

Broken Republic
WHERE TELLING THE TRUTH IS A DEATH SENTENCE.

Silenced

TO
KILL
A Run!
POET

Topped
A NOVEL

Escape

ONWE
ARINZE

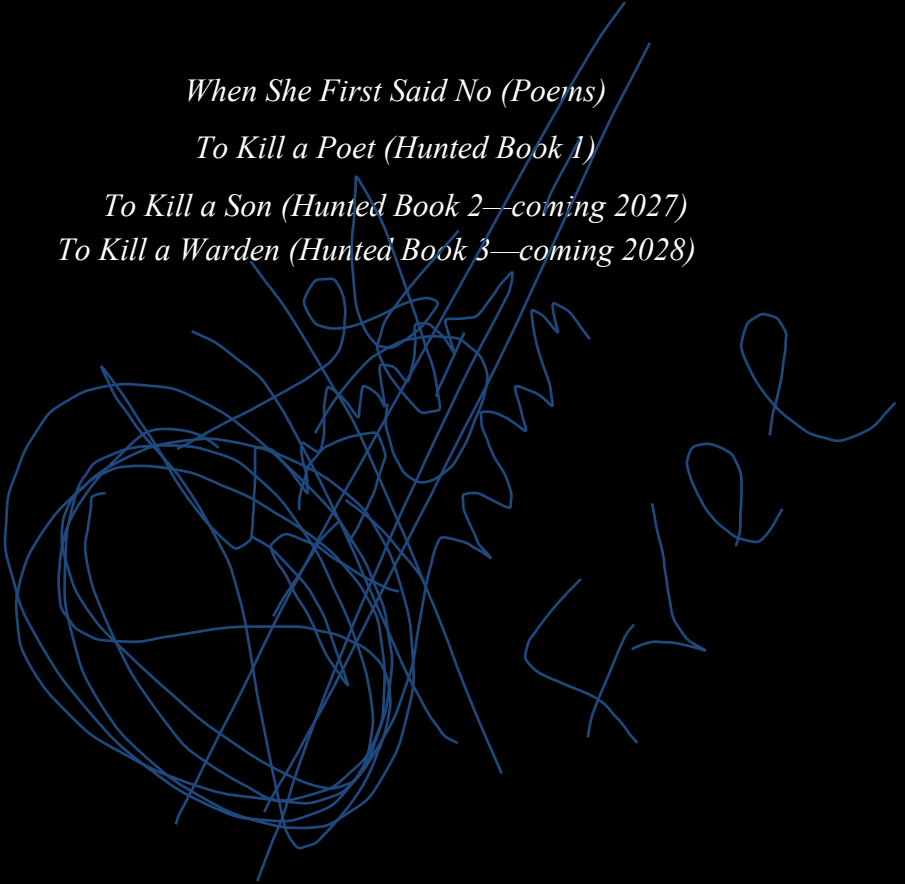
BY ONWE ARINZE

When She First Said No (Poems)

To Kill a Poet (Hunted Book 1)

To Kill a Son (Hunted Book 2—coming 2027)

To Kill a Warden (Hunted Book 3—coming 2028)



TO KILL A POET

**ONWE
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SCONDA

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*To Kego, who was named after the main character in this story.
And to the memory of everyone killed for the EndSARS protests in 2020.
To Christopher Okigbo, Dele Giwa, Ken Saro Wiwa and others like
them.*

One

File

THE CALL CAME at dusk.

“Man, your collection just sold more than a million copies! In two effing days!” Yeks’ voice burst through the line, his excitement flooding the room from miles away in America.

Kego froze, speechless. *This was unexpected*, he thought. *A million copies sold?*

“Unbelievable!” he said seconds later, letting out a breath of excitement.

“The banning of the collection turned out a blessing,” Yeks added.

Truly, that was every writer’s dream, but who would have imagined his debut poetry collection could achieve such a feat in less than a week of its release? To scream loudly and match the enthusiasm in Yeks’ voice tugged at his throat. He held himself back.

Their relationship was only a few months old at this point—something that began when Kego’s manuscript landed in Yeks’ inbox a year and six months ago. Yeks said he had devoured the poems when he found them and could not resist the urge to reach out the following day. He’d described them as unique, powerful, and lyrical masterpieces that deserved a space on every poetry lover’s shelf. Weeks later, the duo secured a publishing deal with a major New York publishing house.

As they chattered over the phone, Kego’s second line beeped on the table before him—an SMS. He pulled down the preview board: *Urgent—leave at once.*

He froze again.

“Kego?” Yeks said. “You still there? When are you coming to the States? The tour will—”

“Soon,” Kego interjected, voice low and distant.

He lingered on the opened message, his stomach dropping, laughter disappearing from his face. His legs wobbled, fingers twitched.

“We needed—”

“Hold on, please.”

The words froze Yeks in his tracks. He sensed a tremor laced Kego’s voice. His own celebratory mood soured. “What is it? What’s the matter?”

“Please, I’ll call you back later, if you don’t mind. I need to go now.”

Kego ended the call, leaving Yeks staring at his phone, baffled and frightened. Yeks considered calling him back, but did not.

His gaze stayed glued to the other phone on his table—a second line he only shared with close friends and family. His forehead creased into a grimace, an odd expression for someone who had just received the best news of his career. The SMS was from a friend he knew when he was younger who became an insider within a Nigerian government security agency years ago.

The text did not just threaten to change things—it upended his life. He had to get to the U.S. Embassy in Abuja immediately if he wished to live to see another day.

His hands shook as he threw clothes into a suitcase. *Leave at once. Unseen. To the U.S. Embassy.* The words hammered in his skull. His death would not be a matter of ‘if,’ but ‘how soon,’ should he decide to linger. The message was simple and deadly: he would be killed on sight. They might already be at his door.

Congratulations on your book release, the text had started, almost a mockery of his abruptly concluded call with Yeks.

That was the first part. But what was his crime? How could a few poems warrant his death? What was wrong with his few-minute address at his book launch days ago? For heaven's sake, the book had only been out for two days. True, it had gone viral almost as soon as the publishers announced its release. But this? This was state-sanctioned madness. He had done nothing wrong. *Was banning the book in the country not enough for the President?*

He paused for a second—as if he had suddenly changed his mind. Should he run away or stand to fight? Wasn't the message in his book worth dying over? He thought of waiting and making a video about this for social media. His friend, Kene, who was good with those kinds of things was already on his way. But then, he continued to put his personal items in the suitcase. The primal fear took over again as he thought of the text.

If you love your life, leave this country at once, possibly unseen. Even better, head to the closest foreign or U.S. Embassy in the country and claim asylum. Stay safe.

—Thanks. Please delete.

He had to act—and fast. This was not about activism or the defence of his writing career. It was about staying alive. And he had to stay alive to fight. *Dead men string no words; instead, they're soon forgotten, like the night's breeze after dawn.* What's the point in dying now when his writing career had finally taken off? He still had many things to pen down for this generation and the ones ahead.

He was packed up and heading to the front door when he heard his CCTV motion detector beep. Quickly, he opened the CCTV monitor on his phone and saw two unfamiliar men standing just outside the gate. They appeared to be deliberating whether or not the gate's alarm was armed, their forms grainy in the low light of the gathering dusk.

This is more serious than I thought.

He stumbled back from the door, his hip colliding with a slim glass side table in the entryway. The sharp crash of its shattering glass rang out behind him. His breath quickened with the sound and caught in his throat. His heart pounded heavily. Then sudden silence fell over him for a second, more threatening than the noise itself.

He stood frozen, letting the silence settle like dust in the air. Then, without further hesitation, he darted to the kitchen. He nearly collided with the island in his haste as he rushed out through the back door, onto the veranda, and down the few steps.

The fence at the back of his house loomed before him—twelve feet of concrete, crowned with dormant perimeter security wires. He had disconnected them months ago due to the outrageous electricity bill generated per month—a frugal decision that now felt like a godsend. Potential intruders would have assumed they were still functional.

He flung his small suitcase over the fence, reached up and gripped the lifeless strands, cold in his desperate grasp, bent under his weight. He lost his balance, nearly toppling backwards. He struggled up, one leg over, then the other, until the worn sole of his slip-on snagged on the wire. He flailed again and fell, tumbling hard onto the bushy lot outside. Air rushed from his lungs in a grunt. The traitorous slip-on had dislodged mid-fall and landed with a soft thud back inside the compound.

His jaw tightened. *Why me?*

A thin, unyielding branch from a spiky shrub had pierced the back of his shirt as he fell and held him in place like a claw. He wrestled free, fabric ripping from his shirt, and pushed forward into the wild growth before him. His back stung as sweat found the bruise that the branch left on his skin.

Ahead, the foliage clawed at his legs and cut through his sleeves. No clear path forward—only the bush alive with the soft song of birds and chirping crickets. He had never ventured into this side of the neighbourhood in the five years since he bought the house.

Now, it was his only way out.

He stopped and held his breath for a second, listening, straining his ears. *Are they in?*

He could hear the gate creaking open. One of the men must have scaled the fence and was now letting his partner in. Moments later, a faint knock came at the front door—soft but deliberate, barely audible over the rustling leaves as he pushed his way through the undergrowth, breath ragged, heart pounding.

He did not look back again or pause. He could not afford to. To delay further was to die, and he did not want to die.

He prayed to reach the main road at the end of the wild shrubs before the intruders discovered he'd escaped through the back. The thought of his body lying cold in the brush behind his own house haunted him.

He pressed on, forcing his way through the low-lying briars that clawed at his skin, drawing blood from his sweat-slicked arms and sun-hardened flesh beneath his trousers. Pain, mingled with panic, became his single driving force toward escape.

As he pushed through the wild growth, thoughts of Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe surged into his mind. Giants of the pen. Warriors of truth. Had any of them ever faced a death order from the government

for their words? He was sure his friend said the order came from the president himself.

Why is my case worse? A tinge of bitterness welled up in his chest. Then, in a breath heavy with exhaustion and disbelief, he asked again out loud, “Why me?”

He picked up his pace.

Back in the house, the intruders had burst through the front door when no one answered their heavy knocks. There was no noticeable damage to the door as it was already unlocked. Both men moved cautiously into the house, their suppressed pistols drawn. One of them was heavily built, broad-shouldered and stood over six feet tall. The other, slimmer and of average height, moved with the authority of a team leader. Both government assassins, hired hands from within the state security agency—former underworld bounty killers implanted into State Service. On any other day, meeting them on the street, one might mistake them for private security guards or regular gym enthusiasts. The tall one wore a tight black t-shirt and black jeans that clung to his frame like skin. His partner wore a dark grey button-down shirt over black jeans. Both men had their shirts untucked.

They moved coldly with precision, their looks menacing, as they stepped over the shattered glass scattered near the entrance to the lounge of the four-bedroom maisonette. The brittle crackle of the broken glass under their feet did not signal them that the owner of the house could have escaped. There was no way he would have known that they were coming, but if it was a sign that they had been spotted, their target may well be trying to hide within the building. At worst, he could be calling for help. But he could not have got out.

They began a methodical search through the house in silence. The big one, whom the other called Antler, took the stairs. The leader,

whose name was Brahim, swept the ground floor, checking every large space and overturning every piece of furniture heavy enough to conceal a man.

Two minutes in, Brahim entered the kitchen and noticed the back door Kego had left ajar in his desperate flight.

“Antler,” he called out, voice low and sharp. “Come here. I think he has left the building.”

He stepped onto the veranda and down the few steps to the rear terrace. He scanned the surroundings carefully, sweeping the compound for clues. A lone slip-on lay upturned near the perimeter wall. He moved closer and bent to inspect it.

“Look up,” Antler said, appearing behind him. “I think he saw us coming and fled.”

Brahim raised his eyes to the sagging perimeter security wires atop the fence.

“He could still be close.”

“It’s possible,” Antler replied. “Do we have a look around?”

“Of course. How else do we get the job done?”

The leader paused, tucked his pistol in his waistband, covered it with his shirt, and approached the wall.

“I’m sure he’s close. Let’s go after him.”

Someone was honking a car horn in the street in front of the house. *Probably one of the landowners on the street*, Antler thought.

Both men scaled the fence with the ease of constant practice, but the terrain surprised them as they landed on the other side. The thick, thorn-laced underbrush tangled their steps as they moved forward. They could see the trail of broken branches where their target had forced his way through.

Suddenly, a snake darted across Antler's path. He flinched and jumped instinctively, his finger tensing on the trigger of his gun—*phut*—the suppressed shot cutting through the air. The leader ducked, taken aback, as the bullet zipped through hanging leaves and fell to the dry ones below. The sound startled the bush to life; birds flapped their wings and scattered, grasshoppers leapt, bush rabbits dived into their holes, and squirrels raced up the trees. Other unseen things rustled away in the undergrowth.

"Fuck!" the leader hissed. "Careful, Antler. We need to listen for movement. He could be close."

"I hope this, at least, startled him," Antler replied, recovering.

They pushed forward, following the trail, quickening their pace, scanning their surroundings with sharp, deliberate eyes. Each movement was calculated; every shadow, every rustling leaf caught their attention. They had to hit the mark. That was the order. It wasn't supposed to be this hard.

Deeper into the thicket, Kego heard the muffled crack of the gun and his body stiffened. The sudden rustle of the awakened bush with the eruption of startled animals confirmed it: they were on his trail. But he was at least four minutes ahead—a good lead. He still needed to move faster.

He pressed forward, his breath heavy, and his ears tuned to every shifting sound around him. He could still escape to safety. He just hadn't expected the distance to the road to be this long from his house.

Soon, he could hear the engines of speeding cars roaring past ahead, and voices—faint but real—carried by the wind. The main road wasn't far now. *No more than a hundred metres away*, he prayed. If he could just reach it, he might live. He only hoped his luck would shine and one of the speeding vehicles passing through the road would slow for him.

One sympathetic driver was all he needed; without it, his flight would be in vain.

He remembered a conversation he had with his friend, Kene, five months earlier, when he'd asked him to read the poetry collection.

"O boy, these poems go bang o," his friend had said with a crooked smile. "But you need to be careful, I must tell you."

"Why?" Kego had asked, even though he already knew what Kene was hinting at.

"Really?" Kene scoffed. "Like you don't know some of these lines are a death warrant with these politicians."

Kego brushed it off. "We're supposed to be living in a free country, remember. This will all pass someday."

"A country where a so-called democratically elected president refused to step down after losing an election for a second term?" Kene wasn't letting it go. "My guy, think well before you release those poems sha. I care about you a lot."

Kego had thought about it for a while. He remembered clearly how the winner of the last presidential election had been arrested and locked away in Kirikiri for leading a mass protest after the sitting president nullified the election results announced by INEC. The President had sacked the electoral chairman and appointed a new one merely three days after the votes were counted.

People had flooded the streets in protest. The new INEC chairman "reviewed" the results and, in a televised address, declared that the incumbent was the 'real' winner. The country nearly splintered. The cities burned. The military crushed protests. Some government buildings were razed during the chaos. Blood soaked the streets. Hundreds died. Then fear took over the land, so thick and suffocating that the people retreated into their shells, helpless.

It was in the midst of that madness that Kego's poems were born—raw, furious, and unsparing. Some verses struck directly at the heart of power. One particular poem still echoed in his mind:

The Devil in the Seat!

*To reach for freedom void of fear,
Fellas must wake and take the war
To the corridors of power, and bear
The pain of death inflicted by law
That serves the devil in the seat;
The one who enslaves the masses
In an endless, sore penury,
While he revels in excesses.
The devil in stolen glory,
Whose veiled wiles desecrate the seat.*

*The devil thrives, though powerless,
Emboldened by the stale silence
Of voices lost to greed. A mess
Made by weak souls with dislodged sense
To serve the devil in the seat.
The devil knows this: he's so gone
When the people's veils are lifted,
And they rise, united as one,*

*Unbound by faux scares from his stead,
To drive the devil from the seat.*

As the memory flared through his mind like a torch in the dark, Kego didn't know if he should regret publishing the poems or hold his ground. One thing remained clear to him: the poems were within his right to freedom of speech. There was no way choosing to tell his story in these poems was a bad choice. It was not a crime either. Yeks, his American agent whose parents were of African descent, had told him the collection was a surefire bestseller. Yes, he may have noted how controversial they would be, but that was it.

Kego had done nothing wrong. Or so he thought.

"Aargh!" he cried out as a sharp pain that tore through his bare foot, violently yanking him from his thoughts back to the present. He had stepped on a mat of thorns buried in the dirt. He lifted the foot with trembling hands as he tried to pry the thorns from his sole. His breath came in ragged gasps, and he groaned through clenched teeth.

After thirty seconds of limping through a thinning patch of bush, the road shimmered ahead. He was only one curtain of foliage away. Behind him, the presence of his pursuers pressed closer; he could feel them coming after him like shadows with heartbeats. He could also feel the blood trickling down from his foot, marking a trail behind him like breadcrumbs for wolves. His eyes started to turn, as if the world was spinning in circles. He knew he was going to faint.

He was so close to the road. But so were they.

Not far behind, a four-minute walk away, the assassins moved like dark smoke through the night. The leader slowed, raising a hand. Antler froze.

“I heard something,” he whispered. “Like someone groaning in pain.”

They tilted their heads, ears facing towards the low hum of honking cars reaching them, and the murmurs of passengers on the road beyond. A muffled voice. A sigh of pain.

“There,” the leader pointed. “He’s close. We need to reach him before he hits that road.”

They hurried forward, forcing their way through the thorns, the brambles, the tangled undergrowth, each step driven by the promise of blood.

Just ahead, the poet bled through the bush, dragging himself towards a freedom that was only a few desperate heartbeats away. He was beginning to admit that his insistence on publishing the collection wasn’t worth the death on his heels. Dying would make him like those before him—like his father whose shoes he was trying to fit in—forgotten while the rot they fought and died for persisted.

The anger drained from his face—his confidence, his hope, all vanished. He should have listened to Kene when he had the chance.

May the throes of death escape me tonight, he prayed, for my wearied being has lost all its might.

Two

EARLIER THAT DAY, Kene lay asleep in the hush of early dawn, sprawled across the bed, his face buried in his pillow. A soft fusion of lavender and vanilla scents hung thick in the air, clinging to the sheets, to the curtains over the windows, and to the very breath of the room.

Soft music played on repeat from his Harman Kardon speaker, a lilting tune for his girlfriend, Dera, to sleep under.

Beside him, Dera lay on her side facing him—naked, unconcerned, and oblivious to the world’s dreadful tides. Her soft, succulent breasts pressed lazily on Kene’s right shoulder. Her round, glistening buttocks pointed upwards, as if in silent admiration of the colourful spiral floral pattern carved meticulously into the white POP ceiling. A light, rhythmic snore rose from her parted lips—small, content, and feminine. The sweet scent of her skin mingled with the aromas of the room. Even in his sleep, Kene could savour it from the fabric beneath his nose.

The alarm exploded into the quiet at 6:00 a.m., buzzing like a trapped hornet from the walnut bedside stool. Kene stirred, his body heavy with sleep. He groaned softly, face still pressed to the pillow, then reached out a blind hand in search of the phone, found and silenced it after a short struggle. He lazily picked it up afterwards, raised his head, and glanced at the screen with squinted eyes, as though hoping it had made a mistake with the time.

“Already?” he muttered, a long yawn escaping him. He turned his head toward Dera.

She had rolled onto her back when the alarm blared, though her eyes remained shut, hovering in the delicate space between dreaming and waking. He smiled faintly. *She is so beautiful*, he thought, his eyes tracing her voluptuous frame.

The night before had been more than memorable for them. Dera, with her curves that melted like molten caramel under his touch, had left him breathless. She was electric, the kind of woman who leaves her scent on a man's soul and his bones. He could still feel the heat of her tender lips, and the primal, hypnotic rhythm of her moans. Their bodies had writhed at intervals until 3 a.m., after which he slept like a log, wrapped in her warmth. But his alarm, ever faithful, had to ring at 6 a.m.

A soft notification beep pulled his attention back to the phone. Still drowsy, he tapped the screen and swiped down the notification panel of the Samsung S25i, the supposed iPhone killer with its razor-sharp display and signature deep blue wallpaper he loved so much.

His finger froze mid-swipe, one headline jolting him fully awake. He tapped the X app icon and bolted upright, his spine straightening as if pulled by a string, his eyes widening in disbelief.

"Babe, what is it?" Dera's voice sliced through the silence. Her eyes now wide open, alert, her feigned sleep having vanished like an exposed lie.

Kene did not answer. Instead, he turned so she could see his phone screen. He was scrolling, pausing to read, then scrolling again. The news was unmistakable. His friend Kego, the firebrand poet, had lit a match under the whole country. The book he had spent months helping promote, *Echoes of the Broken Republic*, had been banned. Just yesterday, he'd helped place dozens of orders, confident a bestseller was born. Published in the U.S. by a heavyweight publishing house, interest in the book had exploded overnight.

But now, horrible headlines were splattered across his feed like blood on a wall:

Federal Government Bans Controversial Poetry Collection by Nigerian Author.

DSS Warns: The Possession or Promotion of a Banned Book is a National Offence.

Customs Ordered to Seize All Copies of Echoes of the Broken Republic at Ports and Borders.

Citizens Cautioned Against Sharing or Smuggling Copies of 'Echoes of the Broken Republic' into the Country.

Prominent Activists Decry Ban—Say Free Speech is Under Attack

Kene's thumb hovered as more posts loaded. International literary communities were chiming in; posts from ANA, American literary organisations, Amnesty International littered his timeline. Even Kego's publishers and other major publishing houses had weighed in. The poet's fire had reached too far, too fast.

The president's order had gone into effect just the evening before and already, the digital sphere was saturated with outrage and fear. Local bookstores were warned. Any post referencing the book was to be deleted. Any citizen caught with a copy of the book would be arrested.

A cold weight settled in Kene's stomach. He knew a few poems in the collection were damning and borderline inciting, but he never expected a backlash this immediate, and of this magnitude from the government. This crackdown was total and had gone too far. It was also unlawful. Even though the poems in the collection had strong words against the regime, they had not broken any law.

He was sure Kego wasn't even online this early to see any of it. Kego was not a social media person and often missed trending events in the country. Kene wondered if the publishers had texted him about it the night before. He would have called him right away to confirm, but it was too early to do so. He made a mental note to call him at a decent hour. For now, he watched the storm rise across social media, its wind threatening to crack the walls of a teetering democracy.

"This country sef," Dera sighed. "Always overdoing things."

By 8 a.m., they had spoken on the phone.

"This is so annoying," Kene blurted, voice taut with disbelief.

Just as he'd suspected, Kego hadn't touched his phone or seen a thing until he called him. He sounded half-amused when Kene told him about the ban.

"You know this was expected," Kego said calmly, almost too calmly. "So, I'm not surprised."

"I know, I know," Kene replied. "But it came so fast. I doubt up to a thousand people in the entire country have got their hands on a copy yet."

"It doesn't matter," Kego said. "Who cares if they don't allow it here? That's why I went with a U.S. publisher in the first place."

He forced a dry chuckle, the kind that sounded more like defiance than mirth. Kene shrugged, even though his friend wasn't there to see it.

"Well, smart move. Thank God for social media. At least people abroad will still talk about the book."

"Are you free this evening?" Kego asked, pivoting with seamless ease.

“Yes, sure. Why?”

“Come pick me up at 5 p.m. today.”

“Where are we going, bro?”

“When you come, buddy. When you come.”

Kego’s smile was almost audible, a soft grin wrapped in mischief. He rarely took such news too seriously, especially if they were things he could not control. His mind lived in three worlds: the realm of books, his large farm, and his work as a real estate developer.

Even romance was not on his radar. He had no girlfriend or a single emotional entanglement. His world, outside work and literature, revolved around his only sister—a student at UNN, the only one who could melt the steel in his voice—and his mom in the village.

“No wahala,” Kene said with a chuckle. “See you then. I have to run.”

“No p. Thanks, man.”

Kene went about his day, his routine tinged with anticipation. Boys’ time with Kego was always fun. He lived in the heart of Abakaliki, within the hills, and his office sat just a ten minutes drive from his home. What he never quite understood, however, was why Kego had bought a house at the very edge of Abakaliki, deep in a new government layout, hemmed in by stretches of fallow farmlands on the other side of town.

The surrounding plots were owned by local farmers who often allowed their farms to lie fallow for two or three years, leaving the fields overrun with wild grasses and thick, tangled undergrowth. It was a place where time slowed, and silence had weight—the perfect retreat for writers like him. Kego said it reminded him of nature and agriculture, and every day he would stand on his backyard balcony observing the stretch of land. Alone.

At 4:30 p.m., Kene called his friend to say he was on his way. It was a roughly 25-minute drive through busy city traffic from his office.

Kego had responded promptly. He was expecting a WhatsApp call from his literary agent in the U.S., who had promised exciting news, something about a major breakthrough and the logistics for his upcoming book tour in the U.S.

Parked at Kego's gate five minutes early, Kene was getting agitated. He was blaring his horn, which Kego would normally recognise instantly and open the gate from a panel inside the house. Instead, there was no response. He stepped out, his irritation mixing with concern, and made his way to the gate to ring the bell, but was stopped in his tracks.

The pedestrian gate was ajar, wide enough for a hand to slip through. Wide enough to betray a breach.

That was not like Kego. He was borderline paranoid about security in this lonely stretch of town, where the air always felt too still and the vicinity unwatched. Most of the properties here were either skeletons under construction or fenced-off plots awaiting development. Only a few owners were already living in the area.

Kene's brows furrowed. He stepped forward cautiously. Something felt profoundly off. And whatever it was, he was convinced it was waiting just beyond that open gate.

He slipped through the gate into the compound. Kego's car was parked in the garage—not that he drove it much anyway. Kene was usually the one chauffeuring them both around in his own car. He thought maybe Kego had stepped out somewhere nearby, but then he saw the front door also ajar, as if it had been pushed open.

A jolt of dread flashed through him. His mind raced back to the ban on Kego's book he'd seen earlier that morning. A knot of pure dread

tightened in his gut as he approached the entrance with measured caution. Standing in the doorway, he spotted shards of glass scattered near the entrance to the lounge.

He froze, thumb hovering over his phone. He was contemplating calling Kego when he heard thuds of footsteps pounding the earth, from the back of the house.

“Kego?” he called, barely a whisper, as if the name itself were a secret password meant only for Kego’s ears. No answer came.

He darted through the kitchen and crossed to the rear veranda. Empty. No movement. Just silence. He hastily scanned the area further, but saw nothing. He called out again. Still no answer. His gut clenched tighter.

He did not notice the lone slipper by the fence or the sagging portion of the perimeter security wire overhead, but he could feel the oddness of the situation in his bones.

Back inside, the disorder began to register fully. A tipped-over chair. A couch upturned with its backrest on the floor. A shattered vase. Upstairs, he dashed through the bedrooms. They were ransacked and all the furniture was out of place.

“Where is Kego? And what the hell happened here?” he muttered.

He dialled Kego’s personal line again. The low ringtone echoed from one of the bedrooms. He rushed in the direction of the sound, and found the phone tangled in a bedsheet on the bed in the master bedroom, forgotten. The room was in disarray. Kego must have left in a hurry. While it rang, he missed the muffled crack of the gunshot in the bush behind. The sudden scampering of creatures seemed normal for the locality.

He dialled Kego’s business line. It was switched off.

Kene picked up the abandoned phone and drew the pattern lock. A single, opened message glared back at him, received only fifteen

minutes ago. One glance through, his blood ran cold as he registered the words.

He did not hesitate. He dialled the sender—saved in the phone as ‘My DSS friend’—remembering how Kego always boasted about having a close childhood friend in the State Security Service.

The call was rejected, with a “Number busy” network message both times he tried. He knew better than to call again.

He slid Kego’s phone into his pocket, panic and resolve warring inside him. This was no accident. If the government was going after Kego for a few poems, the world needed to know. Now. Consequences be damned. Of course, he knew they would come after him, too.

He grabbed his own phone, and began taking photos of the place. Every shattered piece of glass, every piece of overturned furniture, everything awkwardly placed. The world would see it all. Someone would have to answer for this. But he knew this would not be a walk in the park.

While photographing everything that looked disturbed or out of place, his lens caught the single slip-on abandoned at the backyard fence. He crouched, took several shots, then picked it up for closer inspection. The sole still felt warm. As he lifted his eyes, he noticed fresh scratch marks running up the wall. Looking up, he saw the perimeter security wire sagging loosely—something only he and Kego both knew was out of commission.

A cold, creeping dread clawed its way through his chest. *Are you safe, Kego?* The thought surged like lightning through his mind. *Are you even alive?*

His mind raced. Was this the trail of abductors—or worse, assassins? The broken door, the scattered furniture, the silence. Had they taken him? Had they killed him? A tremor of his own mortality ran through

him. Standing alone in that compound suddenly felt like standing in a snare. He could be one step from being hunted himself.

What if they had dumped Kego's body in the bush? What if the marks on the fence were not from an intruder, but from Kego escaping? If so, who ransacked the house? Were they chasing him right now? Or were they still nearby, searching for him? He needed answers. Desperately. But none came.

Then he remembered: Kego had set up a CCTV system around the compound. The memory struck like fire in the darkness and hope stirred. Perhaps there was footage of whatever had transpired in the compound before he arrived. Perhaps the truth was recorded.

Kene's heart sank just as fast. He didn't know the first thing about operating CCTV systems. He was barely a lawyer turned marketing expert. He would need help with that, he had to let the police handle it.

Now, he had to act fast and alert the world before the shadows swallowed Kego for good. He stepped back into the house and sank into one of the imported cushions in the main lounge which remained in place, the upholstery cool beneath his clammy palms. Pulling out his phone, he opened his X app and selected four images: close-ups of the shattered glass, the ajar door, the single slip-on, the scratches on the wall and the sagging security wires.

