

The Testimony



Richard Shekari

The Testimony
By
Richard Shekari

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Acknowledgments.

Ayiwulu Alaku
Israel Dodo
Gordana Misciew

...Your words of encouragement and profound support greatly influenced my
desire to write this novella.

You're appreciated.

Dedication.

For Paul & Peter Ewuzie.

Chapter One: The Good Neighbour.

The doorbell rang. The time was 6:48pm.

"I'll get it!" Tiffany said as she walked to the door, she had a pink top on. A teenager who just couldn't wait for her next birthday. She peeked through the peephole and smiled. "It's Greg!" She said as she opened the door.

"Hi, Tiffany!" He said. "You hold on to that," he smiled as he handed her a bottle of wine. "This one's heavy for your delicate-self!" Referring to the big red wrapped box he carried. Greg was in his early thirties, he was wearing a black long-sleeved shirt with a jacket on top.

"Wow!" She said excitedly, "Mom will devour this, trust me!" She smiled back, "Oh my, you seriously had to drive to our house?" On noticing his black SUV parked on their front yard not far from the mailbox.

"I can explain," he replied, "see, the thing is..."

"The box is too heavy for you to carry?" She interjected.

"Well," he remarked as he nodded, "You're smarter than you look, young lady. Maybe you should run for president when you're of age!"

"Apparently my parents aren't spending their money to get me a good education for nothing." She giggled, "Please come in!" She turned, "Mom! Dad! Greg is here!"

Greg followed her as he panted.

"I can see you've changed your glasses again!" She said.

"Naa!" He responded, "I changed the frame!"

"You know one thing I like about you, Greg?" She said.

"What's that?" He asked.

"Aside from your dashing personality..." She added, "...You're too generous for a neighbour! Is the box heavy? You can just..."

"No, it's okay." He interjected, "Doesn't weigh much!"

"Okay," She remarked, "So how was service today?"

"Just the usual chatter." He replied. "It was good, not my favourite priest though."

"Oh, is that why you left very early?" She asked. "We took some photos, it was fun. You missed!"

"Yeah," he said, "Had some things to do."

"Oh I see!" She responded. "Samantha kept bugging us with her usual, 'where's Uncle Grey.'"

"Uncle Grey!" Mumbled a little girl as she ran towards him.

"Oh, hey Samantha!" He said.

"Speak of the devil!" Tiffany said, she gave way for her kid sister to pass.

"Uncle Grey brought present for me?" Samantha asked as she hugged his legs.

"Yes, I did." He replied, "And I am sure you're going to love it."

“Easy, Sam!” Tiffany said, “It’s Mr Greg, not Uncle Grey or just call him Greg! Okay? Get off of him, the box looks heavy. Go to mommy! Come on, shoo!”

“Take it easy on her,” he said, “She’s just a kid.” He dragged his leg cautiously to avoid pushing Samantha to the floor.

“Yeah, right.” Tiffany said, “This bug buzzes worse than a bunch of bees!” She walked to the dining area.

Her mother walked in from the kitchen holding a bowl of beef chilli.

“Yum! Yum!” Said Jacob as he walked behind holding some plates. He was a timid teenager.

“Mom, why do you allow this Rugrat into the kitchen?” Tiffany said.

“Because someone refused to lend me a helping hand?” Said her mother as she placed the bowl on the dining table.

“You have no idea what I saw him doing with a dead rat at school on Tuesday!” Tiffany added.

“Hey, Mrs Shortner!” Greg said. “You seems to be getting into shape lately!”

“Oh thank you, Greg!” She replied, “Been seriously working out.” She giggled, “Got to stay in shape in order to get rid of the competition, you know what I mean?” She winked as she laughed, “You arrived on time. Sorry, we’re starting a bit late, my husband came home a little late from the grocery store. See why women prefer to do the shopping themselves?”

“And I thought the late thingy is the other way around!” Greg said. “Where do I put this?”

“Are you kidding me,” said a male voice as a bald-headed man in his late-forties walked down the stairs, “Honey, if it was you that went to the market, we’d still be waiting for your return by now with spoons in between our teeth!”

“Yeah, right!” She responded.

“Hi Jerome!” Greg said, still holding on to the box.

“I can’t wait to chop these delicious delicacies with my crushers.” Jerome added as he walked to his wife, he kissed her. “You smell like heaven, honey!”

“You guys should get a room, please!” Tiffany said. “Ugh!”

“We own the house young lady,” Jerome responded, “Me and ma baby we own this C-R-I-B, shorty, you got that?” He bounced as he mimicked a rapper. He then turned to Greg with his hand stretched, “Dude, what’s that you’re holding?”

“Oh, nothing much.” He said, “Just a gift for the family.”

Samantha poked him, “Gift for me?” She mumbled, “My box?”

“No, Samantha!” Greg said, “Yours is a special one!” He smiled.

“Mine special?” Samantha added, “You buy me doll?” She giggled.

“I’ve got something more beautiful for you,” he said as he managed to hold the box with one hand. He slipped his right hand into his jacket and pulled out a small box then handed it to her.

“What is it?” She said as she snatched the small box from his hand.

“Open it!” He replied.

Samantha tore the small box.

“Easy, young lady.” Jerome said. “Don’t behave like your mother the day I proposed to her!”

“Don’t you ever get tired of telling people that story?” Mrs Shortner said.

“Mammy!” Samantha said excitedly as she ran to her mother, “Mammy! Mammy! Look! Uncle Grey bought for me this.”

“Wow!” Mrs Shortner responded as she leaned and picked Samantha up.

“Greg! Oh my...” She headed towards him, “A golden bracelet? Isn’t this too much?”

“Hmm!” Jerome responded, “That’s my problem with you bachelors; always wasting money on the wrong stuff.”

“Honey, really?” Said his wife as she stared at him.

“What?” He said, “It’s the fact! She’ll soon grow up and won’t be able to wear it!

“The good thing is we’d be able to sell it in the end!” Jacob said, “It’ll have more value by then, right?” He grinned.

Greg laughed reluctantly.

“I can’t believe you guys just said that!” Mrs Shortner added as she shook her head, “Thanks a lot, Greg.” She smiled then hugged him, “So, what do you say to Greg young lady?”

“Thank-you-Uncle-Grey!” Samantha mumbled and covered her eyes with her hands.

“Oh, you’re welcome, Sam.” He answered.

“How many times have I got to tell you, he is not our Uncle?” Tiffany said. “It’s Mr Greg! Pinhead.” She snorted, “Samantha doesn’t even like wearing bracelets. Just like mom; she hates wearing anything on her wrist. Too old school.”

