

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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To the publishers, thank you.

And to my readers, enjoy.

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DEDICATION

To Malaika...my baby that lived for less than a day.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the second book I wrote at seventeen, that was in 2002 - I'd just graduated from secondary school. The first book I wrote (Lauretta) was total crap, not worthy to even be read by me. I grimace every time I happen on it. However, that's the book that launched me into the believe that I could actually write full length novels.

So, I tried again, but this time, I'd left home for the university. The setting for this book naturally became my location at the time - the University of Calabar, Cross River State. You dear readers will find that the tone of this writing is different, reflecting my age and experience at the time.

This was first published on Okadabooks, and nowhere else. With the fall of Okadabooks, this and lots more of my earlier works will be migrating to Selar at extremely reduced prices. I hope you enjoy them and appreciate the growth of this humble author.

Love,
Emem Basseyy.

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CHAPTER ONE

The atmosphere was cool and smelt of damp sand, evidence of the night's rain; dew hung suspended in the air like clouds of smoke and made for poor visibility at a distance. At seven am the staff quarters of the University of Calabar was deserted except for a couple of akara hawkers and a handful of cleaners.

The cleaners arrived work at some minutes to seven, today was no exception. Mercy moved to her allotted spot, leaving the other four, of which she was the youngest, to retreat to their own allocations. The staff quarters was built like a suburb, a connection of tarred roads, houses of the same size, style and hue with a lot of trees. Her spot included a stretch of the tarred road and one of the houses. Mercy sighed wearily as she paused and stared at the stretch of road and the front yard of the house which she was supposed to sweep, it was now a routine to do so, she had formed the habit of pausing to think of the tediousness of the job before beginning the act of sweeping. She sighed again, even wearier than the first time, she picked up her broom and started sweeping. She would have begun her sweeping from the front yard of the house but there was a strange car parked there and she could spy dead leaves under the car.

Thirty-five minutes later, she'd finished with the road and sidewalk, perspiration suffused her face and arm, her waist ached dully, as it'd been doing for the past month that she'd been working as a sweeper or cleaner as her employers chose to call it, she thought sarcastically. Mercy bent backwards, placing her hands at the small of her back to ease the dull ache, her face screwing up in a grimace.

After packing the dead leaves into a metal dustbin, she looked up and discovered that the car was still parked in front of the house. Her irk increased, she was tempted to go home, take a bath and sleep the whole day off, but the weasel like man that lived there would immediately report her to her employers, and that would cause a dent in her salary, not an attractive thought, she needed every kobo of her salary and more. So, with this thought in mind and a struggling surge of determination, Mercy carried her sweeping equipment and moved to the house. She placed the metal bin a few yards from the short flight of the house' stairs before beginning to sweep dead, wet leaves that were stuck in the sand like leaches on its victims. Mercy struggled with the doggedly stuck, dead leaves, sweat poured from her pores despite the cold weather, with grimly tightened lips, she cursed those that thought it a good idea to plant so many trees in one place, consciously ignoring the fact that she knew its advantages.

Mercy swept the portion around the stairs and packed the leaves into the metal bin. As she began sweeping, the rest of the compound, she heard angrily raised voices coming from the weasel man's house. Not her business, she just needed the scrap of a car out of her broom's way, Mercy thought wickedly, even after noticing how beautiful and gleaming the car was but it gave her perverse joy to regard it as scrap.

Suddenly, the door burst open, releasing a tall, dark, quite handsome, not that Mercy noticed, and very angry man. She heard the weasel man's voice in the hallway, "Mr Craig, I'm very sorry about this. I would have explained more but I'd be late for work."

"Oh please, go take your bath, Mr Udoma, its probably running cold this minute," the sarcasm wasn't lost on both listeners. "We will finish this discussion after work, which I might remind you, I also have," he concluded and let the door bang shut.

Mercy started from the force of it. She watched as the angry man glided down the short flight of stairs and strode towards his car. Unfortunately, the metal bin was in his way and he kicked it over without a backward glance.

Mercy watched in stunned silence as the man continued striding towards his car without as much as a 'by your leave', no apology, not even an apologetic wave of the hand. Thoughts of the stress she'd gone through to sweep up the annoying dead leaves quickly crossed her mind, thoughts of how she would go through that kind of stress again filled her chest with unbridled anger and she barked at the retreating back, "Excuse me sir! See wetin you don do for my dust bin and the place where I don sweep finish."

The man stopped in the act of unlocking his car and turned to look at the direction the voice had come from. His expression was a little of surprise, as if he'd just noticed her for the first time and the rest was still anger.

"You should know how you address your superiors," the man said through clenched teeth.

"Make I know how I dey address my superiors were no get manners," Mercy hissed, continuing her rant in Pidgin English.

"I'm not surprised. Like master, like servant. Is this what you are paid to do, insult people?" Jim asked, a little stunned at the girl's daring. Just as Mercy readied herself to retort, a deafening screech pierced the air. The fighters paused, looking around furtively to avoid an onlooker, the street was deserted, the other cleaners

were long gone. So, where was the cry coming from, Mercy thought with a frown and listened closely. The weasel man wasn't married; talk more of having a baby. The cry seemed to be coming from the garden beside the house.

CHAPTER TWO

With disparate thoughts, Mercy and Jim moved towards the screech-like cry. If they had both paused to notice, they might have seen concern etched on their faces. Mercy moved faster than Jim, sweeping away cocoyam leaves with droplets of water out of her way, without meaning to, she let it slap Jim in the face as he followed closely.

"Be careful!" he exclaimed after the third cocoyam leaf slap, but Mercy didn't hear him, she had discovered the source of the cry, a carton of cabin biscuit. Without hesitation, she leaned down and lifted the wailing baby out of the slightly damp carton.

"It's a baby", she crooned in awe, unconsciously rocking the now whimpering bundle. Jim scoffed.

"Of course it's a baby. What were you expecting, some bizarre creature that cried like a baby?" The sarcasm was lost on Mercy, she had eyes and ears only for the blue bundle she held in the cove of her arms. Jim rolled his eyes in exasperation, but couldn't help the sudden quickening of his heart when he went close to Mercy and looked over her shoulder at the baby. He silently attributed the flutter of his heart to the breath taking beauty of the baby rather than the sudden whiff of flowery scent emanating from the lady before him.

"What's the gender?" he asked gruffly. His deep, disturbingly sexy voice broke through the baby haze fogging Mercy's brain...and ears. She realized suddenly that the 'rude' man was standing so close she could perceive his aftershave. With shaky hands, she slightly pulled down the baby's pants and diaper.

"It's a boy", she murmured over her shoulder not daring to look at the man behind her. The baby smiled as he stared at Mercy and without notice reached up and grabbed her cardigan, where her breast protruded.

Unwillingly, Jim's eyes shifted to the swells of her very attractive....

"He seems to like you".

"I...um..." Mercy stammered in embarrassment, while Jim reached over her shoulder to touch the baby, he turned and gave Jim a toothless grin.

"He likes you too", Mercy said in a nervous rush. Jim only grunted and tenderly pulled up the baby's eyelid, he tensed and said, "We have to get him to a hospital".

"What?! Why?" Mercy asked suspiciously, holding the baby close to her bosom.

"He has severe jaundice".

"Really; how would you possibly know that?"

"Because his eyes are yellow and I'm a doctor for Christ's sake", Jim added impatiently.

"I don't believe..."

"Wait. Lady, I see that you want to play mother to this poor baby in this garden like the Amazons, but at least do it well, safe the child's life first". Mercy heard the sarcasm this time and bristled angrily.

"You don't have to sound that way. We found the baby together, so we are in this together". There was a heavy pause, then Jim said, "Right. I think I got that, can we go now?"

"To where?"

"Oh, for the love of Christ, lady!" Jim exclaimed in exasperation.

"The name of the hospital..." dumbass, Mercy thought snidely. Jim narrowed his eyes suspiciously, as he stared at the lady's puckered face, she had almost called him a bad name but held her tongue just before it came out. How did he get himself into this tender mess, he thought gravely.

CHAPTER THREE

After a short pause, Jim answered her in a weary voice, "Phoenix, on Marian road". "Oh, the private clinic," Mercy commented to herself as she recognized the very high-class clinic which they were headed.

"Can we go now?" Jim asked dryly. Mercy only nodded and followed his lead. When they were almost at his car, Mercy thought aloud. "Shouldn't we inform 'weasel-man' of this development?" she spoke exactly as the words formed in her mind without censor, instantly pausing Jim in his track. She realized her mistake then and her mouth dropped open in silent alarm and disconcertion.

Jim turned with shocked exasperation to look at her. "You really have a propensity for insults, don't you?"

"I'm sorry." Mercy answered lamely. The laugh was so sudden it left her speechless, the deep quality of his voice tickled humor from the darkest part of her stomach, and unwillingly her lips twitched.

"Weasel-man, eh?" he asked, humor still twinkling in his eyes, Mercy looked apologetic.

"When I think about it, he does really look weasel like, especially since he thinks and acts like one." He chuckled again and continued towards his car with long strides, all the while wondering what horrible name the dark beauty must have tagged him? He decided in his mind not to bother about that particular line of thought, he didn't know the woman and he was very sure by the end of the morning they would go their separate ways...after taking care of the baby's welfare of course, he thought wryly.

He unlocked his car from the passenger's side and held it open for Mercy; he closed it after she was comfortable and went round the car. Mercy couldn't help but stare at the fine male specimen and thought how lucky his wife was, she quickly looked away when he got into the driver's seat.

"I don't think it necessary to bother 'the weasel' on this development. He has too much on his plate already...the guy might even try to sell the baby." he concluded with a smile as he drove out of the premises. Mercy looked sideways at his profile to gauge his expression...he was still smiling. "He's that bad, I tell you." Mercy only smiled with an unsure expression and looked away.

The air conditioning filled the car with cool breeze, Mercy rearranged the shawl of the now sleeping baby to protect him from the cold and felt a dry rustle in the folds of the shawl. She frowned and searched for what made the rustling sound, dipping

her hand into the shawl and blindly fishing for it. Jim noticed, he glanced at her briefly as he drove.

"What's the problem?"

"I felt something..."she paused as her hand came up with a crumpled piece of paper.

"What's on it?" he asked, giving her nano-seconds side-glances. Mercy straightened the paper and read from it, "His name is William, he's three months old."

"Well...that helped...medically." Mercy had no reply for the doctor, she wondered how a mother would have the guts to look at this 'nature's miracle' and callously throw it away. Anything could have hurt the baby in that thick, uncared for garden, in Mercy's opinion, abortion was more humane, at least the baby won't feel pain or discomfort. The car remained silent, each person thinking their own thoughts as they sped towards Phoenix.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mercy wrinkled her nose as the sterile and antiseptic smell of the hospital hit her the moment she stepped into the modernized clinic. The doctor gave out orders the instant he walked into the place; nurses scurried around to do his bidding. Mercy watched in awe and fascination as everybody respected him, it wasn't their fault, Mercy thought quietly, the man's carriage demanded respect, his stature could only be described as charismatic. But a small part of her mind reminded her that she hadn't respected the man back at the garden despite his carriage, she immediately shook her head to clear that thought.

"A room as been set up to examine the baby", a nurse announced at Mercy's shoulder. She got up, cradling the baby close and followed the nurse. They went through a shiny clean corridor, where the antiseptic smell seemed concentrated which took them to a small white room with a couple of chairs and two baby cots. The light in the room was brighter than the ones lighting the corridor, bright enough to make Mercy squint momentarily as she walked in. When her eyes got accustomed to the light a few seconds after she came in to the room, she noticed two more nurses in the room. One was straightening the bed sheet on one of the cots, the other was mixing baby formula in a feeding bottle. The nurse that Mercy had followed into the room came forward to take the baby from her, obviously to feed it, but the sleeping baby cried out immediately he was taken out of Mercy's arms. She thought the baby would quieten after a few minutes of calming movements which the nurse was making, but the cry increased instead.

"Let me try", Mercy said at the nurse's elbow, trying to make herself heard over the din the baby was making. The nurse turned around to face Mercy and reluctantly handed the baby over to Mercy. After a few minutes of soft croons in the baby's ear and slow rocks, the baby kept quiet and proceeded to suck his thumb. Mercy was sorry to see the nurse look disappointed, but it felt good, too good, to have been able to quieten the baby and a professional couldn't, she smiled at the thought and pretended she was smiling at the baby who was vigorously sucking on his tiny pink thumb.

This was the scenario that Jim walked in on, he paused at the door to stare at the tender moment between woman and child, he felt a twinge of surprise that a woman of this era could be so tender and caring to a baby picked up in a garden.

"Nurse Lawrence", Jim called to the nurse with the feeding bottle.

"Yes doctor".

“Forget about the formula, use a fresh bottle to mix two leveled teaspoons of glucose in tepid water for the baby to drink”.

“Yes doctor”, she replied and hurried off to do as was told.

“Matron Ucheaga”.

“Yes doctor”.

“Please send someone to the store to get me a blue bulb, there should still be a couple remaining and on your way back, ask Koko at the kitchen to arrange a tea tray at my office”.

“Okay, doctor”, the matron answered and ushered the other nurse out of the room with her.

Jim turned to the very quiet Mercy and watched with respect as she carefully fed the baby glucose water. The baby’s mouth latched on the plastic nipple of the feeding bottle and sucked vigorously, his eyes slowly drooped as he sucked, obviously enjoying it.

“He must have really been thirsty, or hungry or both”, Mercy commented with concern etched on her brows as she fed the baby.

“Yes, he must have been”, Jim answered distractedly as he studied the woman’s profile; unwillingly his eyes’ first stop was at her breast. He shook his head disgustingly and sharply moved his gaze to her dark, up long face which was presently bent tenderly over the baby. He’d earlier noticed that she had brown eyes and those eyes stood defiantly over a cute, perky nose and a mouth that he wouldn’t mind tasting to see if it was as soft as it looked.

Jesus Christ, Jim silently exclaimed, what was he doing, thinking of stuffs like that, he barely knew the woman’s name. Just then the woman in question turned suddenly and caught him staring. Mercy’s eyebrows went up in a silent question. Jim felt embarrassed but didn’t show it, instead he pushed both hands into his pockets and said, “I didn’t get your name, mine is Jim Craig...your assistant rescue agent.”

Mercy frowned in contemplation, she thought they had already introduced themselves, she thought hard but couldn’t remember, her mind seemed to only want to remember the look that was on the man’s face when she caught him staring at her. She smiled at his joke despite the thoughts in her head and replied, “The name’s Mercy, Mercy Thomas.”

No accent, Jim thought, he had been listening for one, and he wondered where she came from. And of what use would that be to you Doctor Jim, he thought

sarcastically, he didn't like the direction his mind was drifting to. "So Mercy, have you catered for a child before?"

Mercy looked up from trying to make the baby to burp, "No, I've not," she replied with a shake of her head.

"You seem experienced in baby care," Jim said and slightly screwed up his face, he couldn't believe his lameness, how could such a comment leave his mouth, and what do you care, his mind asked. It's not as if you are interested in her, he told himself quietly.

Mercy's frown deepened, her head was slightly cocked as she wondered if the man was flirting with her. "Isn't motherly instinct supposed to come naturally?"

"Not to all women," Jim said with an angry frown. He was angry that Mercy had a cool reply to his very lame comment; it didn't stop him from noticing that she had a sharp mind.

There was a slight pause in conversation and Mercy's mind grabbed it to continue wondering. The man must be married, he should be married, why would he want to flirt with her, she thought. The charismatic tag she had given to his stature began to deflate, but, her mind continued, you don't really know if he's married or not, get proof first. "To what end?" Mercy whispered, she had unconsciously voiced her thoughts.

"Excuse me?"

"Uh?" Mercy said in confusion, her eyes widened innocently to hide her treacherous thoughts. The baby decided to release a loud belch at that moment, unknowingly saving Mercy from embarrassment.

"You said something," Jim said with a contemplating expression on his face.

"Oh, err...I...wanted to ask why he was given water instead of the formula?"

Mercy asked with a fluster, she arranged the sleeping baby into the crook of her arm.

"That's to help him urinate more; the jaundice goes out with frequent urination."

The matron came at that moment, she handed the blue bulb to Jim.

"Thank you matron, that will be all for now." The matron nodded and went out.

Jim fixed the blue bulb over the dressed cot and lit it.

"So what is the light for?"

"Err...to put it in a lay man's term, the mild heat from the bulb is to dry the baby,"

Jim tried to explain but got a confused look from Mercy.

"It sort of evaporates the jaundice from the baby's body."

“Oh,” Mercy said in understanding. This encouraged Jim to explain further.

“Ideally, the early morning sun from seven to nine am is the best source of vitamin D for this treatment.”

Mercy quickly checked her wristwatch, “Well, this is just 8:30am, shouldn’t he be...” she started to protest.

“I knew that was going to be your next argument. With the global warming on the increase and not forgetting the fact that this is the dry season, the rays of the sun get hot quickly. If that baby is put out there now, he will only get sun burned,” Jim explained, unable to hide the smugness in his tone.

“Oh,” was the only thing Mercy could say again after his explanation. She should have shut her big mouth, after all the baby wasn’t hers.

“You seem pretty inquisitive, Miss Thomas,” Jim commented with a smile. Mercy didn’t return the smile, she recognized the irony in his comment, he was indirectly calling her a doubting Thomas, the gumption of the man, she thought furiously.

“I think the bed is considerably warm, you can lay him down now.”

“Sure,” Mercy said with a forced smile, she stood up with the baby and took him to his bluish cot, the light reflected on every corner of the cot, and now on the naked baby, Jim had directed her to remove his cloths so that the light would warm his skin directly.

Mercy felt reluctant leaving the baby alone in his warm cot, so she asked, “Is he going to be here alone?”

“No,” he replied with a quizzical expression, “I’ll get a nurse in here. He has to be turned every few minutes so that the light would warm his whole torso.”

Mercy nodded and looked satisfied before following him out into the corridor again. There was a nurse waiting out there, a very young nurse, probably an intern, Mercy thought.

“The matron sent you here?” Jim asked and the young nurse nodded. “Did she tell you what to do?”

“Yes doctor. She said I’m to change the baby’s position every ten to fifteen minutes.”

“That’s right, go ahead.” The nurse went into the room they’d just come out from. The matron walked purposefully towards them and handed Jim a clipboard, she didn’t need to explain anything, he took one look at what was written on it and walked away, giving instructions over his shoulder, one of them being, “Please show the lady to my office,” he said before branching off to a connecting corridor.

The door to the air-conditioned office bang shot, leaving Mercy alone to shamelessly inhale with pleasure the heavenly aroma of tea with a lot of milk in it. She walked to the mahogany table, her eyes only fixed on the tray, the tea spread was impressive. Her stomach grumbled loudly, Mercy failed to admire the furnishings in the office; she had eyes only for the plate of biscuit with fat chunks of cake with icing. Mercy buried one of the chunks of cake in her mouth and sighed loudly as her taste bud reveled in the creaminess of the refrigerated cake. She picked up the over turned cup of tea and proceeded to fill it from the ceramic jug. She took a sip, and another, the creamy sweetness trickled down her throat making her stomach rumble again, Mercy rushed a stick of biscuit, she only read the engravings on the body of the biscuit after she had had about four helpings, “Hmm, hobnobs digestive biscuit,” she read to herself and finished off the fifth helping.

My God, this is paradise, she thought to herself. She wished her mum were here to enjoy this, especially the cake. Christ, she thought alarmingly, she had totally forgotten about her mum. Mercy checked her wristwatch, she should have been home an hour ago, her mum will be worried and her cousin, Daniel, would have left for school hungry. She felt instantly guilty for enjoying a royal breakfast when she knew there was nothing at home.

Wait, she thought, this biscuits and cake were too much for her. She could take some home; her mum would sure appreciate it and Daniel, well if he hasn't gone to school yet, could have some. Mercy unzipped her purse and found a black nylon bag, she put two fat chunks of cake in it and paused, her heart was thudding, what would the doctor think of her. Probably think you are glutton...and a 'thomas', her mind replied. “But think about your mum and Daniel,” she said to herself, damn what the doctor thought about her, it wasn't as if she had any interest in him, he was probably married. With that, Mercy turned the whole plate of cakes and biscuit into the nylon bag and wondered as she was tying it, how she was going to smuggle it out of the office without the knowledge of the doctor.

“You want some more?” the unmistakable voice of the doctor startled her. Oh crap, she thought, she swallowed her embarrassment and turned to meet his laughing eyes with a defiant smile.

“No, thank you, I'm okay.”

“For the little ones at home, I presume?” Jim asked as he went round to his chair behind the desk.

Thank God, she thought, “Yes”, she replied, now she wouldn’t have to worry about smuggling it out. Mercy cleared her throat and fished for conversation. “So, what kind of hospital has such sumptuous cake just lying around for the eating?”

Jim looked up with raised eyebrows and replied, “Mine.” Their eyes clashed for a few seconds and then Mercy cleared her throat again.

“Wow, you must really charge much here,” her sarcasm wasn’t lost on him.

“There was a birthday party here last night. Not that it’s any of your concern what I charge my patients.”

“Yours...the birthday, I mean?”

“It’s not important,” he said softly, “About the baby,” he changed the topic abruptly, Mercy sat up. “I thank you very much for the concern and care you’ve shown to the baby, it’s such a rare thing to find in the world as it is now.”

Mercy’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, what was he getting at with his well placed speech.

“I suggest you go home and err...try to forget about the baby...” Mercy’s eyes widened at this, “...I believe I’m in a better position to take care of the baby and do what’s best for him. And, of course, there is a handsome reward for you Miss Thomas.”

“No!” she exclaimed with the force of her anger.

“What now?” Jim asked in exasperation.

“I don’t need your money or any form of reward, we found that baby together, so we are in this together. Any decisions taken for the welfare of that baby must also be made known to me,” she finished forcefully.

“There is no need to get upset about this, Miss...”

“I’m not upset about this, Mr. Craig,” she said through clenched teeth, trying with difficulty to control her anger.

“Look...”

“No, you look,” she cut in staunchly, “...money isn’t everything. That baby deserves more than that, money can’t give love or succor, which is exactly what he needs.”

“I admire your verve and concern for the baby but...”

“I stand by my words, Mr. Craig. I always do.” She said in finality and Jim knew then that he was not going to be able to back her down. Well, she asked for it, he thought and she was going to get it.

“So be it, Miss Thomas.”

“Yes...” she enquired.

“Be here by 9:00am tomorrow and we’ll pick it up from there,” he said and stood up, signifying that the discussion was at its end. Mercy didn’t want him to leave the office ahead of her, so she stood up too, clutching her purse and the nylon bag filled with cake and biscuits.

“Thank you very much Mr. Craig, I will be here tomorrow, on time,” she said, turning to walk briskly towards the door but Jim beat her to it, she wondered at his agility. His large, capable hands were on the doorknob and Mercy thought he wanted to open the door for her but after a few seconds she realized that he was blocking it.

“May I...” Mercy started saying in exasperation.

“Just a minute, Miss Thomas,” the way he rolled her name out made her heart skip a beat. She looked at him wearily as he brought out his wallet and fished out three crisp five hundred naira notes.

“No, no, no, Mr...” she started protesting.

“Yes, Miss Thomas,” he interrupted her firmly.

“I stand by my...” she was interrupted again.

“I know, Miss Thomas,” he said, giving her a heart stopping smile, “This isn’t a reward, I’m sorry I even mentioned that,” Jim looked rueful and continued, “This is a gentlemanly gesture, it’s for your transport back home,” he said extending the money to her awkwardly.

His infectious smile tugged humor to her lips as she looked at him in astonishment.

“But, this is too much for just my transport,” she protested weakly, Jim knew he’d gotten to her at last.

“I’m a gentle man and this is how we do it,” he said with a smile as he reached out and took her right hand, Mercy’s stomach somersaulted at the feel of his hand on hers. He placed the money in her palm and folded her fingers over it, his hands lingered on hers as he asked lazily, “Is there anything wrong with that?”

Mercy’s heart thudded furiously, she was afraid he would here the heavy thuds as he stood so close, she suddenly felt shy and lowered her gaze.

“I’m grateful, Mr. Craig,” she said, and then she gave him her brightest smile,

“Thank you,” and was out of the door to escape his equally dashing smile, one could easily fall for that smile, she thought as she hurried out of the hospital.

When she reached the main road, she thought, an unexpected one thousand, five hundred naira was like winning the lottery. Things hadn’t always been this difficult

but when her father had died, a lot of things had changed, she had even discovered some shortcuts in town, and she was going to use one now to take her to the nearest market and home.

Her mother was going to be extremely worried, she thought as she checked her battered wristwatch, and Daniel would definitely have gone to school without food. She hoped he would have the sense to come back home during his break time as his school was close to the house, by then she'd have prepared something with some of this money. Mercy smiled, feeling light hearted and quickened her steps.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Mrs. Thomas said to her daughter. Mercy knew that her mother’s version of ‘looking for her everywhere,’ meant sitting in her rocking chair, on the veranda of their two rooms; watching every single person that passed on the street.

“Sweet Mama,” Mercy greeted cheerily, “I went to the market.”

“The market? I could have sworn on my life...no, wait. I could have sworn on your life that we were kobo less as of this morning,” Mrs. Thomas said with surprise evident on her slightly wrinkled face.

Mercy paused in her tracks with a quizzical expression. “Why swear on my life not yours?” She had always been wary of swearing, a phobia she’d picked up as a kid.

“Sweetie, your life is more important than mine and I wouldn’t use it casually in any case but the truth.”

Mercy stood there with a drooped mouth at her mum’s explanation. “In any case, truth or not, swearing should be abolished.”

“Oh dear, I didn’t swear, I said I could have sworn...there’s a difference. You have to get over this fear of yours,” Mrs. Thomas said, getting up from her rocker and following her only daughter, the breadwinner of the family into the house.

“I’m trying mum,” Mercy said in exasperation.

“So, what’s the explanation for this miracle?”

“A long story mum. You might find it difficult to believe. Excuse me for a minute,”

Mercy said and walked from the kitchen into the room she shared with her cousin. She brought two bars of vanilla chocolate from her purse and hid them in her handbag then she went back to the kitchen.

Before she could say anything, her mum asked, “Where did you get all this? It’s been a while since we’ve eaten like this,” Mrs. Thomas said, looking into the bag again just to make sure her old eyes weren’t deceiving her.

“O the story!” Mercy exclaimed dramatically, “Where should I start, mum?”

Mercy asked knowing that her mum hungered for gist very much, especially because she didn’t go out often. At 57, she was a vivacious talker and a very loving mother. Though hardship had taken its toll on her, the wrinkles on her face still couldn’t hide her beauty.

“Well dear, the beginning will be just fine,” Mrs. Thomas said with a dramatic show of dignity to match her daughter’s equally dramatic exclamation, though

deep down she could feel the stirrings of satisfaction that only a good story could give. Mrs. Thomas had never denied it, she knew she was a pathological gossip. After they'd laughed off their ridiculous, dramatic show, Mercy began preparing rice, she reasoned that it would be faster than cooking soup and Daniel would have something to eat when he came home at break time. Mercy brought out the nylon of cake and biscuits; she placed two fat chunks of cake on a flat plate for her mum. "Oh my God, cakes, I love cakes," Mrs. Thomas said with excitement as she bit into one of the chunks of cake. "Ok, I'm dying to hear this story, it must have been an encounter with God," Mrs. Thomas said through a mouthful of cake.

Mercy told her mum about finding the baby, the encounter with Mr. Craig, the hospital and how modernized it was. When she finished the story, Mrs. Thomas' plate was empty and she was pushing it towards Mercy for a refill.

"Wonderful; absolutely wonderful."

"Is that the cake or the story?" Mercy asked in amusement.

"Both, my dear, both; just put some more of that cake for me again," Mrs. Thomas said licking her fingers.

"Mum! I have to keep some for Daniel," Mercy reprimanded with a smile but still dropped one piece on her plate.

"Thank you so much sweetie. You don't know how long I've desired for things like cakes, or chocolate or just plain good food. And we've not had that since your father's demise," Mrs. Thomas said close to tears.

"Mum please, don't go there," Mercy pleaded.

"No, I'm not going to cry. I take a look at this kitchen and the one we had before your father's death is like a far away dream."

"I know mum. A fridge, gas cooker with oven, very large kitchen with tiles...that is definitely a dream you should let go mum. Because we are here now in this tiny kitchen with smoke blackened wall, barely able to contain three people and we should be glad we have a kerosene stove, some people use fire wood," Mercy said and sighed heavily, "Look mum, dwelling on this past will only weigh you down...,"

"But I wanted the best for you," Mrs. Thomas interrupted.

"And the best will come, okay?" Mrs. Thomas sighed looking at her daughter lovingly.

“You are a strong girl, more like your father than me. And this doctor, baby thing, I feel it in my old bones that it is a good omen. Babies always bring good tidings,” she said with conviction.

“Oh mum, stop raising your hope, please,” Mercy pleaded sadly.

“I’ll remind you when it happens,” she said and left the kitchen before her daughter could retort. Mercy sighed wearily, her mother loved dwelling on dreaming, and then she’s the most hurt when disappointed. As for herself, she took every day as it came and she wore her disappointment as defense badges.

CHAPTER SIX

“I have called all the homes I know, Miss Thomas, and they all complain of the same thing,” Jim began complaining the instant Mercy sat opposite him in his office, he chatted on to cover the fact that his heart leaped when she walked in or the fact that he’d been thinking about her a lot.

“What did they all complain about?” Mercy asked with a racing heart.

“Lack of resources and personnel,” Jim said, arranging papers on his table. “And I have to say that I’m worried all the motherless babies’ homes are in the same committee, because their excuses all sounded the same to me.”