Then he wrote: *Did the President order his minions to kill a poet? Just came to my friend's house on a planned visit and he's nowhere to be found. Instead, here's what I found.*

He threaded the post with more images, each scene like a crime frozen mid-breath. At the end of the thread, he attached a picture of the ominous message on Kego's phone. Then poised to hit 'Post.'

He stopped. This would make him a target if he went ahead with it. Neither he nor his friend would be able to tell the truth if they were both dead. There must be other ways to get this out. He thought of using an anonymous account to post it. That, too, had its own

challenge—this may never get picked up. It was either his account with millions of followers or the truth never goes out. He weighed the repercussions for each option. Getting the truth out while it is still fresh is crucial if his friend's life were to be saved.

He hit post, ready to face the consequences.

He stood. He had to report this to the police at once. The nearest police station was only ten minutes away without traffic. He did not waste another second. As he drove towards the heart of the city, a storm was already brewing online, in response to his post.

His thread was an immediate digital explosion. Hysteria, outrage, and suspicion followed. Then grief. The hashtags raged across platforms.

#ThreatToFreeSpeech

#ProvideThePoet

#WhereIsKego

Within minutes, international media picked it up. Bold headlines took to the skies:

Poet Feared Dead.

Presidency Allegedly Orders Hit on Bestselling Author.

Kego Reported Missing After Book Ban.

World leaders reacted. Ten minutes after Kene's post, the official account of the President of the United States posted on Truth Social:

"THIS HAS GONE TOO FAR! IF TRUE! Secretary of State, look into this. Do we have our citizens in Nigeria?!"

The Nigerian Presidency issued a hasty denial, dismissing the accusations as “baseless propaganda.” But no one was buying it. The storm was already out of the bottle. PROVIDE THE POET became a global demand, rising to the number one trending topic across every social media platform.

Meanwhile, Kene pulled into the police station. Inside, officers were buzzing. Whispers of Kego’s name filled the halls. News travelled faster than orders, apparently.

When Kene described what he had seen, the Divisional Police Officer wasted no time. “Take his statement!” he barked. “And get to that house immediately!”

The fear of public backlash was a fire at their heels. The state governor was a man of the people and would not want a demonstration in his streets. Twenty minutes later, the Anti-Robbery Squad was dispatched; ten armed officers boarded two police trucks and engines roared. Kene led the convoy, urgency pumping through his veins.

The hunt for answers had begun.

The police arrived Kego’s house eight minutes after leaving the station. But something else was wrong.

The small gate, which Kene had left ajar in his rush, was now neatly shut, bolted from within. For a moment, they all stood there looking disgruntled. Then one of the officers helped Kene climb over the gate into the compound. His hands trembled as he unlatched the bolt. The officers said nothing, their eyes flickering with unease as they filed in.

The front door, too, was in perfect order—closed, aligned, untouched. Kene had a key. He unlocked it and stepped aside to let the officers in first, his breath shallow, the knot in his stomach tightening.

Inside, there was...nothing. No disarray. No overturned furniture. No shattered glass. The house was pristine, eerily sterile as if it had

exhaled and erased every trace of what had happened barely an hour ago.

Even the backyard was clean: the scratch marks on the wall were gone, the sagging security wire had been tightened, perfectly realigned, and the slip-on had vanished. Kene blinked fast, stunned. Had he imagined it all?

The officers exchanged confused glances, a few of them looking at him now with quiet doubt. No one said it aloud, but it hung in the air like a blade hanging by a thread over someone's eyes. Had he used AI to create the images he posted minutes earlier? He tried to explain to them that this was different from what he saw and captured earlier, but the words caught in his throat. What would he even say that they'd believe? They could see nothing to prove his claim. Some of the policemen tried to question him again about the incident, but his responses were unhelpful to them.

The only evidence that remained was the phone in his pocket, still unlocked, and displaying Kego's last received message—but they had reviewed it at the station. That too could have been staged.

At 6:03 p.m., the police left the place, their faces expressionless. If the report remained unsubstantiated by morning, they warned, he would be arrested and charged for raising a false alarm.

Kene stayed behind, too embarrassed and disillusioned to drive.

He walked to the centre of the lounge and sank into the same cushion he'd sat on earlier. The silence felt deeper now, suffocating. His head swirled with questions that could not be answered. He could not fathom what exactly had just happened.

He dialled Kego's business line again. Still off. He called the personal line in the phone he held in his hand.

It rang. Once. Twice. Then stopped. He was not hallucinating; he was sure of what he had seen earlier. A faint shadow moved at the far end of the dining room, just at the edge of his vision. He spun around, heart thundering.

There was nothing there. Only the echo of a ringtone still whispering in the air. He could feel the conspiracy and the cover-up closing in all around him.

Suddenly, it struck him. “The CCTV cameras!” he exclaimed, a surge of hope lighting his face. He had forgotten to tell the police about them. He sprang to his feet and rushed outside, circling the building. The cameras were still intact, their lenses fixed in silent vigil over the compound.

How could he have forgotten? He gritted his teeth, disappointed with himself. How had he not remembered the one thing that would have proven him right? But wait. Whoever had cleaned the house could have got to the feed and scrubbed the footage.

Heart pounding, he hurried back inside, scanning the rooms for the DVR. He was so disoriented he forgot the first place to look. He tore through shelves, checked under tables—nothing. Then his eyes landed on the desk as he entered Kego’s room, the spot where the CCTV’s DVR should have been. He remembered clearly, cursing himself under his breath.

It was bare.

Of course. It had been taken. Whoever did this was thorough. The police would not have helped the situation, not with evidence already scrubbed from the location. He took a picture of the stranded black cables from the CCTV cameras. This, at least, would prove to the police he wasn’t bluffing and save him from some criminal charges.

The cover-up was absolute. And the people behind it were not finished yet. If they had been back, they could still be close. He

wondered if they were watching him at that moment. He knew his life, too, could be in danger.

Just then, he saw the gun appear at the door. His heart seized.

Three

WHILE KENE WAS taking pictures earlier to post on social media, Kego burst out from the underbrush onto the shoulder of the busy dual carriageway. Horns blared as vehicles approached. Two overcrowded passenger buses hurtled by, one after the other, followed by a sleek car, then another. And another. He staggered into the open, waving a weak bloodied hand, his mouth agape in a silent plea, but the world kept moving on.

His bare feet were shredded by the thorny bush path he'd trampled on as he fled. Thin lines of blood traced paths down his legs where thorns had ripped at his flesh. He could feel the strength draining from him with every drop he lost. Dizziness clouded his vision. He wobbled, then collapsed by the roadside, breath shallow, eyes fluttering shut. He could still feel his pursuers gaining on him. They were now less than three minutes behind.

Deep in the foliage, the two men tore through the bush, their clothes snagging on stubborn branches. Dry leaves slapped their faces, and thorns dug into their skin as they waded through the thickets. Their years of training and practice had not prepared them for this kind of chase.

"Put the gun away, Antler!" Brahim barked. The big man obeyed, quietly tucking the weapon into his waistband. "We need to move faster. We can't let that boy reach that road."

“You know where this path leads?” Antler asked, panting. “What road is this we’re approaching?”

The leader did not answer. He was half-jogging, driven by instinct and a cold sense of duty.

“It’s a major highway,” Antler added, undeterred, answering his own question, keeping pace just behind Brahim.

“Exactly!” The leader snapped. “No one stops for a bleeding man on a major highway. We need to get to him before anyone does.”

Soon the road emerged, wide and teeming with life: delivery trucks, buses, commuters flashing by in blurs of raised pale dust. But of their target, there was no sign.

“I think we’ve lost him,” Antler muttered, hands on his knees, catching his breath after seven brutal minutes of pursuit through the thickets.

“Shit!” the leader hissed. “He couldn’t have got far, he must be hiding in the grass somewhere close.”

They split up, with Antler dodging honking cars to cross the road. Both men combed the roadside vegetation, kicking through patches of elephant grass and checking under the skeletal remains of abandoned trailers along the shoulder of the road. Motorists shouted insults as they sped by, but both men moved as though the highway barely existed, often stepping dangerously close to traffic.

Ninety frantic seconds passed. No sign of Kego.

Then the leader’s phone rang. He answered quickly. The voice on the other end was clipped and furious. It was their state supervisor, Tete. Images from inside Kego’s house had just surfaced online, uploaded by someone named Kene, he said—damning, high-resolution photos. What a mess they had made!

“This was supposed to be a clean job,” Brahim said through clenched teeth. “I think he saw us on his CCTV and fled.”

“Or he was tipped off,” came the cold, certain reply. “From inside. We may have a mole.”

Antler looked up sharply. “A mole?” he muttered. The leader waved him into silence. They’d never had to worry about a mole in their entire time working the job.

“Headquarters?” The leader asked quietly.

“The screenshot the Kene person posted shows a message warning the target. That message came from within the Service, most likely from headquarters.”

There was a tense, brief pause.

“What are your orders?” the leader asked.

“Return to the house,” Tete said. “Wipe every trace and bring back any CCTV footage from the house. And if that Kene is still there, get the phone from him. Do not create more problems. I don’t want this social media nonsense escalating. The State Director is already asking questions, and we don’t need that. Those are the instructions from above.”

“Understood, sir.”

“No delays,” the voice warned. “Be out before the local police get there. They may already be on their way.”

The line went dead.

Without a word, the two men turned back, forcing their way through the thickets once more. This time, their steps were quicker, more urgent. They had a mess to clean, otherwise, their jobs could be in jeopardy.

Five minutes later, as they vaulted back over the perimeter wall, the squeal of tyres receding from the front gate cut through the air.

“That must be the Kene guy,” Antler grunted.

The leader’s voice was cold. “Let’s clean up fast. He’s probably headed for the police station.”

With that, they got to work. This was their specialty: erasing the agency’s dirty mistakes. It didn’t matter if the mess came from them or not.

Forty minutes later, just as Antler was tightening the last of the perimeter security wires, the distant wail of sirens pierced the silence.

“The police,” Brahim muttered, slipping through the kitchen door to the veranda. “We need to move. Now!”

Without another word, both men scaled the fence for the third time that evening, carefully avoiding the razor-thin lines of the security wires.

“What if we wait?” Antler asked, crouching low in the grass. “That Kene guy may be back with them.”

“Smart point, but risky,” The leader replied, scanning the upper floor windows. “They could spot us from up there.”

Antler followed his gaze briefly, then whispered, “Follow me.”

They crept along the outside of the perimeter wall to the far end of the fence where a tangle of small trees formed a natural blind spot. They found a sturdy branch strong enough to climb and perched on it, hidden behind thick foliage. From there, they had a clear view of the front gate and the back of the house.

They waited patiently as the sirens reached the gate and stopped. Minutes later, a young man in plain clothes jumped over the gate and opened the pedestrian gate to let the others in. Several uniformed police officers in full gear filed into the compound.

“That’s definitely him,” Antler whispered, identifying Kene.

The leader checked his phone. A new message from the supervisor contained a profile picture saved from Kene’s X account. He glanced from the screen to the young man. Same person.

“This won’t take long,” he said.

They dropped from the trees and melted back into the shrubs, ears tuned to every footfall from the compound. Voices echoed as officers swept the property for evidence of the break-in reported. They could hear the officers questioning the young man. The officers were plainly confused and disappointed. What was before them was not the scene they were expecting.

Not long after, they heard the gate creak again and climbed back onto the tree branch. The officers were filing out of the compound, one after the other, their faces unreadable. They watched the convoy depart, leaving Kene behind with his car.

They remained low and waited in silence for any sign of stragglers. All they could hear was the sound of birds returning to their perches and the receding wail of the sirens.

The house was quiet for a while. Then they heard a phone ring twice before cutting off. Afterwards, dead silence.

A moment later, Kene appeared, hurrying toward the back of the house, his eyes scanning the CCTV cameras mounted on the walls, his face a mask of frustration and urgency. The two men ducked low as he turned the corner. They resurfaced as he passed and watched silently as he examined each camera before disappearing toward the front entrance again.

“This is our chance,” Brahim whispered. “Let’s end this.”

They slipped back into the compound like phantoms, tiptoed through the rear veranda and carefully pushed the kitchen door open. Inside, footsteps were pounding up the stairs.

The kitchen door closed behind them with a soft click.

They moved through the dining area to the main lounge. The big man waited in the lounge while the leader crept toward the staircase, suppressed pistol drawn. He ascended carefully, one foot placed deliberately after the other, eyes up and fingers itchy on the trigger. The order was to retrieve the phones from the young man. He knew that would not happen without a physical threat, so he needed to be ready for anything.

Kene stood in Kego's room, jaw tight, like he had a bitter taste in his mouth. The scene was wiped clean and the DVR was gone. His best chances at explaining this madness had been erased. He thought about the pictures he'd taken—those, at least, were certainly real. But who would believe him with only those?

Then, a primal sensation, the feeling of being watched, prickled his skin. He was not alone in the house.

He didn't turn. His eyes flicked to a small hand mirror resting at the base of a wall-mounted shelf beside Kego's writing table. In its reflection was the open doorway, and in the doorway, a shadow crept forward with a raised gun.

One of the bastards who took Kego. His heart hammered, but his mind was faster than his fear. He noticed the half-full can of rubbing alcohol on the shelf. In one fluid motion, he grabbed it, eyes still locked on the mirror.

As the intruder took aim—on noticing his movement—Kene hurled the can at him before he could utter a word.

His gun went off.

The bullet struck the can mid-air with a dull metallic whump, and it exploded. A cloud of vaporised alcohol filled the air and hit Brahim full in the face.

He screamed, staggering back, clawing at his burning eyes. His weapon flew from his hand simultaneously, a second shot going wild into the ceiling in the process.

Kene hit the floor, a searing white-hot pain exploding in his left shoulder. The first bullet had found flesh. He gasped as blood bloomed through the fabric of his shirt. He was dazed, but blinking rapidly to stay conscious. He spotted the fallen pistol just inches from his hand and reached for it, grabbed it, fingers trembling.

Blinded, the leader turned and ran. He collided with Antler who was already bounding up the stairs.

“I can’t see! Help me!”

Antler raised his pistol towards the doorway, expecting the pursuer to appear. “What happened?” He yelled, but got no response.

Sporadic shots came next. Kene, lying on his side, squeezed the trigger again and again. Bullets tore through the wall, sending splinters of cement plaster scattering in the air outside the room. The assassins bolted, the blinded leader stumbling behind the big one.

“Move! Now!”

They fled through the front door and out through the gate.

It was around 6:15 p.m. and Kego’s neighbours, drawn by the commotion, were assembling outside his compound. They had seen the police come and leave earlier. The two men brushed past them and dissolved into the evening.

Back in Kego’s room, Kene writhed in agony, blood pooling on the floor beneath him. He switched the gun to his left hand, reached into his pocket with trembling fingers, and pulled out his phone.

He dialed Dera's number. She was a nurse. She'd been to Kego's place a few times with him, so she'd remember the place. She'd come and help him. She had to.

"I've been shot," he said when she picked up. He was barely audible. "At Kego's. Come fast...call the police...don't let me die."

The line went dead and the phone slipped from his weak grip. Ten seconds later, it rang out, its sharp ringtone echoing in the blood-soaked room, momentarily pulling him from the edge of consciousness. His vision was blurry and his breath was growing shallow. He had no strength to reach for the phone. He left it to ring out.

Just come fast, he prayed, as his consciousness began to slip away again, fast.

Miles away, Kego sat propped on a recliner in the private wing of a hospital in the city. A drip line hung on a stand beside him and he watched the slow beads of fluid drop and trail down into his left arm. His feet were bandaged, and the air smelled of antiseptic.

The hospital's hallway outside his room was still, punctuated only by the soft footsteps of nurses as they moved from room to room, their murmured exchanges subdued beneath the mellow glow of the ceiling lights. It was early evening, and the hospital, known for its discreet service and low patient load, was quiet.

He had just turned on his work phone. The main one, his personal line, was nowhere to be found. He thought he may have lost it while he fled—lost somewhere in the undergrowth, most likely. He couldn't tell for sure.

His thoughts were heavy. Kene would have gone looking for him by now. He knew his friend would be in panic, not finding him at home. He had no idea that the news of his disappearance had exploded across

the Internet. The only television set near him, perched high in the corner of the lounge just outside his room, was tuned to a Nollywood melodrama.

Restlessly, he dialed Kene's number. It rang, but no one picked. He tried again. No answer.

"What's going on, Kene?" he muttered, a deep dread settling in.

He hoped those men had not gone back to the house. If they had, he knew Kene's life would be in danger.

His mind went to the moment he regained consciousness earlier. He'd awoken on an emergency bed in a room adjacent to the waiting lounge. His memories were fragmented; he recalled crawling out from the undergrowth, weak, bleeding, then a moment of blurry movement, a car, headlights, before darkness swept him under again.

He had asked a nurse how he got there, and she told him the hospital's medical director had brought him in about an hour before.

Dr. Dika was heading back to the hospital to attend to an emergency call when he spotted what looked like a body by the roadside. The body was half-concealed behind a cluster of low grasses.

At first, he thought it was another one of those staged beggars—people who feigned injuries to evoke pity from passers-by—but as he drew closer, he noticed an unmistakable trail of blood stretching from the bush to the man's legs. He saw the hand move faintly, waving, an effort too faint to be a trick.

Caution warred with instinct within him. He did not know if it was an ambush, or a high-risk case that could complicate his evening, but the Hippocratic Oath was a current that stirred stronger than fear. In that split second, he made his choice. He pulled up, stepped out, and opened the back door of his car and approached the man.

The man was breathing, but did not respond to voice or touch.

Dr. Dika's assessment was swift: there were deep lacerations on his legs and feet, but the wounds were not fatal. He had also lost a dangerous amount of blood, which explained the unconsciousness.

Kego was slim and muscular, clearly someone who took fitness seriously. Lifting him alone took effort. The doctor managed to put him into the back of the car along with his suitcase, and sped off. The road was lonely, the surrounding bush oppressive in the disappearing light. He was sure he heard movements in the thicket behind them as he pulled away.

Nearing a bend down the road, he glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw two figures step out of the bush close to where he had picked up the man. He pressed the accelerator harder.

Minutes later, he arrived at the hospital.

"Emergency intake now!" He ordered and nurses wheeled the man into the triage room. They checked his vitals, and a blood transfusion was started. He needed to be stabilised quickly. Outside the blood loss, he was safe.

Dr. Dika rushed off to scrub in for a surgery on another patient. When he came out forty minutes later, he was informed that the man he brought in had regained consciousness.

He found Kego in a recovery room, alert but weak. The wounds on his legs and foot had been cleaned and dressed, and his vitals were stable. The doctor assured the young man he would recover fully that evening. Soon after, he was moved to a private room to be monitored. His belongings were returned to him, including the one working phone he had with him.

Now, with dread curling in his gut, Kego waited for Kene to call him back. Nothing.

As he sat waiting for his drip to finish, the whirlwind of recent events began to swirl vividly in his mind. Had he been too stubborn by ignoring Kene's warning not to publish the book? His friend had urged him not to publish certain poems—not until he'd at least "japaad" from the country. Was all this distress worth it? Worse, he had no way of knowing if Kene was safe. Kene might not have been so lucky, especially if those guys had returned to the house and met him there.

A surge of regret, worry, and defiance, rose in his chest, but in that moment of reckoning, he made a quiet vow that he would not back down.

He opened WhatsApp. Notifications flooded the screen. He didn't know where to begin. There were missed calls, countless voice notes, and a long thread of texts from clients, family, and friends. Yeks had called several times. He needed to let him know he was alive.

Mate, where have you been? Yeks replied to his message instantly, as though he'd been hovering over the chat in anticipation. *Can I call you?*

I'm good, Kego typed. In a hospital...not sure where. What's happening? No calls please, I'm too tired.

Yeks responded: *Okay. There's a post by your friend, Kene that's trending online.*

"What post?" Kego replied. *Is he okay? I've tried reaching him, but he's not picking up. What's going on?*

Yeks explained: *He shared a message you received about a threat on your life. And posted pictures of your house. It was completely trashed. Said unknown men broke in.*

Yeks forwarded screenshots from X. Kego was stunned as he stared at the images. He didn't know how to respond. A deep ache filled his chest and his throat tightened. He moaned, low and inward, fearing the worst.

“Please be safe, Kene.” He muttered, somewhat glad his friend could get the word out.

Should we announce that you’re alive and safe? Yeks asked after a pause. *The publishers are worried.*

No, tell them I’m alive, Kego replied. *But let’s keep that quiet for now, until I understand what I’m dealing with.*

Yeks responded: *Alright. By the way, the ban on your book and Kene’s post have made your book more viral. We’ve even received over eight million orders on Amazon since we last spoke.*

Kego sighed. The number barely registered. Right now, his survival mattered more than success.

I’ll let you rest, Yeks typed. *Just glad you’re okay, man.*

Thanks, Kego replied.

He lowered the phone—and froze, sudden wave of panic seizing him.

His Location Services was on. He killed it instantly and powered off the phone.

What was he thinking? How could he have been so careless? Phones were traceable. They might already know exactly where he was if they were still looking for him.

Four

6:25 P.M. SAME day.

In a discreet DSS safe house on the outskirts of Abakaliki, three men sat in uneasy silence. The room smelled of leather, metal polish, and a whiff of cigarette smoke. It was dimly lit and sparsely furnished: a trio of imported leather cushions sat low around three sides of a rectangular table, and a shelf lined the lower part of the wall on the fourth side of the table, half-empty, housing books and ornamental curios—a wooden lion, a crystal globe, and a miniature hourglass. Above the shelf, framed paintings hung at both ends of a 75-inch flat screen TV, their once-bold colours dimmed by time. The TV dominated the wall, casting a muted glow as it displayed a news segment on the missing poet. The volume was so low, you could hear a person's breath from across the room.

The air itself felt brittle. Brahim sat nursing a cold compress against his swollen eyes. Beside him on the lone sofa sat the supervisor, Tete, brows knotted in thought, anxiety etching fine lines into his otherwise composed expression. He'd never felt this kind of weight in all his years with the agency. He was getting visibly tense, like a man lost at sea, distant, buried in deep thought. Behind them, Antler stood unmoving but restless, fingers twitching.

A sharp ringtone shattered the quiet. Tete almost jumped before snatching the phone as it buzzed on the table. He answered it quickly.

It was the DSS Director-General from Abuja. His voice came in hot, cutting across the room with military force. No exchange of pleasantries was necessary.

“Why is that young man still alive?” He bellowed, referencing a message Tete had sent him a few minutes earlier.

A heavy silence descended. No one dared respond when Mr. Bello spoke in that tone. Fear always followed it like a shadow.

“I don’t even want to talk about the mess you’ve sprayed all over social media,” he growled. “Why can’t you handle a simple job without setting the entire country on fire? You should know Oga is not pleased.”

Brahim leaned forward, wincing. “We suspect he was tipped off, sir.”

Tete shot him a venomous glare, palm raised. *Don’t speak again.*

“Yes, I saw the message,” The DG’s voice cracked with rage. “But tipped off by who? Only the three of you knew the operational details about this mission. So who the hell compromised it?”

More silence. The air was no longer just tense; it had become toxic.

The injustice of it burned in Antler’s throat. *How could he think we’d sabotage our own operation?* He muttered under his breath, his lips moving inaudibly. Tete noticed but said nothing.

“Tete,” the DG said, his voice now calmer but infinitely more lethal. “Your team is compromised. This operation is now officially a disaster.”

Tete leaned over the table to speak, his tone clipped. “Respectfully sir, we believe the leak came from outside our unit.”

“From headquarters,” Antler added, the words escaping before he could stop them. Tete shot him a glare that could have scalded skin.

A long pause followed, punctuated only by the flickering of the television. Brahim kept rubbing his eyes, pain flaring up in them like an open flame. He was struggling to keep them open.

“Current status of the scene?” the DG barked. “Has all evidence been cleared?”

“No, sir,” Tete answered.

“Why not?”

“There’s...a complication.”

“What complication?”

“We may have left a body behind.”

“Whose body?”

“The social media guy, Kene.”

The DG exploded. “What the fuck?! This is a gift to these social media journalists and revolutionaries. You have given them licence to keep complaining and raining insults on this government. Clean it up before it gets out!”

“We’ll handle it, sir,” Tete responded.

Panic thickened in the room. Brahim squirmed in his seat. Antler clenched his fists behind him, jaw tight.

“This is a scandal in the making! We don’t want anymore of this! Pray to God there’s no other evidence left there pointing to us!”

“Sir, we retrieved the DVR,” Tete said quickly. “We believe nothing ties us directly to the scene.”

“We were seen by neighbours at the gate when we left—” Antler began.

“Is that going to be a problem?” The DG snapped.

“I don’t think so,” Tete said, his voice a mask of calm.

“How do you know for sure? The whole country’s probably watching that boy’s house now! Why were there people at the gate?”

“No one was filming, sir,” Brahim responded quietly.

There was a pause, then a rustling sound from the other end. The DG was speaking to someone else.

Brahim’s mind raced. *Is he briefing Oga? Are they going to replace us?* In the thirty seconds of silence that followed, a thousand worries marched through his thoughts: punishment, disgrace, reassignment or possibly worse. *Termination.*

The DG returned, his voice now controlled, almost serene. “There’s a new development.”

Everyone straightened.

“We know where the poet is.”

The tension in the room shifted, giving way to a burst of anticipation—but Antler’s mind snagged on the logic. *Wait...he said we were the only ones who knew about the operation. Who gave him this intel? Oga himself?*

“What are your orders, sir?” Tete asked, his brows twitching restlessly.

“Tete, you’re handling this personally. Not your boys. You.” The contempt was obvious. The others shifted. Brahim remained unreadable, while Antler made a low grumble, defiant but inaudible.

“Yes, sir,” Tete said.

“I’m sending you the location now. Be creative. I want this finished before dawn.”

There was another heavy pause. No one moved. The sheer weight of the day’s failure pressed down on them. Now, more than ever.

“Is that understood?!” roared the chief, disgusted by their silence.

“Yes, sir!” They chorused.

Outside, the night deepened.

Streetlights flickered on across the city like tired eyes waking to watch a storm unfold. Abakaliki moved on, unaware that within these four walls, three men were drawing up the next lines in a State-backed hunt for one man’s life.

A reckoning stirred in the dark—a nationwide backlash teetering on the edge, threatening to unmask and unseat a ruthless civilian regime dressed in the sullied linens of democracy.

What would happen next, no one could say. But first, a job needed to be done that night.

As DG Bello ended the call, he stood for a moment in his spacious office, a thousand thoughts racing through his mind. The weight of being Oga’s enforcer had grown heavier with each passing year—a burden he could no longer simply ignore. Using state personnel and machinery to eliminate or imprison perceived political rivals of the presidency was a life they were supposedly meant to have left behind. Six years ago, when they came to power, he’d believed power would bring a clean break from gangsterism. A new chapter for them, their old lives washed clean. That had not been the case.

Nothing much had changed from what he used to be, except now, he let his boys do most of the dirty work. He used to be the hitman, and not just any hitman, but the best: the most lethal, the most elusive. His boss’ handyman.

Targeting politicians or heavyweight opponents in the underworld had never fazed him. That was how they controlled policy making in the country. That was business, too. But a poet? This target felt... insignificant. He was an irritant at best, certainly not a threat. And for this, a national firestorm? Not that he cared about the man. He only

hoped it would be worth it. He never expected this amount of public outcry for a young man no one knew until he published a book.

The political implications of the poet's death were enormous, but so were the implications of letting veiled threats pass unchallenged under the guise of literature—his boss's position when he asked. He shook his head—a gesture meant to dislodge the doubt—but it remained, a bitter pill. Still, he knew the truth of his work: even if the State never confessed, the people always knew. The stench of conspiracy would cling to the administration forever. His Oga did not give a damn, though. Neither did he. Not anymore.

“Sir?” A voice interrupted from behind, dragging him from his thoughts.

“What?” He snapped.

“The meeting with the President is in five minutes,” his aide said cautiously, peeking from the door.

Mr. Bello gave a clipped nod.

The President had summoned an emergency security meeting. Heads of all national security forces were expected to attend. World leaders had been calling non-stop, lecturing him about the sanctity of free speech—some diplomatic, others simply blunt. Banning a book was wrong, but arguably defensible. Going after a writer's life for something that could pass as fiction? Unacceptable. Barbaric. Unbecoming of any government claiming to be democratic.

Not that the president cared for their opinions, but optics mattered. He had to appear innocent, bothered, and resolute. He'd assured them that the security services were on top of the situation, and that the poet would be safe. With that, the foreign aid would keep pouring in, regardless of what was happening in the country.

The nation was boiling. The news of Kego's disappearance had mutated into countless rumours spinning through the cyberspace. Hashtags trended across social platforms. The populace raged.

#ProtectThePoet #NoMoreSilence

#DemocracyIsDead #WeAreWatching

The Protect the Poet movement was exploding into a national campaign. People felt they had suffered enough under the current administration since it came into power: fuel hikes, currency crashes, unending insecurity, police brutality, inflation, and many others. And now, a banned book in a so-called democracy? A missing poet? It had gone too far.

From Lagos to Bauchi, Kano to Calabar, fury blossomed like dry grass under flame. Night markets buzzed with fear and gossip. Radio shows and local podcasts flared with angry callers. Students planned rallies for the following day. Traders whispered about impending shutdown. Civil society organisations published urgent statements calling for calm. Churches called for prayers. Mosques echoed with outrage. The tension in the atmosphere was thick enough to choke on. No one remembered their ethnicity or religious differences.

This was no longer just about a banned book; it was about a nation pushed to its breaking point.

"If they can kill a poet for his words, what will they do to the rest of us?" One user posted on X.

"This is not just about literature. This is tyranny," another user wrote.