“Don’t be hard on her!” Said her mother. “She’s just a little girl, my little angel. She may be two but she’s smarter than you when you were ten!”

“Whatever!” Tiffany remarked, “We need to teach her the right things in time, right?”

“It’s just dinner, man!” Jerome said to Greg, “Not like it’s our anniversary or something! Anyways, thanks a bunch! We really appreciate it. What’s in the box?”

“Well,” Greg remarked, “It’s just...”

“Don’t be rude, honey!” Mrs Shortner said, “Help the young man find a good place to keep the box, jeez.” She pinched Jerome. “Can’t you see he’s sweating already? You guys should keep it in the living room.”

“Oh, my bad!” He rushed to Greg and assisted him with the box.

“Thank you very much, Greg.” She said as she handed Samantha to Jacob, and continued setting the table. “You’re so kind and generous.”

Jacob laid his little sister on the table.

“Mom!” Tiffany said as she held up the bottle of wine Greg gave her.

“What?” Mrs Shortner responded.

“Greg brought this too!” She said.

Jacob walked behind her and seized the bottle.

“You midget!” Tiffany yelled as she chased him. They ran round the table as Jacob laughed. There were six chairs set around the table.

“Jacob J. Shortner, keep it on the table, now!” Mrs Shortner yelled, “Can’t you see we have a guest in the house?”

The kids ignored her and continued running.

“Jerome!” Mrs Shortner hollered.

“What’s going on here?” Jerome asked as he approached the dining area.

“Oh, nothing, dad!” Jacob answered as he gently placed the bottle on the table. He headed for the fridge and opened the freezer compartment, scraped off some frost and swallowed it. He then turned and began playing with his little sister.

His mother shook her head.

“Chloe,” Jerome said, “You see why I can’t afford to invite my boss for dinner?”

“They all behave like people from your side of the family!” She said, “I think it’s only my little angel that behaves like my mother.” She smiled, “Tiffany is like your sister, Venice. Jacob is like um...Oh I almost forgot, his namesake...your older brother, Jacob. Hence the name.”

“Blah-Blah-Blah!” Jerome chattered, “You ever wonder why I love you?” He walked to her and kissed her once more.

“Whatever!” She kissed him back and lightly pushed him off. “Okay everyone, dinner time. Greg! Please come over to the dining!”

“Alright,” Jerome said. “Everybody grab your chair!”

They all sat down, including Greg. Jerome and Greg sat facing each other. Chloe, Jerome’s wife sat by his left hand side while Tiffany on his right. Jacob sat next to Tiffany. Samantha ran to Greg and raised her hands, he lifted her up and unto his lap. She handed the bracelet to him, Greg then helped her wear it.

“Do you like it?” He asked.

“Yes, very much!” She said, “Thank you very much!”

A black cat walked down from the stairs and jumped on the empty chair next to Greg.

“Oh, Jesus!” Jerome said, “I thought we’ve agreed to never let Miss Kitty stamp her paws on the dining table?”

“Uh oh!” Samantha interjected.

“I can’t leave her alone in the room, dad!” Jacob said.

“Unbelievable!” His father responded.

“Tiffany dear,” said Chloe, “Please, pray for us!”

“Mom?” Tiffany answered, “Daddy prayed in the morning, must we pray again?”

“Yes!” Said her parent in unison.

“Greg is here,” she said. “Why don’t you ask him to pray?”

“Shut it, lady!” Her mother said.

“Pray! Pray! Pray already!” Jacob teased, “I am starving, Jesus!”

“Fine!” She protested as she closed her eyes, “Thank you heavenly Father for the meal. Don’t remember us if we don’t remember the poor and the homeless! Amen!” Tiffany opened her eyes and grabbed a fork, when she realised all eyes were set on her, she grinned, “What? God doesn’t like lousy people, so I made it short!” She sank the fork into the plate of rice that was laid before her.

Chloe shook her head and entertained Jacob’s plate with broccoli.

“Mom?” He lamented.

“And you...” Jerome said, “Allow Uncle Grey to eat, okay? Go disturb mammy!” He mimicked Samantha’s voice.

“Seriously?” Chloe said. “I’ve been working all day trying to make dinner.”

“Well, she kicked your stomach for months before you finally dropped her!” He added, “You’re the only one who’ve mastered the art of Samanthism!” He giggled.

Greg and Chloe burst into laughter.

“You’re a joke,” she said, “Do you know that?”

“I guess it’s one of the reasons you dumped the rest of the crew and married the captain?” He said as he kissed her, “I love you!”

“I love you too!” She kissed him back.

“Ugh!” Tiffany responded. “You two make me so NOT want to be an adult anymore!”

“So, Samantha was a boxer, eh?” Greg said.

“Yes,” Jerome remarked as he sipped his wine, “I’d sit down and watch her little foot come and go like this...” he kept the glass cup on the table and punched the air with his fist back and forth. “It was like watching a kick boxer trying to kick his way out of a punch bag.” He laughed.

“Yeah, and what did I get for bringing your seed into this world?” She said, “He was away on an assignment the day I gave birth to her. Now all she wants is daddy, daddy! Daddy!”

“Jealous!” Jerome responded and threw a tongue out.

“Mammy!” Samantha said as she threw a tongue out.

“Don’t mind daddy, my adorable sweet muffin.” Chloe said, “Mommy will teach you how to be a good lady, okay?” She smiled.

“Owokay!” Samantha whispered, “Mammy teach me how-to-be good lady?”

“She really resemble you, Chloe!” Greg said. “She’s got your dimple...and your smile!”

“Well, she doesn’t have any choice!” Chloe added as she passed a bowl of salad to Jerome, “She didn’t want to end up having a face like her sister, so she chose wisely which side of the family to roll with!”

“Whatever!” Tiffany protested as she filled her cup with juice.

They all laughed.

“And now she’ll get away with that?” Said Jerome, “And There you were yesterday accusing me of...”

“Angel, come to mammy so Uncle Grey would eat, okay?” Chloe interposed.

“No!” Samantha said. “I stay with Uncle Grey. You’re not my friend anymore. Uncle Grey is my friend!”

Greg laughed.

“Are you sure you’re comfortable with her like that?” Jerome asked.

“It’s alright,” Greg said, “We can eat from the same plate. Right friend?” He tickled Samantha. She giggled as he took a sip of water from the glass cup before him.

“So what’s in the box?” Jacob said, “When are we going to open it?”

“Jacob! Manners!” His mother said.

“It’s for the family, you can open it anytime.” Greg said, “Right after dinner would be best, I guess.”