“Exactly how many homes are we talking about?”

“Considering my position as a doctor with the state government, I’d say a whole lot...,” Jim replied and stifled a yawn. “My morning has been filled with disheartening phone calls.”

“So, what are we going to do now?” Mercy asked anxiously, inexorably clasping and unclasping her sweaty hands.

“There is one option though,” he said, still opening drawers and dropping piles of papers in it.

“What?” Mercy asked anxiously.

“I have a friend that once worked at the social welfare department. She a *crème de la crème* of the political society and last I heard she was running a private home for orphans and vulnerable children. So, I owed some people favors to get her number and I called.” Jim paused at this point and checked his laptop computer.

Mercy tightened her lips determinedly to suppress her impatience. She wanted to bark at him to continue but instead she breathed in deeply and said, “So, what did she say?”

“Oh, we have an appointment with her in...,” Jim glanced at his wristwatch and swore under his breath, “...in about fifteen minutes,” he concluded while pushing back his seat and standing up briskly. “We should go.”

“What are you going to tell her to make her agree to taking on the baby?” Mercy asked as she followed him out of the office.

Jim frowned, “Why do you ask that?”

“Well, you said you had to owe some favors to get her number, obviously she’s not a close friend of yours, so it’s not possible that she might be doing you favors.” At this point Jim had slowed his pace and stopped walking altogether, Mercy stopped by him, when she looked up at his face, he had an expression of disbelief.

“That...is so...optimistic of you,” he said with a slight tone of sarcasm in his voice. “Do you have any suggestions to add to this predicament which we now face?”

“There is no need to carry that tone of voice with...,”

“What tone of voice?” Jim asked barely able to keep his anger in check.

“That tone of voice. I was only trying to point out that this present option doesn’t hold much hope, more like trying to warn you to brace yourself in case you get disappointed,” Mercy explained, her own temper rising with the tempo of her heart.

“Let me assure you, Miss Thomas...”

“Mercy, if you don’t mind. Stop making me feel like an old spinster,” she grouched. Jim laughed suddenly, he wasn’t expecting her comment; she couldn’t join his laughter immediately, so she settled for a slight smile.

“Okay, Mercy...”

“Help me...” another weak voice broke their mirth. Both Jim and Mercy slewed towards the voice at the same time. They rushed to the side of the feeble old woman and caught her just as her feet gave way beneath her.

Jim’s medical instincts kicked in automatically, Mercy watched as his tender looking but capable hands flew confidently from the fainting woman’s pulse to her forehead and then to her eyes. She wondered to herself, how it was that she noticed the capability of Jim’s hand in such a dire situation, someone’s life was at stake here, she reprimanded herself quietly.

“Madam, madam, can you hear me?” Jim asked the old woman whose eyes had drooped. She slowly opened them again but they weren’t focused.

“Yes,” she answered in a barely audible whisper.

“I’m going to ask you some questions please, can you answer them?” The old lady took a while before nodding weakly.

“Do you have any heart conditions, anything that might have caused this dizziness?”

“Just asthma,” she wheezed weakly.

“Your heart is palpitating; you need a lot of rest. Did you see a nurse when you came in?” The woman didn’t answer immediately, her head lolled back but Jim held her neck firmly and asked again, “Do you have anybody that we can call to...,” at that point she started wheezing.

“Mercy, please, get to the nurses’ station and get one of them.”

“Okay,” Mercy said and walked away briskly. Jim looked down at the woman and asked, “Do you have a prescribed inhaler?” It took a while before she pointed at her purse with a slow move of her right hand.

Mercy and the nurse arrived at a run. Jim gave the nurse orders, which she scurried to carry out while he asked Mercy to help with the woman’s purse. In a matter of seconds, the old woman had used her inhaler with Jim’s help and was breathing almost normally. Jim helped her up with the help of the nurse and took her into one of the rooms.

Mercy waited at the pristine corridor for a couple of minutes before Jim joined her. “Is she going to be okay?” she asked fretfully.

Jim stood in front of her and nodded. “Yes, she’ll be fine. I just wanted to ask her about who I could call, a relative, but she’s already sleeping. I guess I can do that when we get back from our appointment...” Jim said and checked his wristwatch in alarm, “...which we are already late for,” he concluded and juggled down the corridor towards the exit, dragging Mercy along with him, his left hand perfectly latched on her right wrist.

Twenty minutes after they ran out of the hospital, Jim parked his car in front of a block of modern offices. The door that had his friend’s logo was unopened. Jim walked with Mercy to the door and knocked, there was no reply, he knocked three more times before accepting the fact that the woman had not yet come to work.

“But why did she give us an appointment for ten and at ten thirty she not yet at her office?” Mercy asked irritably.

“Well, better her late than us, right?” Jim said casually and shrugged. Mercy sighed tiredly and looked around uncomfortably at the high-class business district. Jim followed all her movement discretely.

Mercy sighed again, “We never got to see the baby today.”

Jim turned fully to face her; they were leaning on the railings of the veranda. “I saw him early this morning, he’s fine. I made sure a nurse took him out for his dose of vitamin D.” Mercy’s smile almost didn’t appear, she nodded and tried to look over his shoulder but the height only made her gaze continue along his collar bone up to his face.

Mercy couldn’t take her eyes away from his mesmerizing stare; his stare was so deep she suspected he might have been looking into her soul. “In the short time

I've known you, I've noticed you worry a lot for other people," Jim said in a dangerously low voice.

Mercy swallowed with difficulty, oh yes, he was definitely looking into her soul, she thought. Her chest tightened and she had to force the words from her throat, "Why do you say that?"

"Because..., apart from the baby, the lady at the hospital, you tried to protect me from disappointment," Jim said with an endearing smile. Mercy tried to smile back but she could only manage something she imagined would look like a grimace, while Jim's stare continued unbroken.

"Who worries about you Mercy?" Jim asked in a voice that Mercy noticed was lower than before. He lifted a strand of hair from her face and stuck it behind her ear. They both were startled by the act, Jim snatched his hand away from her face while Mercy took several steps backwards. She looked flustered, deep down she felt mortified, and she couldn't look Jim in the face in case what she was feeling was plastered there.

"Where are you going?" Jim asked worriedly, as she began walking away, he should have kept his hands in his pocket, he thought dismally.

"Err...taking a walk," she answered over her shoulder, she resisted the urge to run because the rest of the offices on the block were open, she settled for closing her eyes tightly and opening it again. Mercy felt shame suffuse her; she couldn't deny that she liked the doctor's touch on her skin, even though it was the slightest touch. That man is probably married, she thought in disdain to herself, a fact she had still forgotten to check out so that she would repel his advances.

Mercy sighed tiredly, her mind moved from Jim to the baby they'd rescued. How could she feel such a close bond to so little a human she had just met. She felt like the baby was hers, as she walked down the main road, a little ways from the office block, the feeling surged up heavily from within her stomach, almost choking her. At that moment she realized that if she had a well paying job, she would have willingly adopted the baby. Mercy couldn't understand her feelings but she was sure in her conviction that she wanted to be close to that baby.

The situation seemed bleak from where she stood but like a light at the end of a tunnel, an idea blossomed in her mind. If all the homes had the same problem of resources and lack of personnel, maybe she could get herself employed in one of those places with Jim's help of course and she could be like a personal caregiver to the baby. Mercy smiled at her idea and staunchly refused to entertain the part of

mind that told her that she sounded naïve. With a light spring in her step, she went back the way she had come.

When Mercy got within a few feet of the woman's office, she suddenly realized that Jim wasn't standing where she had left him. The woman was around, she thought, and obviously Jim had gone in without her. Mercy paced the short length of the veranda and wondered if she could go into the office without eliciting the wrath of the high society woman, to the detriment of what they came for. Just as she was about to damn all consequences and walk in, the door to the office opened and Mercy saw Jim stand aside for a stout but beautiful and impeccably dressed woman of about fifty to step out.

"This must be your wife Jim," the lady commented with a pleasant smile at Mercy. "Excuse..." Mercy began in confusion.

"Yes!" Jim exclaimed, interrupting Mercy enthusiastically, he walked past the lady quickly to get to Mercy's side. His hands went round her shoulder and squeezed hard when she wanted to speak again. "This is my lovely wife, her name is Mercy," he introduced with a bright smile and tightened his hold on Mercy's arm.

The nice lady extended her hand and shook Mercy's, "How do you do? I am Mrs. Udom. Your husband is a long time friend of mine but we lost touch for years," Mrs. Udom said, her smile never wavering.

"I..." Jim interrupted Mercy again.

"How did you find the stroll dear?" he asked, flashing a smile at Mrs. Udom, "Sometimes I feel she has a white man's soul, she can't wait in one place for long, always wanting to see the next thing." Both Jim and Mrs. Udom chuckled at his comment; Mercy tried a stiff smile while giving Jim a hardened stare, he looked away but didn't let her go.

"My stroll was fine, thank you for asking," Mercy answered tightly, still flashing Jim a steely glare.

"I love seeing young couples like this, so in love, it keeps me hoping that there are still good things in this life," Mrs. Udom said still smiling. "Unfortunately, it pains me that I have to reject your husband's request."

"Why?!" Mercy blurted out before Jim could stop her.

"Well, like I just explained to Mr. Craig, my home has limited entries and they are filled up, and can't take any more kids?"

"But why?" Mercy asked with so much distraught, it caused Jim to glance at her in concern. Mrs. Udom seemed a bit taken aback.

“My dear, if I take kids more than the number that was budgeted for; my plan to run a high class home will be defeated. These vulnerable children’s home is belt like a real home, parlor, kitchen, everything any normal kid has at his or her parent’s home, it’s found there. Their meals, clothing and schooling, which are the best, are all budgeted for.”

Jim had eyes only Mercy, he was trying to fathom what was going on in her mind, she looked extremely sad and close to tears. “Is it possible then to get me employed in one of these homes with low personnel...” both Mrs. Udom and Jim didn’t allow her to complete her question.

“Hey, sweetheart, where is this coming from?” Jim asked with real concern.

“My dear, when they say they lack personnel, it also means they lack resources to maintain personnel.” Mercy nodded slowly in understanding, she looked disheartened, Jim couldn’t help himself, he reasoned later that he wouldn’t have if he could; he hugged her to his side, rubbing his hand tenderly, up and down her arm.

“I’m sorry this whole business seems too stressful for you. I’ve told your husband that you people will have to take care of that baby...,” Mercy’s eyes widened at this.

“...for a little while Mrs. Craig, for a little while. I will at the meantime get you a permit, until we can find perfect adoptive parents for the baby,” Mrs. Udom concluded apologetically.

“What?!” Mercy exclaimed, this woman raised her hope and dropped it in the same instance. Anger showed all over her face, she felt tears threatening so she swiveled and walked away rapidly.

Jim started going after her but paused to say, “Thank you very much Madam, my wife is having a hard time understanding this, she will in time though. I really appreciate all that you doing...”

“Oh Jim, go meet your wife. I understand her perfectly; some wives won’t even have picked the child in the first place. Go. Go. Go!” she urged, waving Jim away. He smiled in gratitude and went after his 'wife'.

He met her by his car, her expression was stormy, and she was trying to wipe the tears flowing from her eyes. Jim took one look at her and unlocked his car instead. He had always been uncomfortable with crying women; besides, this lady was resurrecting feelings that were long forgotten and buried in him.

Inside the car, Jim turned the ignition and reversed into the main road, then he went left towards Marian road where his hospital was situated. Mercy waited for him to say something, an explanation for what just happened.

“Mr. Craig, what just happened there?” she asked with a tone of suppressed anger.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to give you a moment.”

“A moment, I wasn’t given a moment back there. I still can’t fathom what just happened.”

Jim sighed heavily, glancing briefly at her stiff neck before sighing again, what he’d done seemed foolish now. “I offered to take care of the baby until a permanent arrangement could be made.”

“I thought the lady suggested that?”

“I suggested the idea.” They were both quiet for while.

“I don’t understand why I was called your...wife,” Mercy commented, her throat felt constricted, she was close to tears again.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know it just happened. She saw you walking away when she drove in, and when she asked if you were my wife it just seemed easier to nod than to start explaining that we found a baby together,” Jim said and shrugged.

Mercy looked at him incredulously and wondered if he was mad. “You should have explained,” she shouted. “You are still going to have to explain when social welfare comes for inspection of your home as a temporary caregiver to a three month old child, I don’t live in your house for Christ’s sake,” Mercy was perturbed and wasn’t doing anything to hide it.

Jim was noticeably quiet, after a while he cleared his throat uncomfortably; “I thought of a solution for that,” he ventured quietly.

“Oh really; I’m dying to hear what you have to say,” Mercy replied sarcastically.

“Well, you could come live at my house,” Jim said and chuckled nervously.

“What?! And pretend to be your wife?” Mercy couldn’t believe her ears.

“Just for the inspection,” he rushed to explain.

Mercy nodded slowly, her anger was palpable in the car. “And your wife? Is she also in on this great plan of yours? I’m sure she will perfectly smile and stand aside for me to be your wife for a day or two, she won’t mind, right?”

Jim’s hands tightened perceptibly on the steering wheel, he cleared his throat and said quietly, “No, she won’t mind.”

“And why won’t she?” Mercy barked, she was so angry at the man and his blatant disregard for his wife’s feelings, she felt like scratching his eyes out.

“She won’t mind because she’s dead,” Jim replied solemnly. The car became extremely quiet, Mercy felt like scratching her own eyes out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"This isn't going to work. It sounds weird," Mercy tried for the umpteenth time to wriggle her way out of this man's life and out of what she'd started. She should have backed out when he had given her a chance. Now the uneasiness she felt about living in his house, to take care of the baby, though it was what she had prayed for but not exactly, was making her queasy.

"Weird things happen every day," Jim said with a matter of fact expression.

"I can't just opt and leave my responsibilities at home, I'm everything at home, I need to work so that..."

"I'll pay you," Jim interrupted her. Mercy groaned silently. That is not what I was talking about, Mercy thought; I'm talking about leaving your life as it were. She wanted to say that but found herself saying, "How much?"

"Twenty thousand naira," Jim replied without blinking. This time Mercy groaned aloud.

"You are kidding right? Twenty thousand naira just to take care of the baby and you've already offered to feed me or has that changed?" Mercy asked suspiciously. Jim chuckled, "No, that hasn't changed."

"I have a difficult choice here; you are making everything so attractive." Take the offer, your other job doesn't pay this much, Mercy thought to herself. "There's a condition though."

"What?"

"My mum has to agree to this arrangement, I trust her gut feelings. If she doesn't, then I can't take it," Mercy said, she was keeping an opened window as a last escape resort but instead her mind's eye showed her how ecstatic her mother would be, especially with the salary level. She shook her head angrily to dispose the picture.

"Depends on you," Jim said in a relaxed manner as he leaned back in his big, swirling executive chair.

"What do you mean?" Mercy's eyes narrowed warily.

"Your mum's approval or disapproval of this idea depends on you," Jim said calmly.

"Are you trying to say that I control my mother?" Mercy asked in surprise.

"Well..." he said with a casual shrug, rolling a pen he'd just picked up from his table in his hand.

Mercy was perplexed, then the anger set in. The doctor always found a way, most times indirect ways to say what he really thought. She wished she could control her mother sometimes but the woman had a mind of her own even though she looked feeble.

"What you mean is that I am overbearing, right?" Mercy spoke suddenly.

"No! No, that's not what I meant, I..."

"There's no need for explanations Mr. Craig, I do wish I could control my mum, but she's a woman with her own mind...and mouth."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean it to sound like that..."

"So, Mr. Craig," Mercy cut in smoothly, "the baby's things, who will shop for them?" Mercy saw his grip tighten on the arm of the chair, another sour wound, she thought.

"The things I bought for my unborn child who died with its mother, are still available," Jim said watching as her face fell from arrogance to sadness and then self-rebuke, the woman's face was like a television, Jim thought, he could see everything she was feeling there. She wanted to play hardball; he was going to show her hardball.

"Miss Thomas, I'll see you on Friday at my house," he said dropping his card on the table in front of her, he didn't give her the opportunity to apologize, "And, I'm sure you know you have to come with your necessities. I would advise you come in the morning, I have a couple of free hours on Friday, so that we can pick the baby and bring him home."

"But, I didn't agree to live in your house," Mercy said weakly.

"We found the baby together, Miss Thomas, so we are stuck in this together," he said quietly.

Mercy stared at him as he picked up his clipboard and walked out of the office without another word. His last sentence sounded ominous to Mercy, apart from the fact that he was throwing back her exact same words at her, the way he said it sounded final. She felt bad for being insensitive earlier, and she knew he was mad at her, why else would he walk out on her in his own office. Mercy sighed, she would try to control her large mouth from now on, after all she was going to be living with Mr. Craig.

Mrs. Regina Jesam worried, all the while thinking of less disconcerting ways of telling the good doctor and his lady friend what was really going on, but there was no other way to say it but the disconcerting way. The whole story, the connections and betrayals were all so alarmingly unbelievable it left one breathless, though she had faked her own breathlessness earlier in the day to get into the hospital. Now she believed her late husband, when he'd told her she was a strong lady, she believed she got most of the strength from the will to protect her grandson, whom the father had unwittingly put in danger.

Mrs. Jesam sighed wearily, for the first time in several months she was going to sleep with both eyes closed, a welcome respite from the long struggle. A struggle that will continue soon enough but just not yet, she thought and sighed again. If the Doctor or his lady knew what they had gotten themselves into, they probably wouldn't have picked the baby. Their lives were about to take a nosedive, if they were strong, they'd survive. That was the last thread of thought in her mind before the sedative she'd been given took over.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mercy sighed apprehensively as she waited for a taxi to come her way. She clutched her bag with shaky hands as she looked up and down the street for an approaching taxi. Daniel stood beside her with her carryall, he was in his uniform, she had tried to push him off to school, but he'd staunchly insisted on waiting with her.

It didn't take long for a taxi to appear, two passengers were already in the car, and Daniel flagged it down.

"Where you dey go?" the driver asked in Pidgin English. Mercy lowered her height from the waist to look into the taxi.

"108, Palms street," she replied. The driver contemplated for a few seconds, obviously calculating what route to take.

"Enter."

"How much?"

"Seventy naira."

"I go pay you fifty naira," Mercy bantered in Pidgin English, stooping low to the driver's level to affect his consideration.

"Na sixty naira last."

Mercy conceded and climbed into the taxi while Daniel deposited her things in the trunk of the car; he waved at her as the car went on its way. Few minutes later, three more people squeezed into the car, two in the front seat and four behind.

Mercy hoped that the government's policy of carrying just a person at the front and three behind in a taxi would soon come to fruition, she thought her hips had suffered enough squeeze.

The air in the car had become suffocating, body odor mixed with different kinds of fragrances assaulted her nose in a bad way. Mercy sort to take her mind off her present discomfort and purposefully rehashed the conversation she'd had with her mother concerning Mr. Craig's proposal.

"But mama, you won't be able to manage alone," she had complained after her mother had given an emphatic yes to the proposal without even thinking.

"Who told you that? When you were in day school, who cooked for you?"

"That's not what we talking about," Mercy had grumbled.

"Then what? When you are gone, it gets easier, there will only be two mouths to feed. Besides, Daniel can help me in the kitchen when he's back from school."

"But, I don't feel comfortable about it," Mercy complained.

"Who would? It is a strange situation my dear, but then God works in mysterious ways. I hate to say 'I told you so', but it's the right thing to say at this moment," Mrs. Thomas chuckled, bringing a slight smile to Mercy's lips.

"Does your good feeling ever fail you?" Mercy asked her smile widening.

"No dear, it never does. This is good, Mercy. It is hard work to care for a baby, so you deserve to be paid for it. I'm not sending you to prostitute like other mothers do, rather, if that man so much as look at you the wrong way, make sure you get back home immediately. Understood?" Mrs. Thomas said with a stern expression on her face that looked comical. Mercy had laughed and hugged her mother.

"You are the best mother," she'd whispered with tears in her eyes. Mrs. Thomas only managed a nod, she was trying to hold back her own tears.

Mercy sighed wearily and concentrated on the direction the taxi was heading, she realized the driver was on his way to drop her and that the weather looked suddenly cloudy. Calabar rain, she thought, even though the harmattan season was in full swing, it still found time to rain at Calabar.

The wind picked up strength when the taxi stopped in front of a large gate, Mercy and the driver climbed out of the car. As she brought out her purse to pay him, he brought her luggage around to where she stood. When the taxi zoomed off, Mercy stood mesmerized at the sight of the big house. Her hands pushing her wallet back into the purse without looking, the act was purely mechanical because her attention was totally riveted at the magnificence of the house. The now raging wind blew wisps of her hair into her slightly open mouth and that brought her back to reality. Mercy dragged her carryall, and pushed open the narrower gate and walked in to a perfect compound, with a perfect building. She thought even the blue and white paint work was perfect, it was exactly how she dreamt her house would be, not the colors though but its perfection. Cold raindrops rushed her into the veranda and she pressed the bell by the mahogany door.

The door opened and Mercy forgot about the perfect beauty of the house, its owner was a much more pleasurable sight. In a blue jeans trouser and a yellow polo shirt, which enhanced his dark complexion, there was only one word to describe him, Mercy thought, handsome, stunning, breath...

"You are late," was the greeting she got from the good Doctor.

Mercy was shortly speechless, she tried to rearrange her thoughts, then she said, "I'm so sorry ..." she was interrupted.

"Come in," Jim said almost snappishly, he collected her carry all from her.

The wind blew harder and caused the door to banged shut behind Mercy. The sudden noise startled her, she dropped her purse, and it fell open.

Jim glanced her way briefly, expecting to see make up scattered over his tiled floor, but what he saw instead made him want to laugh really hard. His stomach had gotten instantly warm, readying itself for the good feeling of a good laugh but Jim thought better of it and choked on his laugh.

Several bars of vanilla chocolate were scattered on the tiled floor, with a few wraps of peppermint, sweets, and chewing gum. Mercy was embarrassed as she knelt down to pick them up.

"Jesus Christ! Mercy, I hope that doesn't get into my daughters' mouths," Jim said forcefully, it came out sounding angry but he was just trying to keep the laughter in check.

"Your daughters?" Mercy blurted out in shock and just then noticed the two pretty girls smiling at her.

"Oh", Mercy said and rushed up from her kneeling position, and whispered, "But you didn't tell me you had children Mr. Craig, rather, I recall you saying something about an un..." she was interrupted.

"I know what I told you, Mercy and please my name is Jim."

"Sure Mr. Jim."

"Just Jim."

"Ok, Mr... um... Jim." Mercy was flustered.

"Come and say hi girls," Jim said, beckoning on his daughters who came forward. The eldest, a teenager, was dressed in a short jeans skirt, a light pink short sleeved, button down shirt with a leather slipper, her hair was weaved in cornrows. She was dark in complexion and looked exactly like her father but in a feminine way. The younger girl was smiling up at Mercy, her hair was packed in two unequal bunches; she also had on a jean skirt, orange T-shirt and a leather slipper.

"This is Ann, my first daughter, she's fifteen," Jim said looking proudly at the girl.

"Welcome to our home, Aunty Mercy," the girl said with a pleasant smile.

"Thank you very much, Ann," Mercy said, strangely meaning it.

"And this is our Princess," Jim said crouching by his little daughter who was fair in complexion, a contrast with the elder daughter, she probably took after the mother, Mercy thought sadly.

"Princess, say hi to Aunty Mercy," Jim crooned in his daughter's ear.

"Hi, aunty Mercy," the tiny voice greeted and giggled.

"Hi, Princess, how do you do?"

"Fine, thank you and you?"

"I'm fine thank you," Mercy replied with a wide smile.

"Aunty Mercy?" Princess called.

"Yes dear,"

"Are you the mummy of the baby?"

"Princess!" both Ann and Jim shouted reproachfully.

"My class teacher told me to always ask questions?" Princess replied in explanation with so much confidence Mercy almost laughed aloud, she settled for a smile.

"Princess, I'm not the mummy of the baby, but I'll be taking care of it like his mummy should," Mercy explained calmly.

"I'm sorry, Mercy, she's only six and talks a lot."

"It's okay. I don't mind." Mercy said with a smile.

"Will you take care of me too?" she asked again in her tiny, adorable voice.

"Princess...", Jim groaned, rubbing his face with his open palm.

"Of course, sweetheart, Come here." Mercy said suddenly, the little girl came closer. Mercy knelt down and whispered something in the girl's ear, she giggled loudly and said to her dad, "Daddy, I want to show Aunty Mercy her room."

"Of course, Princess, both of you do that." The kids bounded up the stairs while Mercy closely followed, leaving Jim alone to ponder if his decision was the right one.

CHAPTER NINE

MERCY LOOKED AROUND HER room in wonder for the umpteenth time, since she'd been shown to it. Jim had done a good job arranging it for herself and the baby.

The baby in question slept tucked in his cot. Jim's word had been true concerning his unborn baby things, there were more than enough for Willie, who she considered a very lucky baby. The blankets, socks, shoes, cloths, bed sheets...name them, were all in shades of blue and of top quality. Mercy couldn't help the feeling of pity that overwhelmed her at that moment; the poor family had apparently been expecting a baby boy.

Mercy sighed wearily and pushed her mind to the issue of her completing her final year program in Psychology at the University of Calabar, a topic she was dreading having to broach to Jim because she reasoned she should have told him earlier. I could tell him this night and get it over with, Mercy thought with a surge of bravery, it would be better that they don't argue in front of the children who had earlier gone to bed. She hoped Jim was still at the sitting room where she'd left him few minutes ago.

She stepped out of her room into the creamy painted corridor. The whole house was creamy painted. She went left towards the stairs, sliding her palm on the polished banister as she went down the steps.

The sitting room was a very large, lavishly furnished room with black leather seats arranged in an arc facing an oak room divider which carried a freakishly large TV, a VCD player, an audio disc player, several disc plates, enlarged pictures of the family except, Mercy noticed, that of the wife, and a beautiful flower vase.

Mercy stared in awe at the overall affluence of the house, when her feet sank into the blue with large, yellow flowery designs rug, she almost sighed with the pleasure of it. Jim was engrossed in a newspaper and didn't seem to notice her when she walked in. Mercy cleared her throat to get his attention, it worked.

"I thought you were asleep," he said casually.

"No, I wasn't," Mercy replied.

"I hope there's no problem."

"No. I just wanted to talk to you."

Jim looked at her quizzically, then shrugged and shifted a bit, creating space for her to share on the couch, which he sat on. "Do sit down".

Mercy sat without thinking, she just wanted to take weight off her aching feet. "I wanted to ...um," Mercy's voice seemed to get stuck in her throat.

"Well..." Jim encouraged calmly.

Mercy took two deep breaths and opened her mouth, "I wanted to talk to you about my education," she blurted out.

"I thought you were working when we met," Jim said suspiciously.

"Yes of course. I had to work to support my education and my family," she said, almost choking on her whooshing breath, she felt like she'd just completed a marathon.

Yeah right, Jim thought sarcastically, so much for a simple professional relationship, the family finally arrives. "Your family," Jim asked, his face a mask of indifference, "How many of them?"

"Uh, just my mother and my cousin," Mercy replied, breathing more freely.

"No siblings? What about your dad?"

The question caught her off guard, she hadn't been expecting the mention of her father, it felt like a hand full of salt had just been dumped on an open wound. Her heart beat increased and her breathing became difficult again.

"No siblings...um...my..." her voice grew husky, "...he is dead," she said and clenched her teeth to stop the tears that were gathering in her eyes. She tried to swallow the lump in her throat and looked down at her fingers, which were now blurred; the tears had filled her eyes. Mercy brushed the tears angrily from her eyes; she didn't wish to appear weak in front of Jim. Mercy felt rather than heard as Jim shifted closer to her, the heat and scent of his perfume surrounded her, his hand touched her shoulder comfortingly.

"I...I'm sorry Mercy, I didn't mean to pry."

"I didn't mean to cry either, I'm sorry," Mercy said sniffing and trying hard to stem the rushing tears from her eyes with nothing but her palms. An awkward silence ensued and lasted several minutes.

"You could talk to me about it if you want," Jim offered quietly. He didn't know why he was getting involved, maybe he was feeling guilty for the sarcastic thought he had a few minutes ago.

Mercy pondered on his offer and for the first time since her father had died, she was willing to share her hurts. "He died beginning of last year in a ghastly car accident, I could barely recognize..." she choked and fresh tears poured. Jim got

out his handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her, she grabbed it and buried her face in it then she came up looking angry.

"You know, the horrid accident was one thing but the attitude of the extended family just worsened the situation."

"How do you mean?" Jim asked with interest.

"My dad sold electronics, and his friend helped him get a contract from the government to furnish the offices of senior government officials with the necessary electronics devices."

"That's huge," Jim commented unable to hide the fact that he was impressed.

"Yes, it was huge. You can't imagine how our lives changed. My dad built us a house, got my mum a mighty super market..." Mercy's voice trailed off and her eyes looked vacant, she could see everything as clearly as it had happened then.

"You don't need to go into all that, Mercy," Jim said softly, he thought she hadn't heard him but after a few seconds she nodded, sniffled and took a deep breath.

"The...um...the extended family, that's mostly my father's brothers, well, they never liked my mum, the hatred passed to me." Mercy shook her head sadly, as she remembered. "They said a lot of hurtful things; all because they considered the money my dad gave to them paltry and got enraged when my father said he had his own family to cater for. My mum has been called a witch, I've been called the little witch and..." Mercy sighed, still shaking her head and trying to hold back tears.

"...and...and a bastard."

"Oh God, Mercy..."