"We must protect our artists. They are the soul of the nation. If they silence him, they silence us all."

People were daring now. The fear of death was losing its grip. People had seen the worst. They were fed up. They were ready.

Mr. Bello hurried into the security meeting. The heads of the army, navy, air force, EFCC, police, civil defence, and other key security personnel were already seated. The President joined moments later. The time was 6:35 p.m. The meeting, with a few handpicked media members present, lasted barely ten minutes.

The President spoke with unshaken command.

“The safety of this poet is now your top priority. Even more than your need to protect me. All state apparatus at our disposal should be deployed. Find him, dead or alive—preferably alive. Let’s show the international community we are not what they say we are.”

He paused and observed the room.

“We must demonstrate that this...this nonsense about a presidential hit order is manufactured by enemies of the state.”

He swept his gaze across the room. “Is that understood?”

A chorus of affirmations followed.

When the meeting ended, Mr. Bello exhaled a small breath of relief. As the others filed out, the President gestured to him and the Police Chief.

“Stay.”

They followed him into his inner office where they all dropped the facade as they exchanged curt pleasantries. The room was still.

“What’s the latest?” The president asked, eyes locked on the DG.

“He is still alive, sir,” Mr. Bello replied. “But we have his location. My men are en route.”

“Not the same men responsible for this mess, I hope?” The president barked.

“No, sir. It’s not.” Bello lied smoothly. “I’ve assigned my best men to handle it now.” *If you hate the backlash, cancel the damn hit, he thought*, his face a mask of deference. He revered his boss, but often got irritated by his focus on the wrong details.

The president turned to the police chief. “I want your men in Ebonyi on this too. We must act like we care. Launch a credible public manhunt for his supposed abductors. And have some of our assets in the force ready to deliver the package, should Bello’s team fail again.”

“Yes, sir,” the police chief nodded.

“If Bello’s boys don’t get to him,” the president added, his voice dropping to a cold whisper, “then yours will. You fully understand how he must be found.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Good.”

At the same time the meeting with the security chiefs was concluding, Tete and his men sped through Abakaliki in a black SUV.

Tete drove in silence. Brahim brooded in the back seat, his pride still raw, his eyes swollen and barely opening. He had the seat entirely to himself. Antler, in the passenger’s seat, stared out the window as the city slid past, wishing he were anywhere else—like a club house. The breeze from the slightly opened window kissed his face, carrying with it the pleasant scent of the evening—a blend of roasted and boiled street food, fermented alcohol, dry dust, human sweat, and distant petrol.

The city was beginning to hum with the gentle cadence of a Friday evening. Abakaliki, in that hour, reveled in its beauty. The orange hue of the sunset gilded the rooftops in gold. Pedestrians wandered leisurely. Hawkers called out to car owners in the traffic from beneath

solar-lit shops along the street. Music wafted from roadside joints—Afrobeats, highlife, gospel—a chaotic, peaceful prayer. Here, people could walk the streets deep into the night and remain untouched by fear.

And yet, here they were. Ghosts in the night, about to haunt a quiet town.

The irony was a physical thing—a tightening in Antler’s chest. Since that afternoon, he had been an agent of chaos in a city where the people wore peace like a second skin—a bringer of misfortune. Guilt trickled in, even though he wasn’t native to the state. Maybe it was the smell of the grilled corn, or the sight of the children skipping rope outside a kiosk they’d just passed, or something in the air. Whatever it was, it stirred regret in him. Regret.

He’d always told himself that it was just part of the job. *Man must chop*, he would say. The Oga gives an order, and your soul is not consulted as you obey. Still, something in him recoiled from the thought of what they had done, and what they were about to do. Not that he had grown a conscience: this assignment just felt different. The poet seemed more a victim than a threat. Marked for death not for what he’d done, but for the weight of his written words, for his ideas.

Staring out at a city so stubbornly at peace, Antler felt the hollow weight of his gun and the cheapness of his own justification for the evil they perpetrate for powerful men.

Twelve minutes later, they pulled up across the street from a modest private hospital. The plan was clean: observe, enter, locate, and quietly extract the target at gunpoint. Once outside, drive him to the city’s outskirts, execute him—probably by strangling—and make it look like a hit-and-run. A spotless plan.

They sat behind the SUV’s tinted windows and observed the area. The road was busy, but not congested. The street remained lively with

the shops across and beside the hospital buzzing with evening shoppers. The hospital gate, however, remained largely undisturbed. In the three minutes they were parked, it was not opened even once. It clearly was not a very busy hospital.

“You stay here,” Tete told Brahim. “Be our eyes.”

Antler let out a short, humourless chuckle, with one look at his team leader.

“Something funny?” Brahim snapped.

“Nothing, boss,” Antler replied, with a silly grin. The other two men frowned.

“Stay focused!” Tete warned him, and Antler nodded, sobering. “We go in, we confirm the mark. When we identify him, we quietly walk him out. No noise. No mess.”

“What if he resists?” Antler asked.

“At gunpoint?” Tete scoffed.

“This guy does not seem like someone who fears guns,” Antler countered.

“Then he’s either a fool or something worse. Shut your mouth before you attract attention.”

“Just saying,” Antler shrugged. “Maybe we’ll tell him he’s being arrested. Or we may have a whole scene on our hands.”

“Just leave your piece behind,” Tete ordered curtly, cutting him off. “I’m not risking you making this worse.” Antler reluctantly holstered his pistol in the car’s glove compartment.

Tete adjusted his shirt, pulled his face cap low, and donned a pair of dark sunglasses. He was sure he’d be unrecognisable in the outfit. Antler followed suit, and they slipped out of the vehicle then crossed the road after a few vehicles passed. Tete noticed the familiar face

observing them from a shop up the street, but moved on without breaking stride, a smile escaping his cheeks.

The hospital gate was unlocked—clearly for emergency reasons. Tete pushed the pedestrian gate open and stepped in, Antler trailing. The security man on duty barely noticed them. He looked unarmed, indifferent, his baton abandoned beside his stool. Antler wondered if he even had a small knife on him.

They moved toward the building with calm steps and unflinching eyes. Behind them, a car began honking at the gate—the first since they'd arrived.

It was 6.55 p.m.

Thirty minutes earlier, Kego had switched off his phone. A memory, a ghost from his university days, came to mind. He recalled a chilling story Kene once shared with him.

At the time, Kene was a student at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, living in Awka while his family lived in Enugu. During one Easter break, he had bought a brand-new phone from a dealer at Enugu's Phone Village and returned to school with it. A few days later, he received a strange call from his elder brother, who said he was in Awka and needed directions. Kene obliged out of respect and went to meet him at a nearby junction and was arrested by police CID operatives from Enugu. While being held in a police cell in Enugu, he learned that the phone he'd bought had been among a shipment stolen from a phone importer. As the first of the stolen items to be switched on, the police had tracked the phone to Kene through his contacts, and pinpointed his location. They'd arrested his brother first and used him to lure Kene into their trap.

That memory looped through Kego's mind like a curse. The phone he'd just switched on was his business line, publicly linked to him. A

simple online search could connect the dots. He cursed his oversight. If they'd already used that signal to trace him, it might already be too late—whether the phone was on or off now might not even matter.

Fear seized him. Staying the night in the hospital, once the safest option, now felt like staying in a trap he walked into willingly. He needed to move, and fast.

He rang for a nurse.

"I need this drip removed," he said calmly, though his mind was racing.

She looked at him, uncertain. "But you're still stabilizing. Just ten more minutes--"

"No. It's making me uncomfortable," he insisted.

She hesitated, then reluctantly removed it. "I hope you're sure."

"I'm fine," he said, standing from the reclined bed and winced at the still-tender soles of his feet. He picked up his small suitcase and limped down the hallway toward the reception.

"Can I charge my phone here for a bit?" He asked the receptionist, handing her the device.

"No problem," she replied with a smile.

"I'll be back. I need to get cash from an ATM across the street."

She gave him directions, to which he nodded. He thanked her and carefully stepped outside the hospital.

Instead of crossing directly, he walked down the road and entered a small buka—a roadside eatery—across the street. He took a seat with a clear view of the hospital entrance and ordered food. His plan was simple: sit, eat, and observe. If nothing suspicious happened before closing time, he would quietly return to the hospital under the cover of darkness.

At 6:51 p.m., a black SUV pulled up.

Earlier, cars had come and gone, their occupants hopping in and out to grab items from the shops. This one did not budge. Two minutes. Three. No one stepped out. He tensed and watched keenly.

Then the driver's door opened. A tall, heavysset man emerged, his cap and glasses making him unrecognisable. The passenger's door followed seconds later and an even bigger man stepped out. Kego froze. He recognised the build of the second man. The clothes were different, but the silhouette—the sheer mass of him—was unmistakable. It was one of the men he'd seen earlier on the CCTV feed at his gate.

Cold dread needled at him, sharp as glass. Then came the devastating realization. *My phone. The CCTV feed is on the phone.* He'd just handed it to the hospital receptionist. All the footage, their faces, everything was on it. It was a digital witness, and they were here to silence it—and him. Regret washed over him, but almost immediately, instinct took over.

He watched the two men cross the road and enter the hospital. The first man seemed to have noticed him but looked away when Kego turned his face. Just then, the back door of the SUV cracked open. A third man stepped out. Kego recognised him too; he was the smaller one from the earlier footage. He crossed the shallow gutter separating the road from the pavement and disappeared into a nearby supermarket.

It was now or never. Now, if he was going to get away from here.

Kego rose, every muscle screaming in protest, and darted to the SUV, timing his steps to the shadows, to avoid being seen. His feet throbbed beneath the bandages, but he reached the driver's door, heart hammering. It was unlocked and the car engine was running.

He slid in, shoved the gear to Drive, his bandaged right foot finding the brake, then the accelerator. He pressed gradually, wincing at the dull throb beneath his foot.

The SUV lurched forward, the tyres screeching as he braked for a half-second, then floored it.

Brahim burst out of the shop almost immediately, shouting curses, but it was too late. Kego did not look back. He drove off. The time was 6:57 p.m.

Inside the hospital, Tete and Antler stood before the receptionist.

“He’s our guy,” Tete explained smoothly. “He came in earlier this evening for an emergency. We just need his room number.”

“Oh, the patient’s fine,” she said, barely glancing at her chart. “He stepped out about thirty minutes ago to get cash for his bill. I guess he stopped to eat.

“Did he leave anything?” Antler asked.

“No, not really,” she said, adhering to hospital policy. You don’t reveal such details to visitors who are not relatives.

“Do you know which direction he went?”

“Just across the road,” she pointed. “There is a POS shop there.”

The squeal of tyres sliced through the air.

Tete froze. His face darkened.

“That’s my fucking car,” he said, his voice a low growl, eyes narrowing. “What the hell is Brahim doing?”

“Maybe he’s moving it?” Antler offered, unconvinced.

Tete turned to the window. The SUV was already speeding off. He could see it across the low fence of the hospital.

“What the fuck!” he barked, storming out, abandoning the receptionist.

Antler followed, a bewildered grin spreading across his face. *Did Brahim just flee with the car? Was he the mole? Only a mole would do that.*

They burst through the hospital gate just in time to see Brahim standing across the road, stomping and yelling at the vehicle.

Down the road, the SUV was already a blur of speed and dust.

“What happened?” Tete growled from across the street.

Brahim didn’t answer, still confused and enraged.

“This is fucked,” Antler muttered, the thought landing with the weight of utter catastrophe. *He has our car. Not just the vehicle, but their comms, their untraceable plates, their entire operational advantage. Had to be him.*

The SUV disappeared into the night.

And with it, Kego.

Five

EARLIER, 6:17 P.M.

Dera was unsettled.

She had barely arrived for her evening shift when Kene's call came in. She had just stepped into the nurses' room, listening half-heartedly as the outgoing nurse briefed her on the patients for the night. One name snagged her attention, Kego—a private patient brought in by Dr. Dika himself about forty-five minutes earlier. Now stabilised and resting.

The name, which had flooded the news cycle all day, struck her like a distant bell. Could it be the same Kego her boyfriend had declared missing in his X post earlier? She had seen the post and watched the news while preparing for her shift.

She was about to check if it was the same Kego she knew when her phone rang. Kene's voice was a frantic, choked rasp, like someone sinking fast in water too deep to call out from. His words came broken, distorted by panic.

All she could make out were fragments: "At Kego's... shot... police... die..."

The floor seemed to fall away, as if a sudden, sickening void had opened beneath her. Her instincts screamed: *Don't wait. Act now.* She abandoned everything she was about to do and hurried to the doctor's office.

Dr. Dika was her father. She had never mixed her private life with work before, but this could not wait.

“I need to leave urgently. It’s Kene,” she began, the words tumbling out in stutters. “Something’s happened. At Kego’s place. They might need medical help.”

Her father, unaware of the significance of the name, paused, his gaze analytical.

“Is it that serious?”

“I don’t know,” she lied. The words *shot* and *die* were burning her tongue, but she didn’t want to go into further details.

“Do I need to come along?”

“No, thank you.” She was already at the door.

“Alright. Call me if it’s something serious.”

Permission granted, she bolted, forgetting her handbag, and even a first aid kit, everything but the frantic rhythm of her own heart. Her hands trembled. Her mind spiraled. She had seen trauma and she was trained for it, but this was personal. This was different.

Her thumb jabbed at her phone screen as she tried to call Kene back. No connection. She tried again. Same mocking silence. Then she tried Kego’s line. It rang but no one answered. *What is going on?* Should she call the police? What would she even say? *My boyfriend called. I think someone’s dying. I don’t know who, I don’t know where.* Ridiculous.

The first step was to get there, as soon as possible, but she was struggling to recollect how to get there.

She reached the parking lot and a fresh spike of adrenaline hit her—she had left her keys and her bag in the nurses’ room. She spun around and dashed back inside.

“What’s happening?” a fellow nurse called after her, but Dera could not answer. She ran into the nurses’ room, snatched her handbag, grabbed a small emergency kit, and ran outside again, waving frantically at the security man to open the hospital gate.

She sped off with no clear address in mind, following her instinct, but it soon betrayed her.

Minutes down the road, a sign told her she was headed in the wrong direction. Kego’s neighbourhood was on the other side of town, a good fifteen minutes’ drive out of town.

She slammed the brakes. The screech of tyres was a raw scream against the asphalt. A car behind her swerved violently, its horn a prolonged, angry blare, nearly colliding with a vehicle coming the other way. Pedestrians screamed. Drivers shouted curses, but it was a chorus of rage she barely noticed.

”You want to kill yourself? Don’t take others with you!”

“Gosh! She’s a woman!” shouted another.

“Get out of the way, useless thing!”

More horns blared around her like alarms, but she was deaf to them all, adrift in a sea of worst-case scenarios. She was reeling in uncertain fear. She needed to calm down, or she might crash before she even got anywhere.

Dera forced herself to breathe—in, out—the practiced calm of her profession forming a thin shield against the storm inside her. After a minute of forced breathing and clenched restraint, she turned the car around and retraced her route.

Just as she passed the hospital again, her eyes flicked to a roadside buka across the street. For a moment, she thought she saw someone who looked like Kego seated inside, close to the entrance. *That can’t be him*, she told herself, pushing the thought aside. Her priority was getting to his house.

By 6:35 p.m., she arrived at Kego's gate. The street had fallen eerily silent, a few neighbours standing at the entrances to their properties. The small pedestrian gate to Kego's compound was slightly ajar. She slipped through, cautious.

Kego's car was parked inside, but Kene's was gone. She tried calling him again. His line was switched off. She tried Kego's. Same result. Her anxiety swelled.

She approached the front door, gave it a push and to her surprise, it opened. She could have sworn it was locked. Inside, the house was utterly, unnervingly silent—the kind of silence that has a pressure to it, one that feels like it's listening for trespassers. Everything was spotless too, with the sterile precision of a cover-up, as if someone had expertly cleaned the scene minutes before she arrived.

"Babe?" she called softly. "Kene, are you here?"

She got no reply.

She moved through the ground floor, her voice growing a little louder, more desperate with each call. Upstairs, the same chilling, sterile order. All the doors were closed. No signs of struggle. No voices responded. No movement. Just stillness.

Until she saw the holes in the master bedroom wall.

A cluster of dark punctures scarred the plaster. She'd never been upstairs before—their visits to Kego's place were always brief, either dropping him off or picking him up. The sight of the holes stopped her cold. She knew what she was looking at.

Bullet holes.

Kene's choked words came back to her. A cold dread, absolute and paralyzing, gripped her spine. *Where the hell are you?*

She stumbled back outside and stepped out onto the street, scanning her surroundings for any sign of life. Across the road, near a half-finished building, not directly opposite Kego's but within line of sight, two men stood. One slipped into the compound as she approached. The other lingered. She became even more curious.

"Good evening," she greeted.

The man did not reply at first. He just looked at her, his expression a wall of suspicion.

"Please," she pressed, "My friends live in that house. Do you know what happened there?"

At the word "friends," his posture softened slightly. "Oh. You're Kego's friend? Good evening."

So unnecessarily guarded, she thought, but forced a faint smile.

"I haven't been around," he said. "But my brother said there was an incident. Some noises. Like gunshots."

Her heart hammered against her ribs. "Gunshots?"

"Maybe," he shrugged. "He said the sound was muffled. Could have been a crack or pop of something else, anything really."

She exhaled, a ragged breath of doubt and fear.

"One more thing," he added, hesitating. "A few minutes ago...some men and a woman carried someone out from that compound."

Her blood went cold. "Carried who?"

"I don't know, but that wasn't Kego. He looked unconscious, slumped between the two men carrying him—his shirt bloodied. They supported him by the shoulders; he didn't look dead."

Fear flared in her eyes. She blinked faster, fighting to keep her lip from trembling.

"They drove off in a blue Benz and a black SUV," he said.

Dera swallowed against the sickness rising in her throat. *God, please.* She wanted to ask where they might've gone, but her voice had left her. She turned away to hide the tears escaping her eyes, walked back to her car, and drove off quietly, urgently, suppressing questions she was afraid of the answers she might find if she pressed. The thought of what may have happened there scared her.

She prayed it was not Kene in the blue Benz. Not that she wished harm on anyone either, but the uncertainty was eating her alive. Where should she go? The hospital was not an option yet. She had to try Kene's place first—it was along her way home, near the city centre.

When she arrived at Kene's house, the gate was firmly locked from the outside. She called his number again. This time, it was unavailable. She parked by the roadside, unsure of what to do; her eyes fixed on the gate.

Her thoughts drifted.

Two years ago, Kene had walked into her father's clinic with a case of malaria. She was fresh out of nursing school and was helping out at the reception at the time. He wore a big faded singlet, baggy pants, and crisp Nike sneakers, looking too handsome to be sick, and far too aloof to notice her obvious infatuation. He did not even steal a glance her way. Not at first. Not that day.

She remembered how her heart raced behind the counter, and how she secretly hoped he'd return for follow-up treatment. He did. Two days in a row. And on the third day, he noticed her.

When he asked her out, she had long expected it, but she was too stunned to pretend. She said yes. Just like that.

Their love deepened over a year before she finally told her father about him.

A passing tipper honked loudly, jarring her back to the present. She sighed and started her car. She had to keep moving. She'd go to the police next. The time was 6:50 p.m.

Instead of going to the police station, she found herself driving back towards the hospital which was just a few minutes away. She needed to speak with her father about the situation. His connection to the DPO might become useful.

As she approached the hospital gate, she noticed two large men entering through the pedestrian gate. Casually dressed for their size—almost suspiciously so. She was seconds behind them, her car horn blaring impatiently. While waiting for the gate to be opened by security, she glanced across the street and spotted the black SUV parked silently. Another man was stepping out from its far side.

She drove in quickly as the gate closed behind her and parked in the lot. She remained in the car to gather her thoughts, a strange premonition holding her still.

Moments later, through her side-view mirror, she saw the same two men bolt from the hospital building and rush through the gate like fugitives. A car screeched and zoomed off beyond the short wall. She had heard it but hadn't paid it any mind until now.

She got out, locked her car doors, and walked into the reception.

"What was that about?" Dera asked the receptionist. "Who were those men? I saw them come in just a few minutes ago. Now they ran out like they were being chased."

"You're back?" The nurse asked, puzzled. "They said they're friends of the guy I mentioned earlier. Kego."

"Kego?" She repeated the name. Her heart jolted. The image of Kego, once again, flashed through her mind. "Why did they leave like that?"

“No idea,” said the nurse. “The screeching car might’ve startled them, but I suppose they’ll return.”

Dera frowned. Her mind was racing. “Which room is Kego in?”

“He left over thirty minutes ago,” the nurse said. “Just after you did. Said he was going to get some cash.”

“Really?” Dera’s brow furrowed. She suddenly remembered seeing someone who looked like Kego outside the hospital gate earlier. Could it have been him? It had to be him. What was he doing sitting in a buka and observing the street?

“Did he leave anything?”

“Just his mobile phone. For charging.”

“Can I see it?”

The nurse handed it over. She had switched it on earlier. The screen lit up with Kego’s unmistakable face as wallpaper. *What the fuck?* He’d been right under her nose the whole time.

“Where exactly did you say he went?”

“Across the street, but I’m not sure after that. He should have returned by now.”

Dera sprinted out of the hospital. The SUV was gone, and so were the two men. She ran to the buka. “That guy who was here a moment ago, where did he go?” She asked the food vendor, who was busy attending to a line of customers.

“You mean the one wey carry bandage for leg? E never reach five minutes he comot,” the woman replied. “You fit still see am down the road, he waka go that hospital side.”

Dera scanned the street, eyes darting past cars and pedestrians. But there was no trace of him. It was as if the street had swallowed him whole. And the two men who came looking for him. She did not

recognise them at all. Kego and Kene had many gym friends, but none she knew would storm into a hospital, then flee like criminals minutes later. They sure weren't friends of the poet. They were certainly hunters, and Kego was the prey, given all that's happening.

She wondered if Kego was involved in an accident earlier? Only her father could fill in these gaps. After all, he was the one who had brought Kego in. But why didn't he flinch when she mentioned his name before storming out earlier?

Her dad certainly did not know who Kego was, and probably had not seen the news that day. He rarely followed news reports until late in the evening.

If Kego had been at the hospital...why was Kene at his house?

She rushed back inside, heart pounding, caught in the dread of knowing too little. Relief battled with suspicion in her chest. She only hoped Kego would return that night. He might have some answers for her.

Dr. Dika was in his office, preparing to make final rounds before heading home, when Dera appeared at the door. He noticed her shaken expression and stopped what he was doing.

She first asked him how he knew Kego. He obviously did not know him before that evening. He recounted the incident: he found the man unconscious in a bushy path by the expressway. The exact area, she realised, bordered Kego's house, separated only by a stretch of dense shrubs and trees, a farm lying fallow.

Dera told him everything. The news that morning about Kego's book being banned, and the post Kene had made about Kego being missing earlier that evening. The eerily pristine state of the house when she got there. Neighbours had spoken of two men and a woman carrying someone into a car matching Kene's. She feared the worst;

Kego was reported missing, and now Kene was nowhere to be found either. They needed to involve the police if Kego's and her boyfriend's lives were in danger.

Tears welled in her eyes. Her voice cracked under the weight of the burden. Her father comforted her gently. He suggested they wait until morning. If Kego did not return by then, they would go to his house again, and then straight to the police, but she wasn't sure she could wait that long.

"What about the two men who came here some minutes ago, looking for Kego?" She pressed, her voice trembling. "Something's wrong. Dad, these boys' lives are in danger."

Dr. Dika paused. She wondered if any of this was truly worth what his daughter was walking into. Should he probe deeper or shield her before she got drawn in any further? He understood the fragile web of Nigeria's political tensions. He knew the risks that stalked a nation sliding towards dictatorship, especially when the rot touched the highest seats of power.

He loved his daughter deeply. He could not bear to see her hurt, but would she forgive him if he tried to pull her away from this now? When she was only just beginning to get involved?

He wished he'd seen this coming. Had he known the bleeding young man by the roadside was somehow connected to his daughter, he might've hesitated due to the political implications, but that would have been a quiet betrayal of his oath. That moment had called for duty, not foresight. He had no regret for what he had done, but now, paternal instincts screamed at him to build a wall around his daughter.

He placed a hand gently on Dera's shoulder. "We'll find them," he said. "Everything will be all right."

But neither of them showed that they believed it.

His calm was not the solution she needed. *Wait until morning*, he'd said. Every instinct, every fiber of her training as a nurse, screamed a single, silent word in reply: *Don't. If you do not find them this night, the trail might be cold by dawn*, her guts whispered. *Their bodies, too. The silence could become permanent.*

Could she wait? Would she? Did she even have a choice besides waiting in fear? If the government was after the boys, would the police even do anything to help?

Why would the government leave the criminals ravaging the land—kidnappers, organ harvesters, bandits, terrorists—and chase two decent young men doing well for themselves? In Abakaliki of all places? What crime did they commit? What offence did Kego commit in publishing a collection of poems detailing the evils in the land? When did asking the people to wake up and take back their country become treason?

She had photographed a page from the collection a day earlier, just after they returned from Kego's book launch, his speech still echoing in her head. Now she opened her phone and read:

When Does it End?

*When will the complaining cease?
If we sit and smile through our pain,
Praying for healing,
When does it end?*

*Who will send us a saviour?
If we dance and revel for crumbs,
Praying for abundance,*

When does it end?

When do these pains heal?

When do these crumbs become abundance?

If we stay buried in silence

While the land is ravaged,

When does it end?

The poem had answers, even if they weren't written down. Only a revolution would correct course for the nation—one that would sweep across the country. But who would bell the cat?

She would. If she didn't hear from them by morning, she would.

She was an only daughter. She was afraid. But she would not sit idly by while her man went missing.

She gathered her things. Morning would come. When it did, she would act.

Six

TIME: 6:58 P.M.

The city bled past in streaks of twilight as Kego tightened his grip on the wheel, foot heavy on the pedal. His eyes darted between the road ahead and the rearview mirror, watching the streets behind unravel like dark ribbons fraying in the winds. He was not going to take chances this time. To make sure he wasn't being trailed, he cut through a labyrinth of side streets like a ghost chasing its own tail. He knew they would be coming after him, but any pursuit at the moment would be lost in the city's veins.

His mind spun on the next move his hunters would make: tracing the vehicle. He least expected the car to have an active GPS tracking device on it, doubting that the agency would be careless enough to drive something traceable, but he could not afford to rely on assumptions—at least, not tonight.

At a red light with a thirty-second countdown, Kego leaned over and began a swift, thorough inspection of his stolen ride. His fingers ran along the underside of the dashboard, beneath the steering column, and under the seats. He opened the glove compartment and found it clean—except for a folded rag, a set of old vehicle papers and a gun. He tapped lightly on the console panels, listening for unnatural hollows, and examining any exposed circuitry. There were no telltale lights, tracking interface, or signals blinking from hidden modules. He got startled by the honking of the cars behind. It was time to move.

Still, the paranoia lingered like a phantom itch he could not reach. As he took another sharp turn down the road, the car's clock chimed the hour. 7:00 p.m.

His mind veered to the world outside this bubble of fear. Yeks had briefed him earlier on the chaos sparked by his disappearance after the bold post Kene had made online. That was a few hours ago. The atmosphere should be boiling now, but the streets seemed normal. He had no idea what was happening or where.

Some bitter questions troubled him—ones he'd wrestled with for years. *Do Nigerians truly care about freedom? Are they concerned about those who risk everything to speak up for the same? What would they do with Kene's post? Would they stand up to the tyrant now? Or would they just post their rage into the void, a storm of hashtags signifying nothing but their own impotence, and quest for virality?*

A part of him—the weary, cynical part—expected the latter. He pushed the thought away. It was a poison he couldn't afford to taste right now. He needed to have hope that the people will not disappoint this time.

He reached forward and turned on the radio, scrolling past music until he found the state-run FM station. The announcer's voice was crisp through the speakers.

"...we have an update: an emergency press briefing will be held at the State House, Abuja, at 7:15 p.m. The briefing will be delivered by security forces in response to the disappearance of Nigerian poet Kego Nwachukwu, who was declared missing earlier this evening..."

Kego's hand froze on the volume knob. *Missing?* The word felt like a well thought out lie against someone on the run.

"...whose debut poetry collection was banned recently. The briefing will be aired live. Meanwhile, social media has erupted in protest, with reports of scheduled gatherings in various cities already coming in..."

He lowered the volume to a murmur.

The road ahead stretched toward the Enugu-Abakaliki Expressway, a dual-lane artery studded with armed checkpoints all year round, like a frontier bordering a war zone. The thought alone enraged him.

The irony in his predicament was suffocating: he was being hunted for speaking a truth the people only dared whisper in their homes. The people loved him for it, but the powers that be needed his silence. He reached over and opened the glove compartment again, feeling the cold weight of the pistol. He had to get rid of it before he hit any checkpoint. Once he was clear of the city, he would find a discreet place, dump whatever needed to be dumped, and scour the SUV for anything left behind by his would-be executioners. Anything the police might deem incriminating had to go. He hoped the police were not already part of those looking for him.

Despite his performance of stoic focus, Kego was fraying inside. Beneath the revolutionary poet was a man who craved a quiet morning, a world where the events of this night were all just a bad dream. He'd desperately want to wake up from such dream. He glanced out the side windows. Vehicles sped past, some overtaking, some receding on the other lane. He pinched his forearm hard. The sting was real, as real as the bloodstains still hidden in the seams of his memory. This was not a dream. It had become his fate.

His young life had had its own share of troubles. He was barely thirty, yet look at how far he had come.

A boy whose father had vanished twenty-five years earlier, after confiding in his wife about threats to his life over the weekly articles he wrote for one of the nation's dailies, boldly calling out the military government in power. His mother had searched for him for four long weeks without success. The police were unhelpful and dismissive, claiming her husband ran away from home like some irresponsible men

do. Then one morning, in the early hours, his body was found dumped in front of their house.