“I want a bicycle but dad said until I get good grades in school,” Jacob added as he chewed his broccoli, “Did you buy me a...”

“Hush it, young man!” Chloe said. “Where’s your table manners?”

“What this?” Samantha asked as she curiously lifted Greg’s jacket. “Bang? Bang?” She giggled, “Jacob has gun too. Daddy bought water gun for Jacob! Uncle Grey, is this water gun too?”

Jerome and Chloe raised their heads up, they looked at each other, then gazed at Greg.

“Yes, Samantha.” Greg said, “It’s a gun...but not a toy gun.” He sighed as his lively face slowly froze to a more baleful look. He slipped his right hand into his jacket and pulled out a firearm from his shoulder holster. Greg lowered his head as he placed his right hand on the table; the gun was pointed at Jerome.

The Shortner’s stopped eating on noticing the gun. The sight of the pistol sent shivers down their spine. Tension steamed up as fear gripped the kids. The place became silent.

“Jacob, see gun like yours!” Samantha mumbled. “Uncle Grey has gun too!”

Jerome took a small white garment and cleaned his mouth. “Is everything okay, man?” He asked.

Greg nodded. “Yeah!”

“Greg, are you okay?” Chloe asked as fear gripped her. She turned to Jerome.

“Time to play?” Samantha asked.

“Yes, Samantha.” Greg said, “It’s play time!”

“Come on, man!” Jerome added, “We’ve got kids here. You shouldn’t be...”

“Shut up, Jerome!” He interjected. “Tiffany, empty the salad from the bowl, please.”

Tiffany looked at her father. Jerome signalled her to do as told. She was terrified. “Where do you want me to pour it?” She asked.

“Anywhere on the table, please!” Greg said.

She then poured the salad in the middle of the table as she trembled.

“It’s alright, sweetheart.” Jerome said to her as he coerced a smile.

“Keep it on the table, and Sit down!” Greg added.

Tiffany gently laid the bowl on the table and sat down. She was frightened, “dad?” She called.

“It’ll be alright, sweetheart.” Jerome reassured her once more.

“Jacob! Empty the wine from the bottle into the bowl...” Greg instructed, “...Including all the liquid contents in the cups!”

Jacob turned to his father, who gave him a sign to do as told.

“It’s okay, son...go ahead!” He said.

Jacob then stood up, took his cup and emptied the content in the bowl. Then went round the table and did same with the rest of the cups and the bottle. The bowl was half-full.

“Thank you, Jacob!” Greg said, “Please sit down.” He pulled out his phone and gave it to Samantha. “Hey, girl. Go and drop the phone into the bowl!”

“Bowl?” She asked with a smile as the cat climbed up the table.

“Yes, bowl.” He said, “Phone into bowl.”

“But water in bowl!” She said.

“Yeah, I know.” He responded, “Just do it, okay?”

“Okay!” She said.

Greg placed Samantha on top of the table, she walked between the plates and threw his phone into the bowl. She then turned and clapped, “Yeah!”

“Good girl.” Greg said, “Now, come to Uncle Grey!”

“Sweet muffin,” Chloe said, “Come to mommy.”

“No, mammy!” Samantha said, she giggled and ran back to Greg. He held her with his left arm then stood to his feet, with his right hand still holding on to the firearm.

“Now, all of you should throw your cell phones into the bowl.” He ordered.

Chloe turned to Jerome, “No! No!” She cried, “What is happening, Greg?”

“Just do what I say and no one will be hurt, okay?” Greg added politely. “Please!”

“Is this some kind of a joke?” Jerome said.

Greg took his finger off the trigger and pulled back the hammer to full cock.

“Oh my God!” Chloe screamed as she quickly held her mouth tight with her hands.

“Do what Uncle Grey says, mammy!” Samantha said, ignorantly, “You have another gun?”

“No, Sam!” He said, “Just this one!”

“Do what he says kids.” Jerome instructed his children. “Honey?” He turned to his wife. Jerome gently took out his phone from his pocket and threw it into the bowl, and so did Tiffany and Jacob. As Chloe made an attempt to pick her phone which was lying next to her plate, it began to ring. Greg turned the gun towards her, she gently took it from the table and flung it into the bowl. The sound faded as bubbles rose and popped.

“Now, that wasn’t so hard.” Greg said, “Was it?”

“Not hard!” Samantha said as she threw her hands up, “Easy!”

“Yeah, girl!” Greg said, “Easy...Easy!” He then stared at Jerome.

The cat walked on the table towards Greg and began lifting its paws to touch the gun.

“Uncle Grey?” Samantha said, “Kitty wants to be carried too!” She used her leg to push it away, the cat then jumped off the table and went upstairs. “Kitty scared!” She giggled, “Little kitty scared!”

“Yeah, Samantha.” Greg said, “Little kitties are always scared when faced with real danger.”

“Baby,” Chloe said, “Come to mommy!” She sobbed. “Please, don’t take my baby!”

“Look, man!” Jerome pleaded, “She’s just a little girl. She won’t survive out there without her mother. Give her back, please!”

“Oh my God!” Tiffany said as she wept, “Is he taking Sam away? Mommy! Daddy! No!”

“Please, Greg!” Chloe appealed as she wiped her tears.

“No one is taking your daughter anywhere!” He said, “So calm down, okay?”

“No one taking daughter anywhere!” Samantha mumbled, “Mammy, why you crying?”

“Now, let’s go open our gift box,” Greg said. “Shall we?”

Chapter Two: Hot Seat.

Greg ordered the Shortner's to carry their chairs along with them and move to the living room where he instructed Tiffany to unwrap the big gift box. In it were some gadgets; a laptop, a remote control and four other black identical devices that appeared to be about one square-foot each. Greg situated a cushion and sat down opposite the chairs the family brought from the dining. He had them place their seats in a row tightly next to each other. Samantha was still in his arms and appeared drowsy. Greg dragged a small glass table close to the cushion then placed the laptop on it. He ordered Tiffany to place a black device each on all the chairs, which she did.

"You can all take your seat, now!" He said as he opened the lid of his laptop, "Gently!"

They hesitated at first until he swung his pistol at them without even looking at their direction. They all heard a clicking sound as they sat on the devices placed on their chairs.

"Hold the hand of the person seated next to you!" He said as he raised his pistol. "You're family, right?"

Jerome who was seated on the left clenched Chloe's right hand. With her left, she held onto Tiffany's and then Tiffany to Jacob's.

Greg then pressed a button on his laptop and a tone beeped on the devices as red lights came on.