"I wouldn't have minded the name calling if only my dad had been left alive."

"You think he was killed?" Jim asked with a frown.

"I have my suspicions. You see my father's brothers did come visiting to borrow an exorbitant amount from my dad. They were their usual vicious selves, not answering my greetings or that of my mum's. My dad decided he was fed up of their attitude; he refused giving them the money and banned them from coming to his house ever. As you might imagine, there were fireworks, horrid words were exchanged, threats were made and two weeks later the brakes on my dad's car failed."

"Jesus Christ." Jim said quietly. Mercy looked him directly in the eye.

"It had been a normal day, we all went about our businesses with no inclination that something horrible was going to happen..." her voice broke and a new dam of tears

flowed. Jim gathered her into his arms without thinking; all he knew was that he wanted to comfort this woman.

"Eye witnesses said he was trying to dodge a lady that had stepped suddenly into the road," Mercy continued speaking even though her voice was smothered by Jim's broad chest. She inhaled his manly scent and felt quite safe in the circle of his strong but tender arms. Mercy sighed and sniffled simultaneously as her head lay on Jim's chest.

"Your suspicions are not unfounded, with everything you've said happened, I would have thought of foul play too." Jim said softly, the vibration of his voice in his chest was so comforting Mercy felt lollid.

"He didn't have a will. So the brothers took everything, we almost weren't even allowed to come for the burial; they even instigated the villagers against us. We had been accused of killing my dad through witch craft. We were to be banished but the village head was a reasonable man, he refused to do that and allowed us to stay for the burial. Long story short, we had nothing left..." her voice trailed off. After a few minutes of silence, Jim realized that she had fallen asleep on his chest. He smiled and looked down at her dark, smooth face, an ebony beauty indeed, Jim thought, he smooth tendrils of hair from her face. Mercy sighed at the soft touch of his fingers, then her subconscious reminded her where she was, she jerked up with force, her head hitting Jim's jaw.

"Aww!"

"Aww!" They exclaimed simultaneously. Jim rubbed his jaw with a grimace of pain on his face, while Mercy rubbed her head with a scandalized expression.

"My God, I'm so sorry, I slept off and... Christ! I can't believe I burdened you with my baggage," she was scandalized at what had just happened, especially the sleeping part, she got up abruptly and made to leave the parlor.

"Come on, Mercy," Jim said, standing up to block her path, "I didn't mind any of it," Jim said meaning it. He actually felt chivalrous towards Mercy, like he could be her knight in shining armor, his heart made a smart somersault at the import of his thoughts, he had only ever felt that way about... he wasn't going to think about that now.

"We've not yet concluded our conversation," Jim reasoned with her, he wanted to continue being with her.

"It's kind of late," Mercy said with a slight trembling in her voice. "I...I'm very tired."

"Yeah, and it's been a long day," Jim added regretfully.

"You wouldn't want me drooling spittle on your shirt in my sleep," Mercy said very softly, it took Jim a while to realize that she had just made a joke then he burst into laughter and Mercy chuckled along.

"Okay, I get it. We'll complete the discussion tomorrow," Jim said, humor still filling his cheeks.

"Thank you, for allowing me to ...thank you," Mercy stammered awkwardly and hurriedly moved to the stairs.

"Good night, Mercy," Jim said softly, Mercy paused in her ascent and listened, she thought she'd heard something, then she continued upward and thought to herself that she was already beginning to hallucinate.

CHAPTER TEN

At 5:30 am, Mercy and baby Willie were in the kitchen. Mercy felt groggy from lack of sound sleep, this was due to Willie waking up three times in the night to cry for no reason, but feeding him rather calmed him at those moments as it was now. Willie was just finishing off his food when Jim walked into the kitchen looking fresh from a bath. Mercy felt self-conscious, she hadn't thought anybody would be up this early, if Jim noticed her scanty dressing, he did a good job of hiding the fact.

"Good morning," he greeted cheerily, "Such early risers," he joked as he hunched in front of Mercy, his eyes never straying from the baby's face.

"Good morning," Mercy replied trying to sound cheery too but deeply worried of what her nightgown was revealing. "He woke up severally at night," Mercy said by way of conversation. Jim touched Willie's finger and he stopped sucking his feeding bottle to stare at Jim before blessing him with a toothless grin.

"Why didn't you call me?" Jim asked still playing with Willie.

"Because," Mercy scoffed unconsciously, which caught Jim's attention and which in turn sobered her up, "I'm sorry, I've not had enough sleep. I thought that's why you were paying me, to take care of the baby."

Jim rose from his haunches and spared her a glance, which he withdrew almost immediately; she wasn't a calming sight, especially in that nightgown.

"I...will help whenever I'm available, so please never hesitate to call me," he said and purposefully backed her. "I'd better start breakfast."

"You cook?" Mercy asked with all the shock she was feeling.

"Why? Who would?" Jim asked not hiding his impatience.

"Sorry. Was just surprised," Mercy said quickly and stood up with the sleeping Willie, "I'd better go put him down," she said and hurried from the kitchen. She didn't hear Jim whispering, "Lucky guy," as she hurried away.

As she was about to open the door to her room, she muttered to herself out of the abundance of her shameful heart, "Mercy, wear a wrapper to the kitchen, this isn't your..." she was interrupted by Princess' cherry voice.

"Good morning, aunty Mercy." Mercy turned sharply and the baby whimpered at the sudden movement, Mercy rocked him softly and nervously smiled at Princess.

"Good morning, dear," she answered in a lowered tone.

"Please, aunty Mercy, I want you to comb my hair," Princess asked with the straight forwardness that only a six year old would have and blissfully unaware of

Mercy's discomfort at almost being caught talking to herself, she was thankful it wasn't the elder daughter. So she smiled and beckoned Princess into her room, playfully signaling her to be quiet with her forefinger to her lip. Princess giggled softly and nodded, closely following into the room.

Princess watched as Mercy placed the baby on his side in the cot and covered his lower torso with a blanket, when she turned, Princess was holding up a pink comb and two blue ribbons. Mercy smiled again, and quietly collected them from her, she lifted Princess onto a seat in front of a mirror, she slowly combed the girl's hair so that it wouldn't hurt, she divided it into two equal parts, braided it before tying the ribbons at the roots of the braids. Princess smiled appreciatively, "I will come every morning so that you can comb my hair," Princess pronounced with a wide smile.

"I would love that very much," Mercy replied, lifting her off the chair and leading her to the door. They bumped into Ann on the corridor; she was obviously on her way downstairs.

"Good morning, aunty Mercy," Ann said with a smile.

"Good morning, Ann. Hope you slept well?"

"Like a log of wood," Ann replied and laughed with her sister. Mercy was confused she didn't get the sibling joke and it showed on her face.

"Ann is always saying 'like a log of wood' because she heard it in a movie that we watched," Princess explained and this time Mercy joined in the laughter. Their laughter was interrupted by a loud crash from the kitchen area.

"That's dad," both little girls exclaimed simultaneously and giggled again, obviously another sibling joke that Mercy didn't get, this time Ann offered an explanation.

"Things are always crashing whenever he is in the kitchen, which is like every time," Ann said and giggled again with her sister.

"And today is omelet and fried plantain," Princess added, giggling and making a face of disgust in the process.

"Wait, wait! What's wrong with food?" Mercy asked with a concerned expression.

"I..." Ann started answering and then stopped; she finally had some reserve about ratting their daddy out to this lovable aunty. What if she decided to go away because of what she'd said or even report them to their daddy for being loquacious...another word she had learnt from 'the movie', Ann thought to herself.

"I promise, I won't tell your dad anything. I could help." Mercy said recognizing and admiring the fact that the girls were protective of their dad.

"It's just that the plantain gets burnt, in short, everything gets burnt."

"Then why not get a maid?"

"He says he doesn't trust maids with his kids." Then why me, Mercy thought in confusion.

"What about you Ann, can't you cook?"

"I do know how to fry plantain and yam and egg, but daddy won't let me, he says mine would be worse than his, he wouldn't even let me try," Ann answered with a sulk, she obviously was willing to help with the cooking.

"I'm hungry," Princess moaned, she thought the conversation was taking too long.

"Well then, something has to be done. Let's all go down stairs, and I see how I can help," Mercy decided. She changed into something simple and decent and shepherded the kids down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Good morning, dad," both girls chorused.

"Morning girls, did you sleep well?" Jim asked, struggling to crack an egg.

"Like a log of wood," they both chorused again and giggled, Mercy's face twitched with humor. But then it turned into concern because Jim had dropped the egg, he cursed under his breath as he stared at the smashed mess frustratingly.

Mercy made a swift decision, she turned to the wide-eyed staring daughters of Jim and said, "Ann, take your sister into the dining room and wait for your breakfast, it won't take long," Mercy assured.

When the girls were gone, Mercy turned to their father with a sigh, "Let me help with that," she said grabbing a rag and proceeding to clean the mess on the tiled floor. She rinsed the rag in the sink under the rushing tap, when she returned the rag to its rack; she turned to see Jim trying to crack another egg.

"Wait!" Mercy said urgently making Jim to pause automatically.

"What?" Jim asked apprehensively.

"I can complete breakfast," Mercy said walking towards him. As she made to collect the egg from his tight grasp, Jim shifted it from her reach.

"No, I can handle it," he said refusing her request.

"I'm sorry Mr. Jim, I wasn't asking," Mercy replied succinctly.

"This isn't what you are paid for," Jim said with a determined frown.

"We can argue my salary another time but now, you want to get breakfast done as soon as possible because Princess is hungry enough to have spoken it out loud," Mercy replied again in a matter of fact tone.

"Princess said she was hungry?" Jim asked in concern.

"She complained," Mercy said and collected the poor egg from his grasp. "Please, go keep them company while I hurry this up." Jim nodded and walked of the kitchen with his pride sorely wounded.

Mercy called Ann into the kitchen after her dad had left. "Slice up the plantain and fry them for me," Mercy requested with a smile.

"Really? How?" Ann asked with barely controlled excitement.

"Of course. Slice any shape you are comfortable with, I'll prepare the omelet." Mercy encouraged.

They worked in companionable silence except when Mercy had to direct Ann to turn the frying plantain at the right time, when to remove them and how to drain them of excess oil. They completed their task in twenty minutes and transferred their product to the dinning table.

"Daddy has made tea," Princess announced as she took her spot at the table, "and daddy's tea is the best in the world, you will like it aunty Mercy," Princess concluded.

"I'm sure I will," Mercy replied with a smile.

Jim said the grace and directed Mercy to serve Princess, Mercy obliged and placed five plump and long pieces of plantain in Princess' plate, she added a generous amount of sweet smelling vegetable omelet.

Princess inhaled the mouth watering aroma of the meal placed in front of her, she used her fingers to turn a piece of plantain around , looking at it analytically.

Nobody noticed this, they were all serving themselves.

"It's delicious," Jim commented without raising his head.

"I fried the plantain myself," Ann commented proudly.

"It's really delicious, Ann," Jim said with pride in his voice, Ann beamed at him, while munching a particularly large piece of plantain in her mouth. Mercy smiled and turned to check how Princess was doing, she was unusually quiet.

"Princess, what is it?" Mercy asked the frowning girl with concern. Princess took a tentative bite off a piece of plantain. Unknowingly, she held everyone's attention.

"This plantain is sweet," she commented in confusion after swallowing.

"Yes, Princess, it's supposed to be sweet," Mercy answered with a quizzical expression and wondered what was wrong with the girl, she even turned to Jim for help but he shrugged and continued with his meal.

"Daddy's plantain is always black..." Princess said, still examining the golden pieces on her plate.

"Okay, Princess. That's enough, eat your food," Jim said strictly.

"...and it is always bitter," Princess continued as if her father had not spoken at all.

Mercy and Ann who had been trying had to keep straight faces burst into laughter.

Jim frowned at them at first but gave up and joined their infectious laugh. The meal ended on a cheery note, Ann helped Mercy clear the table and do the dishes, Mercy thought with a silent smile that she was going to enjoy it here after all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The movie, a historical one, took three hours to complete. At a few minutes past eleven am, Jim sent his daughters upstairs to finish any outstanding home works they might have had from school, Princess went grudgingly. Mercy remained on the soft carpet while Jim ejected the movie from the VCR and slotted in a foreign musical, he joined her on the rug but at a safe distance.

Mercy sat up, crossed her leg and instinctively asked a question she had been itching to ask all morning, since she'd woken up and realized it was a Sunday.

"Do you go to church regularly?" Mercy asked innocently. Jim was surprised at the sudden question.

"We...we do," Jim stammered in reply. There was a moment's pause, then Jim decided to ask his own question. "I'm guessing you are one of those people that don't believe in attending other people's churches?"

"Christ! No!" Mercy answered vehemently. "I believe that God is everywhere. There is no place you call on God that He doesn't answer. He is omnipresent and omnipotent."

"Oh don't forget to add omniscient," Jim exclaimed sarcastically. Mercy was taken aback by his sneer.

"I'm very sorry, if I've offended," Mercy apologized humbly. Jim shook his head slowly.

"It's not you," he said softly.

"God then," Mercy decided aloud, "You think He has let you down at some point?" Mercy asked tentatively.

"Of course, He has," Jim exploded, "He let my wife die, He let Gloria die," he shouted, his anger and pain were so glaring it left Mercy speechless for a while.

"I don't know what to say. Maybe it was just her time...,"

"It wasn't, damn it!" he exclaimed again with vehemence, he hit his fist on the coffee table. "She was...she was poisoned...at a party, can't you see," Jim said in a strangled voice and turned to look at her with so much anguish in his eyes it formed a big lump in her throat which made breathing difficult and her eyes to mist.

"I should have been by her side the whole time. I knew she tended to drink and even though we had agreed at home she wasn't going to drink any alcohol... I blame myself totally, I should have fixed my business discussion for some other

time...I should have..." his voice broke at this point and he dropped his head on his knees and sobbed.

The sight of a grown man crying was a new experience for Mercy. It left her weak and helpless, she couldn't stop herself even if she'd tried. She moved close to him and tentatively raised her hand to his arm, he raised his head at her touch and looked away in embarrassment, he used the tail of his T-shirt to dab his tears, while Mercy captured his left palm and placed it on her cheek in a bid to comfort him. They were both shocked at this act and Mercy quickly withdrew her hand from his, Jim felt bereft at the withdrawal of her warm comfort.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Mercy began, "I understand how you feel, even though I think the loss of a life partner is worse than that of a parent, but I still get the pains you are going through."

"I'm sorry I broke down like that, I don't usually do that," Jim apologized softly. Mercy nodded and smiled kindly in understanding.

"It's a good thing to break down once in a while, it helps you heal the hurt," Mercy said, still staring at him, while he tried to dock his swollen eyes. "You shouldn't blame yourself...or God either, especially God. Like a story I once heard says, 'everything happens for a reason'."

Jim scoffed, "I would like to know that reason," he muttered.

"I'll tell you the story then," Mercy suggested.

"If you really must," Jim said and shrugged exasperatingly.

"Okay, here goes," Mercy said, furtively gauging his withdrawn expression from her peripheral vision. "An old man lived poorly with his two sons. It was so difficult with them it became a challenge to afford a square meal. Despite the man's sufferings, he never once blamed God or anybody for his woes, all he was known for saying was that 'God knew why it happened; probably something worse would have happened. Not everybody liked him in the village, especially when he offered his usual words of comfort. One of such persons, was a rich man in the village who had recently lost a large number of goats to flood, the rich man was so angry at the old man's comforting words that he threw him out of his compound."

"The rich man wasn't satisfied with what he'd done. He went to a herbalist and procured a poison that would kill instantly." At this point Jim's heard came up and gave Mercy a suspicious look which she ignored and hurried on with her story.

"He went to the old man's house during their meal time, from his informant, he learnt that the ogi (a local custard) which the old man and his sons were about to

eat was their first and only meal of the day. When they were about to seat down to eat, the rich man created a diversion by paying two men to argue violently, it caught the attention of the old man and his sons. When they went outside, he slipped into the house and poisoned the ogi."

"Then what happened?" Jim asked with a frown. Mercy could see he was captivated by the story.

"Well, when the old man and his sons came back to eat, the rich man came visiting, feigning that it was an apologetic visit after the bad way he'd treated the old man. The old man welcomed him warmly, he asked his sons to go ahead with the meal, but that they should remain his share. The rich man watched on, gleefully waiting for the sons to begin eating. Both sons grabbed their spoons, one son suggested that they divide the ogi in three places. The other said the ogi wasn't that much to be divided. An argument ensued, it suddenly turned into a fight and the bowl of ogi was overturned on the mud floor, the meal was made inedible."

"The rich man stood up in shock, he was speechless and as expected, the old man said, 'well, God knows why this happened, maybe something worse would have happened'. The rich man agreed with him totally and out of a guilty heart, he gave the old man and his sons one of his fallow lands, which they planted and never again wanted for food. The end." Mercy said and sighed deeply, when she ventured a glance at the quiet Jim, he was still frowning but this time in contemplation.

"It's a good story," he said, still frowning as he stood up from the rug, "A very good story," he said again and walked out of the sitting room, leaving Mercy to ponder nervously and wonder if she had gone too far.

Later that day, a few minutes after they'd had lunch and Mercy had just fed Willie, they all sat in the sitting room, Jim was carrying Willie and having a fun conversation with his kids, totally ignoring her, the doorbell rang. Ann went to the door to get it and screamed in delight when she discovered her aunt, Jim's cousin at the door. She was introduced as Natasha to Mercy but Jim called her Nat. Mercy noticed she was quite tall for a lady, fair in complexion and had a smile peculiar to Jim and Ann, she could have easily passed for his sister, Mercy thought analytically.

When she came into the house, Mercy noticed that Nat couldn't hide her shock at seeing Mercy, a strange face in her favorite cousin's home and a baby to add to that. But after Jim had explained the circumstances which the 'strange face and

baby' came to be, Mercy had expected Nat to be understanding, instead she kept sending Mercy suspicious and unnerving glances. She muttered some excuses to Jim and left hastily, Jim followed her out.

Mercy didn't know what to think of Jim's cousin, then it occurred to her as she placed Willie in his cot and turned on his intercom, that not all of Jim's family and friends will accept the presence of the baby and herself. But why should it matter, she wondered as she did the dishes at the sink, she was just the maid, she thought with a tinge of acerbity. A maid who had to learn her place, Mercy thought, recalling her earlier conversation with Jim and cringing when she remembered his sobs, she should really mind her place as a maid and try not to get personal with the boss.

Mercy kept pondering on Nat's behavior towards her and didn't hear Jim come into the kitchen.

"Mercy, I've thought of what you said." She started and dropped the plate she was rinsing in the sink.

"Christ! You startled me," Mercy said, turning to glance at him, Jim only raised his eyebrow at her quizzically and said nothing. Mercy sighed wearily and she grabbed a dish towel and said, "I've said so many things today, which of them are you talking about?"

"About letting go of my wife's ghost."

"I never said that..." Jim interrupted her.

"But that's what your story suggested."

"How?" Mercy whispered in confusion, a small part of her mind accusing her that she should really have minded her place as a maid earlier. "I had only been talking about God's divine plans for us and that there are reasons some things happen,"

Mercy explained slowly.

"Yes, yes, I got that. I might never know the reason my wife died and it might be a bit difficult for me to believe that her death was to take away a worse disaster..."

Jim paused here and cleared his throat, Mercy could still see the pain and hurt in his eyes, she looked away and he continued, "...but, I did learn something from your story, and that is letting go. The old man let go of things easily, that's why he was able to believe that something worse might have happened. So, I've decided that the first step is to let go of my wife."

Mercy stood spellbound and speechless, she felt proud of herself but not as much as she felt for Jim, he was taking a giant step and it was wonderful. "That's

wonderful, a very good thing. I'm glad my little story could help," she enthused and then remembered she was supposed to mind her place as a maid, "But you didn't have to tell me...that," she added awkwardly.

"Excuse me," Jim scoffed, "What's this new demure attitude?" he asked with an impatient frown.

Mercy was silent for a moment, she had been caught off guard, not expecting Jim's present question. "I...it's just that I..." Jim interrupted her.

"Mercy please, humility doesn't suit you. You are a very instinctive person and you act according to your feelings at any point in time. I mean, isn't that how we met?" Jim asked teasingly, Mercy docked her head to hide a shy smile.

"Your instinctiveness and your outspokenness makes your unique personality," Jim said with a benign smile.

"I don't know what to say, Jim," Mercy was so pleased her voice shook, "Thank you," she said quietly, looking into his kind eyes, eyes that she'd unconsciously wished would look at her with more than kindness.

"You are welcome, Mercy. That said, I came here to seek advice on how to move forward in the letting go process," Jim said with a teasing smile.

"Excuse me?" Mercy scoffed in disbelief, "Why would you assume that I'm capable of giving such advice?"

"Because in my mind I've tagged you my personal shrink," Jim said truthfully.

"Your shrink?" Mercy's disbelief increased and a small part of her mind jubilated, he did think of her with more than kindness.

"Not the issue right now," Jim said with a comical expression, deep down he was trying to cover up his deepest thoughts which he'd just bared in a moment of madness, not that he had any feelings for her, nothing like that, it was just madness. Mercy chuckled at his expression, shaking her head in the process.

"You can't tell me, Jim, that you've not gone out since...the incident," Mercy choked out the euphemism.

"Ah, well, several ladies have offered comfort, and I can assure you they were most imaginative in their thoughts but I just couldn't get over the grief," Jim concluded with a casual shrug which made him look adorable.

"So none of them caught your fancy?" Mercy said in a low voice.

"Err...one did though, why?" Jim asked with a wide, boyish smile.

"Because the first step to letting go is dating again," Mercy advised.

"Hmm, I'll try that, it's been a while but I'll try it. I just hope I've not lost my touch," Jim said excitedly.

"Yes, you should really try dating," Mercy said in a somber tone and a noticeably heavy heart, she realized with fear that she was jealous of the unknown woman that Jim was going to take on a date. Mercy dropped her eyes and turned to the sink to finish the dishes, she was stunned at, and ashamed of her feelings for Jim. It was hopeless to have these feelings or longings, because they would never be assuaged. "Hey, that reminds me, we had unfinished business concerning your schooling.

How are we supposed to do this?"

Mercy answered without turning around, "I attend evening lectures..." Jim interrupted her.

"What?!" He seemed really shocked and Mercy noticed when she glanced over her shoulder, worried. "Forgive my shock, but how long do these lectures last?" Jim asked.

"A very busy day for me ends at nine." Mercy explained with a confused frown, she was wondering why he seemed so concerned. "Why?"

"Err...I had a nasty experience on campus once and I don't care to talk about it but...you are a lady and..." Mercy interrupted him.

"I'm a part time student, I chose that so that I'd have time to work in the mornings and it's been okay so far. And about your concerns for safety, we walk in groups and the guys in our class sort of act as bodyguards," Mercy concluded with a smile.

"Guys?" Jim asked with narrowed eyes.

"Male colleagues."

"Oh, then there's nothing to worry about. I hand over at the hospital at four, so I can get back in time to take over the kids, it's convenient though," Jim said.

"That's perfect Jim, thank you very much," Mercy said truthfully.

"You are welcome," Jim replied with a smile. They stood around awkwardly without knowing what else to say. "I better go see what the kids are up to," Jim said, walking backwards towards the door, Mercy smiled and nodded. When he left, she let out pent up breath that she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Mercy?" Jim called suddenly, Mercy started.

"Hmm."

"Uh, what's your discipline?"

"Psychology."

"I knew it!" Jim exclaimed, he walked away saying in a comically nasal voice, "My own personal shrink."

Mercy couldn't help the smile that curved her lips. For crying out loud Jim, I'm trying not to like you here, she thought, still trying to stem her widening smile.

CHAPTER TWELVE

For three weeks, the routine they'd figured out worked smoothly. Jim would come back from the hospital at 4:30 or 5:00pm to take over caring for the kids, by this time, Mercy would have finished cooking dinner, then depending on her time table, she would leave immediately Jim walked in or twenty minutes later. It was a smooth operation and Mercy was glad that Jim's kids were to some degree self-sufficient, it made the job easier. Jim had even figured out time for Mercy to visit her mom, on one Saturday every two weeks, her mother was delighted with this arrangement.

It was a Tuesday in the fourth week of her stay in Jim's house. She was at the third pavilion, casually called 'Pav 3' at the University of Calabar campus. Mercy's wrist watch read 7:45pm and their second lecturer for the evening was yet to arrive. The noise that permeated the building was deafening, everybody seemed to be having a conversation which generally sounded like a drone. Once in a while, someone's voice would rise higher than the noise but only in exclamation or hysterical laughter. Mercy wondered how noisy the pavilion got during the day when more students were present, probably a roar, she silently decided.

The pavilion was a very large hall with a small stage usually and constantly used for lectures, especially the 'GSS' courses, meaning general courses that are compulsory for all students and courses that involved more than one department...a vocational course, Mercy was having one of those.

The pavilion was also known for instigating struggles among the students. Everybody wanted a front row seat, though to get the second or third row was still acceptable, from the fourth row backwards was mostly regarded as not having attended that lecture because hearing the lecturer from that point was difficult. The public address systems sometimes used were never good ones, the lecturers voice came out blurry.

Mercy had rushed to the pavilion after her first lecture and had secured a space in the third row of benches directly facing the stage. The few, men and women, who were lucky to get seats in the first three rows also took it upon them selves to occupy the benches with books, bags or folders, claiming that their friends who were, actually, yet to arrive had arrived but left to do some thing vague, therefore the books, bags or folder on that space. It was an annoying practice among the students and some times it caused violent ruckuses but in such situations, Mercy would quietly go for the nearest empty space.

Mercy became bored with waiting and with the boredom came a slight feeling of uneasiness. She couldn't understand why she was getting the uneasy feeling but it grew gradually till she became pressed. Maybe it wasn't really uneasiness, she thought to herself, she just had to find a way and a place to ease her bladder.

Mercy turned to her friend who was in deep conversation with another colleague, "Iseone," she called with a small tap on her shoulder.

"Yes?" Iseone answered immediately and faced Mercy with a smile.

"Could you watch my seat for a minute, I have to go pee," Mercy asked with an apologetic smile and at the same time fishing for a piece of tissue in her purse.

"No problem, but hurry back," she replied. Mercy nodded gratefully and quickened her movements.

"Thanks."

The slim moon outside the pavilion was lovely and the air was cool on Mercy's skin, it felt refreshing compared to the air inside the pavilion; it probably wasn't air anymore, Mercy thought with a shudder of disgust, with all those bodies in there, exchanging carbon dioxide mingled with body odor and different fragrances, she took another deep breath of the cool fresh air.

Mercy had to decide, quickly, where to ease her full bladder, the ideal place would have been the pavilion's toilet but at this time of the night it would be locked.

Students could be unsavory at times with the toilets, so the janitors kept it locked when they closed from work, even pavilion three was also supposed to be locked but the class representatives with a note from the Dean of studies got permission for the late use of the place, Mercy decided the easiest thing to do was to use the bushes behind the pavilion.

Moving left from the single entrance of the pavilion, she walked along the lengthy wall of the huge hall and branched left, almost pulling down her pants trousers, she realized that the bush there would still expose her naked arse as she handled her business, so she moved deeper, went left again, this time she was really behind the building and the bushes here were higher and the place stank of stale urine, she hadn't been the only one with the idea of urinating here.

Just as she was about to pull her panties, she noticed three retreating figures on her left, she hoped they hadn't noticed her, though if they had, Mercy thought wryly, she wouldn't have been able to hold in the urine any more. She cleaned up herself and as she was arranging her clothing, she glanced at the three figures again, they hadn't retreated very far, they stood by the pavilion's back gate which was

permanently locked and the fluorescent light from the pavilion reflected on them but their faces remained shadowed.

Mercy realized there was a woman among the three silhouettes and her figure nagged her memory but she couldn't recall the face that went with that peculiar figure. She waited a minute more, not minding the suffocating urine stench; she tried to stimulate her memory by staring fixedly at the female's figure but still couldn't remember, it was as if that particular memory was shrouded in darkness. The uneasiness which had been surpassed by the need for a perfect cover to urinate came back forcefully.

Finally, the stench of the urine and the chest tightening uneasiness drove Mercy from the back of the pavilion. She couldn't explain the surging uneasiness she was feeling, so instead of going back to her seat when she re-entered the pavilion, she traversed the hall, weaving through the bodies of fellow students and climbing over desks to get to the permanently locked pavilion's back gate.

The mysterious three were still there, they all had on base ball caps, so their faces were still shadowed from where Mercy stood slightly above them. As less obtrusive as possible, she leaned casually on the last rod of the gate, managing to stay hidden by the wall. Mercy felt instantly stupid as she stood there, what did she think she was doing, she silently asked herself. If some one were to ask her why she was standing there, what would be her answer?

The noise from the pavilion increased, it whirled about her like the turmoil she was having with her thoughts. As she was just about to give up her ridiculous pursuit, she heard a snatch of their conversation, the female had raised her voice in anger, it wasn't a voice she recognized, Mercy's interest was fuelled, still.

"Do you think this is a joke? I've waited for years for this!" the female voice snapped angrily. Waited for what, Mercy thought as she strained to listen for more information to make sense of the situation.

"I'm just saying, what if the man suddenly changes his routine?" a deeper voice replied, equally angry.

"Besides, I might be occupied next tomorrow," another male voice added. Mercy pondered silently on their conversation, their voices had decreased again, she couldn't really get what they were saying, until another angry explosion from one of the guys.

"How long have you trailed this guy? You can't be telling us how to do our job." a male voice exploded angrily again.