His mother, a secondary school teacher at the time, struggled to raise him, his sister, and his younger brother, who was born after their father died. Sadly, the boy did not live to see his fifth birthday. Kego remembered hawking goods on the street at ten years old to support her. Her meager earnings were never enough. He was forced to become a man early.

Even after the nation transitioned to democratic rule, things did not get better. If anything, they got worse. His family was forced to move back to the village and take up farming. It was sheer resilience that carried him through secondary school and into university, where he studied Estate Management. Through hard work, like many Nigerians from low-income families, he managed to build a life for himself three years after school. Many of his peers, some of whom worked even harder, were still hustling hard with little to show for it.

His poems were born from a sense of duty to the people of this nation. He was fed up with the direction politics had taken across the country, where self-serving lunatics stole power for themselves. And then came the worst of them all, a horrible man who began hijacking every institution in the country. President Banjo had made his intentions clear: to turn the nation into a one party state controlled by his family. If Kego had chosen not to publish those poems, his conscience would never have let him rest. His life may be hard now because of it, but it would all be worth it once the people heed his subtle call.

So, he drove on, toward an undefined destination, the weight of a nation's gathering rage a storm on his mind.

Back at the hospital, 6:57 p.m.

As he watched the SUV vanish in the distance, Brahim stood on the pavement, cursing and shouting as though his words could pull the car back to where he had left it. He knew he was in deep trouble with Tete. He saw him and Antler running out of the hospital just in time, Tete's face a mask of fury.

Tete was screaming something at him, but the words were a jumble in his ringing ears. He continued to pretend to curse aimlessly at the now-vanished SUV. Antler had a smirk on his face, walking beside Tete as both men crossed the busy road to meet him.

The road was busier than before, with pedestrians and motorists hurrying home. Most of the shops were still open, but a few—those offering services or selling items people would not typically stop to purchase at night—were closed.

“What the hell happened?” Tete bellowed.

“I just stepped out to...” Brahim began, but Tete cut him off.

“Your job was to stay in the vehicle and watch,” he seethed, “not to step out and let some bloody guy get away with it!”

He was almost shouting. He lowered his voice when he noticed pedestrians and shoppers on the street staring at them. Just then, a car pulled up in front of the shop where they stood. Without warning his men, Tete moved quickly, revealing the muffled tip of his pistol from under his shirt to the driver before he could get out.

“Out. Leave the key,” he commanded, his voice low and deadly. “Don’t make a scene. We’re with the government. You’ll get your car back.”

The terrified owner scrambled out without hesitation. He was about to step out of the car anyway, intending to buy something at the shop like most motorists stopping there would do. His mind swirled and he immediately regretted hitting his brakes there. He did not believe the

“we’re with the government” line—but he was not about to argue with a gun.

“Let’s get out of here,” Tete said, sliding behind the wheel.

The others hurried in as he started the engine.

“Are we stealing cars now?” Antler asked, his amusement palpable.

“What would you rather we do in this situation?” Tete roared, pulling into traffic in the direction Kego had fled. That was the first time they had commandeered a car in Abakaliki.

“Are we going after him?” Brahim asked, tentatively, afraid of being shut down the way Antler was. It was obvious from Tete’s visage that he wouldn’t tolerate nonsense now.

“You’re sure it was him?” Tete yelled. “Did you get a clear look as he entered the car?”

“You mean the poet?”

“Of course! Who else?”

“Well,” he swallowed hard, “common sense says it was him, but I only caught a glimpse of-”

“Fuck common sense!” Tete snapped. “Of course, it was him.”

“I don’t see the SUV ahead,” Antler chimed in. “How do we follow him?”

“We’ll track him,” Tete replied coolly.

“Track him?” Antler asked.

“How?” Brahim pressed.

“What do you mean how? I have a tracker on the vehicle. I can see exactly where it is on my phone.”

Brahim and Antler shifted in their seats. They exchanged a quick, sharp glance that spoke volumes. A tracker? On their vehicle? The

implication landed with the cold weight of a shackle. Tete was not just their supervisor—he had also been their warden. They, too, were being watched. It was unclear why.

Tete pulled the hijacked car over, not too far from where they took it, and killed the engine.

“Why are we stopping here?” asked Antler. Brahim was silent.

“You drive!” He ordered Antler, stepping out to take the passenger seat. Antler slid behind the wheel as Tete got in beside him and opened the tracking app on his phone.

Antler started the engine. It made a sputtering sound, groaned and died. The second and third attempts yielded the same result. The three men grew impatient. Antler stared at the dashboard, the single needle resting firmly on ‘E’.

“Fuck!” He blurted, his word a mix of disbelief and dark amusement. The others looked at him for an explanation. He looked at Tete, “It’s out of fuel.”

Tete’s eyes followed, and for a moment, his legendary composure cracked. “Jeez, what the fuck,” he muttered, the profanity sounding alien from his lips. Brahim heaved a sigh.

As if on cue, Tete’s phone rang, interrupting the drama.

“Why haven’t you picked this guy up?” Mr. Bello queried.

“He’s on the run, sir.”

“What do you mean he’s on the run?” The DG sounded distraught.

“We lost him,” Tete admitted.

“He took our—” Antler started, but Tete silenced him with a dirty look.

“My feed shows he’s still at the hospital,” the DG insisted. “Haven’t you got to the hospital?”

They looked at each other, the confusion absolute.

“He’s still at the hospital?” Tete’s voice was strained.

“What have you people been doing all this time?” The DG raged. “How hard is it to understand the urgency of this job?”

He sounded near his breaking point.

“We’re close by, sir,” Tete assured him. He was still unsure what the DG meant by “he’s still at the hospital.” The nurse at the reception had said the guy stepped out and never came back, and now their car was gone. He looked at Brahim for answers. Brahim remained quiet. Tete had spotted the poet when they arrived the hospital, but pretended he didn’t.

“Get this sorted out!” The DG snapped. “Report back to me before 9 p.m.”

“OK, sir.” The phone beeped as the line went dead.

Tete’s boys were confused. For a moment, the three of them sat in the dead car in stunned silence.

“I think we should check again,” Antler said, breaking the silence. “We should probably use threats this time.”

It was not about threatening anyone or even going back to the hospital, Tete thought. Who else would have the nerve to steal their car? He wished Brahim had at least seen who took the car clearly. All this confusion would be unnecessary.

Then it struck him. “The phone,” he growled.

“What phone?” Brahim asked.

“Kego’s phone,” Tete said. “Remember they’re tracking his phone?”

Antler heaved a sigh. “My guess: he figured we could track him with his phone so he left it in the hospital, then went outside to watch if we would show up. When we did, he stole our fucking car. It all makes sense now. He was just making fools of us.”

“We need to get that phone,” Tete said.

The others agreed. But how would they go back now? Commandeer another car, or simply walk all the way back?

“We walk,” said Tete, stepping out of the dead car. Others followed suit.

“Fuck your owner,” Antler muttered as he kicked the car door. He also noticed that Brahim’s eyes had cleared somewhat. At least, he was not rubbing them every few seconds.

The night sky had deepened. The road was still busy with traffic, but the pedestrian presence was thinning. The street lights shone brightly, and the sky was full of distant clustered stars.

As they started back toward the hospital, Tete studied the tracking app. A small, red dot, representing their stolen SUV, was heading for the Enugu-Abakaliki Expressway. Antler stole a glance. *The poet could run*, he thought, *but he would not be able to hide for long.*

7:21 p.m. On the Expressway.

As Kego hit the brake pedal and the car came to a halt, the radio presenter announced that the emergency press briefing was about to begin. It was six minutes behind schedule. The DSS DG, Mr. Bello, addressed the nation.

He turned up the volume.

“*Dear citizens,*” the formal, clipped voice began, “*we have just concluded an emergency meeting with the President where he directed all national security forces to work in full cooperation to locate the missing poet, hopefully alive, unless found dead.*”

Kego let out a dry humourless laugh. The audacity was breathtaking. To label him *missing* when the state itself had orchestrated his attempted elimination made the announcement absurd. His irritation grew as he listened.

“The heads of our nation’s security agencies immediately convened and have devised a strategy to track down any person who may have reasons to target the poet. This plan is already in motion and all our operatives across the country are now on high alert, particularly in Ebonyi State, where he resided and was last seen.”

“Although this administration banned his book for what we consider inflammatory and unpatriotic content aimed at our democratically elected president, we do not, and I repeat, we do not, resort to criminality or political assassinations. The claims made in the viral post by one of the poet’s friends, particularly the so-called screenshot suggesting that the President ordered a hit, are completely false. The Presidency has already issued a statement refuting such baseless rumours. Please disregard this propaganda clearly engineered by disgruntled actors seeking to destabilise our democracy.”

Kego shook his head, a wave of nausea washing over him. The lies were so polished, so shameless.

“Just a few hours ago,” the man continued, “men from the police network in Abakaliki visited the poet’s residence. There was no sign of forced entry or any indication of violence. Nevertheless, investigations are ongoing to determine what really happened. We fear this may even be a stunt by sympathisers of the poet to build hype around the banned book. If we find this to be true, we will hold those involved accountable.”

Kego exhaled heavily, a soft groan escaping his lips. The audacity of the regime to twist the truth without even a flicker of shame sickened him.

“Please, we urge the public to maintain calm and cooperate fully with security operatives. We are doing everything within our power to find the poet—”

Kego switched off the radio in disgust. He could smell the performance behind the polished tone. That briefing was not for Nigerians; it was for the foreign press, the embassies, and international watchdogs. No one was actually looking for him. Not even for those who had tried to kill him. He had escaped death twice that evening. The rage welled inside him.

He clenched the steering wheel and whispered under his breath, “One day, this nation will rise. And those seeking to perpetuate their evil in the land will be rooted out.” He believed that day was not as far as it used to be. However, it all depended on how much longer the people could endure their current suffering.

It was always up to them.

He stepped out of the car, pulling the pistol out with him. Kego had never held a gun before. Should he toss it into the bush? The logical option would be to surrender it at a police station, but with the rot in the force, that would be foolish, possibly suicidal even. They could kill him on the spot.

He scanned the roadside for a heavy stone and his eyes caught one beneath a withering shrub. He picked it up, removed the cartridge from the gun, laid the pistol on the pavement, and brought the stone down twice. It cracked with a metallic groan, the second blow scattering the muzzle and rendering the gun useless.

Vehicles sped past behind him—cars, buses, and long-haul trucks—oblivious to the act of quiet rebellion unfolding in the shadows of the roadside.

He then turned to the SUV and searched it thoroughly, his fingers digging into every seam, compartment, and crevice. Anything even remotely suspicious, he hurled into the bush. Only after the SUV felt stripped clean did he return to the driver’s seat. He found no tracking device. He had no idea what one would even look like.

He started the engine and resumed his drive with no clear destination in mind. Just one instinct pulsing in his veins: forward. If anything, Enugu city will be his next port of call.

The time was 7.30 p.m.

The three agents walked briskly back toward the hospital. Their non-official mission was to retrieve the phone. The silence between them was deafening as they moved quickly but inconspicuously, careful not to draw attention to themselves.

Tete called someone at the state office, requesting immediate pickup from their location.

As they approached the hospital, they saw that all the nearby shops were already closed. Unlike the bustling roadside stores they passed earlier, the stretch had suddenly gone quiet. Tete understood at once: the man they had carjacked must have raised an alarm, and news of armed men had swept through the neighbourhood sending it into fearful early retreat.

Just as they reached the hospital gate, Tete's phone rang again. Mr. Bello. The time read 7:17 p.m.

"I see you've picked him up?" The DG's voice was bright with expectation.

"Sir?" Tete hesitated, thrown off. "We are just arriving at the hospital now."

"What?" The DG's tone hardened, frustration rising fast. He had a national briefing to prepare for and couldn't afford a misstep. "Where's the poet?"

"We don't have him, sir," said Tete, throat tightening.

“Shit!” Bello barked. “His GPS just moved. He left the hospital two minutes ago. You’re telling me that wasn’t you?”

“No, sir,” Tete admitted. “And it wasn’t him carrying the phone.”

“What in God’s name do you mean?”

“He escaped earlier in our vehicle, sir. Without his phone. But I have a tracker on the SUV. I know exactly where he is.”

A pause.

“So who has his phone?”

“That, we don’t know yet.”

“You people are fumbling this assignment and turning it into a catastrophe,” the chief growled. “Maybe it’s time to bring in fresh and capable hands.”

“Sir, we’ll fix this. I promise. I’m sending you the SUV’s location right now.”

“Do it. Immediately.”

The line went dead.

Tete quickly forwarded the tracker data to his superior through their encrypted channel. All the while, Brahim and Antler stood in taut silence. Moments later, Tete’s phone beeped twice. A secure reply from the DG.

Suspend other operations. Intercept the target before he reaches any military or police checkpoint. I’m entering a press briefing now. Get it done.

Just then, a new SUV pulled up, their requested pickup. As they climbed in, Antler wondered whether the new vehicle was also being tracked.

The car sped off in pursuit of the poet. The time was 7:22 p.m.

Earlier that evening...

Dera had left the hospital at exactly 7:15 p.m. If she had to wait, she would rather do so at home than in that corridor of despair where patients abound amidst scents of blood and drugs.

She had read online that a government press briefing was scheduled for that evening. It was already delayed by the time she was leaving, but she prepared to listen to it live on the LED screen in her car.

With Kego's phone in her bag, she drove into the night. The roads blurred beneath her wheels as the sky deepened into a darker shade of dread, the city's streetlights smearing across her windshield like tears.

Somewhere in the country, her lover probably lay dying or dead—God forbid. His friend was being hunted by the very government that claimed they had nothing to do with his disappearance. There was no other way to explain this.

One of the nurses on night duty would call her if Kego showed up in the hospital later that night.

But Dera knew—her mind was already made up. With Kego on the run for his life, if the night passed with nothing done—and if anything happened to Kene—she was ready to take to the streets. She would, even if it made her the government's next victim.

Seven

KEGO SPED INTO the night, the SUV swallowed by ribbons of yellow, white, and crimson light bleeding across the slick dark road. He had always avoided driving after dark, owing to his poor eyesight. The thought reminded him of the glasses still perched on his nose. He often forgot when he was wearing them, especially on days like this, when survival left no room for trivial awareness. He was surprised they had not fallen off during his mad scramble through the underbrush behind his house. Without them, he would have been unable to drive in the shadows of this dark road.

He adjusted them now, a reflexive gesture, as if the slight pressure on his nose could anchor him in this waking nightmare he found himself in.

Then it happened.

A blast of full-beam headlights detonated in his face—a piercing, white-hot, blinding nova. For a suspended second, his heart tried to punch through his rib cage and shoot out through the windscreen. His life flashed before him. *Is this the end?*

He yanked the steering wheel hard, the tyres screeching against the gravelled road as he narrowly escaped to safety. The big truck sped past in frenzy, its driver cursing at the wind. Adrenaline surged through him. *What the hell just happened?*

He exhaled, breath shuddering. *Focus!* Death had already been cheated twice tonight. A third time felt like asking too much.

In Abuja, minutes earlier.

Mr. Bello stepped down from the podium, the ghost of his two-minute statement on the “missing poet” already dissolving into the curated chaos of the press corps. He had taken only two questions from them before vanishing behind a wall of handlers. Being interrogated was not on his agenda for the night.

Still seething from his earlier call with the Abakaliki unit, he mumbled curses beneath his breath. He’d never encountered such a blend of incompetence and ill-luck, but Tete had managed to redeem the situation by sending over the car’s tracking data. The fugitive was now traceable, and he was clearly on the Enugu-Abakaliki Expressway.

That move had been clever, albeit illegal. Installing an unauthorised tracking device on a government vehicle went against department protocol but tonight, it was the reason they still had a chance to catch the poet. Bello shrugged at the thought. Bureaucracy could wait.

He scanned the dispersing crowd. Officials were peeling away into corridors and cars, ignoring reporters who chased answers with disregard for the looming darkness. *These so-called journalists*, he thought, *always behaving as though the right questions could resurrect the dead.*

He beckoned to the Police Chief, who had stood among the array of force heads during the briefing. The man followed him swiftly into a secured inner office. Both waved their aides to wait outside.

“We have a development,” he said, the door sealing them in privacy.

The Police Chief stood at attention, his posture radiating a crisp, practiced deference. He was a man who understood orders and how to give them.

“We believe the poet is headed for Enugu. Is the road still hot?”

“There are three major checkpoints,” the Chief confirmed. “All positioned at strategic locations on the way out of the city. Two of the stations have been briefed on what to do.”

“Are they aware of the urgency?”

“Absolutely,” the Chief replied. “They understand what’s at stake.”

Bello’s eyes narrowed. “They’ve all seen his photo?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Bello said, a wry, predatory smile spreading on his lips. “Instruct them to inspect every black SUV thoroughly. There must be no misses. My agents are also en route to seal any gaps.”

As the Police Chief left the room, he was on the phone, relaying the command that would turn the routine checkpoints into salvaging traps. Their one task was to carry out the President’s demand. He had to make sure there were handy men capable of doing this bidding at each point.

Back in Abakaliki.

Tete and his men sat in tense silence in the black SUV, a newly assigned female agent, Ola, at the wheel. The chase had resumed.

Their quarry was out ahead—a moving dot on Tete’s screen. It had paused, and remained static for several minutes, giving them just enough allowance to close the distance. Now, it was moving again. The road stretched before them like a long, breathless warpath. They drove on in silence, ten minutes still between them and the fleeing car. Ten minutes between failure and a finished job.

Dera was at home when the press briefing aired. She sat through it, hoping for details beyond what she already knew. There was nothing new—only the same curated assurances that the government was taking the matter seriously. They vowed to do everything possible to get the

“missing poet” to safety, unless, the spokesman added, they found him dead. That last bit chilled her. The phrasing was crude, careless and cringe.

Who were the men who came looking for Kego at the hospital? Why was he running through the bush like a fugitive, until he collapsed at the roadside behind his house? What might have happened to him if her father had not stopped to help him?

What about Kene? Who were the strangers that dragged him away? Was he safe? She didn’t want to think about the possibility that he might already be dead. That thought rooted a deep dread in her every time.

She had so many other unanswered questions running through her mind, yet the government was claiming it could all be a hoax. She reached for her phone, scanning through X feeds for any glimmer of fresh hope. There was nothing new. Kene’s viral post from earlier that evening was still gaining traction, followed with talks of protests, plans for protests, raging complaints and more foreign calls for the Nigerian government to do more to ensure freedom of speech. Also making the rounds were press statements from the security agencies threaded with denials, contradictions, and hollow-sounding promises. What was she even expecting to see? She sighed. She was drained, yet doubted if she would ever find sleep before dawn.

With a weary stretch, she turned on the couch where she lay, eyes wide in the muted glow of her phone’s screen.

Up ahead, Kego saw the police checkpoint and slowed. A line of vehicles—buses, cars, trucks—formed a snake of red taillights along the road as officers held each one up. Their flashlights sliced through windows, scanning faces. No one was waved through without scrutiny.

His first instinct was to turn back, to melt into the darkness, but his hunters could still be on his tail. They couldn't have given up that easily, he was sure they wanted him dead at all cost. Then he remembered the press briefing. The government had promised protection. He knew it was a lie, a performance for the world. He doubted police officers at this checkpoint were in on this manhunt. He was no criminal. Worst case, they would detain him, and that was definitely better than ending up in an unmarked shallow grave in the middle of nowhere. He decided to take a chance.

So he stayed in traffic, inching forward until his SUV reached the checkpoint. Fear churned quietly inside, but he stayed calm. He did not know who to trust anymore. Not in a country spiralling toward dictatorship.

A torch beam hit his face. Sharp. He flinched and turned away, shielding his face with his arm.

"Clear the road!" Someone barked—a familiar command to park on the side of the road so as not to obstruct traffic. He had not seen them ask this of anyone ahead of him.

Another officer muttered something about the SUV matching a description they were given of a vehicle with the missing poet. Kego could not catch everything they were saying.

The flashlights shifted as he slowly pulled off the main road, stopping beside a police van. A lean officer approached his window, flashing the light into the SUV.

"Oga, no vex, but come down," the officer said, trying to sound civil.

Kego complied, stepping out quietly. A second officer was already approaching.

"I hope there's no problem?" Kego asked.

“Nothing to worry about,” the first replied, while the second moved in, raising his torch to Kego’s face.

“Who are you and where are you coming from?” the second officer asked, his voice sharp.

Kego shielded his eyes. “I’m Kego Nwachukwu. I’m coming from Abakaliki.”

The name landed with a force of confession and the officers exchanged glances: this was indeed the poet they were told to look for.

“You sure you’re alone in the car?” the first officer asked, eyeing the SUV like it might grow passengers out of thin air.

“Yes, sir.”

The second officer was now comparing his face to an image in his phone.

“No doubt,” he said, a smirk playing on his lips. “You’re the infamous poet.”

“You sure about that?” the first police officer asked, turning back to take a closer look at the image on his colleague’s phone screen.

“Absolutely. It’s him.”

There were now five officers in total encircling him, their presence a mixture of curiosity and something else that was hard to read—admiration, perhaps. Their flashlight beams, headlamps from passing cars, and the encroaching blackness of the night all swirled around him. He felt less like a citizen and more like a trophy.

“Young man,” the first officer said, his tone shifting to one of respect, “your matter dey vibrate for the whole country. They said you were kidnapped?”

Kego hesitated, unsure what to say.

“He doesn’t look kidnapped to me,” the second retorted. “Looks more like someone on the run. Who’s after you?”

“It’s complicated,” Kego replied. “Officers, if you don’t mind, can I continue my journey?”

“You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Poet,” the first officer said. “We’ve been tasked with ensuring your safety. We’ll take you back to the city.”

“No need to let you go,” the second added. “We’ll take you to the station, you’ll be safer there.”

The senior officer nodded. Orders were barked, the other officers at the checkpoint cleared the way, waving on the stalled traffic, then rejoined the circle of officers milling around Kego.

“He’s the poet from the news,” one whispered.

“That’s the missing guy, for real,” said another.

Kego felt like a celebrity being hunted down like a criminal.

He overheard the senior officer making a quick call. “Yes, sir, we have him. He’s with us now and safe.”

Three heavily armed officers piled into his stolen SUV. One of the officers took the wheel. The second officer went back to the police van where one of the officers had sat waiting. The road was now open. Vehicles moved freely again, dodging the makeshift half-barriers at the checkpoint.

The driver turned the SUV around. They were heading back to Abakaliki.

Kego sat rigid, caught between a flicker of relief and a tidal wave of dread. The officers around him wore bulletproof vests strapped tightly over black combat gear, rifles slung with ease, fingers never far from the trigger. They spoke little, and their silence was weighted with something—an unease, or perhaps a plan already in motion. Something seemed out of place, but he could not point out what it was.

Surely, they had orders to protect him. Yet the manner in which he was swiftly taken into custody did not sit right. They were too prepared and looked too expectant. It was almost as though they had known he'd be on that road, in that SUV. He wanted to question the officer seated beside him but decided against it. His instincts, which tested by an evening of survival, screamed that this was not a rescue. He had to come up with something, if he was to survive the night.

The SUV cruised in heavy silence. On either side of the road, farmland sprawled in the thin wash of moonlight that had just started to illuminate the night. On the left, ridged farmland stretched to meet the road level, and on the right, the land dipped sharply, sloping down into a six-foot depression before stretching out into a field of cassava and yam mounds.

Then, like the crack of thunder, came the gunfire.

It was not a single pistol shot. Not a warning shot, but a guttural roar, the unmistakable rattle of an assault rifle ripping through the calm of the night, tearing it apart and punching through the metal body of the SUV.

The driver's skull exploded and vanished in a wet, red mist. A spray of blood and tissue hit Kego's face, hot and shockingly intimate. It made his stained shirt even worse. He blinked, frozen, his heart lurching. In the passenger seat, another officer let out a strangled gasp, blood fountaining from his neck, hands flailing to plug the gash in a futile attempt to stop death itself.

The senior officer beside Kego yanked him down by the back of the neck while simultaneously roaring "Down!"—then threw his own body over him as a human shield.

The SUV swerved violently, tyres shrieking on the tarred road as it careened off the edge. A hailstorm of bullets chased the vehicle leaving

a stitch across its frame as it went airborne before plunging into the sloppy farmland below.

The crash was deafening—the SUV landed nose-first, smashing into the earth, then flipped violently, metal groaning and glass shattering until it landed upside-down with a crunch that silenced the gunfire, if only for a moment.

Inside the SUV, Kego's body slammed against the seat on first impact, then crushed into the weight of the now lifeless officer who had covered him with his body. The SUV's ceiling, now beneath them, was buckled and torn. The moonlight seemed to flicker across shards of glass and streaks of blood. Kego's face was slick with blood, but he did not know for sure if it was his or that of the dead officers. He could not feel anything and could barely move.

Above, on the highway, chaos reigned.

The police van that had been tailing them now sat at an odd angle across the road, its doors flung open like a house the owners abandoned in a haste. Two assault rifles lay discarded on the asphalt, but their owners were nowhere in sight.

Then came the noise—not of gunfire, but of panic.

Headlights pinwheeled in the dark as vehicles reversed at blinding speed, fleeing from the point in both directions. Cars screeched, their tyres spinning furiously. A glaring yellow bus tried a frantic three-point turn, clipping a sedan in its frenzy. Horns blared in a sustained, discordant symphony of panic. Drivers and passengers alike were screaming as vehicles collided and skidded off. A delivery truck veered into the bush at the other end, its cargo spilling onto the road as it hit a tree. People ducked low inside vehicles or abandoned them entirely, diving into the shadows of the trees. It was an orchestra of chaos fueled by fear. Everyone thought it was the usual menace of unknown gunmen. Nobody wanted to die.

Across the road in the bush, crouched beneath thick crops, the two missing officers from the police van watched with bated breath. One was on the phone.

“We got them,” he muttered. “No way anyone survived that. We emptied our full clips.” He listened to the response from the other end. “Understood. We’ll hold position.”

Beside him, his partner kept his official rifle trained on the distant crash site, just in case something—or someone—moved into his line of sight.

Tete and his team tracked the movement of the small glowing dot on his screen. Its sudden pause confirmed what he suspected; it had stopped at a checkpoint.

“We’re closing in,” Tete muttered. They had narrowed the gap to only seven minutes away. Then, unexpectedly, the dot began drifting back toward them after a while.

“The police have him now,” he said calmly, eyes still fixed on the device.

“What now?” Antler asked, breaking his silence.

“Get ready, we don’t know what they know,” Tete replied. “And I want the poet alive.”

“Alive?”

Their seatbelts unclicked in unison and in one coordinated motion, they all unholstered their pistols—except the driver, who kept her grip on the wheel.

Two minutes later, the dot on the screen veered off the expressway and stopped. The distant rattle of gunfire cracking through the night reached them.

“What the fuck?!” Antler blurted.

“Stay focused!” Tete barked, himself rattled by the development.

“Did Mr Bello send another group?” Brahim asked, scanning the road ahead in amazement.

“Keep your eyes sharp,” Tete snapped. “We’ll know when we get there.”

Then, as abruptly as it started, the gunfire ceased.

As they approached the area, they hit a wall of pandemonium. Vehicles had become twisted metals blocking parts of the road. Headlights flared in all directions as drivers shouted in panic, some leaning out their windows and waving frantically at no one in particular as they fled.

“Turn back! Don’t go that way!”

But Tete’s SUV pressed on, weaving through the mayhem, between dent-scarred saloon cars, a taxi locked sideways across the lanes, and a commercial bus whose passengers had already fled. A sedan with its trunk popped open rammed into a roadside ditch in its blind reversal. The air reeked of burnt rubber and fear.

Soon, a total blockade brought them to a halt; twisted metal, smashed bumpers, and two lorries locked head-on left no passage through.

“Weapons!” Tete ordered.

Guns drawn, the three men stepped out of the SUV.

“You, stay in the car,” he said to the female agent behind the wheel. Then to the others, “Follow me.”

They advanced on foot into the commotion, moving like ghosts through the maelstrom. People fled in all directions; some into the bush, others scuttling along the tarmac like ants scattered from their hill. A few huddled behind stationary vehicles, trembling, their arms over their

heads. The moonlight caught frightened eyes and pale faces as the agents moved past like shadows.

They descended into the farmland, guided only by the moonlight and the pulse of the tracker.

“There,” Tete pointed.

Ahead, the SUV lay wrecked in the field upside down, one rear wheel still spinning weakly.

Guns raised, they quickened their pace. Then, the sound of sirens, like a wail, rose in the distance, urgent and close. Blue and red lights strobed the tree line above. Tete froze mid-step and raised a fist. His men stopped.

“They’re right on us,” he said under his breath. “Police vehicles.”

From where they crouched, the approaching police vans came into view. They swept down the road and stopped. Officers flooded the bush with flashlights and high beam floodlights, converging on the wreckage.

Tete took one long glance at the overturned vehicle. There was no movement or any sign of Kego, but he could be in the wreckage. Dead, most likely, he thought grimly. He felt sad, but he knew they could not get involved in the crime scene, especially if the poet was dead. There was no need to interface with the police without direct orders from above.

They turned back, retreating through the moonlit foliage to their SUV. By the time they reached their SUV, the police were already swarming the crash site, combing the wreckage with torches and rifles drawn.

Tete’s expression darkened. The SUV involved in the crash bore DSS registration in the government database and that detail could expose their involvement. Mr Bello would have some explaining or

cover-up to do. What Tete did not yet know was that his boss had been the one pulling all the strings.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

The female agent, stoic and silent throughout, started the engine and turned the car around. They slipped away through the torn ribbon of road, past the debris and the frozen stares of onlookers, away from the carnage.