"Don't panic," he said. "Each and every one of you is sitting on a 2 pound explosive, that's a total of about eight?!" He pointed his pistol at them. "Am I correct? If any of you make any sudden move or an attempt to get up...you'll trigger the sensors and, well...Boom! It'll explode. And if you scream in order to alert the neighbours, I'll activate it here myself." He hit the laptop with his pistol, "If you try anything stupid, remember...we-all-die. Get it?"

They all nodded.

"Mom!" Tiffany said as she began to shiver.

"Don't you pee on my device, young lady," Greg said. "It cost me a fortune! However, at this moment in time I've got nothing to lose." He held Samantha warmly as she slept. "For me, I'm ready to go. I don't know about you guys but from the look of things, I'd say y'all got some more church services, parties, graduations to attend and probably some weddings too!"

Chloe wept. "Please, Greg," she said, "we welcomed you into our home! What have we done to you?"

"How old is Jacob?" Greg asked.

"They're innocent children." Jerome said, "Let my family go, man. Let's settle this between us. Whatever it is, please!"

"How old is Jacob," he said as he stood up, "Don't make me ask again."

"He is uh-he is only fourteen!" Chloe said as she sobbed.

“Hmm!” He responded, “And Tiffany?”

“Seventeen!” Chloe answered again.

“Well,” he remarked, “I do not intend to stay here much longer. So the duration of this...exercise will be determined by you, the parent.”

“What?” Chloe said in tears.

“Yeah!” He nodded.

Samantha yawned in her sleep as she lied on his chest.

“You two did something terribly wrong today that hurt me!” Greg said.

“Something real bad...”

“Goodnight, Uncle Grey.” Samantha interjected as she yawned again.

“Goodnight, Samantha,” Greg said, “Sweet dreams!” He paused and tapped her gently. “Something happened today...” he looked up at the rest of the family, “And I witnessed it, and it hurts. It cut through me, real deep. The sooner you say what it is and admit that it was wrong, the better for us all. So, I’m giving you...” He stared at his wristwatch, “...20 minutes to think and say what it was and as soon as you say and admit to it, I’ll leave you all in peace, and walk out the door, and you will never see me again!”

“I don’t understand!” Chloe added, still soaked in tears.

“You will, Mrs Shortner,” he said, “You will.” He took a step forward, “See, if you fail to say what you did wrong today in the next twenty minutes, you’ll lose a child. And I’ll give you another twenty minutes to try and figure out what you did so you’d be able to save the life of your next child. But...”

“Wait,” Chloe interjected, “What do you mean lose a child?”

“I’ll get to pick which child is next.” He continued, “Are we clear?”

“Please, Greg,” said Jerome. “What is it? Is it money? Is it...what is it? Just say it, if it’s money we don’t keep much at home! Please, leave my family out of this! Is it some old score you’re trying to settle? Did anybody send you?”

“You have eighteen minutes left!” Greg said.

“Oh my God!” Chloe cried as she held Tiffany’s hand.

“Mommy!” Tiffany sobbed along with her mother. Jacob did not utter a word, he only stared at Greg as he held firm his sister’s hand.

“We are neighbours, Greg!” Jerome added, “what did we do wrong that you have to do this to us? Is it about the argument we had last year concerning the fence? I thought we squashed that, man? I offered to pay for it but you insisted. I would’ve paid the guy that fixed it! Please, let my family out of this! Let them go!”

“This is not about anything that happened in the past.” He said, “This is about today!”

“But we only saw...once before you arrived for dinner?” Jerome added, “In church, remember? And we greeted fine, we parted okay, right?”

“Ye-yes,” Chloe stuttered, “And-and you even said that-that you wouldn’t miss the dinner for anything? Was it something anyone said at the dining table?” She trembled.

Greg lowered his head and heaved a heavy sigh. The couple kept talking and bringing up different reasons they believed might have been behind his action but he acted cold.

“Eleven minutes!” He said as he stared at his wristwatch.

Jerome and Chloe looked at each other and wondered what he thought they might have done wrong that day. She mumbled with tears in her eyes, she was so scared her words weren’t clear.

“Are you saying something?” Greg asked.

“I don’t know what we have done to you, Greg.” She said, “This is not you! You wouldn’t harm my kids, would you? Please whatever it is, forgive us. You know that our kids were lucky to have survived a terrible accident just days back, and we invited you for dinner to celebrate their lives, and now this?”

“Come on, man!” Jerome pled.

Greg noticed that Samantha was dead asleep so he walked to the 3 seater sofa and laid her gently. He smiled then took off his jacket and covered her with it. Greg then walked back to his seat and sat down. He stared at his wristwatch once again, picked the remote control and then stood to his feet, “Four minutes left!” He said, “I gave you more than enough time, guys!” He kept the pistol on the table then walked towards Jacob.

“Jacob, no!” Chloe cried, “Please no, Greg. Please! Greg!”

“If you yell again, Chloe, I swear to God you won’t like what I’ll do next.” He said as he pressed the remote in his hand, the red light on Jacob’s device went green. Greg seized Jacob, Tiffany held him tight as they cried.

“Mommy!” Tiffany cried along, “Daddy, please no! Mommy!”

“Oh God!” Chloe said, “We’ll do anything you want, please not the children, Greg!”

“Greg, for the love of God!” Jerome sobbed, “Not my boy! Not my boy! I beg of you!”

“Alright then,” he said, “Hold firm unto your brother’s hand, let-us-all-die!” he snatched Jacob forcefully and Tiffany let go.

Jacob cried as Greg dragged him away from his family. He struggled hard but Greg was too strong for him. Greg dragged him down the basement and his parent heard him cry for help. Then Jacob went silent.

“My baby!” Chloe said as she cried and gnashed her teeth.

Greg returned to the living room with a dagger in his right hand, and blood all over his trousers and hands.

“Oh my God!” Chloe cried, “My baby! No! No!” She repetitively stamped her feet on the floor. “My baby!”

“Jacob?” Tiffany sobbed.

“What have you done?” Jerome said. “You sick bastard!”

“You devil!” Chloe yelled. “I hope you burn in hell! Coward!”

“I-told-you-not-to-yell!” Greg said. “Shh!”

Chloe held her mouth as she sobbed disconsolately.

“Now,” Greg remarked as he sat down on the cushion once again. “You’ve got twenty more minutes to save one of your daughters!” He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face, pulled off his glasses and cleaned it with his shirt then wore it back. Greg took his time to clean the blood in his hands with the hanky. “That makes it about eighteen minutes left,” he kept the dagger on the table next to the pistol.

“You demented fool!” Jerome said, “Bastard!”