"Like I said before, Jim Craig doesn't change his routine!" the lady screamed. Mercy's heart stuttered to a stop when she heard Jim's name, it couldn't be, it could be another Jim Craig, she thought hopefully, but if not, what did these nefarious beings want with Jim?

The answer came in another explosive anger from the guy. "The cost for renting a gun with scope and silencer is very high lady, we are being charged by the hour, so if we are going to do this, it has to be tomorrow and that's final," he exclaimed. A gun? Mercy thought fearfully, with scope and silencer? She'd watched many movies and knew what scopes and silencers were used for. What did Jim do to this people, or particularly, this woman? Could she have been responsible for his wife's death? Mercy's mind was reeling from the shock of discovering a plan to kill her boss. What was she to do? She didn't even know the people responsible for...another outburst interrupted her thoughts.

"The bank's building is better!" a male voice exclaimed forcefully.

"The bank's doors closes on the dot of four and by then the building is cleared of all customers. You stupid man, how do you want to pass through the electronic doors of the bank with a gun?"

" We'll pay some one or threaten them if need be," was the confident reply.

"Don't you use your heads?" the female voice screamed angrily, "Too many witnesses, but the church beside it opens by three-thirty for evening services, the pastor's office is upstairs but he doesn't get there until four-thirty. Listen to me, Craig will leave his office either on the dot of four or a few minutes after, you need to be there before four pm, set up and wait. Get a head shot and be out during the pandemonium," she concluded her angry directive.

"Where is our money?"

Mercy didn't hear the reply for that question, but the last thing she heard before her lecturer walked into the pavilion, causing a sudden hush in the noise level, was, "If you fail me, I know where you live," the female voice said in a very steely tone, it sent a shiver down Mercy's spine. Who was she to Jim? What had Jim done to deserve death? Where his kids in danger? Could she go to the police or should she tell Jim herself? How would she describe her chanced encounter with the killers because of an uneasy feeling she had developed after easing her bladder? Was this why she'd been uneasy, was this providence? Mercy did not hear anything her lecturer said, she didn't take any notes, her hands were shaking violently, from disbelief, fear and indecision.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At 3:45pm on Wednesday, Jim was putting finishing touches to his patients' reports. The doctor he'd employed earlier in the year to take up the evening shift had already arrived and the reports had to be on his desk before four pm so that he would study them before going for his rounds. Though the hospital was his and he could break the rules of operation, he preferred not to, the phrase leadership by example meant exactly that to him.

As Jim concentrated on deciding what medication to give his patients and describing his observations on each patient in details, he only had two things in mind, to get the report to Doctor Essiet on time and to rush home to relief Mercy of the kids. He barely remembered the call he had pushed away as crank, warning him to stay home today. The call had come twice, it wasn't a voice he recognized, and on the second time, he'd snapped and told the caller that he was a professional doctor who wouldn't abandon his patients for anything. He'd been angry in the morning and rattled, but working with his patients and the satisfaction of seeing their healing progress, made the call episode far from his mind.

A knock sounded on his office's door. "Come in," Jim called out with his head still bent over the report. The door opened inward and Doctor Essiet walked in. He was a short, amiable, older man, a widower who couldn't handle the boredom of retirement. Jim had described his well of experience as fortunate to his hospital and had hired him instantly.

"Doctor Craig, good evening."

"Good evening, Doctor Essiet. I heard you coming in earlier, I'm just finishing my report," Jim said, he signed at the end of the report with a flourish and arranged the file, handing it to Doctor Essiet.

"Yes, thank you. Your reports are always informative and concise, a rare talent among doctors," he joked and they both laughed.

"I think it has to do with my literary influence as a kid, at one point in my teen years, I believed I wanted to be a writer but my father wouldn't hear of that," Jim commented lightly as he arranged his patent leather, doctor's bag.

"Ah, yes, fathers, they tend to impose their lost dreams on their children. I am guilty of it but one of my five kids fought me ferociously," he said with a chuckle, Jim joined his humor but didn't stop his homeward bound preparations. "And since he was the third kid, the last two followed his path."

"I will learn from your experience," Jim said with another chuckle, standing up in the process, he was ready to go home. The two doctors moved towards the door, remnant of smiles still etched their faces, but then Essiet paused.

"Thank God I remembered. I've been meaning to ask you about the patient in the private room..."

"Mrs. Jesam," Jim interrupted him and smiled knowingly.

"Yes, her. My professional take on her is full recovery, so I wonder why she still insists she's not strong enough to go home."

Jim laughed, while Essiet chuckled but his expression was still inquisitive. "Mrs. Jesam has recovered, but she asked to stay a while until her daughter got home from vacation. She says she's worried nobody would be around to get her to the hospital in time if another respiratory attack occurred."

"Oh, I see. Such a nice woman shouldn't be left alone, she should have a maid to care for her needs," Essiet declared with a slight tone of impatience.

Jim paused in the process of reaching for the door's handle, "Doctor, I'm sensing your concern for this woman and it's not only professional," Jim said with a poker face.

Essiet turned to him with a bashful expression, "She's a nice woman and... she converses well," he stammered in explanation.

Jim chuckled delightedly, he was pulling the doctor's leg, the lonely man deserved good companionship, and if Mrs. Jesam was the one, he wouldn't interfere. "She's paying her bills, so we have no excuse to throw her out of the hospital and the private room is unoccupied anyway," Jim explained with a smile, they both stepped out of his office and he locked the door.

"Yes, okay. I will bid you a good night now," Essiet said and gave Jim a firm hand shake with a benign smile on his face.

"And a good one to you too, doctor," Jim said and smiled back. Essiet turned and went for his rounds while Jim cringed at the time on his wrist watch and hurried towards the exit.

Jim's hospital was fenced with only a front gate. The parking space inside the fenced premises could only take four cars at a time, customers parked their cars in the lot outside the hospital's fence. The space inside had Jim's car, Essiet's car, the Matron and senior nursing officer's car. Jim had a permanent parking spot on the right side of the hospital's building, directly opposite a church, he loved admiring

the architectural design of the church when he arrived the hospital and before he left, he derived a lovely feeling from his admiration.

Jim rushed out of the hospital's swinging, glass doors and jogged to his car, patting his pockets to search for his car keys. He was momentarily distraught when he couldn't find it in his pockets or on the ground where he stood, then he remembered bringing it out of his pocket at the reception, but had paused to sign a document and had probably forgotten it there. Jim wasted no time in jogging back into the hospital, the keys were there as he'd thought, he grabbed them with a smile at the receptionist and rushed out again to his car.

Jim dropped his doctor's bag on the roof of his car and proceeded to unlock his car, as he turned the key, something, like a stone, hit the roof of his car in between the doctor's bag and the position of his head. Jim was shocked, he looked up and around to find out the origin of the object that just dented his car and... Jim looked closely, was bringing out smoke.

Everything happened quickly. As Jim stood there pondering on the strange object and where it might have come from, another hit closer to his head, he jumped back and looked at the sky, could it be chemical rain, Jim thought in confusion. He was about to open his car to check the extent of the damage but his ankles were forcefully dragged from under his car and he lost his balance and fell heavily on the graveled ground.

Jim had no time to find out who had dragged his ankle or why or even to get angry because nano-seconds after he landed heavily on the ground, glass from the windscreen of his car shattered violently and rained on him, all he could do was protect his head with his arm and put his head down.

Each windscreen that shattered violently, gave Jim a violent jolt, he didn't know what was happening to him, it felt like a dream, he would wake up from it any minute now, he thought fearfully. Jim didn't move from the position he was in until people came to his rescue, he had been afraid to look up when the shattering had finally ended.

"Sir, are you hurt?" a young man kept asking him in a loud, insistent voice. Jim was disoriented, he shook his head negatively and then nodded, his head was reeling. His car was a wreck, it was riddled with bullet holes. That could have been him, Jim thought in sudden realization, that could have been his body looking like his car, he would have been dead. Who would have looked after his children? He would have been dead if not for his rough fall, Jim started physically, the fall, he

remembered, some one had forcefully dragged his ankles. Jim fell on his knees again and checked under his car, there was nobody there.

"Sir! Sir, you need to come into the hospital!" the young man insisted again, he dragged Jim to his feet and was helped by another young man, they put Jim's arm over their shoulders and rushed him into the hospital. All this happened in a blur for Jim, he was in shock and barely noticed the large crowd that had gathered. He would have died, he kept thinking, over and over.

The CRBC- Cross River Broadcasting Corporation ran the news. They interviewed the Commissioner of Police, who assured the victim and the general public that investigations on the attempted assassination of Dr. Jim Craig begun immediately the report came through his office. The Commissioner also added that some officers have been dispatched to keep a twenty-four hour surveillance on the Doctor and his family.

CRBC ran a short profile on Dr. Jim Craig with the news. As the female newscaster read the profile, pictures of Jim and the mutilated cars at his hospital were flashed on the screen.

...the widower, whose wife passed away a couple of years ago, has two children. He won the award for best doctor in Cross River State, two years in a row and was the doctor that delivered the governor's last child. Dr. Craig is described by his employees at the Phoenix private clinic as humble, the best boss and a very unassuming man, and he is said to have taken the word philanthropy to another level when he rescued an abandoned baby and decided to take care of it himself because the motherless babies' homes were filled to capacity. Why anybody would want this doctor dead was beyond the comprehension of all.

We certainly hope that the culprits are brought to book quickly. Moving on to other news, the...

Mrs. Regina Jesam watched the rerun of the news two days later and still had tears in her eyes. What had she done, she thought dismally, why had she endangered his life by coming into it? She should have stayed away as directed by... oh, don't go there she admonished herself. She knew what she had to do, she had to tell the doctor the truth ... but not the whole truth, she decided with determination, at this point the whole truth would create complications.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Two weeks after the shooting, Jim still got ominous shivers down his spine from thoughts of what could have been if the people after his life had succeeded in killing him. He still wondered who had saved his life that day from under the car; maybe a partner that rejected the plan to kill him, Jim thought then he shook his head to clear the fog that was slowly descending on his reasoning, he wasn't a very good detective, he'd leave that for the police to handle.

But no matter how he tried to clear his mind, the thought lingered and bothered him, he sighed impatiently and turned the pages of the newspaper he was staring at with a deep frown.

"I'd advice you talk about it," Mercy said suddenly from his side, he hadn't heard her come in.

"You have to go to school," he commented with an even deeper frown, he would have appreciated her company; she was the light in his life. What about your kids, his mind asked him, or your cousin, whose always calling to check on you? Jim mentally shook his head, his other light then, his children were, well his children and his cousin remained his cousin but Mercy...Mercy was a pillar, he couldn't deny it anymore, Mercy was an intelligent and strong woman whom he realized he was beginning to be attracted to.

"I won't go," Mercy declared directly.

"What? Why?" Jim asked with a concerned frown replacing his angry frown.

"I can't leave you like this," Mercy said, her expression showed her tender thoughts towards him. Jim turned to stare at her, my thoughts exactly, Jim said to himself, a pillar, a woman who was always there for him.

"...with the kids, I mean. You'd make them worried and scared with your attitude," Mercy quickly added in explanation when Jim stared at her like he knew the indecent thoughts she harbored deep down.

"So...will you talk about whatever is giving you that horrible frown?" Mercy asked him with a small smile after a slight pause, his steady stare was unnerving.

"Is it that bad?" Jim asked, still looking worried. He waved Mercy to join him on the sofa.

"Very. I could see it from the kitchen door," Mercy joked and sat by him but with an obvious gap in the middle.

"You are cutting classes for me," Jim commented, giving her a grateful look,

"Thank you."

Mercy waved his gratitude away, "Please, don't thank me, you are my excuse for missing a boring class. I'd do it too for Willie or the girls, if the need arose," Mercy added, she didn't want Jim realizing that she liked him...very much.

Jim sighed heavily, "I think I know the people that might be behind the attempt on my life."

Mercy sat up alertly, "Then tell the police!" she exclaimed.

Jim sighed again, this time wryly, "It's not that easy."

"How do you mean? If you can't do it, tell me the culprits, I'll do the reporting,"

Mercy said seriously.

Jim gave her another of those knowing looks, she would gladly stick out her neck for me, he thought with a slight tightening in his chest. Was it right to have this feelings for... he couldn't even decide what to call her role in his home. He couldn't say maid because that would be demeaning to an intelligent and independent woman who worked to have an education, a rare thing in this era, Jim sighed and down at Mercy's worried face.

"I'm sorry if I raised your hopes, I meant that there are a group of people I suspect but I don't know them...facially," Jim explained. Mercy gave him a blank look, she still didn't understand.

"Let me explain," Jim said turning slightly on the sofa so that he could face her directly; the action reduced the gap on the seat, considerably. "My father," Jim began but couldn't help the tone of sarcasm that came with speaking about his dad, "...was a very rich man. So rich that he was able to purchase a land in one of the Northern Cross Riverian villages, two hour's drive from town, the land has a spring in it and the possibility of oil," Mercy's eyes widened in awe at the mention of oil.

"You think that's what they want?" Mercy asked fearfully.

"Probably, I don't know what else to think. I can still remember my dad furiously telling off a legal representative for offering to buy what he considered his vacation home. He willed me the house," Jim said, the sarcasm still present in his tone.

"Why do I sense that you didn't really like your father?" Mercy asked haltingly, she didn't know if she should be asking such questions.

"My father was an all round asshole," Jim answered not bothering to hide his hatred and anger anymore.

"That is a strong word," Mercy commented slowly, she was taken aback by his hatred.

"For lack of a stronger word at the time of speech." There was a silent pause that lasted almost a minute.

"Why?" Mercy ventured, she couldn't hold herself back from asking, she tried but just couldn't, she wanted to know everything about him, she wanted to know his past, his future, she wanted to know what made him tick. Mercy knew it was wrong, very wrong to have these feelings but she couldn't help it, the urge was an insistent itch she just had to scratch.

Jim knew what she was asking about, why he hated his dad so much, even in death. He sighed wearily and thought of his sad childhood story, told only to his wife after a lot of push, but he was about to tell it to Mercy after a simple 'why?' Jim didn't want to analyze what that meant; he just went on with his story.

"My mother died at my birth, at least that's what I was told by my dad and the servants in our house. All I wanted as I grew into a teen was to see a picture of her, to know what she looked like," Jim sighed sadly as the memory of those days flashed through his mind, he had badly needed a picture of his mom for his imagination, for times of loneliness when he could dream about what she would have done if she were to be around.

"Long story short, my dad had ordered the destruction of my mother's photographs the first time I asked about her. I was just a child and was curious why my mum never came to pick me up like my best friend's mum did.

"As I grew older, I got more inquisitive, I asked about her sisters or brothers or any relation really, I didn't care, I just needed someone with a photograph of her. My dad went apoplectic with rage at these times, and even after I graduated and became an intern, he couldn't stop saying how feeble and less of a man I was because I needed to know who my mother had been.

"Is that a bad thing, I mean to want to get to know my mother even though she's late; is that a weak thing to do?" Jim asked Mercy, his eyes were filled with uncertainty and sadness as he looked at her; he just wanted to know if his father had been right after all.

Mercy instinctively reached out and caught his hand, she held it in both her hands, she unconsciously smoothed his hand, tenderly, which caused an instant reaction in Jim's heart, a quickening, and his heart rate increased considerably at the feel of her hands.

"I think that you are a good person for wanting to know your mother," Mercy said looking into his eyes; she wanted to show him that her words were sincere.

"Despite what your father might have said, he was wrong and I'm sorry for all your childhood hurts. I had a great childhood and I can't imagine not having those happy days with my dad... but, despite what you went through, you still turned out this good, you turned out...perfect, you turned out...benign, you turned out..." Mercy ran out of adjectives to describe how she saw him, her eyes were great pools of feelings. Jim couldn't decide if the feelings were pity, appreciation for his God given good nature, care, love? Could she be feeling the un-nameable emotion he was feeling?

"You turned out..." Mercy struggled to find adjectives, but was interrupted by Jim's whisper.

"...beautiful." Mercy was shocked speechless; her brown, expressive eyes lay widened, giving her an innocent and uncertain expression.

Jim refused to analyze his instincts, it felt easier to follow it, her face was already extended so he only had to bend an inch and he was kissing her. It was the most fulfilling experience Jim had ever had, her mouth was warm and tasted of chocolate, she had obviously been eating her squirreled away candies, her lavender scent filled his nostrils as he deepened the kiss.

Mercy felt every single nuance of Jim's body, his hand behind her neck with his fingers creeping into her hair, the slow movement of his lips on hers, his closed eyes; they were the very things she wished to express. The touch of his lips on hers was so pleasant it shocked her numb, for a long moment she didn't react, and then with a surge of passion, she returned Jim's kiss, eliciting a groan of pleasure from him.

She could feel his palm on her back; she moved closer and wound her arm around his neck. Their bodies connected, Jim felt her soft curve against his body, his hands tightened perceptibly around her full shape, his emotions threatened to overwhelm him and they were clashing. His analytical mind criticized his present action but he ignored it, nothing would make him let go of this woman whose passion measured up with his.

It was as if providence wanted to test him, because immediately after his thought, the intercom crackled to life and Willie's whimpers came through it. Mercy immediately broke the kiss, her expression was of shock, shame and embarrassment when she found herself on Jim's lap, how did she get there, she thought dismally. What had she done?

"Mercy..." Jim began in a hoarse whisper, Mercy couldn't wait to find out what he had to say, she jumped off his lap and fled up the stairs with her hands covering her face in shame. Jim got up to go after her but his beeper, the one that was used to get him for emergencies, went off. Jim made the call and was told that Mrs. Jesam needed his attention; he rushed out immediately but regretfully.

During his fifteen minutes drive to the hospital, Jim pondered on what had just happened with Mercy. His mind was in turmoil of contradictions, he wished the baby hadn't woken up when he had and still he thanked God that he had, Jim didn't know what would have happened, they had both been lost in the moment. And with Mercy's reaction, he knew she clearly wasn't one to flirt, the knowledge only made him want her more.

Jim stifled a sigh at the last moment, he wasn't in the car alone, he had two of his police guards with him, and three had been left at home. He wondered what it was that Doctor Essiet couldn't handle, this better be good, he thought impatiently as he parked his car and rushed into the hospital.

"Good evening, doctor," the night nurse greeted him.

"Good evening. Where is doctor Essiet?"

"He is still on his rounds."

"What's the nature of the emergency with Mrs. Jesam?" Jim asked the nurse exasperatingly, he shouldn't be the one asking, if there is an emergency, the nurse is privy about it and ready to brief the doctor immediately he walks in.

"Emergency?" the nurse asked with a confused frown.

"I was beeped by doctor Essiet and... never mind. I'll check on her myself," he said angrily and walked towards the private wards. Jim knocked on Mrs. Jesam's door, waited a minute then opened the door, he was surprised to find her pacing the length of her room, a deep frown marred her forehead.

"Good evening, madam," Jim greeted her calmly as he straightened his stethoscope and was about to hook it in his ear.

"There's no need for that," Mrs. Jesam said succinctly. Jim paused in his actions and peered at her closely, she didn't look sick, she looked nervous and worried.

"How can I be of help?" Jim asked in a low tone, his senses were heightened; there was something heavy about to happen.

Mrs. Jesam looked at him sadly, "I've made a mistake that isn't a mistake." Jim's brow furrowed in confusion as he tried to understand what the woman had just said, was it an idiom, he thought foolishly.

"Please, seat down," she said and sat on the corner of her bed while Jim took the only seat in the room. Without much ado, she went straight to the shocking point, "I am Willie's grandmother."

Jim's mind never took him to the baby he'd rescued with Mercy, his face screwed up in deep thought, Mrs. Jesam, seeing his confusion, explained it to him. "The baby you found."

Realization shone on his face, then worry furrowed it again, Willie was the sole reason Mercy was in the house with him, apart from that, he was a part of the family now; the children would be devastated; he would be devastated.

"You've known all this while?" Jim asked with trepidation.

"Let's just say that we've recently been thrown together as close friends because we share a common enemy."

"I don't understand," Jim said slowly.

"I'll explain. When I said that I made a mistake that isn't a mistake, I meant that bringing Willie into your life was an avoidable mistake; I didn't know you were going to be in the vicinity at that time.

"In fact," Mrs. Jesam said with a slight frown of contemplation, "thinking of it now, it seems providential that you were there."

"Madam, Mrs. Jesam, I'm sorry, this is very confusing to me...", Jim began but was interrupted by the woman on the bed.

"I apologize. I requested for your presence to explain that your life is in danger because of the baby you found," she said rapidly.

"Such a thing is preposterous, Mrs. Jesam. Have you taken any medications today?" Jim asked suspiciously, the woman might be suffering from the hallucinatory effect of a drug.

"I'm not under the influence of any drug," Mrs. Jesam said with haughty anger.

"And how do think I know of the child you found or the name of the person you found it with? This is harsh reality doctor, I only called to talk to you because Willie has been discovered yet again."

"By who?!" Jim exclaimed angrily, now there were so many faceless players in this saga.

"A recap, my daughter, Sofia was dating a wealthy, older man. I wasn't in support of the relationship but that isn't the issue now. She became pregnant for this man, there was no fuss, the man actually jumped at the idea and took very good care of my Sofia, and he even got her a car.

"One day my daughter comes home from a get together the man had thrown for his friends, she told me that the man had called a secret meeting involving the lawyer in charge of his will, and herself. She had been very excited that night as she told me what had transpired in that meeting.

"The man had written something serious as a joke. Sofia said he had given her two million for general needs and that she had joked that she would need a lot of maids to help with the baby while she pursued her career.

"The man had in turn written in the temporary will that whoever was the caregiver of the child was entitled to a hundred million. Sofia said he signed and stamped it before handing it to his lawyer," Mrs. Jesam's expression wavered between sadness and anger.

"That was a reckless thing to do," Jim whispered slowly.

"Exactly what I told my daughter, but she laughed me off and said that she had agreed to be the sole caregiver her child would ever have, so the money was hers. As an aside she said the man had promised to go and fix her name as the sole caregiver entitled to the hundred million."

"Did he?" Jim asked with a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, he starred at Mrs. Jesam expectantly.

She sighed wearily, "That brings us to the present issue. He didn't, he died two weeks later in a car accident, the police said his brakes failed and their car collided with an oncoming trailer, the man and his driver died instantly." That could have easily been my dad, Jim thought, he had died with his driver in a car accident and the police report had stated a failed brake as the cause of the crash.

"Sofia was distraught, she grieved so much, it hurt me that the man should die even though on several occasions I had wished him exactly that for luring my daughter with his money. So, the will was read, my daughter got her two million and the hundred million was for when the baby was delivered.

"Sofia put to birth through a C-section, it took a while for her to recover," at this point her voice broke and tears streamed down her eyes, Jim made to get up to comfort her but she immediately raised her hands and stopped his movements, she

wiped her eyes and took a deep breath, obviously to fortify herself from the sadness she was dredging up from the past.

"She had only gone out to get a diaper for the baby and never returned. It was a car accident and surprise, surprise, her brakes also failed," Mrs. Jesam said sarcastically.

"My God, I'm sorry madam," Jim said lamely. The brake failure issue wasn't a coincidence any more, there was a conspiracy at work here.

"Ha!" she laughed dryly, "No need for that, I have learnt to curb my emotions. So, after burying my daughter, I disappeared, but I knew it was a matter of time before the faceless assassins found me. I decided to give out Willie to a poor and unknown family, somewhere he wouldn't be discovered.

"I chose Mercy, disciplined but kind, strong and determined, she would do a good job, I would be coming to the house as a philanthropist to help with money issues..." she sighed wearily at this point.

"I had it all planned out but you came along and the whole plan changed and now, they are after you," Mrs. Jesam completed with deeply worried expression as she starred at Jim.

"Hmm," Jim sighed heavily, "I don't know what to say, but I won't apologize for finding Willie."

"I wasn't expecting any. I just want you and yours to be safe."

"I'm afraid to ask this but I have to, are you taking Willie from us?" Jim asked with trepidation.

"My God, no!" Mrs. Jesam exclaimed, "Where would I go? Besides, I'm too old to run around and the baby is safer with you, there are guards around you all day."

"Did you go to the police? With this information, we should go to the police."

"Not advisable son," she said wryly, "I have reported this case countless times with these details, every time I went back I was told such a file was never opened. I gave up trying and used my discretion."

There was a pause of silence, Jim's mind was reeling with all that he'd heard, what was he going to do now? His head felt heavy as he raised it to face the middle aged woman who had gone through this by herself, how had she survived it, Jim thought.

"It is possible that the man's relatives are behind this. With a name, I could hire a private investigator to look into the family..." Mrs. Jesam interrupted him in a rush.

"Curious thing ever, I never heard Sofia talk about any relatives," her eyes were shifty as she said this, she looked everywhere in the room but at Jim and he noticed.

"Madam, we have to do something," Jim said calmly as he gave her a reassuring look.

"Let the police run the investigation, it's safer, it's easier, it's more effective," Mrs. Jesam postulated.

"But, but what do I do now?" Jim cried, he hated the feeling of helplessness that had come over him, he wanted to do something.

"Doctor, watch your kids and my grandson, be security conscious, or brake conscious, that seems to be their forte. Try and live safe, that's something to do."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jim's recent style of existence slowly became relatively normal to him and those he catered for, his children, Mercy, his patients at the hospital and his employees. He was rarely seen without his plain cloths police bodyguards shadowing his every move except inside the hospital building. His thoughts about Willie's granny's story were now a bit mild from an uneventful two weeks and the speculations of the police that the culprits would be dissuaded from any further attempt at his life because the governor of the state was personally interested in his case, though investigations were on going.

Mercy on the other hand had realized, with mixed feelings, that 'the kiss' hadn't been spoken of; it had been overlooked in the shock wave of discovering that the old lady at the hospital was Willie's grandmother. The story Jim had retold to her had sounded preposterously wicked but scarily real enough to give her skepticism pause, there were too many coincidences in the saga, terrifying coincidences; and the old lady, Mrs. Jesam's warning against reporting to the police hadn't helped matters much, all they could do was wait and hope that the involvement of the governor in the case would desist the criminals from their evil plan.

With relative normalcy came slight relief, relaxation and a tweaked former routine. Mercy still attended evening lectures, the kids got used to having armed guards when their dad took them to and from school, Mercy had been registered as the only other person to pick them up in the absence of their dad and everybody took care of Willie, Mercy was grateful for that.

Mercy looked up as Princess giggled at something her dad had said, she started smiling but thought better of it when her gaze clashed with that of Natasha, Jim's cousin who had come visiting with the declaration that her weekend was free and that she'd missed her nieces terribly. Mercy didn't hold any grudge against Nat as Jim called her, she understood her mistrust of a stranger in her only relation's house, Mercy only prayed that with time her mistrust would fade, she wasn't planning on doing anything to hurt the Craigs, Mercy wished someone would tell Nat that.

With the thought still whirling in her mind, Mercy stood up, she handed over Willie to Ann and walked out of the sitting room, none of the adults turned, they were having a pleasant conversation after they'd all just finished lunch. As she strolled to the kitchen, she over heard Jim telling Nat that he'd be travelling to Ogoja in three weeks for a business related meeting and that Princess's birthday

was just a week away. Mercy smiled at the pleasant information she'd just learnt and proceeded to tune off the rest of their conversation as she did the dishes.

"Girls, come say goodbye to your aunty," Jim called out in a slightly raised voice. Ann and Princess giggled and screamed their goodbyes from the top of the stairs, Nat answered them pleasantly with promise of visiting on Princess's birthday with a gift.

Mercy hurriedly finished the dishes; she wanted to be locked up in her room by the time Jim got back from seeing off his cousin. She knew she was avoiding being alone with Jim, she knew it was childish but every time she happened to be alone with him, she felt breathless and the memory of the kiss they had shared plummeted her senses; at moments like that she felt like jumping the man's bones, just crushing her lips to his in a fierce kiss to confirm that the intense, unforgettable pleasure she'd had the day of the kiss hadn't been a dream. She wanted to confirm that he'd felt the same way, and that the kiss hadn't been imaginary, that it had been real, as real as her constant erotic dreams.

But Mercy couldn't do that, she already considered herself a slut for craving canal knowledge of her employer; all she could do and did, was avoid being alone with him, she made sure the children were always around her, maintaining her common sense and control. Mercy hurried up the steps but realized that she hadn't been quick enough because Jim's voice at that moment called out her name and took her breath away, and the kids were upstairs, she thought wryly.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Jim drawled with a lazy smile. Mercy turned to face him, she saw the cute smile and sighed forlornly, if he'd noticed she'd been avoiding him, he wasn't indicating it in anyway.

"I...um...I wanted to get to my room," Mercy stammered in a slightly shaky voice.

"Are you doing anything important...right now?" Jim asked again in that teasing voice that made her heartbeat race, she thought of lying but changed her mind instantly, she shook her head in reply.

"I'll like to have a word with you," Jim requested courteously. Mercy's eye brows flew up in instant worry, her heart beat jammed painfully against the wall of her chest, was he going to talk about the kiss, she wondered fearfully, what would she say? The right thing was to get indignant about it but she worried that she might not be able to pull it off, not with the counter wishes that filled her.

"Oh, okay...alright," she replied and slowly went down the stairs, they sat at the dinning.

"I know you over heard me telling Nat about Princess's birthday in a week," Jim began as he sat down.

"Are you implying that I was eaves dropping?" Mercy asked, her tone had come out harder than she'd intended it to, she couldn't help it, the instant flow of relief that flooded her had been immense, he wasn't going to talk about the damn kiss, Mercy thought, maintaining a slight frown on her face.

"Um..." Jim began with a confused look on his face, "I didn't mean it that way and I'm sorry if it sounded that way," he apologized sincerely but with the sexiest smile Mercy thought she'd ever seen. "I wanted to ask if you could plan a menu for Princess's birthday."