In the back seat, Brahim stared out the window, taking in the cool night air, his gun resting on his lap.

“Think they got him?” He asked into the silence, voice low, turning to look at the others as if expecting a reply. No one answered.

He shrugged and turned his gaze back to the night. The wind whispered past—cool, haunted, and full of things unsaid. The forest on either side seemed to lean closer, shadows pooling beneath the trees. A half-moon hung low, watching like a sentinel, its light broken now and then by the silhouettes of fleeing birds and thick moving clouds. Behind them, on the abandoned tarmac, the only things left to tell the story were the tire marks, the bullet ridden SUV, the abandoned vehicles, and this weak moonlight glinting on a thousand shards of broken glass scattered on the road.

Eight

EARLIER THAT EVENING...

Dera was still curled on the couch, lost in a fog of worry, in her modest lounge when she heard the faint, dragging sound at her front door. It was followed by a weak, hesitant knock, as if someone was half-heartedly trying to push the door open. Her breath caught. She sprang up, dashed into the kitchen, and her hand closed around the largest knife on the island.

Since that evening, every unexpected sound or sudden movement had become a threat. She crept back to the lounge, approaching the door slowly, blade held low, her heart hammering against her ribs. Whoever was outside fell silent. Then came two soft, deliberate knocks.

“There’s a damn doorbell!” She shouted, her voice a ragged mix of trembling fear and annoyance.

“What do you want?”

“Please...open up.” A familiar voice rasped from the other side, muffled but recognisable. “It’s me Kene.”

Her heart seized. She slapped a hand to her chest as if to hold it from falling out, her eyes wide in disbelief. *Could it really be him?* She flipped on the porch light and peered through the peephole. And there he stood, his shirt soaked in dried blood and his frame hunched in exhaustion. Undeniably, but miraculously alive.

She fumbled with the locks and threw the door open, its wooden form slamming against the wall. He stumbled in as she moved to him, her arms wrapping around his weary body.

“Ouch,” he gasped through gritted teeth.

She started to pull back, but he held her, his grip gentle but unwilling to let go. He leaned his weight against her, and she guided him inside, closing the door softly behind them. Their lips met tenderly in a kiss that said what neither of them had the words for. It was a reaffirmation and a desperate confirmation of life in a country that had tried to steal it. Despite the stiffness in his body and the fatigue shadowing his face, Kene melted into the moment, breathing in her scent like it was the first clean air he’d had in eternity. He had thought he would never see her again.

When they finally pulled apart, she cupped his face and whispered, “What happened? I was so worried. I called and called.” He managed a weak smile, freeing himself from her lovey-dovey hold. He limped toward the couch she’d just abandoned, and her eyes trailed his footsteps, scanning him for injuries.

“I went to Kego’s place. His neighbours said some men took you away. Your car...how did you get here? What happened?” Her questions poured out breathlessly. She needed answers.

Kene sank into the couch, a profound sigh escaping him like a weight falling off his chest. His eyes never left her face. She was radiant with a terrified joy, and in her frantic state, she had not yet registered the true depth of his exhaustion.

“A glass of water, please babe,” he murmured, gesturing faintly.

She disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of cold water and a clean glass. She drew up the side stool, poured him a drink, and handed him the cup. He took it with both hands, gulped it down, then asked for more. She obliged. After the second glass, he leaned back again, exhaling, the cold water a balm on his dry throat.

She put the bottle on the side stool and sat beside him, folding herself gently into the space under his arm. He winced as her head bruised his wounded shoulder where a bullet had grazed him.

“I’m sorry, babe,” she whispered, pulling away.

“Stay,” he said, his voice soft and a soothing balm to her fretting spirit.

Her heartbeat quickened. He was here. He was alive. The fears that had become her companion through the evening began to dissolve. She longed to hold him tightly, but his torn, blood-stained shirt and bandaged wound were stark reminders of the violence he had faced. She simply kissed him lightly on the cheek while resting in the profound relief of his presence.

He turned toward her, his eyes locking with hers. In their depths, she saw not just pain, but a raw vulnerability that stole her breath. Kene saw it in her too, the unwavering certainty of her love. It was a truth that cut through all the chaos of the day, a singular, anchoring point in a nation that had suddenly turned sour. She was the one he wanted. He knew it now more than ever. He could see in her eyes that she was in love with him as much as he was with her. Every man had that moment of realisation when they could see it without doubt. This was his. And this love was more than he had known was possible.

“So tell me what happened,” she urged, her voice soft but insistent, but his stomach grumbled violently—something her impatience did not notice in the moment.

“I’m starving,” he said, with the faintest smirk. “Is there anything to eat?”

Her own stomach rumbled in response as she stood up quietly. She hadn’t eaten either. She had been too worried to think about food.

“I’ll fix something quick,” she said, walking toward the kitchen.

Kene closed his eyes and remained slouched on the couch, his mind spinning through the whirlwind of the day. The silence of the lounge and her soft rustling in the kitchen wrapped around him like a lullaby, but the memories came anyway. They were raw but fuzzy, and unrelenting. It was strange that he survived; he still didn't know every detail of how.

More than an hour before...

He had been unconscious, sprawled in a pool of his own blood on the cold tiles of Kego's bedroom. Around him, shards of the alcohol can he'd thrown glistened like malevolent jewels beneath the overhead glow of the recessed ceiling light, their edges catching the white glow in mocking silence.

Outside the compound, a hesitant cluster of neighbours had formed. Some murmured about going in to check, torn between concern and caution. Others warned that it was unwise; interfering might spell trouble, especially since a police vehicle had departed about ten minutes earlier. The unease hung heavy in the air. Seconds passed and no one emerged from the house to claim the navy-blue car parked at the gate. Dread set in, yet no one dared cross into the compound. Fear governed their murmur and silence.

Then, at precisely 6:20 p.m., an SUV rolled up and parked directly behind the blue Mercedes. Two tall men in plain clothes stepped out, followed by a woman with purposeful eyes. One of the men spoke tersely, instructing the idle spectators to return to their homes. The voice, though calm, brooked no defiance. The neighbours scattered like dry leaves in the wind, slipping into their quiet new mansions without a word.

The trio entered the house swiftly. Upstairs, they found Kene on the bedroom floor. The woman knelt beside him immediately, her trained

fingers pressing against his neck to feel for a pulse. Then she leaned in, her fingers deftly parting his bloodied shirt to inspect the entry wound.

“He’s alive,” she said.

She set to work with chilling efficiency. They placed Kene gently on a wide nylon sheet laid out across the part of the floor untainted by his blood. One of the men supported his limp frame while she extracted a compact kit from her side bag. With a surgeon’s precision, she sterilised the area and slid a slender tool into the bullet wound. The extraction was swift but delicate, her eyes unblinking. The bullet emerged and landed with a soft clink into a metal tray, a thin stream of blood following. She applied pressure with some gauze immediately, then staunched and cleaned the wound, then bandaged it tightly with a pressure wrap.

Meanwhile, the second man moved fast, sanitizing the crime scene. He swept the fragments of the can, mopped the floor, and scrubbed all visible traces of blood from the walls and tiles. The bullet holes on the wall remained because he lacked the material to fix them, a detail not included in his orders. He cleaned the blood splatter around them and was done. He worked with a speed that spoke of immense practice.

Kene began to stir minutes after the bullet was removed. He coughed once violently, then again. His eyes fluttered open to a disorienting blur. A firm but gentle hand held him down as voices swirled above him, fragments filtering through the haze. “...*keep him alive,*” “...*boss’ order.*” He let himself drift, understanding only that these were not his killers.

Once the room was clean, the team carried him out, one man at his shoulders, the other at his legs. The woman followed closely behind and closed the door behind them as they stepped outside the building.

At the gate, they adjusted their grip, hoisting him between them to look like they were helping a drunk friend. It was a calculated

performance for any watching eyes peering through the tinted windows of the silent mansions on the street. Curtains twitched. Lights dimmed. No one stepped out.

Kene was eased into the back seat of his car with deliberate care. Earlier, the men had examined the two phones they found with him. They had swiftly erased the images he had captured that evening, though his X account was locked with an extra PIN layer that stymied them. Kego's phone turned out clean—no images, no threats, no noise. The text sent by the unnamed DSS friend was deleted. Both mobile phones were then dropped beside him in the car.

One man slipped into the driver's seat of Kene's car while the others returned to the SUV they had arrived in. Doors shut, engines hummed and at 6:33 p.m., they drove off into the deepening dusk.

They headed towards the town's outskirts, away from curious eyes and watchful traffic cameras. On the shoulder of a bustling road, beneath a flickering streetlamp, they slowed. Without killing the ignition of their SUV, they parked the blue car carefully—angled just enough to avoid the hazard of being hit by passing vehicles. Thus Kene, unconscious and slumped in the back seat, was left behind with the car. The SUV merged into the twilight flow of traffic and vanished into the dusk for the last time.

When he regained consciousness, it was 7:20 p.m.

His eyelids fluttered open to the glare of streetlamps and the red streaks of passing taillights. Confused, Kene bolted upright—stopped by a pang of pain that shot through his shoulder. He winced and stroked the shoulder which was bandaged efficiently by someone who knew what they were doing. His shirt was stained with dried blood and was torn near the left shoulder seam.

Beneath him lay the two phones. He snatched them up as if to reassure himself they were real. One vibrated softly with missed call notifications: one from Kego, others from Dera.

He tried to return the calls, but the network was bad. He noticed the sparse signal bars on the phones. He must be somewhere with poor coverage.

Swearing under his breath, he eased toward the door and stepped out into the night air. The city's pulse throbbed around him; blaring horns from large trucks, the varied hum of engines, the shuffle of distant pedestrians hurrying for a keke ride home. He limped around the car and slumped into the driver's seat, resting his head on the steering wheel for a moment to catch his breath.

Where to go? Certainly not his own place—no one would help him there. The hospital meant questions, and he was too weak to answer any. Then he thought of Dera. Her place was safe, familiar and close to both his house and the hospital. She also kept emergency medical supplies. That alone was enough, unless she was in her father's clinic at that time for her occasional night shifts. He'd try regardless.

He remembered calling her earlier and wondered if she had gone to Kego's or whether she even heard what he was saying. He was worried at the thought that she might have been there at the wrong time. He had to see her immediately.

He turned on the ignition and pulled out into the chaos of the evening traffic. The road twisted like a long artery feeding the peaceful city with life. Headlights flared into his vision and horns pierced the night like sounds from migrating birds. Kene gritted his teeth and pressed on, weaving between motorcycles and impatient commercial keke drivers, blinking furiously against the dizziness gnawing at the edges of his vision. *He was going to faint if he stayed much longer on this road.* His shoulder ached like there was a fire beneath his skin, and he prayed his reflexes would not betray him before he got to Dera's house.

The few minutes' drive felt like an hour, but he arrived at her house.

Dera's house stood among a row of tastefully terraced homes in a serene corner of the city—a pocket of calm tucked away from the daily grit at the city centre. Her father owned the building. Kene parked carefully behind her car in the driveway, stepped out and walked up to her door. He reached into his pocket for his keys and began fumbling for the spare she had given him. His weak frame caused him to lean a hand against the door instinctively. The low sound it made startled them both. He could not tell the right key to open the door, so he knocked.

Kene snapped back to the present as Dera gently tapped his arm.

“Food’s ready,” she said softly. “Come to the dining table.”

She helped him stand, her hand lightly pressed against his back. He did not need the assistance, but he allowed it. They walked slowly together.

“Thank you, *asa m*,” he whispered as he eased into the chair. *My beautiful one.*

She smiled faintly and sat beside him. They ate in silence. The spaghetti she had made—garnished with peppered tomato sauce, scattered omelette, and fried plantains—was warm and fragrant. It was her way of expressing love—quiet, nourishing, without fanfare.

Afterward, they drew a bath. The tub steamed gently beneath them. Dera helped him undress, her hands careful around the bandage. She flinched when she saw the wound—red, raw, still fresh from the assault. She thought about how lucky he must be to have survived such a hit and she was glad he made it back.

She scrubbed his back in soft circles, rinsed his arms, and resisted the urge to have him right there.

From her emergency kit, she produced a vial of anaesthetic, cotton wool, gloves, thread, and a small curved needle. She numbed the area

and stitched the wound with steady hands, her face set with quiet resolve. Kene didn't flinch either. He watched her, and for a moment, the pain vanished—not just from medicine, but from trust.

They settled back on the couch just before 8 p.m., waiting for the news on Arise TV. As the QLED TV screen flickered to life, Kene began to speak in response to Dera's earlier questions. Afterwards, Dera told her part.

She told Kene about the strange men who had come around looking for Kego at the hospital. The nurse at the reception still expected Kego to return to the hospital for the night. The nurse sounded sure, but she doubted it. She believed he was on the run.

"I'm glad you're okay," Dera said softly.

Kene nodded, his thoughts already elsewhere—fixed on Kego's possible whereabouts. If no one had helped him by now, he doubted his friend would survive the night. The idea of returning to the hospital weighed heavily on his mind, most likely not something he would do.

"Can you call the hospital reception?" He asked suddenly. "I need you to confirm if Kego made it back."

Dera reached for her bag, then hesitated. "Oh. I forgot to tell you," she said, "Kego left his phone at the reception." She took it out from her handbag and handed the phone to Kene.

He stared at the screen, disappointed. He had hoped to call Kego on this line. It meant there was no way to reach him now, unless he was able to find a way to reach them.

"Please call the hospital," he said again, urgency tightening his voice.

She dialled the number at reception and a nurse answered, her tone brisk but tired. The response was as feared; Kego had not returned.

Dera ended the call with a quiet thank you. Kene turned his attention back to Kego's phone. Browsing through it, he found an app he remembered Kego using during their usual weekend hangouts. It was for remote CCTV access. Kego used it to monitor his house while away. He was so paranoid he never joked with the security of his home. Thankfully, this might be the only way to ascertain what happened in that house earlier that evening.

He opened it. The cameras were no longer live so the livefeed was dead.

Of course, Kene thought grimly. *The DVR had been ripped out.* But then, he noticed a folder labeled "Saved Videos." His fingers moved quickly. He tapped the last recording.

"Look at this," he said, turning the screen to Dera as she leaned in beside him.

They watched in stunned silence as the timeline of violence unfolded in the screen. There they were, the intruders. Two men, their faces captured clearly. The video showed them creeping into the house. Then another clip cut to the back of the house; the chase, the fence, Kego scaling over in panic, and the two men following minutes after. It caught everything, even Kene himself circling the premises, taking photographs before he left to alert the police. Then it showed the same men returning to the house.

And then darkness after some time. That must have been the moment they pulled the plug.

"This is it," Dera breathed. "This is the proof we need. We can upload all of it right now."

"I agree," Kene replied. "They want to kill him and cover it up with lies."

He reached for his own phone. His gallery for the entire month was gone.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“What?” Dera’s voice sharpened.

“They wiped my phone clean,” he said. “Every single file in the last month is gone.”

She exhaled slowly. “Hmm.”

He opened his X account, praying it had not been tampered with. Relief washed over him when it loaded and the post from earlier was intact. Over a hundred million views and hundreds of thousands of reposts, quotes, and comments. It was a wildfire.

He was about to upload the videos from his account.

“Wait,” Dera interrupted. “It would hit harder and be more believable if it came from Kego’s account.”

Kene paused, then smiled. “You’re brilliant.”

He logged into Kego’s dormant X account, the one he had helped him set up months ago for promoting his book. Working in silence, he uploaded the CCTV clips in a single, clean, threaded post. No captions. No commentary. Just the cold, stark, irrefutable evidence. Unapologetic, he hit send.

It took just under four minutes for everything to upload. He and Dera immediately reposted it on their personal handles, and Kene quoted it with a photo of himself showing the bandaged shoulder and a caption:

“Here is the proof of the attempt on Kego’s life. He is still missing. I was shot by these assailants in his house, but I survived.”

The response was instantaneous. A surge that ignited the Internet. Within minutes, it eclipsed the earlier post with waves of disbelief, fury, hashtags, and mobilization. Users were tagging news stations, human rights groups, and international watchdogs. Journalists were

dissecting the footage. Activists were calling for nationwide shutdowns. Comment threads exploded in multiple languages. The country's digital nerve had been struck.

It was no longer just a post. It was the beginning of something else entirely. How would the government spin this now? They had announced that police found nothing at the poet's house earlier that evening. What then were these videos? No AI could generate such detailed, timestamped clips. This was real, it had to be. And if the government was trying to cover this up, they must be involved.

It was a spark that set the Internet ablaze. The truth had a way of doing that no matter how savagely suppressed it became. It always does.

In the State House, Mr Bello sat within the thick walls of his office, lined with polished imported oak and bright fluorescent lights he rarely left on.

"What the fuck is this?!" He roared, phone in hand, eyes wide with disbelief. He stood frozen for a heartbeat, then hurled his phone against the leather couch in the corner as if it were something venomous.

"Oh my God!" He gasped, now pacing like a caged animal contemplating its escape. "This is a bloody mess. What do we do now?"

In his mind, the damage was escalating by every second nothing was done to stop it.

"We have to spin this," he muttered. "We have to control it somehow. And fast."

"Gina!"

The door opened immediately. Gina, the same agent who'd been tracking Kego's phone all evening, stepped in, dressed in a finely tailored black suit, her face stone cold.

“Sir?”

“Is the Police Chief still in the State House?” He asked sharply.

“I suppose so, sir.”

“Tell him to meet me here. Now.”

“Yes, sir.”

“No—wait,” he snapped. “I’ll go to him. We can’t afford to waste another bloody minute.”

Gina held the door open as he started for it, then he stopped abruptly.

“And call that incompetent fool in Abakaliki they call Tete. Do it now. Tell him to retrieve that phone they left at the hospital. Apparently, this boy—this Kene guy—has it.”

He clenched his fists, knuckles white.

“Also, find out who the hell told me he was dead. Can anyone on my payroll in that State even do a single thing right tonight?”

His fury was a palpable force in the room.

“On it, sir,” Gina responded, her expression unchanging.

“And you, get ready to do some field work tomorrow,” he hollered over his shoulder as he barged out of the door. “Before this completely gets out of hand.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nine

8:10 P.M.

Tete's convoy crept into the shadowed driveway of the safe house. Just then, his encrypted line buzzed: the DSS DG's number. Tete's stomach clenched. *Not now. Not another failure to explain.* He was hoping for an hour of relaxation for everyone before getting the chief on the line.

He braced himself for Mr. Bello's thunderous rage and answered the phone. Instead, a measured, silken female voice poured through the line—composed, and utterly unexpected.

“It's Gina, from the State Office.”

The car halted beneath the shade over the parking lot. All eyes turned to Tete, and he gave them a vague nod for silence. His team knew any call from that demographic was sacrosanct.

“Go ahead,” he replied cautiously, masking his unease.

The female agent at the wheel, Ola, remained impassive. The others leaned in, their professional curiosity piqued, plus the sound of Gina's voice was irresistible.

“I have an emergency directive from the Chief,” Gina's continued. “Are you in a secure location?”

Tete scanned the compound and the idle street beyond the gutter. “Affirmative.”

“The Chief wants your team to retrieve the mobile device belonging to the Kite. Immediately.”

Tete’s brow furrowed. *The Kite?* His team exchanged puzzled glances. They were wondering who or what that was, from Adam.

“The Kite?” He repeated, playing the necessary game of protocol.

“Yes, sir. The Kite,” she emphasised without skipping a beat.

Tete had already figured out who that was. However, seeking clarification instead of relying on one’s intuition for any information received was part of their training. He just wasn’t ready to admit this was his first time hearing the code name for an oppression he had been tasked to see to success.

“Sorry, do you mean...the guy we’re after?”

“Yes, the alias refers to the poet. He’s been tagged ‘Kite’ for this operation. Were you not informed?”

“Ah.” Tete said, feigning recollection. “Roger that. We’re on it.” It was a lie. Mr Bello hadn’t bothered with aliases when assigning this operation to him, a sign of how simple the job was supposed to have been before things began cascading into chaos.

“One last thing,” she added. “Is the Kite still flying wild?”

There was heavy silence for a few seconds.

“Probability is low,” Tete replied.

“Was it your hit, sir?”

“Negative,” he said flatly. “The other group most likely reached him before we did. The Chief should have been briefed on this by now.”

“Understood. I’ll send the coordinates and tracking logs for the phone shortly.”

The line went dead. No goodbye. Just abrupt silence.

“She didn’t even say bye,” Antler murmured. No one responded. Tete turned to the agent behind the wheel. “You and Antler. This one’s yours. Go now.”

“Yes, sir,” Ola replied crisply.

Antler shifted. “But, sir—” Brahim jabbed him with an elbow, silencing him. *For someone so tired*, Antler wondered, *why would I be sent on this?* He was the lowest ranked of the four—even below Ola—and therefore the most expendable. He knew it. That didn’t make it sit any better.

“Instructions are simple,” Tete said. “Find the device. Wipe everything in it. Leave no trace and dump the phone in the Ebonyi River.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Avoid casualties. Use force only if necessary. Minimal noise, minimal risk.”

“Copy that.”

“And you, Antler,” he turned to the big man, his voice like ice. “Don’t get trigger happy. We don’t want any more complications.”

Tete and Brahim stepped out into the night and headed for the building. Behind them, the SUV reversed slowly and glided away through the driveway onto the street, its lights dimmed, engine humming low, the solar lamps on the tarmac glinting in its wake.

Kene and Dera sat entwined in shared warmth, a sweet quietness settling over them. Kene was feeling better, the worst of the ache dulled by Dera’s soothing balm. They were still watching the 8 p.m. news on Arise TV, their focus flickering in and out. On the glass table in front of them lay their mobile phones and Kego’s—their small arsenal of digital witnesses to the alleged crimes of the government that evening.

The news presenter announced a special segment slated for the following morning: a feature on the meteoric rise of the literary firebrand, who was now tragically caught in a political storm for daring to wield truth like a blade in his poetry.

The screen shifted to Kego's sparsely used X account as the news presenter started dissecting the CCTV footage. Playing on the screen was the grainy clip of the unmistakable two armed men slipping through the poet's compound gate and chasing him into the dense bush behind. The post had already crossed one hundred million views, barely fifteen minutes after it went live. Kene's and Dera's reposts had added fuel to the storm.

The ripple effect had continued to spread. The very idea that someone had been shot in the hunt had detonated through the collective consciousness of the masses. The UN Human Rights Council had issued a statement denouncing the attack, calling it a barbaric affront to artistic freedom and political dissent. Amnesty International followed suit, urging citizens across the country to remain alert, to film, to report any injustice they witness.

Unverified sightings of the poet had begun flooding the Internet. One X user claimed to have seen him earlier that evening at a small hospital in Abakaliki, noticing the man from the trending videos while waiting in the emergency room. *"He was pacing,"* the post read, *"nervous, looking over his shoulder every few seconds. I asked a nurse later who told me he left just after I arrived."*

Another user reported a sighting at a police checkpoint along the Enugu-Abakaliki Expressway—someone resembling Kego speaking with officers—though the user had driven on and caught little else.

Fear and fury were becoming a single, national heartbeat.

In the lounge, Dera leaned into Kene, barely listening to the news, her thoughts drifting from the global storm displayed on the screen to

the man beside her. She could feel the simple, profound rise and fall of his chest. A calming storm of its own. She slid her hand into his trousers—her touch a silent, intimate reassurance—and held him in her palm, squeezing gently. He closed his eyes and exhaled, the tension easing in his shoulders by degrees.

Around 8:15 p.m., Kene yawned, breaking the fragile spell. The day had hollowed him out, and the avalanche of news only kept open the wound of not knowing where Kego might be that night.

He stared blankly at the TV. *Was Kego dead and his body dumped in some shallow grave in the countryside outside Abakaliki? Was he chained in a government black site, his screams muffled beneath concrete? Or was he still out there, on the run, staggering barefoot along lonely bush paths, hungry, and terrified of being hunted?*

He silently prayed it was the latter.

“If he’s not found by morning, we must assume the worst.” Kene muttered.

He knew what he would do. His scheduled appearance with Arise TV tomorrow would no longer be an interview; it would be a call to arms. Thankfully, the nation was already riled up. The people wouldn’t need much of a nudge.

On air, reports came in of a vigil outside the State House in Abuja, organised by the literary community in Abuja to support the search for Kego. Citizens—mostly young people from all walks of life—had gathered with candles, lanterns, and whatever light they could find. The camera panned across the stream of flickering flames in the darkness. A chant rose like a rhythmic, defiant wave on the sea shore:

“Give us Kego or go! Give us Kego or go!”

A faint smile touched Kene’s lips. This was it. The tide was turning. If Kego remained missing by morning, the movement would swell beyond imagination. This was what the nation needed, from the north to

the south, from the east to the west—a demonstration devoid of ethnic or religious interference.

He exhaled slowly. A deep breath that was part grief, part gratitude. Then came the dull throb in his shoulder, tugging at him like a ghost seeking to be heard in the waking world, a subtle reminder of the day's violence.

He stood, nudging Dera gently. "Do you have more painkillers?"

"Of course," Dera said softly, rising with him, and reaching for the remote to switch off the TV. "Come with me."

She led him gently by the right arm into the kitchen, fetched a bottle of water, then headed upstairs to her room. He followed in silence, eyes drawn to the sway of her legs. Something stirred within him—the memory of the night before, the intimacy they had shared. Tonight, she had proven herself more than a muse; she was his sanctuary, his shield, his lover. The desire crept quietly at first, then grew urgent with every glimpse of her before him as she walked up the stairs.

The bedroom was a sanctuary of soft pinks and delicate scents, an unmistakable mark of feminine taste. Kene felt the longing bloom deeper. As Dera bent to open a drawer by the bedside, her blouse strained, her bosom accentuated by the curve of her posture. He reached forward and ready to cup them in both hands, almost involuntarily. Events of that evening vanished from his mind.

"Do you mind if I hold this lovely art while you get that?" He asked.

She stood at once, spinning to face him, medicine in one hand, water in the other, her face beaming with smiles. "Are you sure that's what you want to do?"

Kene's hands rose to her face, cupping her cheeks as he drew her toward him. Their lips met—soft at first, then deepening, tongues

dancing in a fevered embrace. Dera trembled slightly, her arms frozen mid-air, unsure whether to hold on to or surrender the items she carried.

When he finally broke the kiss, breathless, she turned quickly to place the tablet and water on the bedside stool. He reached forward, his hands cupping her breasts with a reverence that was both desire and gratitude.

When she spun back to face him, their lips found each other again, faster this time, more urgent. They fumbled with their clothes, helping each other undress between moans and stifled laughter, losing themselves in the taste of passion and the scent of safety. The pain in his shoulder became a distant fire, overshadowed by a much greater heat.

The world outside would wait, or simply move on.

Mr. Bello sat stiffly in the IGP's office. The room was dim, heavy curtains drawn as if to keep the encroaching night out. A single brass lamp lit the wide mahogany desk where the Police Chief reclined, radiating a smug satisfaction.

"My boys in the force got the job done," the IGP said, his tone laced with subtle pride.

"Do we have proof?" Mr. Bello's voice carried tight urgency, his fingers interlocked as though in prayer.

"Not yet, but I'm told we lost three of our men in the operation."

Bello blinked. "Why go that far?"

The IGP shrugged, his expression unreadable. "It wasn't part of the plan, but plausible deniability—once we confirm the poet's death, we can blame the whole incident on the usual scapegoat. Unknown gunmen. The more chaotic, the cleaner the narrative."

"Hmm..." Mr. Bello muttered, a flicker of doubt in his eyes. He despised anything that drew sympathy from the people. He knew the

news of the poet's death would sit heavy on the masses now paying close attention. Expecting them to simultaneously sympathise with the government would be overreaching. They would see through it. But the deed was already done. He could only prepare for the outcome.

"Units are on the ground now," the IGP continued, "and the military is en route from the COAS himself. By morning, we'll have clarity, but as it stands, rest assured that the job is done."

Despite his doubt, dark relief washed over Bello like warm rain—not because the mission had succeeded, but because it wasn't his men who pulled the final trigger. That distance, that plausible deniability, meant everything for the agency, especially with the faces of two of their operatives already circulating online as the assailants. Unknown gunmen attacking a DSS vehicle would sound great.

Yet something kept gnawing at him. The tension online had reached fever pitch, the footage from Kego's X account still spreading like wildfire—from the very DVR his boys had claimed was wiped.

Tete had questions to answer, with Brahim and Antler caught on the CCTV footage. Regardless of what happened to the poet, those two had to be scrubbed from the agency. Their names could never be whispered in the same breath as the Service again. They had become liabilities. Dispensable ones.

As he left the IGP's office, the air in the corridor felt stiffer, thinner. Then, like a spark behind the eyes, a wicked clarifying idea struck.

He dialled Tete's number.

"Are you alone?" he asked when Tete picked up.

"Yes, sir."

"Listen carefully," he said, his voice a low growl. "Brahim and Antler are now the fall guys for this operation. Frame them as rogue agents that the agency was about to let go. Say they intercepted the

police convoy and tried to kidnap the poet for ransom. Spin it however you want, just make it believable. Whatever you do, they're done. Erased. We cannot associate with them in any way, past, present, or future."

There was a stunned silence on the other end.

"And one more thing," Bello added, his voice dropping further, "I need to be absolutely sure the poet is dead. Verify it and get back to me ASAP."

He ended the call, eyes narrowing as he stared out into the darkness pooling across the Abuja skyline. The chants from the vigil beyond the wall tugged at him.

Ola and Antler followed the location pin Gina sent to a quiet, lamp-lit street in an elite quarter of the city. This was a part of town where the rich lived in guarded silence, their mansions standing like monuments to privilege, walled, gated, and whispering secrets in shining marble.