“If I were you, I’ll try and save my children, man!” He said as he sighed, “Okay, let me make it easier on you. Let me give you a clue; the clue is that I’ve already given you a clue!” He snorted.

“My baby!” Chloe couldn’t compose herself, “Oh God, my baby! I am so sorry, baby!”

“Mom, dad!” Tiffany said, “What did you do?” She turned to them on her right. Tears rolled down her cheek, “Please daddy, mommy... I don’t wanna die.”

“You sick baboon!” Jerome yelled, “Okay, I’ll confess! You want confession? I’ll confess you self-righteous prat!”

“Honey,” Chloe said as she turned to her husband, “What are you talking about?”

“I saw his car down at the grocery store this evening!” Jerome added. “That’s what this is all about, right?”

“What about it?” Chloe asked.

“Yeah, Jerome.” Greg said as he laid back on the cushion. “What about it?” He stared at his watch, “sixteen minutes left!”

“You psycho!” He said, “I am no saint! And neither are you, bastard!”

“What?” Chloe responded, “I don’t get it?”

“He must have seen me with her,” Jerome said, “And so fucking what? Most married folks do it too, in case you don’t know you imbecile!”

“Most married folks do what, honey?” Chloe asked, “What are you talking about?”

“It’s the girl at the store, Christy!” He said. “This is about Christy, ain’t it?”

Greg did not utter a word.

“What about her?” Chloe asked.

Jerome turned to his wife and lowered his head.

“What about her, honey?” Chloe said, “What do you mean by, ‘This is about Christy?’ Who’s Christy?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know!” Jerome yelled, “I don’t know! She was all over me, she probably got my number from their record and she kept texting me and

insisted that we meet, okay? I tried to fight it, honey,” he turned to Chloe, “But I was weak. I am weak and foolish, I know that! I told her I’m married, okay? She didn’t care! You know these young girls, baby...She would hold me and kiss me and we did it a couple of times at the convenience. Yes, I said it and I admit it! And I had given her money from time to time, so what? How would I know it’ll get to this? I am human, I make mistakes just like anybody else! But is it enough for this sick bastard to harm our kids?” He sobbed, “Are you dating her? Is she your girlfriend or what? What are you? Some kind of Judge from heaven? I’ll tell you what you are, you fool! You’re nothing but a sick dipstick! That’s what you are!”

Chloe and Tiffany stared at Jerome.

“What?” Chloe said, “You did it a couple of times at the convenience?” She slapped Jerome and spat on him.

“Honey, I am sorry!” Jerome said, “It was the devil! I was tempted.”

“Sorry for yourself!” She said as she spat on his face again, “You disgust me, Jerome!”

Tiffany wiped the tears from her eyes and said, “Please, Greg, can you let us go now? Daddy has confessed!”

“Greg, I admit it, man!” He added as he wept, “Please, let my family go! I beg of you!”

Chloe stared at Jerome with such deep hatred as she breathe heavily. “You had our son killed by a lunatic just because you couldn’t keep your tiny self where it belong?” She said, “And all the while I thought you were different.”

“I am sorry, honey!” He added.

“Seven minutes left!” Greg said.

“Screw me!” Greg whispered.

“Yeah, Jerome!” Chloe said, “Screw you!” She turned to Greg. “Greg, you’re a nice man. Whatever we might have done to you, please forgive us. Is it something one of us did to you or is it the entire family, huh?”

“Well,” Greg responded, “You’re asking for more clues!”

“I can’t read minds, Greg.” She said, “And neither can my...super awesome faithful beloved husband.” She stared at Jerome, “The children are innocent...They know nothing, and I know you’re a man with a good heart. Please let the kids go.”

“It’s not that easy!” Greg said, “It’s not!”

The doorbell rang. Greg reached for his pistol then tiptoed towards the door, he peeped through and sighted two police officers outside the door. He walked back and placed the tip of the gun on Jerome’s temple then deactivated the device on his chair. The police officers continued to press the doorbell.

“Tell them you’re coming.” Greg said as he moved and placed the gun on the back of Jerome’s head.

“I’m coming!” Jerome hollered as he throbbed.

“Go and do what is right,” Greg said as he pulled out a bubble gum from his pocket and handed it to him. “If you want your family to live, you’ll be wise out there.” He dragged Jerome to the door.

It’s the police,” said one of the officers. “Open up!”

Greg hid behind the door and aimed his pistol at Jerome. “Gum in mouth,” he whispered as Jerome unlocked the door.

Jerome unwrapped the bubble gum and threw it into his mouth.

“Hi, officers!” Jerome said on opening the door, “Is everything alright?”

“Mr Shortner, I presume?” Said the male Officer.

“You’ve got that right,” he answered, “How may I help you?”

“Oh, well, nothing really, JS.” Said the other female officer, “This is my new partner, David. We came to uh...check on your neighbour, you know, the I.T guy; Greg Clark?”

“Can I see some I.D, please?” Jerome said.

“Whoa! Okay then,” the female Officer responded. “Show him your Identification Card, Dave!”

The male Officer pulled out his I.D card and showed it to Jerome. “Are we good?” He asked.

“Yes, almost!” Jerome answered, “Can I see yours, please?” He turned to the female Officer.

“My I.D?” She asked.

“Yes, please!” Jerome responded. “Just being cautious; a lot of fake folks trespassing lately.” He giggled as he chewed his gum.

“Ookay!” She emphasised as she pulled out her I.D Card. “So, do you have any idea where we can find him?”

“Alright, Officer...Helen Lavenpour?” Jerome said as he gazed at her I.D Card. “Legit!” He returned it to her, “Is he in some kind of trouble?”

“Oh, no.” She responded as she stood there akimbo, “Not that nice and sexy fellow!” She smiled.

“We just wanted to see him over some personal issues and um...after knocking his door with no answer we figured we should ask the neighbours,” said Officer David, “Also my uh...partner noticed that the SUV parked in front of your yard might belong to him. Do you have any idea where we can find him?”

“Well um...” Jerome remarked as he nodded, “He normally parks here sometimes.”

“Oh, really?” Officer Helen responded.

“Yeah!” He replied.

“We tried his cell phone and it’s off!” Officer David added, “Why would he park here? He’s got like a bigger garage!” He giggled, “No offence meant!”

“None taken, officer!” Jerome said. “Actually his place was burgled some weeks ago, according to what he said and he uh...he said that he hasn’t finished

paying for the car so he always parks it here whenever he's trying to avoid girlfriend issues," he laughed, "You know, bachelors and their problems?"

"Is that so?" The officer interjected.

"Yup," he responded as he nodded.