"Oh, that," Mercy felt stupid as Jim nodded in reply, "How many children are you expecting?" she managed to grind out.

"Hmm, lets keep it at ten children, plus their parents. I want it to be a small affair."

"I can handle that," Mercy replied with a speculative look, "Snacks can be gotten at a fast food in addition to what I'll cook."

Jim nodded in agreement with a happy smile, "That's good, and not to seem like I'm taking a mile at the yard you've given me but, I'd please like you to prepare lunch for a party of six on Thursday, can that be done?" Jim made pleading eyes. Like I could refuse, Mercy thought wryly, "Yes, it can be done. I'll draw up menus for both events for your approval," she answered officiously.

"Okay," Jim replied, giving her an uncertain look which she missed in her haste to flee the dinning table. He had wanted to talk about something else, the unforgettable kiss, he regretted over looking it for so long, now he felt uncomfortable bringing it up.

"Thank you," he called out lamely as he watched Mercy run up the stairs, did she detest him for that kiss, Jim thought painfully, he'd noticed her habit of avoiding him and wondered what to do about it, his feelings were jumbled up when it concerned Mercy, he sighed wearily and walked to his sitting room. Damn her curvy, pillowy figure, that left him aching to wrap his arms around her all day, Jim thought.

"Give me a break Paulo! Whatever you think you are, please forget it, some expert you call yourself but missed a target whose head was just there for the taking!"

"Sharon, I'd appreciate it if you don't use that tone of voice with me, I told you already, the scope of the gun was faulty and the stench from that pastor's toilet wasn't helping at all," Paulo complained, he turned to his companion, "Cyril, isn't it so? You were there."

"You were supposed to use the pastor's office!" Sharon exclaimed angrily, "Your incompetence astounds me."

Cyril was a huge and bulky guy who seldom spoke but believed in acting, paid Sharon and Paulo no mind. He quietly dragged on his cigarette and leaned on the wall of the uncompleted building they were in. Cyril didn't know why he still stuck with this two, he wasn't the type that took orders from a woman but Sharon had convinced them that she was just a figure head for some big shot who didn't want to meet with the likes of him; touts.

The money they had been paid in their first, second and third operations under Sharon had been really good, he'd stick with her for a while, this latest victim seemed really important to her boss, the amount mentioned was mouth watering, he'd do this last job and change towns. Cyril finished his cigarette and turned to the bickering duo.

"Why don't we just use the technique we are good at," Cyril commented in a drawl, Sharon and Paulo, turned to stare at him, "This guy, he has a car, right?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cyril stared at his two, ever bickering, colleagues with disgust. It was only the money dangling at the end of this job that held sway for him, nothing else. He had lost faith in both of them acting like professionals, so while they behaved badly, he worked ceaselessly to aid the job to safe completion.

"Okay, okay, time up, my cigarette is finished, I can talk now," Cyril said as he crushed his cigarette end with his boot, exhaling the rest of the nicotine smoke in a fine, straight stream.

"I was making a point," Paulo snapped irritably.

"Like I really care about any point you make, Paulo," Sharon said sarcastically. Cyril knew it was the beginning of another bout of bickering so he jumped in immediately.

"At this point," Cyril began in a stern voice that gave Sharon and Paulo a moment's pause, "It's the job that should be of utmost importance to us."

"I agree with you Cyril but what happens when some of us don't take our allotted responsibilities seriously?" Sharon said this with a hard stare at Paulo.

"Then, we take up his responsibilities," Cyril immediately jumped in to reply, finely cutting off anything that Paulo had opened his mouth to say, "...and his share of the pay as well."

"Hmm, I never thought of it that way, I like this suggestion," Sharon said with a contemplative nod.

"Wait a minute, who made you leader over us?" Paulo said this insinuatingly and it caught Sharon's attention because she turned questioning eyes to Cyril and waited for his reply.

"You are bent on causing a ruckus, aren't you? This isn't leadership, this is problem solving, the type that doesn't involve much argument because it actually solves the pertinent issue," Cyril drawled, keeping his stare on Paulo and peeking at Sharon with his peripheral vision.

"You sound like an entrepreneur, man but you are a killer," Paulo sulked.

"I do hope, someday, to own a business," Cyril replied with a smile.

"Immediately after this job?" Sharon asked with narrowed eyes. Cyril caught her look and decided that lying was best at this stage.

"No Sharon, the life of crime with blood and gore still holds lots of attraction for me," he explained succinctly.

"When you describe it like that, I believe you totally," Sharon said with a dry laugh.

"So, are you like attending seminars and trainings? Because that 'problem solving' shit you just said man, is what my younger brother could never shut up about when he started attending self development seminars," Paulo asked again, pricking Sharon's interest as she turned to wait for Cyril's reply.

Cyril stared at Paulo with narrowed eyes and thought of pulling out his gun and blasting his brains all over the uncompleted building's rough wall, just thinking about it gave him some satisfaction. Cyril shook his head with a self derisive smile, "What, me, attend seminars? How is that even possible? I heard that shit in a movie man, nothing more. I just like peddling it out to sound professional," he said and laughed in self deprecation, his audience joined in to laugh at him too.

"But that's not the issue now, what's important is completing this job, we need the money," Cyril postulated.

"Yes, me most since it's rightfully mine," Sharon replied without any conscious thought of what she'd said until she turned to find Cyril and Paulo looking at her quizzically. "What?" she asked confusedly.

"Just now you said you needed the money most because it's rightfully yours," Paulo reiterated succinctly.

"I said that?" Sharon asked with widened eyes, both guys nodded with inquisitive stares. She looked so innocent, none of the guys suspected that she might be pretending. Sharon slapped her cheeks as if to wake herself up, the place reddened immediately, compliment of her soft, fair skin. "Oh, I'm sorry guys, I was thinking of something very personal and it slipped into our conversation. What exactly were we talking about?"

"Money," Cyril answered in a clip, giving Sharon one final suspicious look and decided that her confused and embarrassed expression was genuine enough. "I got the information that you asked for."

"Let's have it," Sharon said with some excitement, Paulo's stare was also expectant.

"The good doctor is travelling to Ogoja in three weeks or less, I'm yet to confirm the exact time, but I've been assured that he takes his car for servicing before any journey," Cyril stated confidently.

"Who told you this?" Paulo asked with narrowed eyes.

"I can't disclose my informant to you, I'm sorry but I can assure you that the information is concise."

"I trust your info, Cyril, it's been working for us all this while, so what's our move?" Sharon asked crisply.

"The doctor's mechanic is a hard-ass but I found out a little secret, he's a heavy drinker, we can work something out," Cyril said with a satisfied smile.

Sharon checked her wristwatch as she nodded in agreement to Cyril's summation.

"Okay guys, I have to run, more meetings with the boss, Cyril, keep me posted."

"Of course," Cyril said with a slow nod.

"Do tell the boss that we need money for miscellaneous deeds," Paulo called out to Sharon's retreating back, she only nodded as she hurried away, already thinking of her next move to gain what was rightfully hers.

Doctor Craig's residence was cheery with multi-colored ribbons and balloons, the music was slightly higher in volume than usual, anybody passing by would know that there was a celebration going on.

Inside, the girls squealed and jumped around in their room, throwing balloons and making Willie smile toothlessly. They were all dressed up but were waiting for Mercy to come up and dress their hairs with colorful pins and combs.

Mercy was having a hard time in the kitchen, not because she couldn't handle the kitchen's responsibilities, in fact, she had concluded her menu of coconut rice with fried fish and beef, cold slaw with fried chicken for adults that didn't want to indulge in real food, the drinks had been refrigerated the previous night and the cake was in front of her at the moment, she was fixing tiny, colorful candles on the top.

So it wasn't the kitchen activities that were giving her a hard time, she'd gone through it like a breeze, just like she'd done the previous Thursday for Jim's meeting. What gave her a hard time and would continue giving her a hard time through out the birthday party was Jim's sudden girlfriend.

Mercy had never heard of her since her stay at the Craig's residence, she had not noticed Jim acting weird, coming home late or making long calls, so that she could, at least, have assumed that he was dating, nothing of the sort; so she excused her shocked reaction when Jim introduced the stunning woman as his girlfriend, she'd almost dropped the pile of flat, ceramic plates she'd been about to place on the dinning table.

She pursed her lips to spit on the memory of Lizzy, 'the girlfriend' , giving Jim a lingering kiss on the cheek as she came from the kitchen with more plates to place

on the dinning table, but held herself back just in time. How could this man be bringing out her most primitive attitude? Her heart flipped and rolled continuously whenever she knew she had to pass through the sitting room, where the 'lovebirds' were stationed.

Mercy sighed wearily as she completed her task on the cake, she heard the arrival of the first set of kids and knew that Jim and his Lizzy would be at the front door, so she used the slim chance to slip upstairs to finish up the girl's and her toilet.

"There sweetheart, you look like a real princess," Mercy said as she put the last pin in Princess' hair.

"Thank you, aunty Mercy," Princess chimed brightly.

"Enjoy it, it's your day. Now go meet Ann and Willie downstairs, some of your friends are here already," Mercy encouraged. Princess squealed happily and ran downstairs.

In retrospect, Mercy convinced herself that it had never been her intention to dress up for the birthday party because she knew that she'd have to serve the kids, so she'd earlier decided to go with a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. But contrary to her earlier plan, Mercy found herself dressed in a beautiful, knee length, sky blue, A-cut dress. The color emphasized her ebony complexion, the tight bodies molded her impressive bosom attractively and the knee length A-cut design gave her a childish look...a beautiful, chubby girl's look.

Mercy twirled in front of the mirror and smiled unconsciously at herself. What are you doing? she asked herself even as she smiled and admired herself. She refused to think about what anybody would think, even Nat, she wanted to feel beautiful; she deserved to be beautiful, it was her compensation for slaving over the party's menu.

So with her smooth, black hair caught in a short pony tail, very light eye make up and pink lipstick, Mercy went downstairs, the party had begun without any formal opening. The kids ran around and inside the house squealing in pure joy, parents sat in the living room discussing with each other, though still keeping watchful eyes on their kids.

Mercy saw that the parents had drinks already, and some were eating her cooked food with relish, she smiled and wondered who had served them, at the same time wondering where Jim was. She reached the entrance of the kitchen and stopped

short at the sight that met her, Jim was scooping rice into several flat plates while Lizzy decorated the top with fried fish and beef.

"I'll take these ones to the parents, keep scooping, I'll come back for more," Lizzy said as she lifted the big tray. "Oh, Mercy, right?" she asked with a bright smile, Mercy nodded without taking her eyes off Jim, who had also looked up. "Your food is delicious, everybody is complimenting it."

"Thank you," Mercy answered, managing a small smile as Lizzy went by, then she noticed that Jim had not looked away from the moment he'd looked up at her, she felt disconcerted and said the first thing that came to mind, "What are you doing?" she asked Jim as she walked determinedly to where he stood and snatched the spoon from him.

"Staring at the most beautiful woman at this party," Jim declared honestly, he wasn't smiling when he said it, so Mercy couldn't excuse the compliment as a joke. They stared at each other unblinkingly while Mercy tried to contain the elation bubbling in her heart.

"Jim!" Lizzy called from the sitting room.

"Yeah!" Jim replied loudly still holding Mercy's stare which had immediately become pained at the sound of Lizzy's voice.

"The parents are fine, start scooping for the kids!" Lizzy shouted above the music.

"Okay!" Jim shouted back.

"You shouldn't say things like that with your girlfriend not far away," Mercy said sarcastically but tried to make it sound like a joke, she really hoped it sounded like a joke.

Just then the electricity went off but Jim still said what was at the tip of his tongue to say, "It's not what you think, Mercy."

Mercy scoffed unconsciously, immediately causing a worried frown on Jim's brow.

"Jim!" Lizzy called out again causing a bout of hysterical giggles to burst from Mercy.

"Yeah!"

"Get the generator!"

"I'm on it!" Jim replied. He walked towards the kitchen door that led outside to the generator house but pointed his fore finger at the now calm Mercy, "We have to talk," he said in a fierce whisper before stepping out of the kitchen, Mercy ignored him and began scooping food into plates for the kids, her heart thudding heavily.

The generator came on, the party continued smoothly and she managed to stay away from her confusion inspiring employer.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mercy woke up the next day with a dull headache and the urge to sleep for, at least, twenty-four more hours. She could have managed two more hours of sleep but her internal alarm had woken her up at the exact time she woke everyday, five am. She snuggled deeper into the blanket after peeking at Willie, the baby was peacefully snoring, the knowledge lulled Mercy back to sleep but her already active mind reminded her of the need to do the dishes from the previous day's party.

"Arrrrrrgg," Mercy groaned irritably into her pillow, why couldn't she shirk her duties just once, preferably today, Mercy thought with a frown as she mentally motivated her weak bones to leave the extremely comfortable bed. Because you're being paid, she answered herself quietly with a weary sigh.

Mercy felt extremely tired and weak, her bones felt heavy as she dragged herself off the bed, she lazily drew on a robe over her night wear with the slow thought that nobody was going to be awake at this time. She went down the stairs with utmost care, she didn't realize how tired she was until she started down the stairs, a whiff of dizziness slowed her descent to a stop and she held on to the bannister with all the strength she could muster.

"I'm definitely going back to bed after this," she muttered to herself and continued down without any event. When she got to the kitchen door she had the urge to lean for just a while to catch her breath, her hand rested on the door frame and as she was about to get the much needed relief, Jim's voice startled her.

"Good morning, you look tired," Jim said from the sink, he'd just finished rinsing his hands.

Mercy straightened immediately from her leaning posture and managed a smile, "Good morning," she said and moved smartly into the kitchen, ignoring the weak feeling in her stomach.

"I didn't think you'd be up this early today," Jim said conversationally.

"Me neither, but the dishes cried out," Mercy said wryly in a dry tone that caused a chuckle from Jim, she flipped him a surprised glance and looked away immediately, her weakened state couldn't handle his handsomeness at the moment, her little strength was solely for the dishes.

"I've been down here for a while, I would have heard the dishes crying out if in fact they had," Jim said, continuing the conversation that he obviously was enjoying, he had a half smile on his face.

"Well, there's this telepathic connection dirty dishes have with their proposed cleaner that ordinary people like you won't understand," Mercy said slowly, her breath seemed to be coming in gasps and the weakness had increased. She paused by the table in possession of the pile of dirty dishes as Jim's smile graduated into a chuckle, then a laugh.

"That was a good one," Jim said still trying to curb his humor, "I woke up early anyway to wash the dishes, so I'll help."

Mercy shook her head, rejecting Jim's offer as she lifted the pile of dirty dishes to the sink; obviously she shouldn't have shook her head, because it caused a deluge of dizziness to hit her, resulting in the instant melting of her legs beneath her; she fell where she stood.

The loud crash of a pile of ten ceramic plates on the tiled kitchen floor galvanized Jim to where Mercy lay, breathing heavily, his concern was for her only.

"Mercy! Mercy! Can you hear me?!" Jim called urgently. His medical instincts had automatically kicked in. His hands flew from her forehead to her wrist and then he pulled down her lower eye lid. He noticed several cuts on her skin from the broken plates, he had to get her upstairs to his first aid kit, he prayed the kids would sleep through this unexpected development.

Mercy heard Jim's frantic calls, it sounded like it was coming from a far away tunnel. It would have been a gigantic effort to answer him. Her head throbbed incessantly; hot breath caressed her nostrils on its way out of her nose, her eyes felt like a pair of branding iron behind her eye lids. Mercy opened her suddenly dry mouth to acknowledge Jim's call, nothing but a sigh came of the effort as she immediately felt air borne, her head lulled back heavily and everything slowly faded to oblivion.

It had been a very hectic weekend but everything had turned out alright at the beginning of the new week. Princess had not stopped talking about her party and Ann took delight in teasing her about how great her own up-coming party would be, even better than Princess' party. It caused a slanging match between the sisters but their dad always knew when to break it up.

Mercy sighed softly as she enjoyed the ride back from the girl's school. They'd just dropped them off. Jim had suddenly and playfully decided that Mercy was going to act as their bodyguard today, she was delighted by the development, the kids were

also delighted and so for the first time after the attempt on Jim's life, the family felt secured enough to go out without their police escort for a few hours.

The warm feeling in Mercy's stomach persisted as they drove towards home, could Jim be reciprocating her feelings in a round about manner, she asked herself. He'd been kind throughout the drive, showing so much consideration even helping her buckle her seat belt.

Mercy sighed gleefully, the sound attracted Jim's glance at her, she met his gaze and they both smiled. Mercy almost purred in her delight, they were now sharing knowing smiles, she thought, not long now they'd trust each other enough to get to the kiss stage.

She watched as he indicated and made a turn into a mechanic workshop, Mercy frowned momentarily in confusion before her love foggy mind remembered that Jim had mentioned he wanted to take his car at the mechanic's for a test drive before heading straight home; no work today, Mercy thought with a thudding heart, if he didn't do something soon she'd probably throw caution to the wind and jump the man's bones.

The mechanic rushed out to meet him, Mercy looked away for a minute but when she turned, Jim was already in his recently serviced car, he laughed at something the mechanic had said and she smiled at his boyish laugh without realizing that she had.

Like a flash, Mercy found herself staring at Jim as he sped out of the mechanic's workshop into the busy road. She didn't realize she had stepped out of the car until she found herself staring worriedly after Jim's car by the side of the road. He made a sharp 'U' turn and began speeding back to the Mechanic's shop.

Mercy expected him to slow down as he neared where she stood by the Mechanic's, especially because he had turned on his indicator. She frowned worriedly as he sped by her, he flashed her a scared glance and Mercy immediately realized that something was terribly wrong.

She turned to get the Mechanic's attention, she desperately wanted to tell him that something was wrong with Jim's car; she wanted to scream at him for obviously not servicing the car well but she turned to find the mechanic yard empty, the Mechanic was no where to be found, at that moment she heard the deafening crash and stiffened.

It was the unmistakable sound of harshly applied brakes and shattering glass. No, it couldn't be Jim's car, Mercy thought fearfully as she joined the throng of people

rushing to the scene of the crash. She hurried but she wasn't fast enough; Jim's car was mangled beyond recognition from its collision with a pickup truck which seemed to have sustained minimal damage.

People rushed to help the driver of the pickup truck, there were shouts of command, wailings and moans of pity from the bystanders; all this was noise to Mercy's ears as she struggled through the crushing crowd to get to Jim. If nobody would help him, she would. When she finally surfaced from the pushing crowd, her eyes settled on Jim's bloodied arm with torn sleeves, the sight rooted her on the spot. Her blurry eyes travelled the length of the arm hanging out of the broken windshield to Jim's bloodied face and found that his eyes were open and staring sightlessly, blood dripped from his head, trickling down his face, he blinked; her heart skipped.

Mercy rushed towards the car, intending to drag Jim out of the car, she moved unseeingly, her only focus was Jim. Her path was blocked by another human; she pushed the heavyset man frantically. "Help him. Help him," she cried in a croak. "He's dead," the man pronounced unequivocally. Mercy felt her throat constrict, she couldn't breath, "No!" she croaked helplessly; her sight darkened and slowly, the shouts and blaring car horns faded away but her mind kept echoing, "He's dead."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Her nose woke up first; it tinged with the nauseating smell of medicine and the cloying scent of antiseptic. There was only one place with those smells; her awakening mind reasoned...the hospital. What was she doing at the hospital; she thought with a frown and still tightly closed eyes. Then the heart wrenching memory of painful sadness engulfed her, she remembered and started sobbing in very deep grief. Great balls of tears slipped out of her tightly closed eyes, rapidly drenching her cloth.

Mercy heard the door open softly; the person obviously didn't want to disturb her. She guessed it would be the doctor or nurse checking up on her. She still refused to open her eyes, if she could keep it close, maybe the bad memory would go away, she felt the person's presence by her bed, her mattress deepened with the person's weight.

"Mercy, Mercy...why are you crying? Are you in pain?" Jim asked with concern laced heavily in his tone.

Mercy's sobs ceased momentarily, Jim, she thought hopefully. She quickly opened her eyes and immediately squinted as the brightness from her window blinded her. "Jim?" she whispered in wonder and narrowed eyes. "Jim. Jim you are alive!" she screamed but it came out as a croak. Mercy struggled up from her supine position and hugged Jim tightly. "Oh my God, you're alive!" she sobbed in gratitude.

Jim had not been able to move, first in confusion at her obvious shock that he was alive and second, in dire shock because she seemed not to realize that she was naked. When she'd struggled up to hug him, the blanket covering her had fallen off, therefore exposing her naked breast to crush against his chest, hence his inability to move a limb, his hands lay lifeless on the bed by his side.

His throat had gone completely dry from the brief glimpse and ultimately, the forceful contact of her breast on his chest. It had dislodged a deluge of locked up desires to the fore, it was bad; Jim could feel his fly size increase at a slow but steady pace, the only thing helping his hands to remain lifeless was his tightly closed eyes and greatly controlled breathing. Despite this, his frustratingly active mind was giving him several ideas on what to do to the lovely, curvy and warm being whose head currently rested on his shoulder.

Speak Jim; if you can't control yourself like the professional doctor that you are, speak, he silently admonished himself. He couldn't believe he was sitting there thinking of ravishing an obviously yet to recover patient. Jim let out a slow breath

and tried to coax his brain to remember what she'd first said so that he could respond accordingly.

"Of course, Mercy...it's me and ..." Jim's voice seemed dry and husky to his hearing, so he slowly cleared it with a determined frown and continued. "Of course I'm alive, Mercy, why..." her sobs cut him off.

"Shush, Mercy. Its okay, whatever it is, I'm here now, it's fine," Jim consoled, hesitantly patting her upper back until her sobs subsided. He recalled that the side effect of the typhoid medicine he'd given her also included hallucinations, so maybe she might have had those which caused her state of upset. She needed more rest, so Jim made a quick decision, he lay Mercy on her back with his body covering her, he felt around for the blanket and replaced his body with it. Whew, he thought with silent relief. At least, the other times she'd been unconscious, Jim immediately refused to think about those times, he grabbed the glass of water from the medicine filled side table and fed Mercy with it, she drank it hungrily.

Jim dropped the glass of water and stretched for a suspension that would sedate Mercy but he heard her sigh with relief, he turned and saw her eyes droop, soon her breathing relaxed as she snored softly.

* * *

The light morning breeze and the brilliance of the sun through her slightly drawn drapes woke her up. Mercy stretched luxuriantly, she felt rested but her stomach felt empty, like she'd not eaten in days. Mercy smiled, it was a feeling she use to get as a child when she'd over indulged on her mom's delicious meals, she usually woke up hungry.

She stretched again and turned with the same momentum to check the clock hanging on the wall, "My God," she gasped, she'd overslept, her eyes quickly flew to Willie's cot, he wasn't there, the girls must have tiptoed in to pick him up. Her misty memory tried to recall what day it was but gave up immediately she noticed that she was naked under her blanket. Mercy frowned as a confused feeling washed over her, she never slept naked and it felt strange not being able to recall how she'd gotten to bed in the first place.

Mercy sat up with a puzzled frown mulling over the issue, suddenly it clicked, Princess' birthday, Mercy thought with a sigh of relief, how could she forget, she must have really been tired. If Princess' birthday was yesterday and a Saturday

then today is a Sunday, Mercy smiled proudly as she solved the puzzle but frowned almost immediately as she couldn't remember getting to bed...naked.

The only thing bugging her at the periphery of her mind was the several dreams she'd had, especially the horrid one where Jim had an accident, her grief had felt so real but she could remember her relief when she later found him in her room alive; Mercy sighed wearily, dreams could be so contradictory, she thought wryly.

Her wry expression turned to a slight frown as her door clicked open and Jim materialized, her frown deepened. What was wrong with him? Mercy was surprised that he'd come into her room without knocking. Jim's initial surprise remained on his face as he met Mercy awake and frowning.

"What do you want?" she asked irritably, "And why didn't you knock?" her tone was sharp. Even if she had a wild crush on the man, it wasn't enough to be disrespected.

"Um..." Jim was trying hard to hide a smile, the situation was ironic. "I'm sorry, madam," Jim said, giving way to the smile that tugged his lips.

"What's so funny?" Mercy asked in confusion, she couldn't fathom the reason for the man's presence in her room and pondering over it would have been a grueling task so Mercy let his mistake fly and said instead, "I know we're late for the seven o'clock service, my fault, but we could still go for the one at ten", she suggested looking up at his handsome face from her bed.

"Service?" Jim asked in surprise, "As in church?"

"Yes sir," Mercy replied with some exasperation.

"But today is Wednesday," Jim pointed out humorously.

"Please stop goofing Jim, I know you'd say anything to skip church. Yesterday was Princess' party, a Saturday, even though I still can't remember getting to bed," she concluded, her confident expression turning to a slight frown of confusion.

Jim's heart melted at the expression on her face, the drug must have really affected her, she'd exhibited some of it's side effects, Jim moved into the room with a pity expression, "You've been ill Mercy," her frown deepened.

"You were barely lucid through out your illness, so you do understand my pleasant surprise at finding you awake and conscious," Jim said with a chuckle.

Well, Mercy thought, that explained the feeling of floating about, the bad dreams, the memory mix up and her weak limbs.

"So, how are you feeling?" Jim asked with his eyes sparkling with humor.

“Empty and I suddenly feel like a bath, if I’m correct, I’ve not had a bath in three days,” Mercy said questioningly.

“Not really,” Jim said haltingly.

“What do you mean not really?” Mercy asked apprehensively.

“I...um...” Jim stammered and cleared his throat, just thinking of that special routine took his breath away; he shifted uncomfortably. “I...sort of...like...you know...cleaned you up,” Jim stammered in a voice suddenly gone husky.

Mercy unconsciously pulled the blanket to her neck, her mouth had dropped in shock and mortification.

“Excuse me, I have to get to the kitchen, I was preparing breakfast,” Jim mumbled and escaped hastily from the room.

Mercy covered her face in shame, Jim had seen her naked, she shook her head vigorously as if the momentum would erase the whole situation. How would she face him now, she thought worriedly as she struggled off the bed and walked dejectedly to the bathroom. Even though he wasn’t in the room, she felt the pressing urge to cover herself as though it would erase the previous episodes he’d just mentioned; as though covering it now would magically defy time and cover her then.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SEVERAL MINUTES AFTER HER lip chewing bath, Mercy finally had the courage to come down to the sitting room, Jim was there, occupied with a newspaper and a persistent deep frown. Mercy remembered a similar frown, her meddling and what it had led to, so she decided to use another approach; an offensive one.

“I thought you were preparing breakfast,” Mercy accused the man who had confessed to seeing her naked in her dazed state; that he'd been nursing her seemed inconsequential.

The newspaper came down seconds before he turned, as if he was bracing himself for the encounter, Mercy thought.

“I was when I made the excuse,” Jim answered calmly. His calmness brought an irked frown to Mercy's brow.

“You don't look happy about that,” Jim commented with a wry smile.

“I'm not happy that I was vulnerable to...your ministrations,” Mercy choked out the word, the simple word sounded sensual to her ears and it increased her embarrassment.

Jim coughed to cover his humor, “I'm a doctor Mercy, there's nothing you have that I haven't seen before,” he said succinctly and thought, liar-liar.

“What would your girlfriend say if she heard that you...you know,” Mercy accused with a frown that was sapping up her none existent energy, she had to eat soon or she would swoon.

Jim frowned, “Girlfriend?” he was confused.

“You know, tall, fair in complexion, sinfully sexy, red dress at Princess' party,” Mercy recounted as if she was speaking to a retarded person.

“Oh, Lizzy,” he recalled with a smile.

“You must really go through them like knife on butter, you can't even recall the latest one,” she said sarcastically. Mercy knew she was on the wrong path, she was crossing the line but she couldn't help herself, he had no right to see her goods when he consorted with other females, added to that, she liked him a lot.

“What are you talking about?” Jim asked impatiently, his anger was beginning to show, why not; he had nursed the damn woman back to health and she was giving him an attitude in her first moment of coherence.

The whole situation was a disaster, she had come down to thank Jim for nursing her to health, but she had instead let her innermost feelings to the fore. She laid

bare her jealousy for Lizzy, her mortification due to Jim seeing her naked and now he was angry without her ever uttering a word of gratitude. Her emotions were a mess and it brought tears to Mercy's eyes unbidden, she turned but it was too late, Jim had already seen it and his angry expression had melted, she rushed into the kitchen.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" Jim asked with concern, he couldn't recall mood swings being part of the side effects of the medicines he'd administered to her, he touched her shoulders and she turned to face him

The effect of her tear-drenched face was like a blow to his gut, her brown eyes glinted with her tears.

"I'm sorry Jim, please disregard all I've said," Mercy begged earnestly. Jim silently wiped her tears with his thumb, the caress extended to her ears and neck and Mercy thought she heard him sigh but she was not sure, the sigh might have been hers.

"Lizzy isn't the kind of girlfriend you are thinking," Jim said staring into her eyes, he dropped his hands from her smooth face and took a step back, Mercy held herself back from groaning in pain immediately he deprived her of his warmth.

"Well, she looked that way to me," Mercy answered, folding her arms over her bosom, she caught Jim's quick glance and entertained some hope.

"She's been our family friend, I, and my wife. And after she died, she became my, self acclaimed, protector from the wild women in our social circle," Jim explained with a sober expression.

Mercy bit her lip before asking, "Is she married?" she looked hopeful.

"No, she isn't," Jim answered distractedly and missed the forlorn look on Mercy's face. Lizzy probably had romantic designs on Jim without his realization.

