. My father's demise was a nightmare that haunted me throughout my stay in high school. I would so much have wished he were here today, but I am not wishing. One thing I didn't realize all the while was that though he died, his spirit was very much alive in me. He is here today and he is right by my side right now. I want to thank my Mum who had been everything to me these past years. I love you so much, Mum and I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused you." His Mum stood up in the crowd and everyone clapped.

"Without getting you all more emotional, I will begin my closing remarks. Today has been filled with love and our hearts have been red. Indeed, one cannot give out what he does not have. The love today flowed from one channel I know who has led me to the source above. I will now call on the graduating class of 2023 to please join me here." They all marched down in pairs and stood beside him.

"The graduates today are all here to celebrate the one man who taught us how to love, how to forgive, how to pursue our dreams and become the best we can be. The man who has been our father and teacher and our shepherd. So, we preserved the best award for the last and we will love the honor of having our freshest boy on stage, Father John!" Everyone laughed and clapped as Father John came out.

"This award is for the best father of the year and nobody here deserves it but you. Congratulations, Father!"

Father John came out on the stage, his eyes filled with humble surprise as the room erupted in laughter and applause. The graduates, dressed in their caps and gowns, were beaming with gratitude and admiration for the man who had touched their lives in profound ways.

As the applause settled, Joshua stepped forward, his face glowing with joy. He embraced Father John tightly, the warmth of their bond evident to everyone present. The other students joined in, forming a circle of affection and appreciation around their beloved mentor.

Tears welled up in Father John's eyes as he looked at each student, feeling an overwhelming surge of love and pride. The journey they had all embarked on together had been filled with challenges and triumphs, and at that moment, it became clear that their connection had transcended the boundaries of a typical teacher-student relationship.

Father John took a deep breath, trying to compose himself. His voice quivered with gratitude as he addressed the grandaunts, who were eagerly awaiting his words. "Thank you, my dear students," he said, his voice filled with warmth. "You have given me the greatest gift a teacher could ever ask for — your love and trust. It has been an honor and a privilege to guide you on your journey, to witness your growth, and to be a part of your lives."

The room fell silent as Father John's words settled in, creating a profound sense of unity and appreciation. The grandaunts understood that their success was not solely their own but was also a testament to the guidance and care provided by Father John.

In that poignant moment, they made a silent promise to carry the lessons of love, forgiveness, and pursuing dreams that Father John had taught them throughout their lives. They knew that his impact would extend far beyond their time as students, shaping them into compassionate individuals who would make a difference in the world.

As Father John went back to his seat and the event drew to a close, the students gathered on stage, their eyes shining with hope and excitement for the future. They joined hands, forming a circle, a symbol of their unity and shared memories. In unison, they recited their class motto, a testament to their resilience and determination: "We came, we learned, we conquered!"

The auditorium erupted in applause once again, the sound echoing through the halls as the graduates, their families, and friends celebrated the culmination of their academic journey.

With hearts full of hope and dreams, they looked forward to the future, ready to embrace new challenges, make a difference, and continue their journey of lifelong learning.

And as the ceremony came to an end, the graduates tossed their caps high into the air, a symbolic gesture of their triumph and the beginning of their new adventures beyond the walls of IvyStar Model Schools.

Later that evening, after the graduation festivities have settled down, Josh finds a quiet corner in his room. He takes out the letter Uyaiabasi gave him, unfolding it carefully. His heart beats a little faster as he begins to read:

*Dear Senior Josh,*

*As I watched you walk across the stage today, my heart swelled with pride and admiration for the person you've become. These past months with you have been filled with incredible moments, laughter, and growth. You have inspired me in ways I never thought possible.*

*But as we celebrate this milestone in your life, I want you to remember that life is not just about achievements and accolades. It's about the connections we forge, the love we share, and the impact we have on others.*

*I want you to know that I am grateful for every moment we've spent together, for the way you've opened up to me, and for the love and trust you've given me. But I also want you to be true to yourself and follow your path. Don't let anyone or anything hold you back from pursuing your dreams.*