They pulled up just across the street from their target. A fine terraced building stood before them, its architecture angular and modern, softened by the warm wash of security floodlights. There were five distinct terraced homes, stacked in a quiet rhythm along the row of the building. But the tracker had not narrowed it down, it only pinged the general location. The phone could be in any of them.

Ola hesitated, her fingers brushing over her phone, tempted to call Tete for further directions.

Antler, squinting through the windshield, leaned forward. "That car," he said, voice low. "The blue one. I saw it earlier in front of Kego's compound."

Ola followed his gaze. A sleek blue Mercedes rested quietly in one of the driveways, its metallic surface reflecting the streetlight like a mirror. Her stomach flipped. She remembered it too. It was the same

car Kene had arrived in, the one they had left him bleeding in earlier that evening after the almost brutal cleanup at Kego's. He had lived. But Antler did not know that part of the story.

"You sure it's the same one?" She asked with steady voice, playing along.

"If the phone is here, then yes. The odds are on our side."

Ola gave a subtle nod, masking the unease crawling up her spine. "Alright. Let's proceed with caution."

They slipped out of the SUV and crossed the street, their movements light and deliberate, their eyes fixed on the blue car like wolves circling their prey.

Inside the house, Kene lay beneath Dera, lost in the warmth and wonder of what they shared.

She moved above him with a rhythm borne of yearning, her body a sculpture of desire silhouetted against the dim light spilling through the open blinds. His eyes were half-lidded, sweat glistening along his brow. His injured shoulder flared with pain, but he welcomed it, transfigured by the ecstasy of the moment. His hands gripped her waist like lifelines, grounding him in the sheer, aching beauty of her.

She gasped from that deep place where love and lust entwined, her moans a raw, unrestrained prayer spoken more through flesh than sound. Kene's breath came in staggered pulls, his pulse a drumbeat in his ears. In that moment, the world had faded. There was no State, no surveillance, no betrayal—only the two of them, the undeniable truth of flesh and sweat.

The doorbell rang.

A single, sharp, unforgiving chime that shattered the moment like porcelain knocked from a shelf. Their bodies froze, caught in the cusp of his release.

Dera clutched his shoulders, her eyes wide with a new kind of terror. Kene winced, stopped mid-thrust, the world rushing back in with the force of a physical blow.

“Who the fuck is that at this time of night?” Dera hissed, her voice a ragged whisper of frustration and fear.

They held their breath, listening to the thundering of their own hearts in the sharp silence that followed.

The bell rang again.

Ten

IN A SECLUDED chamber within the fortified walls of the State House, His Excellency, President Ibe Banjo sat—not in the grandeur of the high-backed chair meant for men of power, but perched uneasily on the armrest of a sofa, his tailored agbada creasing under the weight of a mind burdened with dread of what may become of his empire. Dim lights cast long, skeletal shadows on the walls, echoing the growing uncertainty within the room. Opposite him, the First Lady and their son, Ibe Banjo Jr., sat in silence thick with unspoken anxieties.

The television flickered with headlines and heated commentaries—a hostile eye in the room, broadcasting the roar of networks that had long ago refused the regime’s bribes. They were the last free voices of the nation, and tonight, they were screaming, every one the president switches to in hope of reprieve.

His vision blurred as he watched a montage of street protests from the election year, expert analysis from his detractors, and excerpts of the poetry collection that sought to bring his government to its knees—all airing unfiltered and unapologetic across stations once muted by fear.

A presenter on Arise TV was reading one of the poems aloud in a daring display of insubordination against the bans placed the previous night. The poem was infuriating in its subtle call for revolt, the title a veiled summons to arms against his presidency—a recurring theme in the infamous collection.

We Will Storm their Stead!

*We're not even fed up,
We're only sad that it's not us
Who do the embezzling—and thus
We complain for more sup.*

“Isn’t that enough for the masses?” The President muttered, a venomous whisper. “What more do they want?”

His wife and son seemed lost in their own thoughts.

*But the day we awake
Or stop sleeping with our eyes closed
These oppressors will feel opposed
And know what is at stake:
For we will storm their stead
And chase them from our common wealth
Where they feed and steal without stealth
And leave us poorly fed.*

*We still sleep with eyes closed,
Unaware of the pow’r we wield
When unity becomes our shield.
How greed has us overdosed!*

“Who is supposed to be regulating these fools?” He queried, though he already knew the answer.

These media houses had endured it all: threats, frozen bank accounts, and journalists silenced under the cover of night. Yet here they were again, relentless and emboldened, openly daring him, declaring they would no longer sit in silence. He would need to press the NBC chairman into action come morning, if this didn’t stop on its own. He would order his replacement if he failed to do his job.

The State House landline buzzed relentlessly, pausing only in brief intervals as if to catch its breath before ringing again. Aides shuffled in and out bearing updates, their faces etched with growing alarm: embassies were demanding explanations, foreign governments issuing warnings and threatening sanctions if it was confirmed that the poet—now a near-mythic figure—had been targeted by the State. The world was watching, and judging. It was the judging he disliked the most.

The First Lady’s voice was soft and controlled when she finally spoke. “Maybe we should unban the book. It might calm things.”

The President turned briefly toward her and silenced her with a sharp glance, his pride a wall of iron, his paranoia too deep for reason. He wondered whether she spoke out of fear for his presidency or out of disdain for his predicament. She had not agreed with his decision to ban the book, but he had gone ahead regardless.

His son stirred, scrolling on his tablet, then looked up. “They just released CCTV footage from Kego’s X account. Reposted by that Kene guy—the same one who started this. It’s already gone viral. That’s what’s fuelling everything.”

Ibe Banjo exhaled slowly, frustration burning in his chest. “Who is this Kene?” He asked, his tone dangerously quiet. “Do you know more about him?”

“Just some influencer on X,” Ibe Banjo Jr. replied with a shrug. “A nobody before today. But he’s clearly very close to the poet and was key to the book’s pre-launch marketing. His large social media followers made this possible.”

The president hissed. That cursed platform. He had fought for years to take it down, blaming it for protests, and potential revolts. But every attempt to clamp it shut had only made it more defiant, earning him stinging rebukes from foreign governments and tech watchdogs—often affecting foreign aids. Now, it was hosting his greatest humiliation in real time.

From across the globe, statements poured in condemning the assault on free speech, on art, on youth—yet none mentioned that the poems were direct incitement to sedition, a calculated attempt to rally the people against his rule. No one would care if there was a coup against him tonight, yet they expect him to always be the one that did things right. Others could say their minds without filter and expect to go unquestioned.

“When did inciting violence against a sitting president become free speech?” he asked no one in particular. “And where the hell is the DSS Director-General?”

He gestured to a DSS aide. “Go get him to my office ASAP.”

The President tapped his foot impatiently. Kego’s death was supposed to be a cold deterrent. A final message. He hadn’t needed proof of the State’s involvement—only the whispers, the suspicion, the fear. That was the currency of power. He would have held a national mourning for the boy, spun a tragedy from the State’s necessary act of erasure, and the people, cowed by the chilling unspoken threat, would have fallen back in line.

Instead, people were lighting candles outside his gates. Small groups at first, but growing bolder, more determined, and anything but silent—as if they are mourning a messiah before he had even been

crucified. He had already ordered the army to reinforce the perimeter. When the news of the boy's death broke, they would scatter like startled birds before morning. They had to. Mr. Bello would know how to frame it.

Just then, the DSS aide stepped in.

"Sir, Mr. Bello is waiting in your inner office."

Ibe Banjo stood, brushing imaginary dust from his kaftan. He needed good news, not excuses. There was no truth that could not be twisted, no tragedy too great to spin. He needed that tragedy now more than anything else.

Without a word, he strode out, leaving his wife and son behind—two silent witnesses to the tide swelling on every screen, every street, and in the hearts of the people being interviewed live on Channels TV. He walked all the way to his home office.

This had better be the good news I've been waiting for, he thought, stepping briskly into his inner office.

The room glowed in moody amber from an antique chandelier. Standing stiffly by the conference table were Mr. Bello, DG of State Security, and the Inspector-General of Police. The ornate grandfather clock in the corner read 8:20 p.m.

They rose at his entrance, offering clipped salutes. The president waved them down and took his seat at the head of the table.

"Is the job done, Mr. Bello?" His voice was a cold blade—clipped, commanding, with a glint of suppressed fury.

"We believe so, Your Excellency," the DG replied cautiously.

"My men believe the mission was accomplished," the police chief added. "But...we had three police casualties."

The president's eyes narrowed. "Three?"

“Yes, sir. They were ambushed during the operation by our own men,” the chief admitted, his voice laced with forced calm. “To make the scene...authentic.”

President Banjo leaned back and exhaled slowly. “That may work in our favour, it makes it easier to distance ourselves from any State involvement. Plausible deniability.”

He turned sharply to Mr. Bello. “And the videos? I heard something went public on social media. Who leaked it?”

“Not a leak in the conventional sense,” Mr. Bello said. “We believe the poet had remote access to the compound’s CCTV. He must have backed up the footage to his phone. We’ve been tracing him through that device, but it appears he ditched it—most likely left it somewhere his friend could retrieve it. That’s how the footage made it online.”

“And the implications?” Banjo pressed, eyes cold and calculating.

“There’s no direct trail to us,” Bello replied. “But we’re retrieving the phone as we speak. I’ve also ordered the lead operative to distance the agency from the exposed field team. They were originally our boys from back in the day.”

“In fact,” the police chief interjected, “we plan to frame those men as rogue agents turned kidnappers—men who ambushed the poet for ransom and killed three police officers in the process.”

“Excellent,” President Banjo said, nodding. “Make sure the optics are clean. I want undeniable proof of that boy’s demise on my desk by morning. No more excuses.”

He rose. “Prepare a presidential address for 9 a.m. sharp. I want the world to see a man in absolute control.”

“Understood, sir,” echoed Mr. Bello, though a tightness had settled in his chest. He could not shake the gnawing dread that the poet might still be alive. If he was, no spin, no scapegoat, and no disavowal would suffice. The people knew their government far too well.

The president waved them out with a dismissive flick of his wrist. Both men bowed slightly and exited, tension trailing behind them like gunsmoke in a windless room.

He sat back at his desk. His eyes caught the paperback lying on it. He frowned, stared at it.

One of his spies had returned a day ago with this copy of the doomed collection. He had read what the poet wrote. He had listened to his book launch speech. He couldn't contain his anger, and had to order an immediate ban to curtail local distribution. The young man was literally calling for his head on a platter.

His jaw tightened now at the memory. He wondered if the poet's death would suffice.

He picked up the book and leafed through it.

The usurper ought be hanged on a pike, one line read, paraded in the streets where the homeless dwell, bearing the blood of the slaughtered ones.

He read further. The poet had written a playbook—how to deal with tyrants, how to forcefully remove them and why success largely depends on unity among the people. *For the oppressed, read another, who are more powerful than their oppressors, need shake off their slumber, and stop praying for the light at the end of the tunnel when they could walk it holding up their own flames.*

He shut the book and tossed it into the waste bin, his forehead creasing.

"The poet does deserve worse than death," he muttered to the empty room. "And if he were to rise from the dead, I would hunt him down until he never woke again."

He retrieved the book from the bin and walked out of the office. His detail followed. He held it out for one of the agents.

“Burn this to ashes.”

Tete sat in the safe house, the order to sacrifice his own men a bitter pill lodged in his throat. Brahim and Antler.

It was a brutal ask given the bond he had shared with them over three years as their supervisor in the state capital. They were not among his inner—certainly not among his top five—but they had always been his go-to hands for the grimmest jobs. Their failure had been spectacular, but the directive to erase them felt like a betrayal he would have to swallow whole.

The pair had consistently worked as a unit for over two years now—tight, sharp, efficient. Precision was their signature, mastery their method. Rarely had they failed. But lately, it felt as though unseen forces were unraveling their every move, rendering them pawns in a game where the rules kept shifting.

He thought of Brahim—technically in the clear from earlier discomfort but still nursing his troubled eyes and haunted by the possibility of blindness. The man had said a while ago, in a voice tight with dread, *“I’d rather die than go blind.”* Then there was Antler, the duo’s brute force—reckless, hot-blooded, driven more by impulse than strategy. The codename suited him. He was also the loudmouth, the comic relief. Tete hoped he would rein in that temper during the errand he had sent him on with Ola.

Ola was his favourite. Her assignment tonight might be limited, but she was the one person who would walk into fire if he asked. She had never questioned him. He had recruited her straight out of university. She was a fresh criminal law graduate, six years ago in Lagos. He had trained her himself, groomed her like the sister he never had. When he was transferred to the East for a special assignment, he brought her as part of his team. When he needed Antler kept in check, she was the one he trusted.

Now he had to go alone to the scene of the shooting. He harboured a sliver of hope that the poet had survived, but truth be told, it was a desperate hope. From the wreckage he had seen and gunfire that preceded it, survival seemed near-impossible. No official report had surfaced yet—perhaps none ever would—but Tete knew better than to wait on bureaucracy for closure. He would assume the worst until proven otherwise.

He felt sad for the young man whom he had not wanted to see his bullet-riddled body—something he'd hoped could be avoided. But the mission had moved on with or without him, apparently beyond his scope of control. An overreaching misuse of state machinery, but what could he do. He was only a pawn in the game.

DG Bello's text had buzzed his secure line that afternoon. 4:20 p.m.

He was at the State office in Abakaliki.

Urgent mission. Get two of our most ruthless operatives with you in a secure location. I'll call in ten. Move now.

He'd taken Antler and Brahim immediately, knowing nothing about what lay ahead. Political assassinations were common enough, but rarely urgent. This was different.

They were barely pulling into the lot when Mr. Bello called again.

"I've just sent you a location and a picture. This should be done quickly. Twenty minutes. This is top priority for the president."

"What's the mission?"

"Check the message."

Tete opened it. The image stopped his breath. He composed himself.

The Poet. Kego Nwachukwu. Same Kego.

"I need proof of death in twenty minutes," Bello said.

"Yes, sir."

“Make it clean. He wouldn’t see it coming.”

“Will do, sir.”

The line went dead.

“What’s up boss?” Antler’s voice jarred him from his silence.

“Get on with it,” he said. His head was heated. “I’ve got a headache. Do the job fast and neat.”

They left with the SUV. His chest tightened. A hit on the poet for his collection? He’d been at the book launch a day before—on Bello’s demand, unnoticed. He’d secured a copy and sent it expressly to the State House that same day. The next evening came the ban. Now this?

He hadn’t expected it. Any of it.

He took one of the smaller, nondescript vehicles from the safe house and left Brahim asleep on the lounge couch. The man’s face was now a viral image across social media—Tete had only seen the trending posts after Antler and Ola had left. Bringing Brahim along for surveillance would have been reckless. He might be recognised by officers not privy to the official plan to eliminate the poet.

He left for the crash site with a subdued sense of urgency.

Twenty minutes later, he arrived. Traffic, though managed, moved sluggishly under tight military control. Uniformed men flooded the road—armed, alert, and everywhere. He considered circling the area but settled on a quick stop. As he neared a cluster of police vans, he eased out of traffic and parked by the roadside.

A constable moved toward him, flashlight sweeping his face.

“You can’t park here, sir,” the man began, squinting.

Tete shielded his eyes with one hand and retrieved his badge with the other. The beam dimmed. The officer stepped closer, eyes catching the seal and the DSS acronym. He straightened immediately.

“Where’s your patrol leader?” Tete asked evenly.

“Please follow me, sir.”

He was led through a cordon of police and soldiers to a knot of high-ranking officers. Tete flashed his badge again. They stood to greet him. He acknowledged them with a quiet nod.

“What’s the casualty count?” he asked, cutting through pleasantries.

“Regretfully, we lost three police officers,” the inspector replied. “And we recovered two other civilian bodies beyond recognition.”

“Two?” Tete’s brow twitched. “Genders?”

“Both male.”

“Where are the bodies now?”

“Moved for official autopsy.”

Autopsy. His mind stirred. *Could one of them be Kego?* He resisted the urge to ask outright. *Would they know if the bodies were unrecognisable?*

“Any witnesses?”

“Two of our men escaped,” the inspector said.

“Where are they now?”

“Taken to the station. Still shaken, but alive. Being treated like heroes, as expected.”

Heroes, Tete thought. *That’s generous.* More likely, they were the culprits. Still, they might hold the thread he needed. But that could wait until morning. It was approaching 9 p.m.

He walked to the wreckage, standing under the cold gaze of the floodlights. The black SUV lay twisted and overturned, drips of thickened blood and shattered glass pieces strewn around it. Forensics crews combed it meticulously. Tete scanned the scene. If there were traces linking the Service to this mess, they’d be buried eventually. And

if not, the government had mastered the art of spin. That was the DG's specialty.

He exhaled—neither angry nor grieved, just resolved. He waved off the sadness creeping into his heart.

He returned to his car, texted Ola a brief note to give him a full debrief when she returned with the phone, then turned on the ignition and drove off into the slow pulse of the city night.

He would go home this time. *He survived*, he wished.

At Dera's terraced house, Kene sat up at the second ring of the bell, his left shoulder flinching instinctively, the ache from the earlier pleasure dull but still present. Dera had shifted to the edge of the bed. She pulled the pink bedsheet to her chest, her bare skin trembling beneath its thin cover, eyes searched his face—anxious, wanting, uncertain.

"Stay here," Kene whispered, voice low but firm. He reached for his boxers, slid them on, then stepped out swiftly.

The house felt colder. Stiller.

He descended the stairs barefoot, each step calculated and silent. In the kitchen, he reached for the largest knife, its handle worn from use, blade gleaming under the dimmed overhead light.

Crossing into the lounge, he moved with quiet precision to the window by the entrance. The door, deeply recessed into the porch wall, revealed nothing in the dim outdoor lighting. But beyond, the street lights shone bright. He saw the SUV parked on the road.

The weight of the day's chaos hung over him like a second skin.

A third knock came.

"Who is it?" he called, his tone cutting through the silence. "And what do you want?"

A brief, deceptive pause.

Then a woman's voice—cool, almost polite—broke the silence.

“We just want to talk,” she said.

Ola did not know what else to say. Her heart beat unevenly. She tried to sound calm, but the words carried unease.

“Please open the door,” she continued, “We’ll talk briefly and be on our way.”

Antler stood beside her, tense, gun drawn. She had told him to holster it—to let her speak first, test the ground before resorting to aggression. They did not yet know for certain if this was the right house. But Antler was not built for patience. He was sure this was it with that blue car parked outside. He was not taking anymore chances that evening.

Inside, Kene's brow furrowed. That voice tugged at his memory. He had heard it recently, somewhere, but he could not place it. The sound of it made his skin crawl.

She hadn't given her name either.

“I don't know who you are or what you want to talk about,” he said, keeping his distance from the door.

“I want to talk about the phone,” came her response.

Kene's eyes narrowed. “Which phone?”

“Kego's phone.”

A chill, sharp as ice, ran down his spine.

Everything clicked. These were not random intruders. They were not here to talk either. They were assassins, here to silence the truth. The same people who had been after Kego's life. The president's hands.

And she said 'we.' How many this time?

"Please go away," Kene said firmly. "I don't want to talk to you. I won't let you take that phone. It's not even here."

Antler's jaw clenched. That confirmed it. Diplomacy was finished.

"You better open this door or we do it the hard way!" he barked.

Ola winced. "Let me try something," she murmured, pulling a slim metallic hairpin from her bun. She knelt at the lock and began picking it with practised ease.

Inside, Kene heard the faint tick of metal against metal.

"If you barge in here, I swear, I'll shoot you dead!" he shouted. He had no weapon but the blade.

Ola's fingers went still.

"He's bluffing," Antler whispered.

"You can't be sure," she replied, her voice sharp. "What if he's not?"

"Then get ready to fire back."

Kene stood completely still, his heart thudding against his ribs. He could hear the shuffle of feet beyond the door and the low murmur of voices. He knew they would not leave.

The lock clicked. They were in.

His grip tightened on the knife. Without a sound, he slipped behind the door, breath steadying. His eyes darted to the lounge. The phones sat on the glass table in front of the couch.

Damn it.

He moved—one fluid motion across the room, bare feet silent on the tiled floor. He nearly slipped. He grabbed Kego's two phones and

pushed them deep into the left and right corners of the couch cushions. He could not risk either falling into their hands. If anything had happened to Kego, these phones were the only proof of how the State had silenced him. He would not give them up without a fight.

Antler was itching to storm the house, his finger curled tight on the trigger, but Ola shoved him behind her. She paused, listening. Muffled footsteps echoed faintly from within.

She pushed the door open gently, gun half-raised, sweeping the dim room with her gaze. Antler followed closely and shut the door quietly behind him.

Kene stood by the couch, shirtless, breath shallow, one hand raised in surrender. In the other, the blade of the large kitchen knife caught the low light.

“Drop the knife,” Ola said, her voice even. “We’re only here for the phone.”

“You mean my phone?” Kene asked, lowering the knife slowly to the floor.

“We don’t care about your phone,” Ola replied flatly. “We want Kego’s phone. The one with the videos you posted on X.”

Kene gave a half-smile. “You’re too late. It’s not here.”

“You’re lying,” Antler barked, stepping forward, gun aimed squarely at Kene’s chest. “You’ll be dead if you don’t hand it over now.”

Ola moved to the small table and scanned the two phones resting there. Her face tightened. Neither was what they wanted.

“You really don’t want this to get ugly,” she warned, her tone hardening. “My friend here has a short fuse and a long list of regrets.”

“You’re one of the guys in the video,” Kene said, fixing his gaze on Antler.

Antler had not seen the video—but he knew about it from what Ola had told him. The poet must have had remote CCTV access. That means his face was already out there, and anonymity in daylight was gone. The thought made his anger flare hotter.

“Shut up and get the phones before I shut your mouth permanently,” he warned.

Ola raised a hand to settle him.

Upstairs, Dera had not wasted a second. The moment Kene left the room, she retrieved the emergency phone hidden in her drawer and dialled her father. Her voice trembled as she explained: dangerous people were at the door. She was sure. She begged him—call the Police Commissioner, send someone, anyone. Time was of the essence. She also told him about Kene’s return and the gunshot wound he came back with.

Her father, startled, said he’d make the call immediately. Within minutes, officers were dispatched. He rang her back to confirm.

“Stay hidden,” he said, “until the police arrive.”

The waiting gnawed at her. The murmurs below disturbed her. She wanted to know what was happening down there. She tiptoed out, barefoot, grabbing the fire extinguisher from the wall bracket in the hallway, clutching it tightly as she descended the stairs. *Kene might need her*, she thought. *The extinguisher might come in useful.*

At the last step near the lounge, her foot caught the slick edge of the tile. She slipped. The extinguisher flew from her grasp, spun wildly in the air, and crashed into the polished floor of the lounge with a heavy metallic clang.

“Tell me where—” Ola’s sentence was cut short. Her eyes widened as she caught the movement in real time.

The extinguisher sailed through the air like a rogue missile. Behind it, Dera appeared—hair wild, face pale, frantically trying to regain her balance.

Antler reacted on pure instinct, reading it as an attack. He swung his gun toward her, finger already beginning to squeeze.

Kene saw what was about to happen and lunged without thinking. He could not let that bullet reach her.

“No!” Ola shouted. “Don’t shoot!”

Too late. The shot cracked out—unnaturally loud in the confined space. Antler’s bullet, meant for Dera, found Kene’s chest as he threw himself into its path. The impact slammed him backward. He collapsed at her feet as she finally found her footing, her face a mask of frozen horror.

As Antler began to swing his weapon back toward Dera—as though unsatisfied—Ola pulled her own trigger. Her gun had no muffler. The report was sharp and loud, reverberating through the street outside. The bullet struck Antler cleanly in the stomach. He dropped without a sound, profound surprise fixed on his face.

Both bodies hit the floor in near unison. The fire extinguisher clanged once, twice, then a final time before rolling to a stop. A glass vase shattered somewhere in its path, its pieces scattering across the tiles.

Silence followed. Breathless and harrowing. Then came a tense, sorrowful shock.

Dera had caught herself mid-fall. Now she stood dazed, staring at what lay before her.

From beyond the gate, sirens tore through the night, wailing louder, drawing nearer.

“Shit!” Ola gasped, her voice sharp with panic. She took in the scene but knew there was nothing more she could do.

She spun and bolted from the house, steps reckless on the concrete. She reached the SUV just as the sirens surged closer, louder. She slammed the door, ignited the engine, and the tyres screeched as she pulled off, vanishing into the shivering dark, her mind turning over who could have called the police as she fled.

Behind her, inside the house, Dera’s raw scream ripped through the night, rising above the hum of a city turning in for the night, above the approaching wail of sirens. Her love lay at her feet, dying in a pool of his blood.

Eleven

TWO DAYS EARLIER...

Kego sat alone in his lush apartment, bathed in the warm glow of filtered daylight, his eyes on the bluish hue of the TV screen. His publisher had just announced the launch of his poetry collection, *Echoes of the Broken Republic*. On the table in front of him, three pristine copies of the book lay like offerings. He held a fourth, its pages fanned open, but his mind was elsewhere—drifting back, unspooling the thread of a life that had led him to this point in his career.

He thought of the quiet ache that had followed him from boyhood, a deep longing for his voice to matter, and of how this book was his way of speaking out. Just the same way his father spoke through his articles before they killed him.

As a teenager, he had devoured Shakespeare, Achebe, and Orwell—doing menial jobs just so he could afford the books. Their works whispered truths that made him feel seen. He dreamt of becoming not just a great writer, but one willing to write things others were scared to—a literary icon celebrated for standing up against power. Beyond the ambition, however, was a simpler, more urgent need: to be heard. To unburden his thoughts onto the world. He needed to shout the truth into the endless gusts of wind, and let them carry it to the stars, and from the stars to every listening soul out there.

All he ever wanted was to be a voice for the people too afraid to speak for themselves. He had not foreseen that such a dream could

bring fear to everyone around him—that it could lead to threats on his life.

Months prior, Yeks had been both ecstatic and terrified. His elation came tempered with warning: “These verses are fierce. Too fierce. Some of the poems are politically explosive. While the theme of awakening the sleeping masses is strong, it could easily be misconstrued as a threat by those at the helms of power.”

Yeks had asked if Kego wanted to remove the most incendiary poems. He refused. His resolve was granite. The poems had to be published so the nation could be awakened—if truly the people wanted change. He would not cower before the few in power who oppressed the masses. He would give the masses a chance to decide what they would rather have. *It was the responsibility of the artist to deliver truth untethered to fear or prejudice, the choice of the powerful to interpret that truth as they wished, and the right of the people to react to it as it affected them.*

Yeks said he believed the collection would sell, that its political defiance would only feed its popularity. But he warned him again: “The people in power may not forgive you.” Kego did not flinch. He was not staging a revolution with guns, but with his pen—and it would not tremble before tyranny. His verses would stand, and they would scream without a veil over their mouth.

His publishers were thrilled. They saw the book’s controversy as a perfect storm for virality, exactly what Kego craved.

Kene, his best friend, had begged him to delay publishing those dangerous verses, to wait until he was safely out of the country, but Kego refused.

It was Kene who built the book’s massive pre-launch hype online, stirring waves that led to thousands of pre-orders. Kego barely used social media; his accounts had been created by Kene solely to promote

the book's release. Still, thanks to Kene, the public was expectant. Many people had been looking forward to this day.

Now, as he stared at the launch announcement, his heart beat with a mix of hope and dread. Would readers understand the urgency in his words? Would they take action? Would his poems shake the country from its deep-rooted rest on mediocrity? More than anything, he wished the government would listen and not silence his voice. His words were a call for course correction, not a declaration of war.

The launch held the next day at the prestigious Abakaliki Conference Centre. It drew politicians, friends, colleagues, and journalists in their droves. Unbeknownst to them, spies had been dispatched by the State. The regime did not trust anything as hyped as the book. The announcement had aired on too many channels to be ignored.

The hall, designed for one thousand five hundred people, was packed. Everyone wanted a signed copy, as if they already knew this was about to become a forbidden book. The two hundred copies Kego had requested from the publishers were auctioned off to the highest bidders, raising nearly ten million naira in addition to donations from wealthy friends and colleagues in attendance.

It was not just the limited copies or the pre-release buzz that drove the crowd. It was Kego's voice.

He took the podium for only ten minutes, but it felt like thunder echoing through the room throughout. His composure was calm but fierce. He called for a change in the trajectory of the nation's affairs, pausing to mourn the protesters mowed down after the rigged presidential election months before. He lamented the jailing of the leading opponent, and asked a question that silenced the hall:

"Have we not had enough?"

He questioned the people's endurance of injustice, and mockery while the children of the political elite revelled and partied unchecked. The tension in the hall was heavy. The speech made the presidency quake. Rumours swirled that the president, in fury, had asked if social media could be blacked out, for even a day, to halt the video's spread. All Kego had done was ask bold, necessary questions—he spoke the truth, and that truth became a thorn in their flesh.

That night, his phone rang. His mother, who lived in the village, had somehow seen the speech.

“My son, you have to be very careful,” she pleaded.

He assured her that he would be fine.

In the present, Kego sat in silence in a mud farmhouse deep in the bush, surrounded by the smell of dust and dead leaves, shivering without a blanket. He knew it was that speech, the fire he had lit, that brought him here, hunted and in hiding. Strangely, he no longer felt any regret. Afraid? Of course, his life was in grave danger because of it.

That ten-minute firestorm had not only sent the nation spinning, it had sent his book soaring. Despite the government's swift ban, it had gone more viral than he could have imagined, an instant bestseller by every metric.

He sat on the ground, back pressed to the cold dusty wall, arms folded over his chest. In his mind, he heard the speech again. If given another chance, he would do it again. There was no point regretting it now. He had spoken from the heart, within the boundaries of the law. If they were hunting him for telling the truth, then they feared his voice. They were afraid of the hearts his poems would wake.