"We are so close she even asked to borrow my car on Sunday and I gave it to her," he said with a small smile. Mercy looked up apprehensively.

"The jeep?" she asked looking suddenly scared.

"Mercy what's wrong?" Jim asked with a frown and made to go close to her but she stopped him with her sharp question.

"Was it the jeep?!"

"What's wrong with you today?! Yes, I gave her the jeep, so?!" Jim snapped irritably.

The mention of the car had immediately reminded her of the scary dream, “I had a dream that you had an accident in that jeep when you went to pick it up from the mechanics,” her fear was palpable and Jim tried to calm her.

“It’s just coincidence that she asked to borrow my car and I gave her that one. The medication I gave you were really powerful ones, the nightmares are part of the side effects.”

“I’m sorry Jim, but I’m a very spiritual person and I don’t take my dreams lightly, especially vivid ones. This one was so vivid, Jim,” Mercy said worriedly.

“You shouldn’t worry so, you are still recovering you know. Okay, what do you want me to do? Tell me anything that’ll give you peace of mind,” Jim requested with a loving smile.

“Don’t use the car. Have you used it already?” Mercy spoke each sentence in quick succession.

“No, Mercy. I actually asked Lizzy to drop it at my mechanics for servicing when she was through using it because...” Mercy interrupted him.

“It’s not a coincidence, Jim. I know that’s the car you want to use for your journey, but...please, please don’t use it. I don’t want to experience that kind of pain in real life,” Mercy begged, her eyes shone with unshed tears.

Jim recalled the episode at the room, she’d been crying and was shocked and grateful that he had been alive, a nightmare. If he agreed to this, he would be doing it because he sensed Mercy’s earnest care for his life not because he believed in her dream.

“I feel flattered that you care for me so deeply,” Jim said moving slowly towards her, Mercy swallowed hard and held her ground.

“It’s only fair because you cared for me in my illness, thank you.”

“I...loved doing that,” Jim said boldly, watching as Mercy’s lips parted in shock, he was about to be bolder when the phone in the sitting room shrilled loudly, breaking the moment as Mercy stepped back from him, she widened the gap by backing him.

Jim murmured an excuse and went to answer the phone; he silently wondered and was miffed why such a small contraption would have such a loud sound and why it had such bad timing.

“Hello,” he half barked into the receiver. It was his mechanic and he was calling to inform Jim that he would not be able to get his car that afternoon as earlier scheduled because the car had been in an accident. An apprentice had taken it for a

test drive; he had been speeding, and had crashed the car because the brakes had suddenly failed to work.

“But you just serviced it,” Jim said incredulously, his heart was beating a staccato; that would have been me, he thought.

The mechanic explained that somebody had tampered with the brake fluid, causing the gradual disfunction of the brakes. He assured Jim that the car was repairable but that it would take at least a month; the damages were extensive.

“My God, how is your apprentice, is he okay?” Jim asked in sudden gratitude because he was not in the apprentice’s place. The mechanic assured him that expert driving and the air bag had saved the apprentice; he had swerved the car out of the road when he realized the brakes were not functioning.

“Okay, okay, I’ll come to your office, and...and we’ll talk,” Jim said, he suddenly felt impatient, he wanted to give the woman in the kitchen a tight hug for ever coming into his life; for believing and having conviction in her dream, for caring so much for his well being.

Jim slammed the receiver and moved purposely to the kitchen, Mercy was just downing a glass of juice, he did not break his stride; her eyes registered fear as Jim stopped in front of her, he grabbed her face and lowered his head without hesitation.

The glass landed the tiled kitchen floor with a loud smash, not that they heard; and if they did, they didn’t care, satisfaction was paramount. However, at the back of Jim’s mind, the question remained; who wanted him dead?

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Ann!” Jim called from the sitting room, his daughter answered from the landing of the stairs. “Please, bring down my suit case,” he requested and his daughter flew to do his bidding. He was dressed in a pair of navy blue slacks and a tan colored dress shirt with patent leather shoes; he was busy arranging documents into his portfolio.

Mercy stood a few feet from him with the baby strapped to her hip, her expression was forlorn and she wasn't hiding it, she was really going to miss him, even though it would be a few days. They had both agreed to take their relationship slowly, especially for the sake of the children; it had been her idea but she was regretting it now, she really, really liked Jim and he was going away, this thought deepened the furrow of her frown.

Jim looked up from what he had been doing and saw Mercy's face; God, she was so beautiful, he thought, he swallowed hard before moving to where she stood.

“I will not stay for long, it's just a couple of days, and I will start right back immediately I'm through,” Jim said in a quiet voice, he tenderly tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“I'll miss you,” Mercy pronounced earnestly, it shattered Jim's carefully controlled desires. His face was just breaths away from hers, all he had to do was touch his lips to hers, but Ann chose that moment to return.

“Dad, your case is here,” Jim almost snapped at his daughter, he controlled himself and said instead, “Go drop it in the car, honey,” the girl complied instantly. When she was gone, Jim caught Mercy's lip in a sensuous, toe tingling kiss, her knees buckled from the sheer pleasure of it. Jim placed a hand on the small of her back and brought her closer, he wanted to feel her soft curves settle into his...Jim groaned in pleasure and deepened the kiss, it was all they could have for now, and it was driving him crazy.

Willie the baby used the rare opportunity given to him to taste Jim's attractive shirt, it tasted good, and so he sucked on it, spreading his drool all over Jim's shirt at the point below his chest. Jim felt nothing except that he wanted to stay back and finish what had begun as a consolation kiss; he only had eyes and ears for the human sweetness that was currently in his arms. He nipped at her lips, beginning to withdraw from the kiss but delved back into the succor of her mouth, he couldn't help himself, he was lost.

Jim finally withdrew with a last nip, his eyes were glazed with desire, it mirrored Mercy's eyes, and her lips were swollen from the thorough kiss she'd just experienced. "My goodness, I want you so bad," Jim, whispered urgently, Mercy didn't doubt that, the evidence pushed against her abdomen as they stood close. Mercy almost declared her love for him but caught herself at the nick of time and said instead, "I do really desire to be with you," she said it in such an innocent and earnest voice, Jim's blood surged hot into his loins and hardened it more.

"When I come back," he promised earnestly, giving her one last hard kiss before withdrawing totally. He turned away and took deep breaths with his legs spread apart; Mercy frowned but snickered when she realized what he was doing. "Don't laugh woman, this is your fault," he accused frustratingly.

They both strolled out into the courtyard, Jim gave instructions to the three remaining police guards; two were going with him to Ogoja. He kissed both his daughters on their fore heads, the baby on the cheek and looked Mercy in the eyes with a whispered, "I'll miss you, but not for long."

Mercy felt a heavy lump in her throat and silently warned herself against crying in front of the kids and cops, they would wonder at their relationship. Princess came to stand by Mercy and she drew the little girl close.

"You will come back soon daddy, won't you?" Princess asked.

"Of course, honey," he replied as he crouched in front of her, "I'll be back really, really soon, alright?" Princess nodded, with that, Jim entered his car and drove out of the compound.

"Go and come back in peace my love," Mercy whispered as one of the cops closed the gate.

Exactly fifty-eight hours later, Jim was on his way back from Ogoja, he was about crossing the Odukpani junction, he was ecstatic that he'd finished early and was soon going to see Mercy, his Mercy. She had been on his mind all through the meeting; it had been a miracle that he hadn't fumbled in any way. Just then, his cell phone rang and the cop in the passenger's seat passed it to him.

"Hello, Jim Craig speaking," he said into the phone, he indicated and cleared the car to the side of the road.

"Your enemy, I would presume," the male voice at the other end of the phone replied.

“Who is this?” Jim asked angrily though he was immediately apprehensive.

“Well,” the voice began casually, “I just wanted to give you a little tidbit, your children are with us and much thanks to your mistress, she delivered them.”

Was this insane person referring to Mercy, she wouldn't do that to him, or would she? His stomach churned at the thought, he really didn't know her that well but still, “She's not my mistress and she wouldn't do a thing like that,” Jim snapped without conviction.

“That's really brave of you doctor, I admire your trust for her but she's not worth it. Don't worry; she'll play innocent when you get around asking her for your children.”

Mercy wouldn't do this to him; she loved his kids and cared for them like they were hers. Jim began analyzing all his experiences with Mercy since he had met her and he was seeing possibilities of the strange caller being right, take the car issue for example, it was either she was innocent or the best damn actress he had ever met.

“What do you people want? Let nothing happen to my kids or I'll...” the voice interrupted Jim's angry words.

“Get home first, Doctor Craig,” and the line went dead. Jim starred at his cell phone in trepidation, this wasn't happening to him, it was a dream he would soon wake up from.

Mercy flashed through his mind, he was recalling how she had told him about her nightmare, it hadn't been a dream she had known all along, she had been playing him. Jim was so furious he barely heard what the frantic cop beside him was saying, he had to get home, and while doing that, he would put a call to Mercy to hear what she had to say this time.

“They have my kids!” he shouted angrily at the persistent questions from the police officers in his car, their walkie-talkie crackled as Jim dialed Mercy's cell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mercy smiled yet again as she did the dishes, her mind was bursting with excitement, Jim was coming home today, at least that's what he'd told her last night in their late night calls. She smiled again when she recalled the naughty things they'd talked about, she was scandalized at the things that were coming out of Jim's mouth, but those things also gave her such thrills she immediately requested for a repeat and he obliged her.

She heard the girls thudding down the stairs and turned with an expectant smile which disappeared when she saw the fear in their eyes.

"What is it?" Mercy asked with an apprehensive frown, the girls were panting and Princess was teary eyed.

"The...two men are at the gate aunty Mercy..."

"Yes, yes, what?" Mercy interrupted urgently. She was already moving to the sitting room scanning the courtyard through the window, Ann had to follow closely behind.

"They...they..." a gun shot sounded at that moment, just once and everything went quiet, Mercy could have sworn that she'd imagined the sound but the terror on the girl's faces spoke otherwise.

"Ann," Mercy whispered urgently, Ann turned but was shaking in fear. "Hurry upstairs and pick up Willie, grab my purse too. Can you do that?" Ann nodded and flew up the stairs with her skinny teenage legs, two at a time.

Mercy checked the front door, it was locked, she dragged one of the stuffed chairs from the sitting room to the door, all the while thinking of the last place she had seen the piece of paper that Jim had written the Police Commissioner's mobile number on; she had never in her wildest imagination thought that this would happen, she was sure this were the people after Willie.

She heard struggling outside, the cops were obviously fighting the intruders but Mercy had no faith in them, if the men could come into the compound then they were going to do what they came to do. Her mind was in a whirl, she had to call the commissioner but it might take a while for back up to get here and the kids' safety was her first priority.

"Aunty, aunty," Princess tapped Mercy's hip incessantly, breaking her churning thoughts, Mercy turned and saw Ann coming down the stairs with the baby who didn't know he was in danger. "Aunty!" Princess called again.

"Yes dear," Mercy answered as calmly as she could manage, she felt like freaking out, they were killers outside and she was trapped in here with two innocent girls and a baby.

"I want my daddy," Princess cried and Mercy looked at her incredulously; seriously, you're going to do this now, Mercy thought and controlled herself from throwing a fit, she dragged Princess close and consoled her with a hug, she didn't know what to say to the little girl, she couldn't forecast how this situation would end.

"Aunty, the men are still at the front fighting the police, we can go out through the back," Ann suggested fearfully; hope, Mercy thought.

"The back?" Mercy asked before her exhilaration could make her speechless.

"Yes, the small gate at the backyard, our mummy normally used it to quickly get to the store but since she...daddy locked it."

Mercy allowed her elation to show in her eyes, they shone brightly as she hustled the girls towards the kitchen. The gate was plain, faded blue with no designs; it was really a service entrance, barely noticeable; she'd lived there for months and took that gate for granted especially since it was never opened.

Ann silently brought the key for the gate from the generator house, it felt rusty as Mercy struggled to urgently turn it in the lock, finally it opened and made a loud yawning sound as it widened, they all flinched at the sound and hurried out. Mercy stopped the first taxi she could find, all the while instructing Ann on what she should do when she got to Uwanse, her mother's house.

"Are you not coming with us?" Ann asked worriedly as Mercy closed the taxi's door; Princess was crying in earnest now, Mercy quietly paid the taxi.

"No Ann, I'm not coming with you, but I'll be there soon. Go now, driver," Mercy commanded and the taxi jerked forward, she turned back into the compound in a half run.

Mercy listened and heard the intensive fight going on, she hoped no one had been killed, she thought and quickly moved to the room divider, where the telephone and its directory were kept. She scattered the whole area before suddenly remembering that she had changed her mind and taken the most important piece of paper to her room for safe keeping. Mercy felt like slapping herself as she flew up the stairs, she could have saved the number in her mobile phone but...

There it was, she thought in elation and ran out of her room only to hear the splintering of wood, the front door had given way and she could hear an

authoritative voice directing someone to check upstairs, they had obviously overpowered the cops and the heavy thuds on the stairs, indicating the ascent of danger, brought terror to Mercy's throat; she actually felt physical pain as fear clutched at her throat like a vice, she couldn't breathe.

Mercy ran the whole stretch of the corridor, she tried the door after Jim's room and it opened, she didn't have time to be surprised that the door was unlocked since the kids had informed her on her arrival, that it had been their mother's room and that their dad had closed it up when she'd died.

The room was dark and smelt damp; it truly had not been aired for a long time.

Mercy held her nose tightly to cease the sneeze that had begun. The slender line of light from a slight shift of the drapes enabled her to see the looming closet.

Paulo thought he'd heard something as he'd began climbing the stairs. He didn't have any hope of finding anyone, not after the long fight with the stupid cops outside. He touched his face and frowned at the gnawing pain on his jaw, the idiot had clipped him there before Cyril had rushed down to over power him. The cop had been like a mad man, he raged because Paulo had shot his compatriot, the over zealous cop had died on the spot and the only reason he shot the cop was for self defense. Paulo stood at the landing, and surveyed the whole stretch with so many doors, if he had to search all those rooms, the police would find them here.

Mercy's hands trembled as she tried to key in the commissioner's number into her nokia 3310, its dim green light illuminating the numbers on the piece of paper. She was hiding in the indiscernible space between the large closet and the drape, if she was very quiet, maybe they won't find her. Sweat poured from all her pores making her hand slippery as she punched in the numbers, suddenly, the keys stopped showing the numbers and unbelievably to Mercy, it rang, shrieking in the quiet room.

Paulo's steps stilled as he heard the phone ring, was it coming from downstairs, he thought, or from one of the numerous rooms on the corridor. Cyril would check it out if it was downstairs but if it wasn't...he started moving slowly, he cocked his head to one side to listen closely at every door before he opened it.

Mercy could feel the immediate drenching of her t-shirt with sweat when the phone suddenly rang. She hurriedly answered the call from Jim and was filled with a bitter-sweet feeling.

"Jim," she whispered into the phone urgently.

"Hello, Mercy is that you?" Jim answered with disgust heavily laced in his voice, Mercy heard it.

"Jim what's wrong?" she whispered again in concern.

"What sort of question is that?" Jim spat through the phone. "Where are my kids? I swear to God, if anything happens to my kids, I'll kill you myself!" Jim exclaimed.

"Jim...what...?" Mercy felt confused and dizzy.

"All this time you pretended to be the caring girl while you consorted with my attackers. I've never met a bitch as slimy as you!"

Mercy could feel the venom from all he said pouring on her through the phone; she tried not to faint as her heart thudded faster than when she'd been scared of the killers finding her; this was worst, she thought, Jim thought that she was among the killers, it was preposterous and would have been funny if she hadn't been listening to the stream of hurtful words flowing from his mouth, through the phone and into her head.

"...after making up so many stories, your dead father might even be alive somewhere. You watch out, I'm going to arrest the whole of your family if I as much as find a scratch on my kids' skin," Jim continued ranting.

Mercy wasn't conscious of hiding anymore, her voice broke as she sobbed heart wrenchingly, she couldn't believe the same man she'd just had the most delicious conversation the night before was accusing her of being a killer, she had saved his life at the hospital; she loved him with all her being, she couldn't even imagine doing the things he was accusing her of.

"Quit the acting slut, I've had enough of it to last me a life time; where are my kids?" Jim spat sarcastically.

"You do not know what you are talking about," Mercy sobbed, her sobs sounded loud but she didn't care if she was discovered and didn't notice the form of the man that loomed ominously behind her. "I would do anything for you, Jim," Mercy said sincerely.

"I can't hear you, speak up!" Jim shouted, he sounded frustrated. Mercy tried to speak but the words came out as air when the blow landed on the back of her head; she slumped into a blanket of nothingness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mrs. Thomas stared at the apparition before her eyes, she was looking at a teenage girl with a sleeping baby on her thin shoulder and a six year old sniffing girl grasping her hand; the teenager looked determined not to cry but Mrs. Thomas could see the strain of the baby's weight in the outstanding cords of her neck.

"Mercy sent you over alone?" Mrs. Thomas asked before Ann could supply her name, she'd immediately recognized them from the many loving descriptions that her daughter had given of them in their phone conversations; her frown was angry, Mercy knew better than to allow this innocent children to traipse across Calabar without an adult, the town was filled with so many unscrupulous people ready to hurt kids.

Ann read the woman's mind, "Some men killed the police guard at our house, aunty Mercy sent us here and said she will come later," her voice shook as she spoke to Mrs. Thomas, she was so scared it felt as if her bones were at the verge of melting.

Mrs. Thomas rushed over and gingerly collected the sleeping baby from Ann, she shepherded them quickly into her house, all the while looking about furtively. Her daughter had told her everything about the baby and the danger he was in, this was the worst case scenario, they had come to the house. Mrs. Thomas silently prayed that her daughter was safe.

She bolted the door and silently led the children to her room, she hesitated when she unconsciously wanted to lock the room door too, she realized the act would only scare the kids more. She left the door and carefully placed Willie on her uncluttered bed while the girls stood around uncertainly.

"Will you like something to eat?" Mrs. Thomas asked in a whisper, she didn't want to wake the baby, both girls shook their heads. Mrs. Thomas sighed wearily and lowered her stout bulk to the linoleum carpeted floor. The room was bare except for the big mattress, gotten from the days of her late husband's flourish and a very big, square iron box with a big buckle on the front, a gift from her husband.

"Sit down," she whispered to the girls, the obliged.

"My mummy had that type of box," Ann offered solemnly. Mrs. Thomas smiled with a nod.

"Every woman should have it, that's were important wrappers are kept."

"Your bed is like aunty Mercy's own," Princess chipped in with a sniff, Mrs. Thomas noticed that the little girl looked fagged out, intense emotions could do that to anybody.

"Yes Princess, I taught her to always make her bed straight. Would you like to lie down?" Mrs. Thomas asked slowly.

Princess nodded shyly and slowly crawled onto the mattress; the electricity came on at that moment, the ceiling fan whirred to life. Princess was too tired to look excited, she promptly closed her eyes as Mrs. Thomas began tenderly patting her back, she slept in minutes.

"What about your daddy?" Mrs. Thomas asked Ann in a whisper. The simple question revived the anxiety in the girl's eyes.

Slowly she explained everything and how it had happened. She was just telling Mrs. Thomas how Mercy had instructed them not to call her father yet when they heard banging at the front door. Both females froze in fear and looked at each other uncertainly.

"Mama!" Daniel shouted from outside, "Mama!"

"Oh," Mrs. Thomas sighed with relief, she gave Ann an apologetic smile, "That's my son, Daniel."

"Aunty Mercy's cousin?" Ann asked with a confused frown.

"Yes, but he is now like a son to me."

"Mama!" Daniel called out again

"Please get the door for me," Mrs. Thomas nicely asked Ann, her rheumatic joints were a bother these days, it slowed her down. Ann jumped up and rushed out of the room.

"Who are you?" Daniel squeaked in his recently cracked adolescent voice.

"My name is Ann..." he interrupted her excitedly.

"Mercy stays at your house," he said and Ann nodded solemnly. Her solemn gesture suddenly made Daniel conscious of his cracked voice, there was a beautiful girl in his house, he suddenly realized how dirty his uniform was from playing football after school.

"I'll lock the door," he told her solemnly, Ann shrugged and went back to Mrs. Thomas' room.

"Where is Daniel?"

"He was locking the front door when I left."

Mrs. Thomas frowned, she expected Daniel to come greet her, maybe he'd gone to change his uniform, her frown cleared and she focused on Ann who had sat down, this time leaning tiredly on the mattress.

"So, what does Willie eat? I believe he'll be hungry when he wakes up from this sleep."

Ann considered the question before replying, "He eats whatever we eat but his main meal is Nutrend."

"Oh," Mrs. Thomas' face fell, she didn't have enough money in the house for Nutrend. She glanced at the wall clock and knew she couldn't make it to the bank before it closed.

"Does he take custard?"

"Yes, yes," Ann answered with excitement, "With lots of milk," she added. Mrs. Thomas smiled with relief, that she could handle, she still had the big container of custard that Mercy had bought for her last month.

"Mama good afternoon," Daniel greeted from the door. Mrs. Thomas looked up, her jaws went slack at the sight. Daniel had taken his bath and changed into a set of clean shorts and sleeveless shirt, a phenomenon considering that she'd been screaming this same instruction for almost all his life with no positive response.

"Daniel," Mrs. Thomas finally found her voice, "What happened?" she couldn't wipe the surprise from her face.

"I..." Daniel scratched his head and furtively glanced at Ann who was also blatantly waiting for his reply. "I had to wash my uniform," he replied grudgingly. "So you took your bath too, this is a miracle. Have I not been screaming about this same..." Daniel cut her off mid sentence.

"Mama, your voice will wake Willie," he said in a whisper and walked towards the sleeping baby. "He his so fat," he said for want of what to say after the silence he'd caused. He stole a glance at Ann again, their eyes met, held and quickly averted. Mrs. Thomas caught the look and noticed the speed of Ann's pulse in the hollow of her throat; and then some fools say that women have no power, she thought with a slow shake of her head. Mercy please be safe, her anxiety returned with the thought.

* * *

The iciness of the water woke her up, it dripped into her eyes when she opened them suddenly, she choked and coughed because she'd inhale some of the water. Mercy tried to blink away the water from her eyes but her heavy laden lids were

doing a poor job of it, she began lifting her hand to do the job but discovered that both her wrists were bound behind the chair she was on.

There were in an uncompleted building, it was dark outside, a rechargeable lamp relieved the darkness in the room. Mercy had earlier noticed a table and two chairs, she was currently bound to one while the architect of this whole scene sat on the other.

"Cough it out, cough it all out," a lazy male voice said and proceeded to pat her back but not tenderly. Mercy didn't want to be patted, the act created a blossom of pain all over her body; she couldn't mentally pin point where her injuries were, her whole body was on fire. Mercy took in deep breaths and managed to calm her coughing so that the back pat would stop.

"There, it helped. Sharon, your witness," Paulo said humorously and the three culprits laughed.

Natasha dragged her seat close to Mercy, "Girlfriend you have to stop passing out whenever we try to pray for you. It's a good thing, we only want to jog your memory into remembering where the baby is," she said in a conversational tone. Hot tears flooded Mercy's eyes, she began speaking in frustration but the slicing pain from her lips slowed her down, she suddenly recalled what had caused her second faint, the skinny guy, Paulo, had held her lips with a pair of pliers and pressed down with considerable force, the pain was too much and she'd blacked out.

"You smashed my head with a gun, veaten me up unnecessarily, pinned down my lips with pliers," Mercy said slowly, she mispronounced some of the words because of her swollen lips. "What else is there to do vhefore you velieve me, I don't know where the child is." Tears flowed from her eyes, her blurry sight noticed the blood stains on her drenched yellow T-shirt.

"Na wa for this girl o. You wan die before you talk were the pikin dey?" Cyril exploded angrily in Pidgin English. "No be your pikin sef, see, make I tell you," he said bending into her vision, "Sharon no go mercy you o, the worse is yet to come."

"Her name is Natasha," Mercy corrected, she didn't know why they kept calling her Sharon.

"Who?" Cyril asked with a frown.

"Sharon is Natasha," Mercy said and received a deafening slap from Nat but the damage had already been done.

Cyril straightened to his full six feet and pinned the angry Nat with a narrowed eye stare, "What's she talking about Sharon?" Cyril emphasized her name, he was quick to believe the girl because he'd already suspected that they weren't really working for any higher powered boss.

"She's spilling rubbish and trying to cover up for..." Paulo interrupted her.

"We've wasted enough time with this chick, we should call in the doctor."

"So both of you know something that I don't know?" Cyril said with a knowing smile. It was possible, he had been the last crew member, certain information might have been kept from him.

"Cyril, this is not the time for..." Paulo began but was interrupted.

"She's the doctor's cousin," Mercy provided, glancing at Cyril, she sensed that a ruckus was brewing and it might be advantageous to her.

"Really? Is that all you've got?" Nat said slowly but her anger was palpable, she rounded Mercy's chair and cut off her restraints with a knife Mercy hadn't noticed she was holding. Her hands dropped heavily to the sides, they were numb and as she tried to lift them forward, with the intention of rubbing warmth into them, Nat grabbed her left wrist suddenly, she struggled but Nat was stronger.

Natasha placed Mercy's hand on the table, palm up and stabbed it without hesitation. Mercy's screams echoed in the uncompleted building, she was mad with pain and couldn't reason; she pushed Natasha blindly but the force tipped her chair backwards, she fell, banged her head on the roughly cemented floor and passed out.

The uncompleted building was eerily silent after Mercy's scary scream. Cyril stood still in shock, he couldn't fathom why Sharon would do that to the girl. "Jesus, Sharon, why?"

"Because, I am the boss and you do not take the victim's word over mine, I pay your bills, remember that," Nat said in a deadly voice and walked towards the space in the wall that was supposed to be a window. "Call the doctor and bring him over."

"Of course, boss," Paulo answered immediately and dialed a number on his phone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jim loosened the knot at his throat; he pulled off the tie and dropped it on the detective's table dejectedly. It was of little relief; the real knot he would've liked to loosen was in the center of his stomach, the knot was so tight it hurt like a physical wound. Where could his kids be? He wondered for the umpteenth time. "Calm down doc, lieutenants are scoring the streets for information on your kids," detective Okon said calmly.

Without feedback, Jim thought snidely. The last time the detective's walkie-talkie crackled with any information was two hours ago, dusk had fallen and he couldn't stop envisioning his kids in a hopeless situation, his imagination was driving him crazy.

"Okay, thank you lieutenant, keep at it," detective Okon said into the telephone receiver before dropping it. Jim hadn't noticed he was on the phone, his thoughts were far away but now he looked at the detective hopefully.

"Have they been found?" Jim asked, instantly straightening up on his seat.

"A lady whose shop is opposite your back gate says she saw Mercy urgently putting the kids with the baby in a taxi at about one in the afternoon."

"To where?" Jim asked even though he already knew what the reply would be.

"She said when the taxi left, Mercy ran back into the compound and didn't come back out. This information is a bit contrary to the phone call you told us about."

"That isn't conclusive, the person said Mercy had given the kids to them," Jim reminded the detective with a confused frown.

The detective leaned back in his swiveling chair, the only luxurious item in his office, purchased from his personal finance, and rubbed his eyes wearily.

"I wish we could get Mercy's address, I really think that's the link."

Jim got up and paced in the small confines of the office, "I thought you sent someone to her school?" he couldn't still believe that he'd been stupid enough not to find out Mercy's home all the while she was staying with him; stupidly trusting, he thought disgustedly.

"Yes, her records carry her former address. The man staying there had nothing but abuses for the woman and her daughter that he claimed had killed his brother; he said the family was not interested in the whereabouts of their late brother's wife or daughter."

"It means her father is really dead," Jim muttered to himself guiltily, but his voice was loud enough for detective Okon to hear and he responded.

"Yes, the man at Mercy's previous address, obviously her father's house, confirmed that he'd died in a car accident."

"But why would the person tell me Mercy had given the kids to him?" Jim's mind was in turmoil, he couldn't understand the twists and turns of this sick game.

"I think they really wanted to confirm if you were home," detective Okon said reflectively after a moment of thought. "The guard strength was reduced because you travelled with some of the guards, they would be free to tackle the remaining few and kidnap the kids...that's why they called you!" detective Okon exclaimed and sat up with bright eyes.

Could this mean that Mercy was innocent and in possible danger, Jim thought as a tighter knot twisted his stomach; he was remembering all the things he'd said to her on the phone.

"Doc, your phone is ringing," detective said loudly. Jim was jerked out of his guilt ridden thoughts, he brought out the Samsung trueye flip from his pocket and answered without checking the screen.

"Hello," was the only thing he got to say, he listened numbly until the call ended.

"That was them," Jim pronounced helplessly.

Detective Okon, stood up smartly, he looked alert, "What did they say?" he asked urgently.

"The guy asked me to come to the Groove alone. I don't know where the Groove is," Jim added helplessly.

"We'll get you there," detective Okon said as he hustled Jim out of his office.

"He said they have Mercy," Jim continued as they moved towards the car park.

"I suspected they would," the detective answered the numb doctor before giving orders to his squad.

"You don't understand, I accused her wrongly," Jim said to himself, the detective wasn't listening this time around, he felt so alone. He wished he could talk to someone close, he'd earlier tried to reach Nat but her phone had been switched off.

Mrs. Thomas stared at the sleeping children helplessly. Her mind was in turmoil, she was confused as to the action to take. Earlier on she'd been surly tempted to call Dr. Craig but held back, she had a deep rooted conviction to allow the whole saga play out without endangering the kids by exposing their location.