"Well, sorry to disturb you, sir!" Officer David added, "Please if you don't mind, when he comes back tell him to come down at the station; Precinct 5. Tell him it's urgent!"

"I sure will, officer." Jerome said. "You take care!"

"Goodnight, sir!" Said the Officers.

"Goodnight!" He responded as he locked the door.

Greg dragged Jerome back to his chair and activated the device.

"You've got two kids left," he said, "And at this moment, you've got less than four minutes left." He went back to his cushion and sat down looking disturbed.

"You don't want to do this, Greg!" Chloe said, "I know you, you're a good person. Please put a stop to this before it gets worse. I'll do anything you want. Please, let my babies go!"

Tiffany sobbed.

"Baby, don't cry." Chloe said, "God will pull us out of this, okay? Do not cry!"

"Mom, you know he'll pick me next, right?" Tiffany said as she cried, "He wouldn't want to harm Sam. You know that, right? Please do something, give him what he wants! Daddy, you said you'll always be there to protect me, remember?" She wiped off the snot from her nose.

"Don't say that, angel." Jerome answered, "Everything will be alright, okay?"

"No, baby, don't cry!" Chloe said, "Don't say that about your daddy." She wiped the tears from Tiffany's face, "God will intervene! He always does!"

"Then where was He when Jacob got killed, mom?" Tiffany said, "Where was He when this evil man planned his wickedness?" She sobbed, "I know I'm next!"

"Time's up, folks!" Greg said as he picked the dagger. He also picked the firearm and strapped it into the waistband of his pants. He clicked the remote and deactivated the device on Tiffany's chair as he walked towards her. "Let's go!"

"Mommy! Daddy!" She cried, "I don't wanna die! Not Today, mommy! Not today, daddy! Daddy? Save me! Oh God! Mommy!!!"

"Greg, no! No! No! Greg!" Jerome pleaded, "Please no, Greg! I have confessed to what I did wrong today! You promised to leave us if I admit my wrongs!" Jerome's eyes became swollen and red with tears. "Please not my family, they are the only thing I've got left in this world. Not them, please! They've done nothing wrong!"

Greg held Tiffany by the neck and forced her off the chair. She held the chair firmly, he pulled her by the hair and she let go. The device fell off the chair.

They all went silent as they stared at the device. Greg appeared scared too.

“If any of you scream,” Greg said as he held up the remote control, “I’ll detonate this thing right now and we’ll all blow to hell!” He put it back into his pocket and dragged Tiffany away.

“I hate you!” Tiffany yelled as she cried, “I hate all of you!” She peed in her pants. “I’ll never forgive you! I hate you all! Oh God!”

Greg grabbed her and lifted her up with one hand, he covered her mouth with the other then took her down the basement. Chloe and Jerome wept.

“Please, save my baby!” Chloe said to Jerome as she sobbed, “God, please! Where are you? Save my baby!”

Chapter Three: The Testimony.

Minutes after Greg took Tiffany down the basement, he came back with more blood in his hand. The gun was still strapped to his pants. He walked right back to the cushion and sat down with his head down.

“Tiffany!” Chloe sobbed. “Not today, why today? Why are you so heartless, Greg? Who are you?”

“I forgot to uh...charge the laptop.” He said as he sighed, “Battery down Twenty percent! We don’t have much time, guys. At least save the last one!” He turned and looked at Samantha where she laid.

“I have told you all that I did wrong today!” Jerome said. “What more do you want?”

Chloe continued to sob. She wrapped her hands around her head. “I didn’t!” She said.

“No, Chloe...” Jerome said, “He saw me at the store. Maybe she’s his...girlfriend, some amateur boys who think they’re men do not like seeing their precious jewels being tampered with.”

“I said I didn’t say what wrong I committed today!” She sobbed.

“What?” Jerome said.

“I um...” She remarked as she sighed. “I went to church, and well, I invited my best friend over ’cause we had a thanksgiving today and I wanted her to join us in celebrating how God saved our kids from an accident on Friday.”

“Honey, you didn’t do anything wrong.” Jerome said as he wrapped his left arm around her, “You did the right thing inviting Kim over to the church.”

“You don’t understand.” She said, “Kim and I, we um...Greg saw me when I was going to the restroom during service.”

“He followed you to the restroom?” Jerome asked.

“No, honey!” She replied as she turned to him, “I think he um...he saw when Kim followed me to the restroom.” She closed her eyes and bit her lower lip.

“What are you talking about, honey?” Jerome asked.

“Damn you!” Chloe yelled as she covered her face with her palm. “We kissed in the restroom, Kim and I. I am so sorry, Jerome. I know I’ve messed up; I promised to stop it after we got married, I am so sorry.” She sobbed, “Kim just couldn’t let go...She kept coming and asking for more, and I just...I just couldn’t resist! It’s the devil, baby. I am so sorry!”

Jerome gently withdrew his hand off of her shoulders. He gazed at Greg and heaved a heavy sigh. “It’s okay!” He said, “It is okay, honey. Let’s put the past behind us.”

“It’s not okay, okay?” She added, “We did it in the restroom. She can’t come over to the house because of the kids and I don’t want you to find out, the church was the only place we’d meet and...Kim carried some vibrators in her bag. Maybe he saw it?” She sighed heavily, “Maybe he took some shots! But

so freaking what?" She lifted her head up and stared at Greg, "It's my life! It's our lives! You have no right!" She yelled, "You self-righteous bastard! You'll rot in hell!"

"What are you saying, honey?" Jerome asked.

"We did it in the church restroom countless times!" She said, "All the times I've invited her over to the church. I am so sorry, honey. It's not that you don't satisfy me. It's just that...I couldn't resist it. I am sorry, baby!"

Jerome raised his left hand and wrapped it around Chloe once more. "It's okay, darling!" He said, "Stop crying!"

"I promise it'll never happen again, baby." She said, "I am sorry!"

They held each other as she sobbed.

"Hmm!" Greg remarked, "Beautiful...Beautiful story," he sighed, "Plus, what a coincidence; our battery here's at fifteen percent and you've got only fifteen minutes left! You two wasted more than forty minutes talking trash!"

"What?" Chloe said in shock.

"What do you mean?" Jerome asked as he lowered his hand off Chloe's shoulder.

"It means when the battery runs down, we all die!" He said, "And when your fifteen minutes elapses you'll lose your last child." He pulled out a bubble gum from his pocket again and threw it in his mouth without unwrapping it. "That's if it elapses before our battery runs down, that is!" He mumbled as he crossed his legs, "Then I'll decide what to do with the two of you!"

"You're sick!" Jerome yelled, "I'll kill you!"