And that, to him, was all the proof he needed: his voice had finally been heard. The attempt had nearly cost him his life three times in one evening, but it would be a great honour to die for the truth. Whether

this truth would save the people or only end in his demise, only time could tell. For now, he would focus on outrunning the people who wanted to kill him.

His mind slipped, unwillingly, back to the crash site.

The sound of gunfire had vanished as the roof of the SUV crumbled on impact, slamming into the farmland at the base of the steep slope from the expressway.

Kego had landed heavily, sprawled across the body of the policeman who had earlier shielded him from the rain of bullets. His head was pressed into the man's chest, hair bloodied, back hunched, legs splayed upwards toward what had once been the floor of the SUV—gravity reversed in the wrecked shell of the vehicle.

He was weak and dizzy. His face and shirt were covered in blood. He could not see clearly in the faint shadows the car cast beneath the moonlight. When he tried to move, the confined space seemed to squeeze back against him. He reached out with his left hand for something to grip and pull himself up, but his arm brushed the jagged tip of a yam stake jutting from the senior officer's side. For a moment he wondered if the yam stake had pierced through the car's body to get through to the man. He couldn't tell if it really did pierce through the man's body or just went through his uniform. He thought to check, but flinched, and looked away. This was no time for anything trivial.

His survival was miraculous, but escaping the scene was more urgent than basking in the miracle. Otherwise, his survival would be meaningless.

Earlier, he had seen where the bullets came from—the second officer from the checkpoint and another policeman who had sat in the van while they questioned him. When he caught a glimpse of the weapons trained on the SUV, in that flicker of clarity, he had thought

death had finally come for him. He had whispered a single-word prayer as the gunfire erupted: *mercy*. But in that moment, life blurred. Time slowed. It seemed his prayer would go unanswered.

His memories had unreeled before his eyes in split-seconds. He was clutching at life with his eyes closed, waiting for death. Yet he made it out alive. Now the message was clear: *get out*. He needed to leave before anyone arrived to confirm his death.

He forced himself sideways, pushing through a brutal collage of shattered glass, crumpled metal, torn flesh, dust, blood-soaked fabric, and the salt of his own sweat droplets. He was glad the glass on the window was broken in, its mangled frame barely wide enough for him to squeeze through. He reached out, grabbed the inner handle of the car door, and pulled himself toward the opening.

He slithered out like a rabbit fleeing a burning burrow that was about to collapse. As he dragged himself from the wreckage into the quiet of the farmland, he remembered scenes from car fires he had seen in films—bodies trapped mid-escape, charred halfway between inside and out. That image burned into his memory. But not today. Today, he lived. And for that, he murmured gratitude to the God who gave him this fragile breath.

He crouched in the quiet of the farmland and looked around. Moonlight fell on yam and cassava leaves, their broad blades watching him like silent sentinels. Above him, the expressway loomed. The police van sat abandoned there. He thought he saw bodies sprawled near the road, but looked away. He didn't want to pay attention to that horrifying detail. He did not think anyone would be out there by that time of the night. He felt sorry for whoever they may have left behind in the world.

Gradually, the ringing in his ears gave way to the growing noise of chaos from both sides of the road. He began to move, melting into the thick rows of cassava, picking quiet footfalls between plants. Then

came voices—whispers and faint footsteps from the other side of the wreckage. The wind, indifferent to life or death, carried their sound toward him as he slipped away.

He increased his pace, barely avoiding dry leaves and brittle stalks he hardly noticed in time. He kept his head low. The moonlight was still his only ally.

Then came the growing wail of sirens. Police vehicles closing in, but were they coming to save him or were they State assassins in uniform coming to finish the job? He did not wait to find out. He pushed deeper into the farm, quickening from crouch to stride, then broke into a run.

The sirens faded behind him, swallowed by the distance he covered in his race to safety. Ahead, there was only bush. Kego had no map and no destination in mind, only the need to get farther away from the road. The farmland pulled him forward, through narrow footpaths, into thicker brush, past half-cleared plots and low-hanging trees.

Then he came to a stream—muddy, winding down a narrow path, mostly invisible in the dim moonlight until it was nearly underfoot. He slipped and fell backwards in his attempt to steady himself, legs splashing into the cold water as his hands caught the gravelled bank behind. He winced but did not cry out. He stood immediately, water dripping from his ankles, and crossed the stream carefully. The stream was shallow—no deeper than his calves—but every second out here was risk.

He kept running.

The forest thinned. Wild bushes grew sparse. The sounds of the night shifted—crickets chirped louder, owls echoing nearby, as if they were mocking his desperation, or offering him sanctuary in their dark, unchecked world.

Then he saw the farmhouse—a dark silhouette against a tree-lined underbrush, illuminated by the moonlight overhead, a short sprint to his right.

He had no idea how far he had run from the highway. All he knew was that he was not where he had started.

He darted toward the house, every step through the brush another breath borrowed from three-time defeat of death. He noticed the door had no lock. He paused, hand hovering, eyes scanning the shadows of the simple wooden frame. He feared the worst, that whoever lived inside might be hostile to a stranger covered in blood, stumbling in from the dark. He hesitated, then knocked on the door—more from instinct than hope.

No answer came. No sound from within either. Just the indifferent silence of the night.

He pushed. The door creaked open on tired hinges, and a peach-black darkness stared back at him. Behind him, moonlight lingered faintly, but he shut it out as the door closed with him inside. The world around him shrank even more to the hush of darkness.

He reached out with tentative hands, feeling his way through the void until he reached the wall opposite the entrance. His fingers knocked over a few farm tools leaning against it, metals clinking as they hit each other against the hardened floor. He froze until the sound stopped echoing.

He was neither surprised nor pleased to find no furniture in the hut. Not even a woven mat. Only the unyielding, dusty ground beneath his feet.

He traced the wall to the farthest corner from the entrance, crouched, and slowly, without even realising it, folded into himself and sank to the floor.

The ground was ancient cold. Dust clung to the soaked hem of his trousers. The drying blood on his shirt brushed his skin. He leaned into the wall, and for the first time since the crash, let himself ask the question: *Am I safe here?*

He did not know. But he desperately hoped no one had followed him. With no watch or phone, he had completely lost track of time. No stars were visible through the cracks in the mud wall. Only the silence and his memories sat with him.

His mind wandered to the hospital and he clenched his fists. What would those bastards do with his phone when they find it without him? Had they wiped it clean to get rid of the video evidence? That evidence was the only proof that could expose the men who tried to kill him—though it would only matter if he failed to make it through the night. He prayed that he would. His life was the only proof that mattered now.

He thought about his friend and brother in all but blood. Had they gone after him too? Kene had not taken the call he made to his number earlier that evening. Something about that now clawed at his chest.

Back in the city, at Dera's house...

Dera's grief was not a quiet thing. It was a physical storm. She wept loudly and without restraint, as if the very fabric of her soul had been ripped open. Her chest heaved with profound, untamed anguish. Her jewel lay on the floor—unmoving, unresponsive, blood gushing from his chest.

The bullet had found its mark near his heart and shattered hers in the process. It felt as if the floodwater of death had swept through her soul and left only a hollow shell behind. Her body trembled as her voice cracked with sorrow, each cry a dagger to the throat of her sanity.

She had collapsed to her knees beside him, cradling his head in her lap, her body rocking in a primal rhythm, as if she could will his heart to beat again through sheer force of her own.

“Why would you do this to me, Kene?” She wailed, tears streaming down her face, soaking into his blood-matted hair. “Please, Kene...stay with me. Stay with me, Kene. Kene? Kene!”

Across the room, Antler groaned, slumped against the couch, blood trailing from the hole in his gut. His pistol lay just out of reach, glinting faintly beneath the lounge light. His vision flickered in and out, the room spinning like a nightmare carousel. His fingers clutched his stomach in a feeble attempt to stop the bleeding, but his strength was draining fast. Sirens howled nearby, piercing the night air as they grew steadily louder—salvation and doom in one. He could hear them circling into the compound. For the first time in years, Antler felt the cold weight of helplessness. The DSS would not rescue him now. Not after this.

Outside, a police van skidded to a halt. Four officers stepped out swiftly, weapons drawn. The echo of screams inside confirmed their worst fears. The leading officer kicked the door open and they stormed into the house.

The room wasn’t exactly carnage, but felt like it. Blood painted the tiles in grotesque puddles—one around the motionless young man, the other leaking from the large man slouched in the shadows of the couch. The screaming woman’s hands were soaked in blood as she clung to the motionless man, howls of pure agony tearing from her lips.

“Call an ambulance. Now!” The team leader barked. One of the officers instantly reached for his radio. “Dispatch, we need medical emergency and forensics at our location. Immediate response.”

“Affirmative, sir. Ambulance en route.”

Two officers moved to separate Dera from Kene’s body. As they approached her, she clutched him tighter, nails digging into his shirt.

“No! let me hold him! Let me hold him!” She screamed, thrashing as they tried to pull her away.

“We need to get you out of here, ma’am,” one officer said, his voice gently firm, as protocol demanded. With practiced control, they peeled her off the body while she kicked and sobbed, and begged to be left with him for one last time.

An officer knelt beside Kene and placed two fingers on his neck checking for a pulse. After a short pause, he stood slowly, his face grave.

“He’s not breathing,” he announced. “There is no pulse.”

The words, clinical and absolute, struck Dera with the force of a physical blow, as the officers escorted her outside. Her hands still dripped blood.

The commanding officer turned his attention to Antler, who was barely conscious, eyes glassy and drifting between opening and shutting. The officer ripped a wad of fabric from his gear and pressed it to the gaping wound in the man’s stomach, then placed Antler’s hand over the clothing. The hand slipped off, lifeless. He placed his own palm there instead.

“Check the upper floor. Make sure no one’s hiding!” He ordered.

The officer sprinted upstairs and soon shouted back, “Clear!”

“Check the kitchen and the back.”

From the kitchen, the officer’s voice crackled over the radio. “All clear.”

Outside, Dera was still convulsing in sobs. She clawed toward the door, desperate to return inside, but the officer assigned to her held her back. Her cries tore through the quiet of the estate like thunder.

Neighbours began spilling from their homes. In no time, a small crowd had formed on the street—frightened and curious faces peering into the night, trying to make sense of the scene before them. The glow of the solar streetlights mingled with the pale half-moon, casting long, surreal shadows over the commotion.

Not long after, headlights washed over the estate walls as two ambulances arrived, trailed by a forensic van. The area was cordoned off with caution tape. Flashlights blinked, cameras clicked, and gloved hands swabbed stains inside the house. Officers moved like ghosts through the bloodied scene and noise.

Both bodies were wheeled out—one presumed dead, the other barely groaning. Dera tried grabbing the gurney carrying Kene, but the officer with her held her back. Had her parents not arrived at that moment, she would have followed the paramedics into the ambulance.

Outside the cordoned area, Dr. Dika and his wife stood with four of the estate's armed security men. He lived far across town but had driven like a madman the moment she called. He had thought the worst was over when she left the hospital earlier that night, but clearly, fate had more to offer. He ran to his daughter as she walked toward them, gathering her sobbing form into his arms while his wife hugged them both.

"She's okay...Thank God," he murmured between breathless kisses to her hair. But their daughter wasn't relenting in her cries and continued to sob heavily. Her mother comforted her.

"What happened here, officer?" Dr. Dika demanded.

"Multiple shots were fired inside the house," one officer said, tone clipped. "We're still gathering details to ascertain what exactly happened. We may need a statement from your daughter in the morning. For now, you should take her home."

Dissatisfied, Dr. Dika attempted to cross the tape. The security men followed, but the officers did not let them through.

“Sir, I understand your concern, but this is an active crime scene. Please leave now.”

Soon after, the ambulances pulled away, their sirens fading into the darkness. The receding sound echoed sorrow. Inside the house, the lights seemed to dim under the weight of the night’s events as the forensics team worked—as if the space itself was mourning.

Dr. Dika guided his daughter and his trembling wife toward the car. Dera’s head remained bowed, buried against her mother’s shoulder, tears soaking into both their clothes like rain no roof could keep out. The blood on her arms smeared faintly against their clothing.

They drove home in silence, the streets growing quieter with each turn, hushed by the deepening night. Dr. Dika kept a steady hand on the wheel, his knuckles pale, his thoughts a blur of dread and helplessness. Dera did not raise her head once during the journey. She wept the whole way.

In the farmhouse, sleep eluded Kego in the corner of the hut where he sat.

The cold was relentless, biting through his skin like icy needles. Mosquitoes sang their cruel lullabies in his ears—wretched, whining things that rose in pitch as if they loved his state. His stomach churned with a hollow, acidic hunger.

The food he had eaten at the roadside buka near the hospital was long gone, digested by panic and sweat. Now, the hollow in his belly made thunder of its own, rising and twisting in sharp, rhythmic protest.

Outside, nocturnal creatures prowled. Soft pads of hooves brushed against fallen leaves—cats, rodents, or creatures without names. Each sound made his breath stall, eyes darting toward the door. *Had those*

who sought his death found him? Were they just outside, weapons drawn, ready to drag him back into the night and bury him in silence?

All he had was the ache in his body and the chaos in his mind. In the middle of all that, he made a fragile wish: *let this be a dream*. He thought of waking up safe in bed, laughing at the nightmare, no blood on his clothes, no fire of longing in his throat. But no such miracle came.

His head slumped slowly, heavy from exhaustion, and his limbs grew still. Somewhere in the numbed weight of his skin, the mosquito bites lost their sting. The hunger dimmed, replaced by dizziness. He did not know when sleep finally took him.

Outside, a little far away, the night remained alive with schemes. Police and forensic teams searched for answers at two crime scenes. The evil men were hoping to confirm what they wanted—that the poet was dead. But the truth lay curled in the corner of a nameless hut, still breathing. The gift they sought was far beyond their grip.

Ola went to Tete's apartment when she did not find him at the safe house, her breath short, her shoulders tense. The second he opened the door, the terror in her eyes struck him before her words did.

"Antler is dead," she said, her voice clipped and hollow.

Tete let her in and closed the door behind her. "What happened?" He asked, his eyes wide, dread seeping into his bones.

"Just as you feared," she murmured, unblinking.

"Who did he shoot?" His voice was urgent.

"Kego's friend." Her voice dropped further, heavy with regret. "He shot Kene."

Tete stumbled a step back. "Oh God...shit!"

Ola looked away, lips tight.

“So, I shot him,” she added, her tone steadier, colder. “He was going to shoot the girl too. She was in the house.”

Tete stood still, his mouth parted, but no words came. He was just staring into her face as if more answers were written somewhere on her facial skin.

“When I heard the sirens,” she continued, “I had to get out.”

He sighed—a long, leaden breath that seemed to carry the weight of the entire night. “You did what you had to do,” he said, his words softer than she had heard it in weeks. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, and she collapsed against his chest, drained and trembling. He held her close, rubbing her back in slow, steady circles.

“You did well, my love,” he whispered into her hair.

Seconds passed. She lifted her face to his, her eyes no longer haunted but longing, needing more than comfort. She needed warmth. She needed him. Their lips met.

“You know I love you,” he said between kisses. His voice was certain and she knew he meant it.

She loved him too. Maybe even more. She had carried that love silently for six years, while his had only bloomed over the last year. Their affair was strictly forbidden within the agency. If they were discovered, they could be dismissed, or worse. But tonight, love demanded its due.

Their kisses deepened as clothes slipped away like old skins. His lips found her neck, then her breasts and he suckled gently, his hands roaming her body with familiar hunger. She reached down and loosened the string of his pyjamas bottom, fingers trembling. As she slipped her hand into it, he stiffened and exhaled sharply.

He scooped her into his arms with ease and carried her into his bedroom, away from the accusing silence of the main lounge, the blank TV screen, and the judging eyes of the wallpaper.

Three minutes later, the shrill ring of his phone from the lounge shattered the quiet. They broke apart as if the phone might report them to the caller. The intimacy of the moment evaporated.

Tete sat up, breathless, and walked out of the bedroom. Ola lay in the bed, her bare figure bathed in the gentle silver of the bedside lamp. She felt calmer now, lighter. The trauma of the night had begun to ease from her shoulders. She had never killed anyone in her six years with the agency. Tete made sure she didn't have to.

In the lounge, Tete picked up the phone. The caller ID glowed with the name that had dictated their entire disastrous night—Mr. Bello. Tete was no longer a lover; he had become a subordinate again.

“What report am I getting from your town?” Bello barked. He said ‘*your town*’ as if Tete was some monarch over a chaotic Abakaliki city. His voice pulsed with rage.

“What, sir?” Tete asked cautiously, hoping it was not worse than what he already knew.

“The Police Chief just reported your man, one of those in the damn leaked video, was seen bleeding out in the house where that Kene boy was found dead!” The DG’s voice cracked through the speaker. “Why do you people keep screwing up my evening?!”

Tete remained silent.

Isn't that what the DG wanted all along? For Antler and Brahim to take the fall for being careless enough to show up in that damning CCTV footage. Now, by some cruel twist, the pieces were aligning just right for that very cover-up. An armed assailant caught red-handed in the home of the murdered friend of a dissident poet? It was a perfect setup. A gift, in fact.

But Tete would not offer it so easily.

“Why are you suddenly quiet?” Bello roared. “I don’t understand how a job this simple became so messy!”

“I’m here, sir,” was all Tete said.

“Well, listen carefully,” the DG snapped. “Gina’s flying down first thing in the morning to assist you with clean-up. She’ll take command of the next phase.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Did you find anything at the crash site I asked you to check?”

“Nothing there, sir,” Tete said.

“Nothing?” Bello’s voice shot up again.

“Only the heavy presence of the police and military. There were forensic teams all over the place, and the casualties had already been removed when I arrived.”

“Where were the bodies taken?”

“To the central police station, I believe.”

“How many bodies?”

“They said five,” Tete answered. “Three police officers, two civilians. Only two policemen survived.”

“Did you interview the survivors?”

“They weren’t there when I arrived.”

A tense silence followed.

“Listen,” Bello said finally. “I want answers by morning. Gina will be there before sunrise. The President wants proof that the boy is dead by the 9 a.m. address to the nation. We need to put this to bed before then.”

“Noted, sir.”

The call ended.

Tete sent out some texts, then switched off the phone and dropped it on the table.

In the bedroom doorway, Ola stood silently watching him. He turned to her, tenderness in his eyes. He walked up to her slowly, took her hand, and she followed him back into the bedroom.

There, in the quiet that remained, their bodies spoke again—more urgently this time, as if the world were ending outside while the night still offered them one last shelter.

They kissed beneath the dim light and said nothing for a while. Then Tete whispered something about Antler surviving the bullet.

And in that moment, although chaos ruled the land, only warmth and skin and sighs existed between them, the night making room for their forbidden love.

Outside, the world raged on.

And in the silence inside, they burned more and more.

Twelve

THE ALARM BUZZED at 4 a.m.

DG Bello bolted upright with a gasp, then slumped back on the bed, wishing the night had taken longer. He reluctantly reached out and slapped the alarm off with a groggy grunt.

He blamed himself for letting the damn thing startle him every morning for the past thirty years. All that time had not dulled its power to jolt him like a live wire. It was not the same old clock, of course—by his count, he had replaced it more than fifty times across cities, duty stations, and hotel rooms. They all seemed built to deny him sleep. He sometimes broke them trying to shut them off.

He had slept in his State House room, which smelled of old carpet and scorched coffee. Proper sleep had evaded him; what he managed was a shallow, fractured thing, haunted by the ghost of a poet who refused to die. He wanted to stay in bed another five minutes—just five—but the fear of the president rousing him was a more potent stimulant than last night's coffee. He sat up, hunched, yawning into the quiet, scratching his scalp. This job was slowly chewing through his blood pressure and his sanity.

He reached for his phone on the bedside table and stared blankly at the screen. It was 4:01 a.m. No one involved in this mess had the right to be asleep.

As his thumb hovered over Tete's number, the phone rang. The Inspector-General of Police.

“Good morning, sir,” the voice came when he answered, brisk and apologetic. “Forgive the hour. We have a big problem.”

Bello’s stomach dropped. He hated big problems, especially at this hour. He craved the silence that came after clean kills or flawless raids. Not this. He feared it was what he’d been expecting.

“What’s the problem?” He asked regardless, his voice cold.

“None of the bodies were the poet’s,” the IGP said. “Two civilian casualties were found at the scene, both riddled with bullets beyond recognition, but neither was Kego. Now confirmed.”

“Fuck,” Bello snarled, slamming a fist into the mattress. “Not again.”

The poet had vanished. Again. He just couldn’t understand how this kept happening.

“How the hell did this happen?” He bellowed—not at the IGP, but at the defiant fact that Kego had slipped through the cracks of their operation once more.

“We’re not sure,” the IGP answered. “Given the wreckage, survival seemed impossible, but somehow he got out. He could still be hiding somewhere near the farmland, most likely wounded.”

“We must find that young man before daylight!” Bello ordered, his jaw clenched. “Unless we want the president in a rage when he gets up.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve dispatched units to comb every inch of the area and nearby settlements. We’ll find him.”

Bello did not respond immediately. His mind was already racing. If the boy was still alive, he had gone into deep hiding. With no way to trace him now, things were slipping out of their hands.

“Meet me before seven,” he snapped, ended the call and immediately dialled Tete’s number.

“This damn boy had better be awake,” he cursed under his breath as the phone rang on the other end.

Tete was tangled in the warm bedsheet with Ola when his phone vibrated violently. He had switched it back on after their late night romp. He reached for it, gut tightening at the caller ID.

“Good morning, sir,” he answered, rolling out of the bed.

“Don’t ‘good morning’ me!” Bello barked, catching immediately on that Tete had been asleep. “You’ve got unfinished business. This is not the time to sleep.”

Tete said nothing. His throat was dry, his chest hollow. He checked the time on the phone screen.

“The poet is missing,” the DG growled, more disappointed than surprised. “I want you on that crash site now. Join the manhunt. Find him dead or alive.”

“Okay, sir,” Tete replied, stunned but not entirely shocked. Somehow, Kego had slipped out of an overturned SUV with three dead officers and two bullet-riddled bodies of some random dudes, the boss explained. Miraculous. Maddening. Tete heaved a silent sigh of relief, but then, this meant the hunt was not over. He wondered how long it would continue.

“Gina will be in Abakaliki before seven this morning,” Bello added. “She will take care of your compromised assets. Work with her.”

“Understood, sir.”

The call ended. Tete sighed.

Compromised assets. The words were more or less a death sentence. Technically, it was his job to take care of things after the team made a mess of any kind—but if Kego was still alive, cleaning house now was

pointless. Antler was already in police custody, likely cuffed to a hospital bed with his stomach half-open—if he wasn't already dead. And Brahim? Probably still holed up in the safe house. No one that exposed would risk going home. Both their faces were all over social media; they were being framed by the public as the face of a state-sponsored assassination attempt against a burgeoning literary icon. Brahim was as good as decommissioned. Maybe they'd use him for deniable black ops later on if he was spared, but his time in the daylight was done.

On the bed, Ola lay awake, watching him.

"Get dressed," he said. "We have work to do."

By 4:05 a.m., the crash site was swarming with police officers. Their flashlights slashed through the pre-dawn darkness, sweeping across the expanse of the farmland. Some of them had held night watch positions since the incident.

For most, the mandate was clear: search for any possible hideout linked to the supposed abductors of the poet involved in the previous night's shootout that had left three police officers and two civilians dead. For a select few, the mission was more covert: find the poet, dead or alive, and deliver him to the Department of State Security operatives on standby.

Whether driven by duty or loyalty, the officers combed through the farmland with zeal. The one to find the missing poet alive would become an instant hero worthy of promotions, medals, and presidential handshakes. Their boots dug into the red earth, turning up dust and hope alike. Units were also dispatched to raid homes in the surrounding villages.

When Tete and Ola arrived fifteen minutes later on a motor bike, the police had already found the mud-brick farmhouse where Kego had taken refuge the night before. They were just beginning to realise that

someone had indeed slept there. The planting season was long gone, and the harvest weeks away, so the disarray of farming tools around the hut meant only one thing. Tools that should have been neatly stored had been disturbed, some knocked over.

Inside the clay-walled hut, footprints marked the dry floor. Finger marks traced parts of the mud walls, as if someone had been searching blindly in the dark. The officers who found it assumed it was where the poet had been held—kidnapped and hidden by unknown gunmen. This only intensified their efforts. They widened the search in the area, merging with units already going around in the nearby village.

Every home in the village was checked. The police knocked down doors, stormed into traditional courtyards surrounded by mud huts, and demanded cooperation. The villagers were livid, their morning peace had been shattered by federal boots. Their resistance was futile. Who could dare question men acting under direct presidential instructions?

Photographs of the poet were shoved into terrified faces of villagers.

“Have you seen him?”

“Did any strangers pass through here last night?”

“Any noise? Any movement you did not recognise?”

The villagers had seen no one. Not a shadow, not a whisper of the man whose face now haunted their walls.

Around 5:30 a.m., the search ended. They had searched every inch of the area in consideration. The police vehicles rolled out slowly, their beams bouncing off dewy leaves and beaten paths. There was no trace of the poet, no witnesses. Not a single fly had any idea where the missing poet could be. Nothing. The mission only yielded frightened silence among the people and the lingering scent of diesel fumes from countless police vans moving in the wearing darkness.

Tete and Ola returned to the safe house and found it empty. Brahim was gone.

Tete dialled his line but it was switched off. They drove to Brahim's house. The door was locked, his personal car nowhere to be seen. The only thing left behind was a motorbike, standing in the corner of the compound like an abandoned child.

The night before, Brahim had woken up alone in the safe house long after Tete had left. In the three years they had worked together, Tete rarely moved for any field action without him. It was their unspoken protocol. If one moved, the other followed, unless Tete was staying back. But that night, something was off.

At first, he chalked it up to his weak eyesight—maybe Tete had decided to spare him the stress. But when Antler did not return either, alarm bells began to ring. The two of them never went dark like this. He called Antler's line. No answer. Switched off. That was unlike him.

By 11 p.m., unable to ignore the knot in his gut, Brahim took the motorbike, the only vehicle left at the safehouse, and rode straight to the apartment he shared with Antler. Antler was not there either. The house had not been touched. Nothing was missing, and there were no signs of packing up or movement. That sealed it for Brahim—Antler had either vanished or been taken.

He knew what happened to compromised agents. If the situation became too public, too political, or too messy, there were only three outcomes: be thrown under the bus, be buried in deep-cover operations, or simply be disappeared permanently, if the mess demanded utter silence.

He and Antler had cleaned up such messes before, silencing rogue agents with quiet bullets or smothered overdoses. Now, he feared he was the next loose end, the latest mess to be cleaned up. With their

faces all over social media, there was no way they would escape what was coming. But, at least, he had to try.

Moving quickly, he packed essentials into a briefcase—documents, cash, a weapon—and loaded it into his car. He siphoned every drop of fuel from the motorbike into the car's tank and added the emergency gallon of fuel they kept in the back shed. Then he tossed his mobile phone into a waste bin and swept the vehicle twice for hidden trackers. He remembered Tete bragging about planting a tracker on their work vehicle earlier that evening, which was a breach of internal protocols. He feared the man could have gone beyond that to install something similar on his boys' private vehicles. Whatever the case, he was not taking chances.

Once satisfied he could not be traced, he drove into the quiet Abakaliki city night with no lights on, guided by moonlight, until he reached the highway. His plan was simple: drive north, and cross into the Republic of Niger before noon. By the time they realised he was gone, he'd be far beyond their reach.

The journey ahead would be long, unforgiving, and silent. But that silence was better than a bullet to his head. His glory days were over.

Tete stood in Brahim's empty house, a flicker of grim amusement in his eyes. If he were in Brahim's shoes, he'd have done the same—vanished before the guillotine dropped. The man had read the signs and bolted. Tete could not blame him.

He turned to Ola, his voice low. "We don't mention this to anyone. Especially at the office."

She nodded. It did not need repeating. Let Gina figure it out when she arrived.

Without another word, they began transferring fuel from the motorbike they had arrived on into the one at Brahim's place. The air was still cool with dew, and the sound of liquid flowing between the motorbikes in a tiny rubber pipe was the only noise between them. Ola mounted the refuelled bike when they were done, and together they rode off silently into the waking day, the streetlights flickering out one by one behind them as the town yawned awake.

By the time they reached Tete's apartment, the sky was lightening with the slow breath of dawn. It was 6:10 a.m.

Inside, Tete opened his encrypted communication device, his fingers dancing across the secure channel. His report to the DG was terse and clinical. He detailed their early arrival at the crash site, how the police had combed the surrounding villages, the farmlands, and even a farmhouse that appeared to have housed a fugitive overnight. Every house had been searched. Not a soul resembling the poet was found. It seemed the man had finally vanished without a trace.

All he got in return was silence. Not that he expected his boss to respond to such a disappointing report as soon as he read it, but this kind of silence was one that screamed.

At the State House, DG Bello was pacing his office like a trapped wolf. The morning was collapsing around him. He had just been summoned to the President's inner office for a 6:30 a.m. briefing ahead of the national address scheduled for 9 a.m.

Now this. No Kego. No body. There was no way to spin a convincing lie when they don't know the poet's whereabouts. The pressure in his skull felt volcanic.

Someone within the agency is feeding the poet information, shielding him from every move. He was certain of it. But who? And how to find them? He would fish the culprit out, whoever they were. He hoped it was not one of those he trusted most on this case—Tete and Gina. They

were his most loyal operatives, not even directors yet, but they had access to information some directors were unaware existed.

His phone buzzed with an incoming message from his network providers. He snatched it up, swiped it away, and called the Inspector-General of Police.

“What the hell is going on?” Bello’s voice was sharp, slicing through the line. “Where the fuck has the poet disappeared to?”