Mrs. Thomas hoped that she'd had taken the right decision in protecting the Craig kids, but, who would protect her own daughter, she thought apprehensively. Her

throat clogged up and tears threatened to fall from her eyes, a ragged sob escaped her tightly closed lips which she immediately covered up with a yawn as Daniel turned on the extra mattress he had brought into the room. Sleep at this moment was a luxury, how could she sleep when her daughter was in danger? Mrs. Thomas leaned her back on the wall and began whispering protection prayers for her daughter.

Mrs. Jesam paced her hospital room and sniffed back tears intermittently, she was helpless and incompetent in the situation. Dr. Essiet had intimidated her on the problems Dr. Craig was facing; she wished she could help him. All she could do now was pray that they were strong enough to survive this; they will survive, Mrs. Jesam thought with a shaky positive belief.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Paulo's informant, stationed at the junction, had reported the arrival of the doctor the moment he drove through the entrance of the Groove; he had also confirmed that the doctor was alone and wasn't being followed. Paulo smiled as he waited for the doctor in the middle of the untarred, dark and deserted road.

Jim's headlight shone on the skinny man in the middle of the dark, bumpy road, his heart immediately began beating faster than it had, his hands holding the steering shook uncontrollably, this was it, he thought apprehensively as he slowed down and finally stopped his car, he would either survive this or go under.

The Groove was an unofficial name given to the housing estate that the government was developing at the outskirts of town. It was a ghost land, the uncompleted buildings loomed in the dark like apparitions in a horror movie. There were rumors that the contractor had abandoned the project due to lack of funds from the government; but the undeniable truth was that hoodlums and criminals had taken over the Groove, evidence of their nocturnal activities were seen in the several dead bodies that were strewn on the road.

Jim swallowed hard and stepped slowly out of his car, the description of the Groove and its dead bodies, by the detective, was still fresh in his mind and causing havoc to his breathing.

"I...I came alone," Jim announced stupidly in a shaky voice, he hated that he was so afraid, he had to calm himself down.

"I know that you came alone and that you weren't followed. There are look outs everywhere doctor. If anyone attempts to follow later, we will know and you'll be dead," Paulo drawled lazily, he saw dejection and hopelessness in the doctor's eyes and smiled, good, he thought, it was best to keep them frightened.

Jim's heart rate was becoming erratic, he might have a heart attack if he didn't calm himself; he took deep breaths as he followed Paulo through a bush labyrinth and wondered how the detective was ever going to find him.

They stepped out of the labyrinth onto a similar untarred road, Jim kept stumbling and wondered continuously how the skinny guy found his way in the dark and never once stumbled. Jim had to keep his head down to carefully survey the path; he ignored the slow bicycle rider with squeaky pedals who whistled as he rode by. Jim naturally assumed that a farmer or palmwine tapper or hunter was returning from his job. He refused to think that the bicycle rider might be a ghost, especially

with the squeaky pedals and the chirpings of nocturnal birds, he quickened his steps behind his nonchalant captor who had also ignored the rider.

They went through another labyrinth, Jim could see a glimpse of light in one of the uncompleted buildings, they weren't afraid of being spied because this particular uncompleted building was very far from the main entrance.

"Welcome doctor." Jim yelped in fear and would have jumped out of his skin in terror as the voice sounded from his back, from a bush track they'd just passed without even a cricket's chirp.

"Sorry to scare you," Cyril said with a smile, he wasn't sorry at all. "We've been expecting you."

"You don't say," Jim replied sarcastically, he was angry, this people were doing everything in their power to scare him and this last straw had hardened his mind, he would show them no fear.

Cyril hid his surprise and settled for shoving the doctor forward, he hadn't expected the sarcasm. They stepped into the building and not long materialized in the room with the light, a rechargeable lamp.

"He's here, Sharon," Cyril announced.

Sharon, Jim thought, a woman was doing all this? He waited for the silhouette at the window to turn, he scanned the room with the table and two chairs and...

"Mercy!" he exclaimed in terror, he'd recognized the scar on her right ankle. She was lying in a dried up map of her blood, unmoving, she looked unconscious, Jim hoped she wasn't dead. His medical instinct propelled him towards her to make sure of this, but he was stopped by strong, restraining hands.

"Not so fast...cousin," Nat said calmly as she turned slowly to face Jim.

"Natasha!" he exclaimed again, if he survived without having a coronary today, he knew he would grow old without any heart complications, because nothing would shock him more than the realization that his cousin was behind his woes; anger blossomed hotly in his chest as he stared at her smiling face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jim rushed, blindly angry, towards Nat with violent intentions, Cyril's muscled arm collided with his neck forcefully, immediately desisting his movements, he gagged and coughed and fell on his knees.

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen," Nat commented humorously, Paulo laughed with her while Cyril kicked Jim in the stomach.

"You dey craze?" he asked in Pidgin English, "You know who Sharon be? Abi you feel sey we go just stand dey look you as you go touch am? Guy, there's something called a brain, use it," Cyril snapped angrily.

"Oh, poor Jim," Nat exclaimed and chuckled wickedly. She stared disgustedly at Jim as he grabbed his neck and his stomach and groaned in pain.

"At least, let me check if she's still conscious," Jim begged in a hoarse voice, his larynx had been affected by the blow to the neck.

"What does it matter? None of you are leaving here alive anyway," Nat said casually, still smiling. Her fair face that he'd always admired looked sinister at that moment.

"Why?" Jim asked confusedly, "Why Nat? I don't understand. What did I ever do to you?" he had to know, his mind was going crazy trying to find an answer.

Nat casually slide her hands into the pocket of her black trousers, the action tightened the pants around her curvy hips, she had a nice figure, a dream woman for any man; her tucked in black shirt emphasized her fair complexion and flat stomach. She gave Jim a considering look and thought for some seconds.

"Your very existence is what you did to me."

"I don't understand."

"You never did, you clueless, miserable fuck! You roamed in satisfaction in our asshole of a father's house, in blatant ignorance!" Nat screamed, Paulo and Cyril looked shocked, they'd never experienced their boss in a hysterical state.

"I don't understand, you said..." Nat's angry groan interrupted him and the blow to his jaw came unexpectedly, the pain was deafening.

"Shebi, I tell you make you use your brain," Cyril said calmly. Jim groaned and held onto his jaw, Paulo yawned loudly and plopped his ass on one of the chairs.

"Thank you, Cyril," Nat said after taking a deep breath, she had controlled her emotions but she couldn't stand still, she paced angrily.

"Stop hitting me like that!" Jim cried angrily. "I was going to ask why my father became 'our' father before you hit me," Jim shouted.

"You been dey vex boss na, nobody dey allowed to vex boss. You see your girlfriend for ground, na vex wey she vex boss wey keep am for ground so."

"What are you saying, Nat? How does this all add up? What has my father got to do with this?" Jim threw the questions at her and dared her with his eyes to reply. Nat held his stare for a while and shrugged, "I have nothing to loose by telling you anyway. I am your sister, same dad, different mothers."

When she dropped the bomb, even Paulo stopped looking bored, he exchanged shocked glances with an equally shocked Cyril.

Jim chuckled in derision, the act widened Cyril's eyes as he looked at Nat for instructions; she nodded slowly and Jim was kicked firmly in the gut, effectively cutting off his chuckle.

"I understand that this information is a hard blow, but it gives you no excuse to insult me," Nat said slowly as she stared at his bent posture.

"You..." Jim gasped for air, his stomach was on fire with pain; he could feel grits in his mouth and in between his teeth as he gnashed them in a bid to control the pain.

"Then...why are you doing this, Nat? If you are truly my sister, shouldn't you be defending me from whoever would want to harm me?" Jim asked in a gruff voice, he was trying not to be emotional.

"Because, Jim, you got the full treatment and I got the crumbs. You didn't appreciate what you were getting while I only wished for nothing but to be in your place. And our father..." she mentioned 'father' with the right amount of venom that Jim could have applauded if the situation wasn't so dire. "...our father degraded me to 'cousin' status; my mother was forced to bring me up to play second fiddle to you with the threat of being left hungry!"

"Then you should have taken it up with father; this situation should be his comeuppance not mine," Jim replied weakly but with a tint of anger.

"Oh he did get his comeuppance," Nat said with a slow smile, "I made sure of that. Which now brings us to the issue of the baby, where is it?" Nat asked forcefully. Jim looked around checking where Cyril was stationed before he answered, "I swear Nat, if I knew I wouldn't be here."

"You mean you would have abandoned your mistress?" Paulo finally spoke with mock shock.

"She's not my mistress," he replied angrily but looked around cautiously for Cyril who looked tired of the whole situation. "And what has Willie got to do with all of this?"

"Willie is our father's son. Willie holds millions of money that belongs to me and I'm ready to kill even my mother to get it," Nat pronounced calmly but Jim had stopped listening, he was recalling his conversation with Mrs. Jesam at the hospital.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jim's mind swirled with thoughts; several pieces of the puzzle were fitting in after Nat's pronouncement. A slim thread of guilt wriggled in, blossoming as he realized that Mercy was innocent in all of this. The most important issue on Jim's mind was getting himself and Mercy out of there, he could not wait for the cops any longer, if they weren't here by now, then they never will, he had since lost the belief that they'd find their way to this very hidden place. Just then an imaginary light bulb lit in his mind, he could bet that Nat hadn't told her accomplices that she was a....

"You are a cop, Nat, you shouldn't be doing this, you'll be disgraced for this. You shouldn't allow these hoodlums lure you into crime, you are..." Jim's blubbing ceased at Paulo's sudden exclamation.

"No, this isn't happening!" he exclaimed, shooting out of the seat in the same breath and moving threateningly towards Nat, "Is this..." he was interrupted by Nat's gun in his face.

"Not another step, Paulo," Nat said in a calm voice.

"Shit, it's true," Jim heard Cyril conclude in a stage whisper, the doctor tried to look really scared and innocent in the same vein. He stared at the faces of his three captors, Cyril looked shocked and deflated, Paulo looked angry and betrayed and Nat; Nat looked calm, it seemed as if the situation was routine for her.

"I thought I mentioned the dangers of taking the victim's word over mine," Nat commented calmly, she slowly stepped backwards, keeping both her accomplices in sight.

"So, you are going to shoot us...just like that," Paulo commented in a betrayed tone, "We trusted you Sharon."

"I don't know about you but I'm done," Cyril declared and slowly stepped backwards.

"Wait," Nat exclaimed suddenly, gun hand still pointed, he stopped. "I'm not going to shoot you, I need your help to finish this job," she sounded desperate, "Come on, I can't do this alone, what about your money?"

"Say we help you finish the job...cop," Cyril began; Jim noticed Nat's jaw tighten, "Then what?"

"She'll betray us, it's a given. She'll probably shoot us in the back and announce a single handed crime burst which generally leads to a promotion. Wasn't that your plan...cop?" Paulo sneered, his eyes consciously stuck on the pointed gun.

"I won't do that to you, guys..." Nat replied wearily but was cut mid sentence by Cyril.

"But we'll never know that now, just like we never knew that you're a cop."

Jim had slowly inched away from the range of the pointed gun while the standoff continued; he'd kept sparing Mercy long glances to see if she was breathing, he couldn't be sure since she lay in the shadows. When he'd decided to expose Nat's occupation to her crew, he'd expected it to cause a riot among them, not a freaking dialog, Jim thought angrily.

"Why are we wasting words? See, listen, this person manipulates; I've known him since we were kids. He is trying to pit you against me and..." Nat's voice steadily rose in burgeoning anger, "...it pisses me off that so called hard men like you have fallen for it," she ended with an angry scream.

Jim winced fearfully at Nat's legendary anger; Paulo stood his ground with a deep frown while Cyril appeared to go deeper into the shadows without perceptible movements. Nat panted, gun still pointed and calm lost; Paulo's expression turned cynical.

"Sharon, this ends now. We are going to work out of that door with a decision never to recognize each other forever. This whole drama...never happened," Paulo concluded and moved backwards towards the exit, Cyril preceding him; Jim swallowed hard as he saw them go, he knew Nat was going to kill him and Mercy, if she wasn't already dead.

Her hand pointing the gun had dropped dejectedly as Paulo neared the door, so it had surprised all parties when there was a sudden and continuous blast of gunshots. It sounded deafeningly loud within the walls; Jim couldn't help the whimper of fear that escaped his throat, Paulo and Cyril instinctively crouched with their hands over their heads, they looked up when she spoke.

"Nobody is going anywhere tonight," Nat declared in a ragged voice, her hand holding the gun was still raised from shooting into the concrete ceiling, the rechargeable lamp reflected the white particles of cement dust on her hair and cloth, she looked spectral.

"You were right, Paulo," she chuckled crazily, "This ends now, here, this night," she said, drunkenly waving the gun at the three men in the room undecidedly, then she settled on Jim; she focused her attention on him and failed to notice that Cyril was trying to free his gun from the waistband of his jean.

“I think you should go first,” Jim whimpered, his breathing got difficult, his heart stopped in dread, his eyes shun with blatant pleading.

“Nat please don’t do this...” Nat giggled and moved closer to Jim, pointing the gun at his head.

“Instead of begging like a coward, you should have asked me why I want you to die first. It doesn’t matter though...just say hi to our father for me, his baby mama,” she added sarcastically. “Tell her that despite disappointments...” she glanced at Cyril and Paulo at her mention of disappointments and faced Jim again. “...I’m still going to find that boy, get what’s rightfully mine, and then relish killing him slowly.”

“This isn’t right, Nat, you need help... I can get you help,” Jim tried to convince her in a shaky voice, his whole torso vibrated with dread.

“Ha!” she barked in derision, “The type of help that you got your wife when she over indulged in alcohol? What help could you get her when she rolled on the floor at that party in the throes of death? If you had gotten her help, Jim, maybe she wouldn’t have gotten drunk and stumbled on my plan, forcing me to poison her,” she concluded with an innocent smile and a pretty shrug.

Jim’s head was pounding, his eyes bulged in anger, and hot breath caressed the walls of his nostrils as he fumed in helplessness. He could only stare at Nat as she cocked her gun and placed her finger on the trigger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Drop the gun Sharon,” Cyril barked suddenly, Nat turned and saw the gun pointed at her, she smiled and did nothing.

“And if I don’t?” she asked lazily. Cyril looked undecided, Paulo was still crouched, and in that position, he moved behind Cyril.

Jim was furious. Nat had killed his wife and she had been visiting him and his kids, all the while pretending to care for them. Without any coherent thought, Jim moved suddenly, galvanized by anger, his shoulder connected with her pelvis in a spear dive, knocking her down on the rough concrete floor.

The gun fell from Nat’s hand, Cyril and Paulo saw it, Paulo thought of going to get it but in that moment there was a rare merging of their thoughts, they shared a glance and rushed out of the door, this time successfully.

Jim sat astride Nat’s stomach, he succeeded in landing several furious blows to her face and was still doing so when Nat growled like an animal and suddenly turned him over, she boxed his eyes and made a dash for the gun. Jim howled and grabbed her left leg and dragged her on the rough floor towards him with an angry shout, away from the gun.

Nat hit Jim in the neck with a flick of her wrist, he let go of her leg to grab his neck as he choked on a groan of pain, and he helplessly stared as Nat crawled to where the gun had fallen. She grabbed it and laughed triumphantly; the laugh sounded dry, she stood up and turned to Jim with a face so swollen on one side, the only side that Jim had repeatedly conked.

“You thought you could beat me...brother,” she licked blood from her lips and spit on Jim, panting, he winced and continued staring at the dusty woman he had once known, the blood and cement dust on her face made her look ugly.

“Your kids... consider them dead. And as your only next of kin...” she cocked the gun and pointed it at Jim, “I’ll enjoy living at your...aaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” she suddenly screamed in pain as she succinctly felt the sharp steel buried in her back. Mercy had gained consciousness for a while and had bided her time waiting for an opportunity and it had come, she had saved Jim from death; her left palm burned though from the stab and hung limply down her side. The next few seconds happened in a flash, Mercy staggered backwards as Nat suddenly swirled with her left hand desperately trying to reach the knife stuck in her back; she fell on her knees and cried in frustration. Mercy and Jim stared in fascination, transfixed to

their different spots. Unexpectedly, Nat turned the gun on Mercy and fired without hesitation, she dropped like a sack of potatoes.

Nat only got one shot out before the detective shot her in the head; she died before hitting the rough concrete, raising a curtain of dust. Jim only spared Nat's staring eyes a brief glance, he rushed to where Mercy lay, he couldn't immediately discover where the injury was on her body, the whole of her clothing was covered in blood. Jim tried to keep an objective mind like the medical professional that he was but couldn't, his hands began shaking as he discovered the injuries that Nat had inflicted on her.

"Doctor, Doctor!" the detective called, he had to scream to get the man's attention. "What?!" he screamed back without looking up, his hands nervously fluttered over the immobile lady. "I need to get her to a hospital! She needs..." Jim choked and tears filled his eyes but he continued, "The bullet needs to be removed immediately," he said and sniffed.

"I'm going to call for the cars to be brought around, we had to park a few ways from here to maintain the element of surprise and..." the detective stopped talking when he heard Jim's sob, he stepped out of the room to give frantic orders. Jim changed his kneeling position to sitting with spread out legs and carried Mercy on his lap like a baby. The light from the rechargeable lamp was dimming from low power, he could barely see but he could feel the heaviness of his dead... sister behind him. Damn you dad for putting all of us through this, he thought and sniffed.

"Please, my love... Mercy, hold on, I'll get you to a hospital, you'll be fine... you have to be fine," Jim said, intermittently sniffing, wiping tears from his eyes and checking her pulse, it felt weak. He had earlier stanching the flow of blood from the bullet wound in Mercy's rib with his bunched up shirt but it quickly soaked up and Jim feared for her vital organs.

Cold breeze blew in through the hole in the wall, it felt eerie as it dried the sweat sticking his singlet to his skin and Mercy's blood on his hand, he dragged her closer and tried to warm her up. Why was it taking so long to bring the car around? Mercy's eyes fluttered open weakly, Jim noticed because he hadn't taken his eyes off her for moment.

"Hi," Mercy said with a weak smile, Jim controlled his sobs and held her face tenderly.

“You’ll be fine, the car will be here any minute now,” he sniffed and smoothed back her hair.

“It hurts,” she whispered with a grimace, Jim nodded knowingly and choked.

“I can’t take out the bullet here, I don’t want to endanger your vital organs,” he explained, Mercy tried a smile that turned to a worse grimace.

“I need to...” she began in a weak whisper but Jim cut her off.

“Shush, you shouldn’t be talking, any movement causes more blood flow,” Jim explained nervously.

“My mother is with the kids,” Mercy hurriedly said with a surge of energy. Where is the car? Jim thought desperately.

“Okay, that’s fine,” he replied distractedly, he hadn’t thought of the children at all, his concern was for Mercy. He heard the distant sound of approaching cars the same moment he felt Mercy’s head loll backwards; her body went lax.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Jim repeated the horror filled litany as he rushed to check Mercy’s pulse, his hands kept slipping from hers which was covered in her blood, he wasn’t sure.

“Mercy!” he called, “Mercy!” He became frantic and slapped her to get her awake, nothing. “Please, don’t do this to me, wake up!” he shook her not minding the blood flow; he could feel the sticky warmth of blood in his pants. “The car is here honey, wake up...we are going to the hospital now, it going to be fine... I can’t lose both of you,” he cried heart wrenchingly.

On his way to the room, a cold chill went up the detective’s spine as he heard the keening scream that consisted of a single word...Mercy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The third day, Jim thought tiredly as he scratched his untidy beard, his eyes were sunk in its socket, his dress shirt hung loosely from his shoulder in a rumpled drape; he had folded the sleeves to his elbow and his trousers escaped being rumpled only because it was a jean. Jim had slept in those cloths for three days, he knew his appearance was causing a concerned stir among his employed nurses; when he passed by a flushed door on his way to his office and mistakenly looked at himself, he had thought he looked like something a cat regurgitated.

Jim twisted in his hospital's uncomfortable seat; he made a mental note to get cushioned hospital seats as he checked Mercy's drip. He leaned forward and smoothed the hair from her marred brow, her face had many weals, but Jim still thought her beautiful. It had been days of uncertainty, hope and fear as Doctor Essiet battled to stabilize Mercy's condition.

Jim hadn't realized that he had been driven to his hospital until he met Doctor Essiet at the swinging doors. Mercy lay comatose as she was wheeled into the operation room but his older partner had stopped Jim at the door.

"You can't come in Jim, you are unstable, and your wounds need to be cleaned," Doctor Essiet firmly informed him. Jim had put up a struggle with him but the shorter man had held his ground and had resorted to a shout, "You have to control yourself Jim if you want me to concentrate and save this lady's life!"

"Take him to a nurse, detective and get his wounds tended," Doctor Essiet commanded before disappearing through the door. The detective had dragged the dejected man to the nurse's station, where his wounds were tended, and a fresh set of cloths from his office brought to him.

After a series of whiskey shots from his office drawer, coupled with strong painkillers, Jim was numb from his anxiety enough to ask the detective how he knew to bring Mercy to the Phoenix, his hospital.

"You screamed at me continuously to," the detective replied incongruously.

"Oh, I'm really sorry..." Jim couldn't remember shouting at the detective.

"No man, I understand. It used to be that good with my wife in the beginning...I'd probably wish her dead in such situation; I'm not sure though but there's a probability," the detective said soberly as he poured another shot of whiskey.

"That's sad," Jim had said slowly and poured another shot too, they had a silent toast and both had grimaced at the burning sensation down their throats.

“Will you be okay?” the detective had asked Jim, the silent question was would he be okay alone; Jim understood him perfectly and nodded. “Because I have to get to the wife at home, she’ll be worried,” he said and stood up from Jim’s leather office chair, his vertebra made popping sounds in the process.

“Then you still love her,” Jim said with a smile, there was another silent communication between the two men, the detective nodded.

“I guess so. Please...what I said...” Jim interrupted him.

“Was never said,” Jim, concluded.

“Right; I’ll be by tomorrow to get your statement. My lieutenant tells me both boys are singing like nightingales, the case is as good as closed.”

“Thank you very much, Detective...for everything.”

“No, thank you,” they shook hands firmly and the detective moved towards the door, he paused and turned, “You’ve inspired me today, I’m taking some romance home and I’m giving it to the wife,” Jim laughed in spite of himself, the detective smiled and walked out.

Jim smiled at the memory of that night, the smile vanished when the private room door opened and Mrs. Jesam walked in.

“We need to talk,” she pronounced.

“Yes, we do,” Jim replied with a hard look on his face, he had totally forgotten about her existence; the woman owed him a lot of explanation.

Mrs. Jesam sighed heavily and plunged into the issue, she didn’t want to think what this revelation would do to the doctor, or to her fragile heart; if she thought anymore of it, she’d not say anything at all.

“I am your mother,” Mrs. Jesam pronounced as soon as she got comfortable on her seat.

This bomb dropped into heavy silence; Jim did nothing but stare at Mercy’s bandaged left hand that lay there motionless, she hadn’t been fully conscious since the operation; Jim was scared to call it coma but Doctor Essiet assured him that she wasn’t in a coma. She wouldn’t be in this situation, bruised and battered, in the first place if life had dealt with him differently.

“Do you think this is a joke?” Jim asked in a soft, deadly tone. The dark skinned woman shook her head and choked on a sob.

“I wouldn’t joke with something this serious,” Mrs. Jesam sniffed and Jim noticed the uncontrolled quiver of her lips as she tried to explain. “I couldn’t tell you then,

I felt it would have been too much complication in your life and when your dad warned me off from seeing you, I..." she sobbed heart wrenchingly.

Jim couldn't console the obviously hurting woman; the situation still didn't make sense to him. He was staring at a giant puzzle with so many different pieces; Mrs. Jesam had just added another piece to it.

"Mrs. Jesam, with all due respect, my mother died while giving birth to me," Jim said chilly.

"That's what your father led you to believe," she cried, staring Jim in the eye, trying desperately to convince him.

Jim shook his head, "I still don't understand."

"I can explain; I want to explain," Mrs. Jesam pleaded; Jim shrugged, he had no choice, his life had slowly turned into a never-ending telenovela.

"I was naïve when it came to your father. I couldn't quite place his attitude or understand his behavior. He could love one minute and be extremely devious the next minute."

Jim nodded unconsciously, he understood her perfectly, and he had lived with his dad more than half of his life. His dad could be so devious to him that when he showed a smidgen of love, Jim would lap it up and open up himself for more hurt that was sure to come from Engineer Craig.

"I worked in his office as a secretary when he started showing interest in me. He was so romantic then, and I thought I was in love with him and him with me. Then, a year into the relationship, I realized I was expecting his baby...you."

Jim never looked up while she spoke; his eyes remained on the motionless form of Mercy on the hospital bed. He folded his arm on his chest and his head hung to the side as if in rapt attention.

"I was excited but when I told him the news, he hit the roof. He verbally abused me and asked how a woman like me would allow such a mistake. He wanted me to abort the baby but I refused and stuck to my decision. I thought we were not too young to have a baby and I told him so; I believed that he'd change his mind.

"A few weeks later I discovered that he had impregnated one of his house cleaners and she too wasn't ready to abort." Mrs. Jesam sighed heavily as she recalled the memory. The cleaner had seen an opportunity of a lifetime and had taken it, for Engineer Craig was very rich but she...she had believed in love too much.

"This woman, she was Natasha's mum?" Jim asked slowly without looking up.

“Yes, she was,” there was a pause before she continued. “In one of our numerous arguments, I told your father that he had to choose between both of us who he would take as wife. He choose me and I regret that decision.

“Marriage with your father was hell. I discovered that he had rented a place for the cleaner and she was getting a monthly allowance; I envied her so much because she was lucky to be away from the hell I was facing.” There was silence after her thoughts were revealed; the familiar pain she got from the memory of her life with the late Craig wasn’t so familiar anymore; she smiled inwardly and Jim remained silent.

“As my pregnancy grew, romance with my husband turned soar, I became his punching bag, his whore...I was his slave. I went into labor and had to take a taxi to the hospital because he couldn’t be bothered at the office,” Mrs. Jesam sighed heavily and shook her head, “It was a difficult delivery, the doctor on call, Sofia’s father, pronounced a C-section and there was nobody to sign the necessary documents. He got your father’s phone number and called personally; when he came back to the room he looked extremely angry and I knew instantly that my husband wasn’t coming. Sofia’s father took the risk and signed the documents, and then he did the surgery.

“Later, he told me that he had to safe the baby immediately; you were in stress and had got tangled with your cord. I was so happy to have you and hold you and I knew that no matter what your father would do to me, you’d be there as my solace, my comfort,” she sniffed back the tears that were polling in her eyes, she dabbed at it and continued after a deep breath.

“The doctor, Sofia’s father...he was supportive while I recuperated from the surgery and all your father did was send his driver to bring money for the hospital bill. I felt bereft and hurt but kept a game face, I told anybody that would listen that my husband had travelled out of the country that’s why he wasn’t with me. Sofia’s father was the only one that listened and nodded and...he was just a good man and as I lay in that hospital bed, I wished that I were going home with him and not to Engineer Craig.

“Long story short, Sofia’s father drove me home after a week and a half at the hospital. Your father received me with a slap and the accusation of cheating on him. When you turned a year, he divorced me and threw me out of his house with nothing; I was never to see you again and there were restraining orders.

“I had nowhere to go but on a whim I went to the hospital, I went to Sofia’s father, he received me warmly and I broke down in his office when he nicely asked about my baby; I told him everything. He offered to help me, his idea was the court, but I refused.”

Jim finally looked up, he was angry and shocked all at once, “Why refuse his help? You could have gotten me back,” Jim cried and looked hurt.

“Are you sure you lived with your father?” Mrs. Jesam couldn’t hide the sarcasm and Jim accepted it because he should know better how influential his dad had been.

“He could have destroyed us...and even if by some magic or miracle, I got you back, you would have been less privileged. Anyway, I moved in with Sofia’s father and three-year-old Sofia, we bonded immediately; Sofia was my solace but it didn’t, couldn’t take away the hurt of losing you. Benson loved me and slowly helped me heal; he died three years ago after a protracted illness,” she choked on the words and couldn’t sniff back the tears that poured. Jim silently handed her his handkerchief.

“You really loved him?” Jim asked quietly and his mother nodded as she sniffed and dabbed her eyes. Jim pitied her at that moment, his father had really done a number on their lives, he wasn’t sorry that Nat had killed him, she had obviously inherited his wicked streak, he deserved what he got and worse.

“Ah,” Mrs. Jesam sighed loudly, she was bracing herself for the next part of the story.

Jim sensed that Mrs. Jesam, his mother, had something heavy to drop. His heart twisted painfully at the years lost and what could have been. He glanced at her and tried a smile that was supposed to show encouragement; it felt bland to him but it worked because Mrs. Jesam...his mother, mirrored the smile and heaved another heavy sigh.

“What I’m about to say reeks of weird...” Jim interrupted her worried explanation.

“Come on Ma, I can hardly be surprised about anything now; not after all that has happened,” Jim said slowly, he was really tilting to the idea of having a mother; a thing he had so longed for.

Mrs. Jesam was laughing and crying at the same time, her son seemed to have accepted her without even completing the grueling story of how they got to where they were now.

Jim consoled her by simply putting his hand on her arm; at his touch she burst into a fresh bout of crying, she was unexplainably happy to be by her son at that moment, she grabbed his wrist and held on tightly, not minding the flow of tears dripping down and staining her tan blouse.

“Oh, Jim,” she sighed with so much happiness brimming with tears in her eyes.

“Oh dear, Jim; I wish now that I hadn’t been cowardly about fighting for you. I do regret that now; how can you forgive me so easily, when the thought of me not fighting for you, especially as a baby, churns my stomach,” she said this intently staring into Jim’s eyes, he returned the gaze with kindness.