"I've been waiting for you to say that, Jerome!" He said, "The difference between us is I don't talk, I act. When the thoughts come to me I just...get up and do it. When I moved in here I noticed that your family is different, you guys are not like the rest of them out there...At least that's what I thought! You guys actually encouraged me to want to settle down, you know; have my own family and all. And when I grew fond of your kids I showed it in giving them whatever I felt they'd appreciate. They're wonderful kids. But I think they deserve better guardians."

"Greg, please!" Chloe said, "She's just a little girl! Don't take it out on her, whatever the beef is, not our little girl! I beg of you!" She sobbed, "Jerome, do something about it!"

"We told you all we did today, man!" Jerome said, "What more do you want? What have we done to deserve this? Why do you hate us so much, Greg?"

"I don't hate you!" He said, "I don't hate your kids! You're the...haters here, not me, guys! I am just a product of your words!" He paused and sighed. After a long thought he smiled, "Can I ask you a question?"

Chloe turned and looked at her husband, "Yes!" She answered reluctantly.

“I’ll need an answer from any of you,” he said. “Now, what do you think will happen if the neighbourhood wakes up tomorrow morning to discover that your house was invaded and everybody was killed?”

Jerome and Chloe looked at each other, she held his hand tight.

“I asked you a question!” He added.

“They’ll call the police?” Chloe said.

“Well,” Greg remarked, “Yes, that’s for sure but...how do you think they’ll react to the incident? Do you think they’ll rejoice and say, ‘Oh thank God, it’s not my house? It’s not my family?’”

“Well uh...” Jerome said, “Unless if they despise us, I don’t think anyone in the neighbourhood would say that!”

“Alright!” Greg said as he nodded, “I have another question.” He bit his lower lip, “Okay, let’s check out this scenario; let’s say you’re some leader or president of some sort or say, just an ordinary citizen. Now, let’s imagine this; say some crazy guy or some terrorist gets their hands on a nuclear bomb and then say they’d pick a country at random and fire their new found arsenal. And let’s say they launch it at a neighbouring country, killing almost everybody in that country. More than a million plus innocent lives, and say no harm gets to you and your loved ones, and the entire people of your beloved country...would you rejoice over that?”

“No.” Chloe and Jerome said in unison.

“Oh come on, guys!” He said, “No harm gets to you and your children, your jobs, lives and property is secured. You know, family and friends? Won’t you dance to it when it appears on the news that the bomb hits the neighbouring country and not yours?”

Jerome and Chloe nodded.

“No,” she said, “We won’t.”

“But at least you’ve got to thank God, right?” Greg added, “Besides, He saved you from total annihilation! So it’ll be wise to dance and rejoice and bless His name, eh?”

“Is it a trick question?” Chloe asked as tears rolled down her cheek.

“Nope!” Greg responded, “It’s no trick question, Chloe.” He stood to his feet and walked to where Samantha was laid. He stared at Samantha for a while in her sleep then leaned and picked her up. Greg held her close to his heart. Samantha stretched, yawned and continued sleeping. The couple were frightened.

“Please, not my little girl!” Chloe said, “She’s innocent! She hasn’t done anything wrong!”

“Are you sure?” Greg said as he giggled. “Has she been baptised yet?”

“She is just a kid, God damn it!” Jerome yelled. “Are you insane?”

“Maybe I am, Jerome!” He said, “Maybe I am.” He kissed Samantha on the forehead. “You can just stand up and blow us all to hell so I wouldn’t harm your little girl, guys. What are you waiting for, huh?”

“You bastard!” Jerome yelled, “You’ll never get away with this! You’re a coward!”

“Are you yelling now, doc?” Greg said as he walked to the cushion and sat down. “We have a rule against yelling, remember?” He picked the remote.

“Uncle Grey?” Samantha whispered in a weak tone as she woke up from sleep. “Where-is-my-gift?” She mumbled.

“It’s around your wrist,” Greg said as he smiled, “See?” He pointed it to her.

“I want it,” She mumbled, “I want my gift. Take it off.”

Greg gently managed to take it off and handed it to her. She clung to it with her left hand and laid her head back on his chest. Greg pulled out the gun from his pants with his right hand and kept it on the small glass table then picked the dagger and stood up.

“Please no. Greg, please, don’t!” Chloe said. “Please, can I hold my baby?”

“You can’t have her,” he said, “she’s not safe in your hands.”

“But we confessed our wrongs!” Chloe added. “I can’t hold this any longer!” She wept. “I can’t let you do this!” She appeared restless on the chair as though she would stand up.

“You’ve confessed the wrongs you’ve done to one another.” He said, “Nothing you both said affected me in any way! This is about something you did today that pierced my heart. This isn’t about your infidelity to each other, guys. I don’t care what you do with your lives. Let’s face it, it’s your life!”

“Then what it is?” Chloe asked.

“Freeze!” Said a female voice. “I swear to God I won’t hesitate to shoot if you move an inch, Greg!”

“Drop your weapon!” Said another male voice.

Jerome turned and saw the two officers that knocked on the door earlier. Chloe calmed herself on her chair. The Officers stood in the space between the dining area and the living room. As soon as Greg turned, the bracelet fell off of Samantha’s hand and ricocheted on the blade, Officer Helen fired a shot as her eyes picked the reflection from the blade before the bracelet landed on the floor; the bullet pierced through Greg’s throat. He held on to Samantha and managed to fall on the cushion as blood gushed from his neck wound. The little girl began to cry on sighting Greg trying to save his breath as she held his neck with his right hand.

“Uncle Grey?” Samantha cried, “Mammy? Daddy!”

Officer David rushed and seized Samantha from Greg. “Call the paramedics!” He said.

Helen ran and checked his pulse, “Greg, can you hear me?”

His cold eyes gazed into the officer’s soul, he smiled.

“Where are the rest of your kids?” She asked as she turned to the couple.

“They’re...dead, in the basement!” Jerome said. “He killed them!”

The officer then ran towards Jerome and Chloe. After studying the device she said, “Help is already on the way, you guys should hold still. I know nothing about this stuff. We’ll get the experts, okay?” She pulled out her walkie-talkie and put a call through to dispatch and informed them on the current situation, she asked them to hurry up.

“All units have been dispatched to your location ten minutes ago!” Said the voice over the walkie-talkie.

Chloe sobbed and asked for Samantha be brought to her but the officers insisted that Samantha be kept far away from the house as possible. The two officers left the couple in the living room and by the time they got to the door, sirens were already wailing. The police surrounded the building with their vehicles. Ambulances and news trucks arrived the scene as a chopper hovered above the neighbourhood.