*I will always be here for you, whether as a friend or something more. But the most important thing is that you find happiness and fulfillment in whatever you choose. Remember to trust yourself and your instincts. You have a bright future ahead of you, and I believe in you with all my heart.*

*Congratulations, Senior Josh, on this incredible achievement. May this graduation be the beginning of a beautiful journey filled with love, joy, and success.*

*With all my love,*

*Abbey.*

As Josh finished reading the letter, a mix of emotions floods his heart. He feels a deep appreciation for Uyaiabasi 's presence in his life, her support, and the unconditional love she has shown him. But at the same time, he grapples with the uncertainty of their future and the choices he needs to make.

Lost in his thoughts, Josh realizes the profound impact Uyaiabasi has had on his healing and growth. Her letter serves as a reminder to trust himself, follow his dreams, and cherish the connections that have helped shape him into the person he is today.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Several years later, on a sunny afternoon, a familiar group of individuals gathered in the courtyard of IvyStar Model Schools. The once-graduating class of 2023 had reunited, their lives have taken different paths but their bond remains unbreakable.

Joshua, Eric, and Etoro, now successful in their respective fields, stood amidst the laughter and joyful chatter, reminiscing about their time at IvyStar. They marveled at how their lives had unfolded since that memorable graduation day, carrying with them the lessons learned, the friendships forged, and the unwavering spirit of IvyStar.

As they walked through the corridors of the school, memories flooded back — the classrooms where they had shared countless lessons, the playground where they had laughed and played, and the chapel where they had found solace and inspiration. IvyStar had been the foundation upon which their dreams had flourished.

The trio made their way to the auditorium, now filled with a new generation of students preparing for their graduation ceremony. They watched with a sense of pride and nostalgia, knowing that they had once stood on the same stage, filled with dreams and uncertainties, just as these graduates did now.

Taking a moment to reflect on their journey, Joshua, Eric, and Etoro exchanged heartfelt words of gratitude for the profound impact IvyStar and Father John had made on their lives. They realized that their shared experiences had shaped them into the individuals they had become, instilling in them values of resilience, compassion, and a lifelong pursuit of knowledge.

As they stood in the auditorium, admits the students the trio made a promise to themselves and to IvyStar — to continue paying it forward, to uplift and inspire others just as they had been uplifted and inspired. They knew that the spirit of IvyStar lived on within them and that they had the power to make a positive impact on the lives of those around them — to leave a legacy of love, compassion, and transformation, just as IvyStar had left its mark on their side, lives.

As their voices faded into the distance, a gentle breeze whispered through the school, carrying with it the echoes of their laughter, their dreams, and the profound impact they would continue to make. Father John's legacy would forever remain etched in their hearts, a testament to the power of a remarkable teacher who had become their father, their mentor, and their guiding light.

## **EPILOGUE**

Years have passed since that fateful day at IvyStar Model Schools, where Joshua, Eric, Etoro, and Uyaiabasi 's paths crossed and their lives were forever changed. They have grown into confident individuals, carrying the lessons they learned during their time together. Josh, now a successful young man, cherishes the memories of his friendship with Uyaiabasi and the transformative effect she had on his life.

As they say their final goodbyes at IvyStar's alumni reunion, Josh pulls out a worn-out letter from his pocket—the one Uyaiabasi had secretly placed there on their graduation day. With bittersweet nostalgia, he opens it, reading her heartfelt words that capture the essence of their journey together.

## **About the Book**

In the quiet halls of IvyStar Model Schools, where dreams were nurtured and futures were shaped, a young boy named Joshua embarked on a journey of self-discovery. Battling his inner demons and haunted by a troubled past, he found solace in the most unexpected of places: the presence of a girl named Uyaiabasi. Through their deep connection and unwavering support, they embarked on a remarkable journey of healing, forgiveness, and personal growth. This is the story of their friendship, love, and the power of human relationships in the face of adversity.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