“That’s water under the bridge, Ma; I’m as guilty as you are, I couldn’t fight for my dignity while I lived at his house, even after I left his house. Seeing as things have turned out, I say it would have been and still is a losing battle to fight Engineer Craig,” Jim smiled and his mother chuckled with several acknowledging nods, she understood Jim and felt at peace with herself.

“Well,” Mrs. Jesam sniffed, her tears had dried up, but her voice sounded nasal, stuffed nose from so much crying. “When my husband died three years ago, Sofia was the only one I had left, we comforted each other, and then the year before last, she started seeing someone really wealthy. The man showered her with expensive gifts, got her a car and suddenly she announced that she was pregnant.

“I’m devastated with déjà vu; this happened to me a lifetime ago. Of course, I wanted to know who was responsible and what the person’s intentions were. Sofia flared up and for the first time she screamed that I wasn’t her mother...after she had calmed down, I advised her to be careful though.

“Sofia was an adult, I couldn’t influence her decisions. She came back from one of his lavish parties one day and excitedly told me that the man had given her two million naira to take care of herself. Sofia was a daddy’s girl, a little spoilt; she told the man that the money would hardly be enough for a full time nanny after she’d have paid all her bills. The man picked up his phone and called his lawyer, instructing him to set aside ten million naira for any person that would be his unborn child’s caregiver.”

“Why?” Jim asked ludicrously, he had heard this story before, but it just felt therapeutic and he loved his mother’s voice.

“The same question I asked Sofia but she laughed at me. She said she had agreed to be the soul caregiver to her child, so the money belonged to her. Obviously, the man was trying to get such a response from her.”

“That was careless. Why didn’t they just get married?” Jim asked with the same ludicrous expression.

“Sofia said they had it all worked out and that the wedding would come after her birthing the child.”

Jim shrugged, “I hope the man had re-worded his will after that,” he commented casually, then paused, his brain turning the odds around, his face expressing a deep frown.

“He never got the chance. He was murdered and my Sofia was murdered too, a few weeks after the man had been killed. I received an official letter stating the careless words of a man that I believe had finally fallen in love with someone other than himself. You father, he had finally fallen in love but had done what he does best, he had destroyed Sofia; only hers was a mortal destruction with no hope and no second chances.”

Jim listened to his father’s sins and quietly wondered if it would ever end. Even in death, the man was still actively messing up people’s lives. Jim rubbed his stubble covered face wearily, then he popped his head up suddenly, eyes blazing, a fresh possibility brimmed from those eyes. “Are you saying Willie...the baby is my...brother?” Jim’s confusion showed on his face, he frowned but wanted to laugh at the same time.

His mother’s smile beamed while she nodded, “Yes son, he is. Now you’ll understand why I said that your being at that location, on that particular day, was providential.”

Jim nodded, he had settled for a calm smile and a happy expression that rested on Mercy marred face. God was indeed awesome, He replaced his wife and unborn kid with a bonus, the kid was his baby brother. There and then, he knew that Mercy would recover, he had a strong conviction in his gut; Jim’s smile widened.

Mrs. Jesam noticed her son’s look as he stared at the young woman she had invariably endangered, he loved her.

“You love her, don’t you?” Mrs. Jesam asked boldly.

Jim kept staring at Mercy’s listless form on the bed, he heard his mother’s question but didn’t reply; his heart was choked with emotions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Mercy was having a silent conversation with herself, she thought that regaining consciousness wasn't all that it was rumored to be; regaining consciousness was highly overrated. She quickly smothered a hysterical giggle with her bandaged palm that was more numb than painful. The kids thought she was laughing at their joke, the grandmas too, as the kids preferred to call her mother and Jim's mother. Her eyes tentatively turned to the one that made her have snide thoughts on the subject of regaining consciousness...he stared too when she giggled but wasn't taken in like the others, Mercy looked away and breathe deeply.

Mercy was glad to be going home, wherever that might be at this point, and the whole family, including Daniel and the fast growing Willie, was there. Her mother had helped her dress up before the visitors popped in and they were all waiting for Doctor Essiet to bring her prescriptions.

The door opened, Mercy looked up expectantly but it wasn't the doctor, it was Daniel.

"Could you open the trunk?" Jim asked Daniel with a kind smile. Daniel nodded excitedly.

"Yes, I did. I came to get the rest of the bags," he replied as he picked up both duffels at once.

"You are smart. When I bought that car it took me an hour to figure it out," Jim commented humorously and everybody except Mercy laughed.

"Can...can I help him dad?" Ann asked her dad tentatively. Mercy noticed the wariness in Jim's eyes; he seemed turned between wanting to protect his teenage daughter from boys and allowing her to grow up. He unconsciously glanced at Mercy, his help in such situations but there was no help there, only a wall that he didn't understand the reason for its creation.

"She's a smart girl son, let her," his mother replied with a glowing smile, Mrs. Thomas nodded in affirmation. They all read his mind, Jim thought embarrassingly and nodded to his daughter, and she flew through the still open door.

"Thanks dad. Thanks grandma!" she shouted from outside the room. Mrs. Jesam beamed, Jim shook his head ruefully while Mercy managed a smile, Jim caught her smile, and she struggled to stop it. Jim watched her struggle and thought for the umpteenth time what he had done wrong.

Where are we going? Mercy kept asking herself. She couldn't ask the question aloud and give Jim any opportunity to have any conversation with her. She fumed silently as the car sped smoothly out of Calabar town; finally, she fell asleep from exhaustion.

Jim sighed wearily, some of the tension he'd been feeling from the hospital, ebbed when he realized that Mercy had fallen asleep. Now he could look at her freely without the evil eye she kept giving him since she regained consciousness. Jim drank in her peaceful demeanor and wondered again, why she was so cold to him. Could she still be mad about his accusations on the phone when he had questioned her morals and loyalty? Jim winced as he recalled the names he had tagged her. Nevertheless, she had saved his life; she had saved him from Nat's gun and for that, he was eternally grateful. Jim sighed deeply, he tapped the steering wheel nervously, and frowned, then a groan of frustration escaped his mouth; he startled himself to reality and looked in the rearview mirror at the occupants of the backseat.

Ann and Daniel conversed in whispers, his mother and Princess were asleep, and then his eyes met the knowing ones of Mrs. Thomas; she smiled kindly at him. "Stop worrying so much, she'll come around," she advised in a voice slightly above a whisper. Jim nodded but still had the deep frown, he wasn't convinced by her kind words but he'll be damned if he was going to allow Mercy push him away; he hadn't employed that young doctor so that he could take time off for nothing.

Paradise was the only word Mercy could think to come up with at the sight of Jim's inheritance; the house his father had bequeathed to him. Nothing could have prepared her for it; no amount of description could depict the serenity and peace that this place emanated. She had realized that they had all wanted it to be a surprise and she had been pleasantly surprised, in fact flabbergasted with open mouth amazement at the sight that greeted her when Jim had shook her from her nap.

The house was a massive two-storey building with fifteen rooms and mini sitting rooms on every floor. Mercy had heard Jim telling that detail to Ann as she trailed behind father and daughter in total awe of the simple but definitely costly décor. The house was done in cream, gold and brown hues; the walls were painted cream,

the floor tiles were marble and black, really emphasizing the creaminess of the wall and bringing out the beauty of the brown leather couches with gold fixings.

Mercy stared and wished that this were her home. The drapes were a panorama of brown and gold, the rods holding it and other tiny fixings in the whole house boasted of sprayed on gold. It could easily be a palace in a fairytale, Mercy thought for the umpteenth time after three days of roaming the premises.

Outside the house was her favorite, there were different kinds of birds and multicolored butterflies that hovered bravely above her head when she ventured into the garden. Oh the garden, Mercy thought, though overgrown with weed but the flowers, the flowers made her think of Alice in Wonderland; she felt like she was in a wonderland of her own each time she ventured into it, the different fragrances enveloped her and kept her safe.

Mercy never wanted to leave this haven, she thought as she sat on the field behind the house. The grass rolled on acres and acres of land; a green pasture with boundaries of tall rubber trees surrounding it, with a brook trickling in the naturally formed rocks in between the trees, with a suggestion that they might be oil in the land, Mercy thought, no wonder Jim had thought people would kill for it.

Mercy shivered as a cold breeze brushed past, she sat there enjoying the sun set before going into the house from the back door, which was the kitchen. She joined Mrs. Jesam and volunteered to set the royal like dining table, which she would have to sit and bear the heavy tension that was sure to be present with the appearance of Jim Craig.

While Mercy fretted about the looming dinner, Jim watched from his room on the first floor as his eldest daughter skipped into the house with a handful of flowers; a habit she picked up immediately she got here, Jim thought.

He had locked himself in all afternoon, trying to clear his mind of all grudges he held on his dad, this was the only way he could enjoy the paradise he had left him. Jim had succeeded, and for the first time he appreciated the beauty of the place without a searing pain in his heart except when he thought of Mercy.

“Damn you woman!” Jim whispered fiercely before flinging himself on his massive bed. She was ice when he was around, the only time he ever caught the warmth he knew she had was when she was with the kids...without him in the picture. I want to be in that picture with you, Jim thought with a log in his throat. He didn't have any idea how to bring up the issue with Mercy, she barely had

anything to say to him except greetings. Moreover, he had to forgive himself first for all the bad things he'd said to her, because it became a barrier each time he scrounged up the courage to talk to Mercy.

There was a tentative knock on the door, Jim raised himself on both elbows and answered, "Come in." Ann walked in and Jim sat up fully, sliding his feet into his leather slipper.

"Dinner is ready, right?" Jim asked with a smile.

"No daddy, but it will, soon." Jim frowned but still had on a smile as he watched his daughter stand by his bed awkwardly.

"What is it, Ann?" Jim asked softly, he patted a place beside him on the bed and she sat, then he noticed the tears. "Jesus Christ. Ann, what's the problem, why are you crying?" he held her face and tenderly wiped the tears with his thumb.

"Please don't send aunty Mercy away," Ann cried in a voice so broken Jim was taken aback by it, and then by what she was requesting. Did Mercy send her to do this? Why would she send her to do this?

"Shush Ann, did Mercy ask you to come here?" he asked slowly, still wiping the still pouring tears from his daughter's eyes.

"No," Ann answered, shaking her head in the process.

Jim sighed, "I don't understand, Ann, why do you think I'm sending Mercy away, what gave you that impression?"

"Daddy you don't talk to her anymore, like you used to at home. You always frown when she's around and she's always sad." Ann cried, she was becoming hysterical now and talking fast, Jim couldn't even get a word in. "I even caught her crying in her room yesterday. Please daddy, forgive her, I know you are angry that she sent us to her mother's house by ourselves but it was for our safety and..."

"Ann, please..." Jim began but she wouldn't stop crying and talking.

"...her mother took care of us well, daddy. Please forgive her, if not for anything but for the fact that she saved your life the day of the shooting at the hospital and she helps me with my homework and Princess' hair and Willie..." Jim finally screamed Ann down.

"Ann, shut up!" and she froze instantly, panting, sniffing and breathing from her mouth. "Better, now get a tissue from my bathroom, clean your nose, and get back here," Jim commanded, Ann obeyed.

Mercy saved me on the assassination attempt day. His eyes widened and he remembered. The unknown caller, the person under his car that had dragged him

down, but how could it be, how could she have known to rescue him from an assassination? Could it be from dreams? Like the one about the car brakes.

Ann came back into the room with a dry face but with red rimmed, swollen eyes and dripping nose, she held a piece of tissue for that. Jim stared at his daughter's swollen face but he was thinking of Mercy crying alone in her room while he idly sat in his room battling with his guilt instead of being with her, consoling and reminding her of the massive love, he had for her.

Jim snapped out of his reverie and held out both arms to Ann, she walked into them and the sobbing began, "Shh, Ann, it's okay. I'm not sending Mercy away, I could never do that," Jim said, playfully scratching his daughter's cornrows.

"But you..."

"I know, Ann, but adults do have their differences at times, do you understand?" she nodded and Jim felt her sigh in relief. She was sighing because she knew her father wasn't going to send their beloved aunty away but would the aunty want to stay, Jim wondered in trepidation.

"Hey, you said something about her saving me at the hospital, the day of the shooting..." Ann shifted from her father with widened eyes and mouth. Jim's eyes narrowed.

"I wasn't supposed to say anything, it was a secret," Ann said softly, she looked down and away from her father's probing eyes.

"It would help me let her stay, if you told me." Jim cajoled, Ann considered it for a while, and shrugged, the cat was already out of bag, she thought, and it was for aunty Mercy's own good. Therefore, she told her dad the whole story, starting from how Mercy stumbled on the three people in the shadow planning to kill him.

Why hadn't she told him of this? He would have understood and loved her more.

Would you have? He asked himself while his daughter's head rested on his shoulder. He had been fast to believe what a stranger had told him about her, quickly forgetting that her dream had saved him from certain death. Jim rubbed his eyes tiredly and made a decision, it was now, or never, he had to break this barrier.

"Ann, go down stairs, tell the grandmas to preserve I and Mercy's dinner, we are going to be having a rather long meeting."

CHAPTER THIRTY

The jewel of a house had grown dark from the evening dusk; the gold spray-on light fixings glowed with yellow light in and around the premises. With dusk came the biting cold largely common in places with brooks and tall trees. Jim paced the length of his room as he waited for the sound of Mercy's door opening.

They had only occupied part of the ground level and first floor of the house; the serviceable areas like the large sitting room where the elderly women lounged most of the time, the kitchen, and store and rooms just enough for all of them.

Jim lost his patience and dragged his door open the same moment that Mercy did, he saw her hesitate, she took a step back, obviously intending to close her door and let him pass by to the stairs leading to the dining area. However, Jim had another thing in mind, even though her simple action hurt him more than her silence this past week, he simply had to have this talk with her, clear the air for the last time. He walked purposely to her slightly open door and sure enough, she was leaning uncertainly behind it. The sudden appearance of Jim rattled her and Jim took perverse joy in seeing her, widened eyed and speechless. He took a moment and boldly perused her beauty, part of her face was in the shadow, but he knew every line on that face by heart. Staying by her bed at the hospital had accorded him the opportunity to study that face; her wonderful face.

"Can I have a word with you?" Jim asked in a voice that was too husky for comfort, his throat had gone dry just by being in close proximity with this woman. Control yourself, Jim, he thought, silently admonishing himself.

"No, you can't," Mercy replied in a breathless whisper and cleared her throat. What was suddenly wrong with her voice, it was making her sound nervous and that in turn was making her angry, she should be showing confidence to this guy she had been a fool to.

"I wasn't asking, Mercy," Jim said laconically. His tone caused her to bristle; Jim could almost see her hackles rising.

"I'm recuperating, Doctor Jim Craig, not deaf. I specifically heard you ask to have a word with me, which..." Jim broke in.

"My mistake, Mercy," he said with a smile, he felt elation that she was even replying, all he wanted was to hug her tightly and kiss her a deep welcome. However, he settled for saying, "I want to talk with you."

She straightened and eyed him levelly, “And I said, no. What part of that didn’t you understand, the ‘N’ or the ‘O’?” Jim’s smile widened, this was more conversation than he’d had for weeks with her, he realized he missed her contradictory nature.

Jim shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks and returned her leveled stare with a determined one. “I’m sorry, Mercy, but I must and will have this talk with you,” he stated calmly.

Mercy’s heart skipped fearfully, how was she to handle this, she thought but maintained eye contact with him. She had never experienced this assertive side of Jim; he could be determined but not arrogantly assertive like now. Mercy swallowed and trudged on, “For a doctor, you sure are dumb. Nevertheless, I’ll be charitable and repeat myself. Please, I...” Jim cut her off with his actions; he pushed her from the door and closed it firmly behind him, locking it for good measure.

“It wasn’t an offer to be rejected, Mercy,” he told the shocked woman, who stared at him as if he were mad.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t force me to have a conversation with you Jim, I have nothing to say to you.”

Jim was sorry to hear the quiver in her voice but he was confident and hoping that the quiver of fear and uncertainty in her voice would at the end turn to that of passion, he couldn’t wait, Jim cleared his throat to hide his excited eyes and moved determinedly towards her.

Mercy took several steps back and gasped when she suddenly fell on the bed, the back of her knee had struck the edge of the bed. Mercy scrambled to stand up and flee but Jim was quick to pull the high back chair forward, effectively blocking her escape path and creating a face-to-face situation. For he sat on the chair not minding that his slack covered knee brushed against her jean-covered thigh; the effect though, was still the same, her warmth seeped slowly but surely into his skin.

Jim took covet deep breaths to control his wild desires as he sat locking both legs of the gorgeous woman in front of him in between his legs, though she struggled and the more she did, the hotter he got.

“Jim, what are you doing...all I have to do is scream and both our mothers will be here in a jiffy,” she said in a frantic tone.

“And then what? You’ll need more than our rheumatic mothers to break down that door and don’t even think of mentioning Daniel; that would be too embarrassing even for you.”

Mercy groaned frustratingly and glared at him, “What do you want?”

Though she had stopped struggling, Jim refused to take his hands off her thighs, he loved his hands just where they were, thank you very much, he thought and almost smiled. Moreover, she wasn’t hustling to fling off his hands in a huff either; encouraging.

“I just want to have a conversation with you, is that so much to ask?” Jim asked calmly but seriously.

“Oh,” Mercy said and nodded, “May I ask why?” her tone was sarcastic.

Jim thought for a moment before answering, “Because,” he began, holding her gaze with the sincerity in his voice, “. . .I want to know what’s going on with you,” he paused, “. . .with us.”

For a couple of seconds, emotions chased themselves on Mercy’s face and in that time, Jim never took his gaze off her face, he saw every race of emotion and swallowed to free his suddenly constricted throat.

Mercy shook her head slowly, “I don’t understand. Why now. . .to what purpose?” she asked and because she couldn’t hold it in any longer, she burst into tears. All the frustrations, tension and uncertainty she had felt since hearing Jim’s conversation with his mother and the only question he never answered, exploded in her flood of tears. She’d been hurting for so long but not knowing what to do about it. She’d been longing for him, especially when he went out of his way to be kind to her despite her cold shoulder, but hating him also for putting her in that position. Mercy was not a woman to beg a man for his affections but in the past week she had seriously considered it and it pained her to stoop so low.

“Sh, sh, sh. Mercy, please, I’m sorry. Is it something I said?” Jim asked confusedly, he stood up and sat beside her on the bed, gratefully gathering her into his arms, he sighed as he comforted her. . .and himself for that matter. “Sh, it’s okay, you can tell me about it.”

“It’s more like what you did not say,” Mercy exploded angrily, pushing herself away from his seductive warmth. She stood up and moved away, pausing behind the high back chair, Jim followed and stopped in front of her with an angry and confused mien.

“You were the one that refused to talk to me, you were cold to me Mercy and I wondered what I had done wrong and I remembered. I remembered the horrible things I said to you when your life was in danger, I remembered what I believed you had done to my kids and I’m sorry for thinking that Mercy.

“I’m sorry for not trusting you enough even after you had saved my life at the hospital...” Mercy looked up shocked and sniffling, effectively cutting off what he was about to say.

“You weren’t supposed to know that,” she said, tears still dribbling down her face. Jim wanted nothing more than to hold her and erase every single hurt he might have caused her and more but...

“But I know...Ann told me.”

“She wasn’t supposed to,” she said and made to move away but Jim caught her arm and made her face him.

“She said so too but she was worried about us, no, scratch that, she was worried about you. She noticed our silence and assumed that I was going to send you away.”

“She wasn’t so wrong to worry, one afternoon while having a nap, I dreamt that you rejected and sent me away...”

“She heard you crying in your room; that’s why you were crying in your room,” Jim said in realization, tenderly he wiped her tears. “I’m so sorry for the hurt I’ve caused you. I don’t know why you didn’t tell me you stumbled on Nat’s plot to kill me, it could ha...” Mercy sniffed and broke in.

“Even if you would have believed me, the police would have suspected my involvement...it was just safer not to tell.”

“Except to Ann,” Jim accused and playfully tweaked her nose.

“Well, she minded Willie while I rescued you, she deserved to know,” Mercy replied, smiling coyly.

He didn’t know what pushed him. It could have been the relief of tension carried through the week between them or the coy smile she gave him, Jim didn’t really care, he just knew that he had to kiss her or die. So, without prior indication, he swooped down and captured her lips in a kiss that melted every guilt and frustration away. It was life; all he’d been longing for, all he ever wanted was contained in that moment or so he thought until she began responding.

Mercy reveled in the sparks that shot off in her head when his lips merged with hers, it was much better than what she’d imagined it would be. She waited

expectantly, pausing to enjoy the tender dance of his tongue in her mouth. Her eyes were closed but she was acutely conscious of all his movements; the tender weight of his hand on her lower back, surreptitiously moving her closer to his hard body, the light crawl of his fingers on her nape into her hair, the obvious increase in heart rate. She felt rather than heard him inhale her scent during the slight moment he left her mouth to scatter tiny kisses on her jaw line down to her ears. His groan of pleasure resonated in her chest, sending shivers of pleasure down her stomach to her abdomen already heavy with want urging her then to sort for the warmth of his lips.

Jim kissed, caressed with his nose, and tenderly bit the smooth skin between Mercy's shoulder and her head; her flowery scent mixed with sweat was intoxicating. However, he became thoroughly inebriated when she turned and swallowed his lips in a kiss so passionate he thought he'd burn with the fever of it. It had become a fight. A feverish race to assuage all the longings they had ever had or imagined. Tightly wound together in this passionate embrace, the world lost to them, it greatly surprised Mercy that Jim withdrew from her, taking two steps backward, she immediately felt bereft, and her eyes spoke loudly of her emptiness at his desertion.

"Don't look at me that way; don't be the cause of my losing my self control and ravishing you this instant," Jim panted.

"Well," Mercy commented insinuatingly, she shrugged and began unbuttoning her chiffon shirt.

Jim shook his head when he saw what she was doing, "No, stop. Mercy please let's talk for a moment," Jim begged desperately, this woman was driving him crazy.

"I'm open to talking, but while YOU are doing that..." she pulled off her shirt, smiling at Jim's wide-eyed stare. "...help me with my jeans."

Jim realized that he'd forgotten what he wanted to talk about. He couldn't tear his eyes from the bountiful bulbs on her chest. The contrast of the white, lacey bra against her dark skin was so erotically staggering it caused mushiness in his brain. What had he wanted to talk about? Jim asked himself as he hurried out of his own cloths. Why had he foolishly left the warmth of this woman's arm to talk? What was there to talk about?

There was nothing to talk about, he thought dazedly as he reverently kissed each weighty globe. He trailed a line of wet kisses down her stomach to the buckle of her belt. Slowly unzipping the jean, he peeled it off her skin as one would peel a

firmly ripe mango. Jim salivated as he divested her of all articles of clothing; he envisaged the momentum of pleasure he would get from this encounter, he couldn't wait to hear her sighs, and moans from the things he'd always imagined doing to her. This was his chance, and he wanted it forever.

He placed his face in the juncture in between her legs and sighed, deeply inhaling the intoxicating scent of her core; his mouth watered and his mind flashed with graphic pictures of erotic thoughts buried in the face of the past crisis. Jim flipped out his tongue and reveled in the sound of her gasp and shaky legs.

His face was so close to her triangle that he could see the glisten of her juice gliding down in response to his proximity. Jim caressed a path up her thigh, slowly making her burn, her sighs were music to his ears, her whimpers...

Jim stood up abruptly and grabbed her behind her knee, lifting her bulk and taking three wide strides that took them to the bed. Mercy squealed and giggled, muffling the sound on the pillow while her eyes beamed with love for him.

"I've wanted to do this for so long; worship your body. You are beautiful, Mercy." Her heart melted and quickened at his tone, "I'm fat," she murmured, lowering her gaze and experiencing the familiar shyness that accompanied anything concerning her body, especially with Jim, and when she was naked.

"I love it," he murmured distractedly while bending with focus towards her breasts, his tongue extended and ready, he licked her nipple as though it dripped with honey. He hummed his pleasure and did the same to the other nipple. His teeth grazed the nipples lightly, bringing them to a hard pebble and Mercy's breathing to a pant.

Jim flicked a glance at her, a very sensuous glance, one that made her gasp at the pleasure it promised. "I've often wondered what your scream would sound like in the throes of passion," he said conversationally, while licking his way down her soft stomach and ignoring her little whimpers and restless movements.

"I don't scream, it's un-lady like," she managed to counter and was glad that she did, because it made Jim pleased, he gave her a smoldering look and a knowing grin.

"That's my girl, always arguing on principle," he murmured, his tongue tracing a wet trail down her abdomen. His busy hands roamed to her thighs and lifted them off the bed, opening them wide in the process, her womanly scent wafted out and engulfed him and he wallowed in it. Leaving her knees raised and open, he sniffed

and licked his way down her inner thigh, his fingers massaging and caressing her fleshy, hairy mound but pointedly staying away from her slit.

Mercy growled in frustration; no matter how restless her waist moved, Jim refused to touch her where she wanted him most. Moisture dripped down her slit into her buttocks, and all he did was hum appreciatively and lap it all up, making slurps in the process.

“Your screams are increasing,” Jim observed laconically.

“Not screams, cries,” Mercy gasped and tried to reach for his arm.

“So, that’s what we are calling it now,” he chuckled and went for another slurp session but stayed away from where it mattered. But this time, his finger, as though on its own accord, found its lone way to her clit and robbed the button as though desperately wishing for a genie.

Mercy choked and gasped breathlessly, the sound louder than any she’d ever done since they’d begun exploring their bodies. The sound encouraged Jim, he scooted close and without warning widened her slit and plunged in tongue, teeth, his whole face; he chewed her out.

It started as mewling cries and peaked to a full fledged scream. Jim hummed encouragingly as she soaked his face with her cum, a rush of fluid that he lapped up completely while still stimulating her clits. His other hand found her left breast and he was promptly distracted, he wasn’t so laconic or casual when he crawled over Mercy, wedged himself in between her open legs. He shook from the intensity of his passion as he was shocked to feel her hand grab his thick, long and quite engorged cock, without hesitating, she plunged it into her welcoming warmth and sighed as though relieved.

Jim’s growl was quite animalistic as he felt the wet, silk, fist surround him and sucked him in deeper. He started moving with controlled strokes, but when she tightened the walls of her suctioning pot, he lost all control and buried himself to the hilt, slamming continuously and sometimes, rhythmically into her and she welcomed all of it. She crooned in his ear when she wasn’t gasping her pleasure; she whispered erotic pictures and he went crazy pounding into her.

Jim felt her gasp and groan she neared the edge of her climax, now she whimpered helplessly, and even though she raised her hips to meet him half way, she was incoherent in her speech and cries and her nails dug deeper on his nape, prodding him for more. He gave her everything and collected all she had, his voice cracked as he neared the edge with her; his plunges became deeper and harder and the

sudden drenching of his phallus, an indication that she had gone over the edge if one were to ignore her keening scream, flung him over the edge too.

TWO HOURS LATER

Jim tiptoed bare feet down the tiled steps, he crossed the dining area and emerged in the kitchen. The house was quiet and he was sure everybody was asleep; he was ravenous.

He smiled when he recalled Mercy's complaints and the loud growl of her stomach, though he was hungry, nothing would have detached him from her side if she hadn't been hungry too. He loved her to distraction and he was gleefully happy, embarrassingly so, he felt like tap dancing because she loved him too and they couldn't stop saying it.

Jim found their preserved dinner, boiled yam, and fishmeal sauce; he stared at it for a moment and shook his head, discarding it. He had other ideas; he wasn't planning on sleeping much this night, so he needed light food for them. He rummaged in the refrigerator, and found a half-eaten pack of sliced bread and a carton of orange juice. He closed the fridge, as he was leaving, his eyes caught the squat container of honey, and his eyes widened excitedly as ideas filled his head, none of them having anything to do with the humble combination of honey on bread for consumption.

Jim gathered his arsenal; a small gallon of chilled water included and made his way through the dark path he'd once taken. He neared the stairs and was about climbing...

"How was the meeting, son?" his mother asked from a corner of the sitting room. Jim yelped in sudden fright, hitting his big toe in the process. It was a miracle his wares were still intact in his arm fold.

"Ma, what are you doing up by this time?" Jim asked, it came out as a complaint. He danced around to ease the pain on his big toe while his mother switched on a lamp. Jim would have rather she not because he was dressed only in a slight boxer short and the evidence of his excited thought about the honey was glaring.

"A question I should be asking you," she replied humorously, she was enjoying her son's discomfort.

"Jesus, Ma, please let's talk in the morning," Jim said, facing away from her, his excitement was still obvious.

“Answer me this child. Where you able to tell her how you feel about her?” she asked matter-of-factly. “The last time I asked you, you were silent.”

Jim sighed with a smile, “Of course, I told her. She’s the love of my life, my soul mate. Ma, she completes me, she’s my better half, and I asked her to marry me.”

“And?” his mother prodded, unable to hide her excitement.

“She accepted my ring. She said ‘Yes’,” Jim proclaimed. The excitement of his announcement had deemed the other darker one; he now faced his mother as he spoke.

“That was fast son. You had a ring already?” she asked with a wide smile, teasing him.

“I’ve had it for weeks now,” Jim said bashfully.

“Then son, I declare your ‘meeting’ a success,” she said benignly.

Jim nodded and went upstairs; yes, his meeting had been a whooping success and hadn’t ended yet. The dark excitement bludgeoned hardly, he moved as fast as his hardened third leg would allow. Jim knew he had forever with Mercy but right now, he was suddenly suffering from the ‘Oliver Twist Syndrome.’

THE END