A bomb squad was quickly sent in to defuse the bomb but they discovered that the devices were all dummies. Jerome and Chloe were ordered to move out of the house immediately after being set free, and the officers searched throughout the house for any other hidden device or bomb.

While outside, Officer Helen handed Samantha over to her mother.

“Thank you, Officer!” She said as she wiped her tears, “How did you know he was in the house?”

“Well,” Helen remarked, “When we came to your house earlier, your husband came out and demanded that my new partner provide his I.D, which was okay, but when he insisted that I provide my mine, I smelled something fishy because we’ve known each other for quite some time and he knows my husband, I mean; they work in the same hospital so I got a little suspicious. I explained it to my partner after we left the house and he advised that we sneak into your home. My partner helped break through your kitchen window and that’s when we heard the conversation.” She snorted, “But before then, I had put a call through to dispatch about a possible hostile situation.”

“Thank you, Helen!” Jerome said. “We can’t thank you enough!”

As the chopper hovered above the building, an officer ran out of the house to meet the couple outside with some news. “We’ve found two kids alive in the basement but heavily dosed and asleep,” said the Officer, “Injected with some kind of anaesthetic, I think. But they appear fine! There was a small bottle of chloroform found in the dead guy’s pocket.”

“Oh my God!” Chloe said. She and Jerome hugged each other joyfully.

“Alright, get the stretchers!” Helen ordered, “How about Andy and his team?”

“They’ve skimmed the entire house,” the Officer added, “Found nothing”

“So it’s safe to go in?” Helen asked.

“100!” He nodded.

The officer along with some paramedics wheeled in three stretchers and a body bag into the house. Minutes later, Greg's body was taken out of the house. Another officer called Helen aside and spoke to her, she then walked to Jerome and Chloe.

"The gun Greg held was fake!" She said, "But the blood wasn't. It's his blood! There was a tube found strapped around his right arm under his shirt. It is discovered that he had a plastic tube sealed off with a cap, attached to a needle that's inserted into his vein. It was held in place with tape and bandages!"

More paramedics came out with Jacob and Tiffany all strapped on stretchers and fed oxygen through a Venturi mask.

"My babies!" Chloe said as she rushed towards them, "Oh my babies!" She kissed Jacob then Tiffany. Who appeared to be heavily asleep.

"Ma'am!" Said one of the Officers. "Please allow the medics to do their job. Your kids are going to be fine. They are safe now!"

Jerome held Chloe and they both moved aside, the paramedics wheeled in the stretchers into the ambulances and zoomed off.

"It's cold outside," said Helen, "Maybe you need to take Samantha in."

"Yeah, that will be a good idea." Officer David added.

The officers assured the couple that their kids were in good hands as they led them into their home. Some men in black suits later walked into the house and interviewed the two officers before approaching the couple.

"Hello Mr and Mrs Shortner." Said one of the men as he opened a booklet, "I'm Detective Hazer, I understand that this is rather a tough time for you but hope you don't mind me asking you some important questions?"

"Not at all," Jerome said, "It's alright, Detective." He held Chloe while she kissed Samantha on the forehead.

"Do you have any idea why the deceased, Greg Clark, would want to attack your home?" The Detective asked. "What exactly happened here? I am sorry but this is a normal procedure, it's for your benefit!"

"Well," Jerome said, "Not that I know of, however, he did mention that my wife and I did something earlier today that hurt him. He was bitter!"

"He used to be a nice man!" Chloe said, "A perfect gentleman... Very kind, until this evening!"

"We don't know what we've done wrong." Jerome said, "He was a cool guy! Used to... buy nice things for the kids. Very calm and sweet fellow!"

"Remember what I said when I came to your house earlier?" Officer Helen said as she walked towards them.

"Yeah," Jerome responded, "You said something about him having some issues or so?"

"Well," she remarked, "did he tell you he had a seven year old son out of wedlock?"

“No,” Jerome said, “he was single, that we know, and all the while he never said anything about having a kid. Had only one girlfriend that we know of, Gina, yeah...that’s her name.”

“How often did he uh...come around the house?” The detective asked.

“The kids loved him.” Chloe added, “He bought lots of gifts for Sam. He comes from time to time, and we loved having him around. He was...kind. A nice man.”

“Well,” the detective said, “The truth is he had a kid...” He sighed, “...and the child was supposed to come stay with him for the first time in a long while. Because Greg was denied access to see his son since birth, recently he and the mother of his child reached an agreement in court and Greg was granted the opportunity to be with his son, but uh...I guess Greg never saw him, and didn’t hear from the child’s mother as well the day his son was to be brought over.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Chloe asked.

“Greg’s son and his mother were among the few people that died in an accident that took the lives of four other people last Friday. They were badly burnt.” Helen said, “And I think he found out this morning or so, and um...that’s why I came to tell him after their bodies were identified. So on sighting his vehicle parked in front of your house, I thought he was here.”

“This doesn’t make any sense!” Jerome said.

“Did he say why he attacked your family?” Helen asked.

“Not really,” Jerome said. “Like I said, he only stated that my wife and I did something wrong that hurt him today, and that if we confess...he’ll uh...let us go in peace...” he turned to his wife. “Oh shit!”

“What’s that?” Helen asked. “Why did you say that? Did you know anything that could aid in this investigation, Jerome? Talk to me!”

“He was there at the church this morning,” Chloe said, “When we gave the testimony about how God saved our kids from the crash.”

“Are you Christians?” The detective asked.

“Yes, sure!” Jerome answered. “We are...”

“You said your children were involved in an accident,” Detective Hazer interjected. “Is that correct?”

“Yes!” Jerome answered, “Two days ago, their school bus collided with another vehicle.”

“The one that happened last Friday?” The detective asked, “The one the driver was found to be drunk?”

Chloe and Jerome nodded.

“His son was in the other vehicle that collided with your children’s school bus that day.” Helen said.

Chloe looked at Jerome, “Oh my God!” She said, “Maybe it’s...maybe it’s what we said when we gave the testimony!”

“You said he made mention of you guys doing something that hurt him today...” said the detective, “Can you clarify that, please?”

“What exactly did you say in church?” Helen asked.

“I uh...” Jerome remarked, “I uh...we said that um...”

“We said, ‘thank God...’” Chloe interjected.

“Thank God?” The curious detective remarked with a lift of his eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Chloe responded in a sad tone, “We said, ‘Thank God our children were not among the ones that lost their lives in an accident that occurred two days ago. So we came to offer our praise and thanksgiving...to God!’”

Jerome lowered his head. Helen and the detective looked at each other.

###

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