“We lost him, sir,” the IGP admitted, voice weighted with fatigue. “My men swept the farmlands, combed the villages, and knocked on every door, but there was nothing. It’s like the earth swallowed him completely.”

“What do we do now?” Bello asked through clenched teeth.

“We’ve ramped up checkpoints on every major exit road in the area and placed extra eyes everywhere,” the IGP said. “I’ve also embedded officers in plain clothes in the surrounding villages. Unless he has left the community entirely, we’ll find him. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Time,” Bello snapped, “is exactly what we don’t fucking have. How do we explain this to the president in fifteen minutes?”

The police chief went silent. There was no good answer in his mind.

“We’ll talk at 6:30,” Bello said flatly and ended the call.

He glanced at the Rolex glinting on his wrist—₦18 million worth of time and failure. It was 6:15 a.m. Fifteen minutes to face a man who had once ordered someone’s kneecaps to be crushed for failure in an operation. Bello had known the president long before he donned the polished robes of public office. Back then, he was the ruthless kingpin of a drug pushing syndicate. His wrath was always biblical; not a single soul survived it.

Now, in power, he no longer split skulls himself, but he crushed budgets and cut funding. He exposed the dirty tricks his cronies who

tried to step out of line used to siphon public funds. That was his new weapon: silent financial strangulation. And it worked. No one dared fail him. He had loyalists installed across nearly every government agencies in the country. He could leave office today and still control many agencies from a distance.

In the private sector, he had established the most powerful corporation in the country, known as the Conglomerate, that controlled the biggest companies in the major industries in the country.

Bello's mind snapped back to Gina. She was en route to Abakaliki.

He keyed in her private line on the encrypted network. A blue light blinked in his mobile. She responded instantly.

Bello: Status?

Gina: Airborne. Left 30 minutes ago. Landing in Ebonyi International Airport just before 7.

Bello: Good. Neutralise the compromised agents. The President's speech will include that they're in custody. Hopefully, we get to the Kite before then.

Gina: Understood, sir.

Bello: And find the mole. One of Tete's people is feeding the Kite intel.

Gina: Noted.

Bello: Call Tete as soon as you land. Keep me updated.

Gina: Copy that.

The transmission ended and the screen went black.

Bello exhaled, leaned back in his chair, and ran a hand across his scalp, the weight of the morning still pressing down on him. The hunt was still not over; it seemed to only just be beginning. The poet could run, but he couldn't hide in one place for long. Unless, of course, the president decided to call off the hit as a result of the mounting backlash.

He did not see that happening anytime soon, knowing who his boss was.

In the farmhouse, Kego awoke with a jolt, breath heaving, limbs stiff from where he had slumped in the far corner of the hut. The cold earth had left a print on his skin. The dawn light was gently filtering in, glowing on the cracked mud walls. Outside, the suffocating blackness of the night had retreated, replaced by the gold-tinged serenity of early morning light.

He rose slowly and stretched, his limbs groaning from the strange posture he had slept in. For a moment, he was disoriented as he blinked at the walls, wondering:

Where am I?

There was a creak. The door swung open.

A woman stood there. Middle-aged, wrapped in a faded akwete, her head tied with a cloth in a way that looked like she was carrying something heavy on it. She did not look surprised to see him.

“Are you the owner of this farmhouse?” Kego asked in the native Izzi dialect, brushing dust from his shirt and trousers.

“No,” she said plainly. “It belongs to my husband.”

She turned her head slightly and called out, “Honey, we have a new farm boy.” And with that cryptic remark, she disappeared out the door.

Farm boy? Kego frowned. Is this a joke?

“I’m not a farm boy,” he muttered to himself, stepping toward the doorway. “I am a published poet. I am—”

He stopped cold.

A man was blocking the entrance—tall and broad-shouldered, most likely in his late fifties—cradling a rifle in his hands. His face was firm, unreadable. He pointed the barrel squarely at Kego's chest.

Kego's hands shot up instinctively. "Please, I meant no harm. I just needed shelter for the night. I was going to leave at dawn. I'll leave right away!"

The man did not answer immediately. Instead, he chuckled darkly. The woman reappeared, her lips curling in amusement. She put her hands on the man's shoulders and they both began to laugh hysterically.

Kego's mind raced. *Who are these people?*

"Please," he pleaded again, voice tightening with fear. "Don't kill me."

The man took a step forward, the laughter gone. "You really thought you could escape us?"

"He believes the world revolves around his silly words," the woman added, eyes narrowing.

"Well," the man said with an eerie calm, cocking his weapon, "you've come to the end of the road."

The gun rose with the man's finger on the trigger. He fired.

"Go to hell," he growled as he clicked the trigger tightly.

Kego screamed, "Nooo!"

Then he woke with the scream caught in his throat. His voice could have echoed into the early morning darkness but the walls of the hut were thick.

He sat up in the pitch-black hut, panting hard, drenched in cold sweat. His heart slammed against his chest. His hands flew to his torso, there was no blood. He touched his neck, his ears, his sides, blinking rapidly. Alive. Everything intact.

"What a fucking dream," he whispered, still trembling.

The crows of bush fowls drifted through the cracks with the morning air from outside. The sky was a pale charcoal hue, the moon veiled behind thick drifting clouds. Dawn was still minutes away. He stepped outside to ease himself.

The darkness was deeper than when he had arrived hours ago. Still, darker shadows of trees loomed like silent sentinels over the farmland. Just as he was about to return inside, something caught his attention.

Flashes of light. Faint at first, but unmistakable. Flashlight beams were dancing in the distance, weaving their way down from the expressway towards him. Panic gripped him. *Had they found out he was close? Who were they? Could they be the Police or worse?*

His first instinct was to flee toward the village, but he hesitated. They had probably reached it already. He was most likely boxed in, and there were no good options left for escape.

He froze, his legs refusing to move as his thoughts clashed in a flood of dread. *Was this it? Was the dream a warning? Was it a prophecy that he had finally reached the end of the road after making it through the night?*

An idea lit up in his mind like a flare in the dark. The trees.

He scanned the terrain quickly. Years of farming had taught him how to climb trees. He owned an orchard in the village, after all. His eyes soon landed on one with a broad trunk, dense crown, and branches like muscular arms reaching to the sky. It stood several feet in the direction of the approaching lights.

He darted to it, every second counting as the shouts and the shifting beams of light from the search party drew closer, and closer.

He gripped the rough bark and began to climb, each movement silent and deliberate. The smaller branches creaked slightly beneath his weight, but he ascended quietly, inch by inch, choosing each branch

like a lifeline. He stopped near the top, hidden in a cluster of heavy foliage. He crouched there, gripping the branch above him tightly, his weight carefully balanced.

Soon after, the lights arrived. From his perch, he could count over a dozen beams dancing in the fading darkness, piercing bushes and skimming tree trunks. Voices murmured below—sharp, suspicious, alert, and searching. One flashlight swept over the tree he was in. Then another, lingering for a heart-stopping second. He held his breath, the burn in his lungs a dull fire.

One false move and he would be found. One shift, or a sound and they'd pull him down like a ripened fruit.

He closed his eyes and counted the seconds in his head, each one an eternity. One. Two. Three...

Then, the voices and lights began to move away. The search party was moving on. He waited about five minutes before descending—not that he'd been timing it. Every step down was deliberate and he touched ground with the silence of a ghost. Stillness returned.

But there was nowhere left to go.

The expressway was a death trap—a cordoned corridor crawling with military, DSS, and police. Behind him, the village was being rigorously searched, he was sure. He was a wanted man on both ends of a narrowing funnel. The farmhouse would be his grave if he returned to it.

There was only one direction left: westwards. He would need to cut through the farmland to avoid the village roads and follow the inner bush paths in the direction of Enugu.

And so he did. Moving like a shadow, deeper into the thicket in the growing dimmed light of dawn, a fugitive from the sins of the powerful, running to reclaim his breath of freedom.

Thirteen

6:20 A.M.

The nation awoke not only to sunlight, but to a raging fire—the smouldering embers of unrest in its streets. Overnight, a tremor of pure fury had surged through its digital backbone. Kene’s final, bleeding post, the CCTV footage from Kego’s phone, and his first brush with death after being shot the previous evening had detonated like a grenade across the cyberspace. X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube; every platform groaned under the weight of a collective outrage. Kene’s bold words had multiplied into thousands of posts, blogs, vlogs, millions of comments, and the single, inescapable question was no longer just a whisper, but an uproar: *Have they killed the poet for daring to write the truth?*

Footage was already trickling in from civilians in the affluent estate where the previous night had turned bloody. Blurry, panicked shots showed bodies, lifeless or severely wounded, being carried out by paramedics from a residence. Muffled shouts and cries pierced the shaky recordings. While some people swore they recognised Kene, others feared it was Kego. A few screamed that both had been silenced, and the rage spread like wildfire online.

The vigil outside the State House had mushroomed into a formidable, seething mass, tenfold its original number the night before. The crowd had become ten times more determined, and it kept growing as time progressed. They ignored the lines of stern-faced military men and riot police guarding the gates and the Presidential office buildings

as they surged forward—not with violence but with volume—their presence a thunderous act of insubordination, their placards high, chants unrelenting.

Placards now read:

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

BANJO IS A KILLER! HE MUST GO!

WE ARE KEGO!

DEMOCRACY OR DEATH!

NO MORE SILENCE!

LET THE VERSE BREATHE!

The authorities had unofficially deployed everything short of gunfire and tear gas to deter them, but they had underestimated what a poem, a bullet, and lies could do to a broken nation. Reports of miscreants in support of the administration holding fringe counter demonstrations were also heard in several cities. They were so few, in comparison, they were driven away by the masses. This resulted in minor skirmishes that got swallowed up as the crowd grew. The demonstrations in most locations were largely starting out peaceful.

Across the country, the story had become the same. From Lagos to Sokoto, Uyo to Jos, state government houses found themselves surrounded by angry, growing mobs. In Abakaliki, once silent in its dawns, the streets were swelling with protest even before its largest market could flicker to life. The Ochoudo Centenary City Government House area was fast becoming a boiling point. People came in trickles that turned to tides—traders, teachers, students, clerics, the unemployed, and the unknown—united by a common thread of dissatisfaction with the betrayal by the people in government.

Somewhere in the crowd, voices had begun chanting something more dangerous than slogans. They were revolutionary chants, almost musical:

KEGO IS OUR BLOOD, PROVIDE KEGO...PROTECT KEGO...KEGO IS OUR BLOOD.

Entire morning shows had gone off-script. On Arise TV, the anchors looked pale with urgency, reporting chaos not as pundits but as citizens. One presenter looked straight into the camera and announced in a heavy voice, “We regret to inform our viewers that we have been unable to reach Kene Okorie, the revered marketer and social-media activist scheduled for our segment this morning. We are gravely concerned for his safety.”

The international media had caught scent of the blood in the air. The headlines on CNN read: *Nigeria Boils: Mystery of Missing Poet Fuels Civil Unrest.*

Al Jazeera was no softer: *Democracy at Gunpoint: Protests Rock West Africa’s Giant.*

Africa’s largest democracy had become the globe’s newest spectacle, and at the centre of it all, above the smoke of confusion, the static of politics, and the noise of propaganda, hovered the second pertinent question: *Where was Kego?*

Even the government had no idea.

6:34 a.m.

Mr. Bello sat rigidly in the heavily furnished inner sanctum of the State House, his mind racing as he watched the President fuming from across the wide mahogany desk. The room was unusually cold from the air conditioning, yet the atmosphere burned with tension. The clock on the wall ticked too loudly, each second a countdown to judgment.

The President was repeatedly dabbing his sweat-free face with a white handkerchief—a nervous tic that betrayed the simmering fury beneath. His eyes darted between the Director-General of the DSS and the Inspector-General of Police, both of whom remained mute, caught in the crossfire of presidential wrath.

“How do we spin this if he is still at large?” The President asked, his voice a low, sharp-edged weapon. “Should I even proceed with the address? Can either of you tell me what the hell to say now?”

The question was rhetorical, but the weight of it crashed through the room like a hammer through glass. He tossed the handkerchief onto the desk with disgust.

“Why do I have you two on special payrolls—enhanced benefits, shadow allowances, everything in between—if simple assignments like this can’t be executed properly? Do I have to do this job myself?”

Neither man spoke. The silence was absolute, broken only by the faint, rhythmic pulse of the protests echoing from the street beyond the walls.

The President rubbed the bridge of his nose and muttered, more to himself than to them—a bitter litany of what should have been. “This could have been solved with a simple shot to the head by one of our men from the syndicate—no badge, no uniform, no questions. Just an unknown gunman. And we can pretend to chase shadows for a few days. By then, what’s done is done—clean and fast.”

He threw his arms wide. “Instead, we have bodies, sirens, footage, and a goddamn poet turning into a martyr while still alive!”

Mr. Bello kept his expression fixed. Inside, his stomach tightened.

“If we don’t give the people a version of the truth they can fear or respect,” the President went on, “they will believe the one that glorifies this boy. And if he’s still alive, any video, any voice note, any poem

from him will undo everything we have built. His book will be a prophecy come true.”

He turned to them again, tone sharpened. “I need actionable plans—what do we do now?”

The IGP cleared his throat, choosing caution over silence. “We could declare the poet wanted for multiple homicide charges; claim he killed the policemen and two civilians during an attempt to escape. That could re-frame the story.”

The President’s eyes narrowed to slits. “That’s your masterstroke? That’s your ‘spin’? With the internet on fire and half the country chanting his name, you think the people won’t see through it? Won’t they even call it self-defence the moment the story gets out? We’ve already denied involvement. Now, you want to reverse the narrative and paint him as a killer?”

“Sir, if I may,” Mr. Bello stepped in, his voice calm but firm. “That approach will backfire as you’ve already noted. He’ll become a national hero—an international one, even. The street protesters will double in number and we’ll lose the script completely. No one would believe he’s a killer.”

The President swung toward him. “Then you tell me, Bello. What the hell will work?”

Bello adjusted in his seat, then spoke with quiet precision. “We stay on the current trajectory. Officially, Kego remains missing. We’re conducting a full-scale investigation. We confirm that we have one of the masked assailants from the leaked footage in custody, and that his accomplice and their sponsors are still at large. National forces remain on high alert. No acknowledgment of the incident in Abakaliki and we deny all witness claims to delay public clarity long enough to replace it with our own version. Or better still, we could paint that as unrelated.”

The President nodded, slowly, calculating.

Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, “Perhaps I should lift the ban on the damn book like my wife suggested. It might soften the optics.”

Mr. Bello and the IGP exchanged glances. The DG was first to nod. “That could work in our favour, sir. It helps the narrative by showing that we aren’t suppressing art or free speech after all. It will buy us some room to breathe.”

The IGP gave a reluctant shrug. He didn’t like the idea, but with the president, the DSS DG, and the First Lady against him, it was three to one. Resistance was futile.

“Fine.” The President exhaled. “Let’s do it, and prep it for my 9 a.m. broadcast.”

He barked a new order. “Call an emergency security briefing: 7:30 a.m. sharp! All service chiefs and directors of agencies. I want every intelligence unit present—and bring in the media. I need cameras rolling while I issue my directive. Let the people see me on top of this.”

He paused, then added with finality, “Find that poet and end this before it ends us.”

Mr. Bello stood and offered a crisp nod. There was a fire in his eyes now—one born not of loyalty, but survival. The president had made himself clear. Their survival was getting highly dependent on their success with dealing with the young poet. He never envisaged that to kill a poet would be so hard.

As he left the office, the weight of the impending national unrest felt heavier, but so did his resolve. Their next moves had to count.

Gina’s plane touched down at Ebonyi International Airport at 6:58 a.m. The airstrip was quiet, save for the dull hum of ground crew activity in the distance. No press, no escorts, just shadow work in motion. She walked through the arrival lounge with precise steps, to where Tete and

Ola stood waiting in plain civilian clothes. No smiles, no greeting—just the clipped nod of acknowledgement between professionals.

Gina was all sharp edges and coiled silence. She exchanged a brief, cold glance with Tete and slid into the back seat of the waiting black SUV. Ola thought she was cool while Tete was indifferent. They both joined her in the front seat of the car. The tension was professional; they all understood what this visit meant.

“I want to see Brahim and Antler first,” she said, her voice calm, but laced with quiet command. She wasn’t asking. She was a rank above Tete even though the man was a little older and had more field experience.

“No problem,” Tete replied. “Antler is at the police clinic, under arrest and unconscious.”

“I’m aware,” she muttered, gaze fixed on the passing scenery. “And Brahim?”

Tete hesitated. “No response on his line. He’s also not answering messages from the secure channel.”

“Try again,” she said flatly. “Now, please.”

Ola reached for the secure tablet and sent another encrypted ping to Brahim’s last known channel. Still nothing, as both she and Tete had expected. Gina said nothing, but her silence was heavy with judgement. Something about the Abakaliki team didn’t sit right with her. She had no idea what it was, but she could sense it. Perhaps, this might have something to do with the presence of a mole.

“I’ll be calling Chief next,” she said. “I also need full access to Operation Bring Down the Kite.”

As the SUV drove the thirty-minute stretch toward Abakaliki city, Tete used the time to fill her in. He gave her a clean summary, deliberately omitting that Ola had shot Antler to defend a civilian, and

that Brahim had most likely vanished. Gina listened without interrupting, but made mental notes of not only what he was saying, but the shape of the things he must have left out.

She dialled the Chief afterwards and put him on speaker.

“Are you up to date?” Bello’s voice crackled, going straight to the point.

“Yes, sir,” Gina replied.

“Good. Work hand-in-hand with Tete. I trust him.”

“Noted, sir.”

“Tete, can you hear me?” the Chief asked suddenly.

Tete straightened in the front seat. “Yes, sir.”

“Both of you, find the boy. Wherever he is. The operation is red-alert priority now. Bring me results before 9 a.m.”

“Understood, sir,” they chorused.

“This is important for the president,” he emphasised. Then the line cut off without a goodbye.

“Where do we start?” Tete asked, glancing at her through the rearview mirror.

“Antler,” Gina replied instantly.

“What’s the plan?” He pressed.

“No plan,” she said. “Let’s get there first.”

Ola veered toward the city centre. They continued the journey in silence.

At the police headquarters, the reception was tense. After identifying themselves, they were directed to a clinic annex two blocks away, an old government hospital functioning as the station’s medical ward. The building was quiet and slightly rundown. The bottom half of the walls

was washed in flaking pale green paint and the top half in creamy yellow. The corridors echoed with every footstep.

A tired-looking doctor greeted them inside the clinic.

“He’s stable, but barely alive,” he said when they asked about Antler. “We removed the bullet last night, but he had already lost so much blood and there haven’t been any signs of consciousness since. There’s still brain activity, but its faint. He’s cuffed and under observation.”

“Good. We need a moment alone with him,” Gina said coolly.

The doctor hesitated then relented. “You can go in, but please don’t tamper with anything.”

“Of course,” Gina offered a faint smile.

Inside the room, Antler lay unconscious. Tubes fed into his veins, and machines beeped steadily beside the bed. His face was pale and looked lifeless.

“You can leave us now,” Gina told the doctor. He gave a wary nod and stepped out.

The moment the door clicked shut, Gina moved swiftly. She put her gloves on and unfastened every wire and tube keeping the man alive. The machines wailed briefly before she silenced them. Antler’s body began to convulse in shallow, desperate gasps, and she grabbed a pillow and pressed it firmly over his face.

His legs kicked against the mattress and his hands clawed at the air, feeble and frantic. Within seconds, the body went still.

Gina waited another ten seconds, then checked for a pulse. Nothing.

“He’s dead,” she said, her voice as neutral as if she were reading a weather report.

She reset the room; wires reattached, tubes replaced, and machines turned back on. To the casual eye, Antler was still a comatose patient whose heart has simply stopped.

Wordless, she walked out of the clinic. Tete and Ola followed her to the SUV. Once they were in and moving, she wiped her gloves clean and tossed them into the bin in the SUV.

“Brahim next.” She said, as if they were running errands.

Minutes later, a nurse doing her routine check opened the door and paused. The room was too quiet. The machine was on, but it had flatlined. She rushed in, screaming for the doctor, who came in a haste. Moments later, he confirmed Antler dead.

“Take me to Brahim. Now,” Gina ordered as the SUV sped away.

Tete and Ola exchanged a look. A long pause. No words.

“What is it?” Gina pressed.

“Nothing,” Tete said.

The silence that ensued was the kind you notice the minute you enter a room full of people who don’t talk to each other.

At Brahim’s place, nothing had changed since Tete and Ola left earlier that morning. The compound was quiet, early daylight casting long shadows across the walls. Gina approached the front door with swift efficiency, produced a slender lock pick from her coat and worked the entrance in seconds. The door gave way with a soft click.

The apartment was modest—two bedrooms flanking a small central lounge, a narrow kitchen tucked into the far end. The floors were tiled but worn at the corners. A single ceiling fan spun lazily overhead in the lounge, its motion doing little to disturb the stale air. The sitting area was neat: no throw pillows out of place, and no cups left unwashed. The sort of sterile order that suggested military precision or someone who knew how to cover their tracks.

They moved from one room to the other. Nothing seemed touched in a hurry—no drawers flung open, ironed clothes still hung in the closet. The second bedroom was virtually untouched. Brahim's secure-channel mobile device was resting on the desk in one of the bedrooms, screen dark, lifeless. It was the only real item of note besides his car that was missing outside.

"His car's not outside," Gina observed, eyes narrowing.

"He most likely took it," Tete replied, even though it felt too obvious to state.

Gina said nothing as she led them outside. She was scanning the compound and her gaze shifted toward the small waste bin in the corner of the yard. Without asking, she pointed at it.

"Check that bin!" She ordered.

Ola walked to the bin and sifted through its contents. Moments later, she pulled out a shard of black plastic with gloved fingers.

"Got something," she called, holding up a shattered mobile phone.

Gina stepped forward, took the phone, and examined it. The SIM tray wasn't empty. She nodded grimly.

"He's running," she said quietly.

Tete and Ola glanced at each other again—one too many times for Gina's liking.

Her brow twitched. "Why do I keep seeing those looks?" She asked sharply, but neither of them answered.

Gina exhaled and returned to the business at hand. "We need to check for CCTV coverage in this area. Anything that might have caught him leaving. Shops, street posts, anywhere they are found."

"I reckon we check the office first," Tete suggested. "He might've gone there."

“I doubt it,” Gina muttered. “He’s gone. I know the signs, but you can call in to confirm later.”

“What’s the play now?” Tete asked.

“First,” she said crisply, “Ola, stay behind and canvass the street. Look for any cameras, ask shop owners, scan everywhere. Let’s find his car or at least the direction he fled.”

“Do we have the license plate?” She added.

“It’s a personal vehicle,” Tete responded. “We’d need to see it to identify the plates.”

“Fine,” said Gina, her tone tinged with urgency. “Let’s move. We’ll track him, but our immediate priority is the Kite.”

She turned to Tete. “As Chief made clear, the Kite matters more than anything else right now. The Lion wants results before 9 a.m.”

“You lead,” Tete replied. “Where do we start?”

“Wherever you didn’t search thoroughly.”

Tete paused. Her words jogged something.

The farmhouse.

The mud hut by the farmlands, the one officers claimed appeared recently occupied, but he hadn’t taken it seriously. His instincts flared. That was it. He hadn’t looked closely enough.

“I have an idea,” he said finally. “Let’s go.”

Without another word, Gina and Tete slipped back into the SUV. The tyres crunched over gravel as they pulled out of the compound, leaving Ola to begin her sweep of the street. The hunt was back on.

This time, Gina was leading the charge.

Fourteen

THE NIGHT BEFORE, Dera did not sleep a wink. Her old bedroom in her parents' house, once a cocoon of memory, felt like a tomb. The faded pale pink curtains did little to soften the raw ache in her chest. The framed pictures on the walls, the bookshelf filled with worn-out young adult paperbacks she had not had time to pack, the old flower-print bedsheet clinging to the mattress—everything stood still in quiet contrast to the new storm building within her.

Her pillow, damp from relentless weeping throughout the night, lay limp under her head. The mattress itself bore the full weight of her grief; a sadness so heavy it warped the air around her. Beneath her tears, rage burned. Rage for a government so vile it would rather murder to silence the truth than face it. Rage that her beloved Kene was gone, a casualty in a war he did not ask for, taken by cowards lurking behind State machinery to perpetrate their evil. Rage that the people were still being fed lies, and that the government did not care about the people anymore. A maddening, consuming rage—one that she needed to do something about.

She clenched her fists in the dark. She would no longer be silent. If they thought they had buried the truth with her lover, they had only planted a seed. She would grow into the voice he no longer had.

If people like her continue to look the other way while the nation continued downhill, it would implode and be sucked into the abyss of its own wickedness and take everyone with it. But not anymore. There would be no more quiet mourning. She would resist, not caring what it

would cost her. With Kene gone, she had no one else to worry about—her parents were capable of taking care of themselves.

She wanted to make a post that night about her boyfriend being shot, but she could not find her phones. In her anguish, she had forgotten to take them from her house.

The intruders came to mind. They had returned that night for something. She had overheard the girl who saved her mention Kego's phone just before she stumbled into the lounge. It all made sense now. They were after one of Kego's phones. Perhaps even the hospital visit earlier had been about the same thing. They wanted the proof of their involvement gone, even if they had to kill to get it.

Unfortunately for them, the secret was already out in the open.

She felt a deep chill as the realisation set in. In a country where data and privacy were state weapons, carrying the wrong device could mean death. Now, the death of her beloved.

She finally drifted into a fitful sleep as dawn was slipping in.

Minutes later, she was driving home. The roads were still, kissed by early morning sunlight. Chella's chart-topping love song floated from her speakers, and she sang along, her voice light, her mood lifted. The night shift was over, and she was returning to joy. Her fiancé, Kene, would be visiting later in the day. She thought of cooking his favourite—white yam with pepper sauce and fried plantain—and smiled.

Her street looked calm, almost serene. But as she pulled into the driveway, something felt off. Neighbours stood outside their homes, silent and still, watching her car like it bore a coffin. Their eyes were heavy with pity. She greeted one or two awkwardly but did not ask any questions. Nothing was going to ruin her day.

Inside, the air was familiar. Her favourite scented candle still gave off a faint vanilla trace. Kene was sitting on the couch, smiling. Her heart soared.

“You’re already here?” She squealed, rushing toward him. She leapt into his arms, but there was no response, no warmth. No squeeze. No whispered, “I missed you.” His body did not move.

What is wrong? She wondered and pulled back.

His face, once beaming, had darkened into something haunted. His eyes stared through her, vacant and heavy with sorrow, and her heart twisted.

“Kene?” Dera whispered. No answer.

Then she saw the blood. A wide dark smear crept across his chest, and when she looked down, it had seeped into her uniform. Her hospital scrubs were soaked red. His arms were wedged stiffly into the sides of the couch. He slumped forward, lifeless.

She screamed.

Dera jolted from her sleep, heart pounding, drenched in sweat. Disoriented, she looked around the dimly lit room. The window glowed with the first traces of dawn. For a moment, she did not know where she was. Then it hit her—her parents’ house. Her old bedroom. The clock on the wall read 7:02 a.m.

Then came the dreadful flood—memories of the night before. Strangers in her house. The shooting. The blood. The lifeless body of her boyfriend on the floor in her lounge. Tears welled in her eyes again, but this time, they felt different. Less like grief, more like fuel.

She clutched a pillow and smothered her face into it, trapping the scream rising from her soul. She did not want the house to hear. Her wail was soundless, but her body convulsed with each gasp.

A soft knock broke the silence. She did not answer, she could not. The door creaked open regardless. The footsteps were light and familiar.

The bed dipped slightly as her mother sat beside her. No words, just a hand stroking her back, slowly, patiently. Then the whisper, “The police are downstairs, dear. They want to take your statement.”

Dera said nothing. She kept her face in the pillow, her sobs quieter now. As if she was waiting for this moment, she sat up slowly. Her mother took her hand, and they walked downstairs together. Her face was still streaked with tears, and sweat clung to her brow. She sat down opposite the two officers—one female, one male.

“Are you sure she’s up for this?” The female officer asked, glancing at the mother. “We can come back another time.”

Her parents looked at her, giving her the choice. Dera nodded.

“I can do it,” she said softly. She was ready to tell her story, not just to the police officers, but soon to the whole world. Her voice was cracked, but her eyes were clear and so was her mind. *This government had taken more than it should from the people—it should end now.*

When she finished giving her statement, Dera wiped the last of her tears and looked up.

“I need to go to my house,” she said softly, her voice still laced with fatigue. “There’s something there I need to pick up.”

The female officer, a middle-aged woman with kind eyes and a no-nonsense tone, nodded. “That’s fine. Just be mindful not to tamper with anything. The place is still considered an active crime scene as our forensics team hasn’t concluded the investigation. Also, your phone is not there if that’s what you’re going to pick up.”

“I understand,” Dera said, though her mind was already made up.

Her mother immediately offered to go with her. “I’ll be fine, Mum,” Dera replied, with a faint smile that did not reach her eyes.

“Drive slowly!” Her father called from the stairway as she stepped outside.

She did not. She took one of her mother’s cars and tore down the street in it, engine revving like a declaration of war on the road. Her hands gripped the steering wheel tightly as tears threatened to cloud her vision again. She nearly clipped a group of protesters holding placards as she rounded a bend. They jumped back and shouted curses after her, mistaking her for another government stooge choosing to drive around rather than join the uprising.

Through the rearview mirror, she noticed one man who bent to mime picking up invisible stones to hurl at her car. She flinched instinctively when he did, and pressed hard on the pedal. *If only they knew*, she thought. *If only they knew how dangerous my resolve has become.*

The city was simmering. She passed streets filled with clusters of people—some whispering, some shouting, all consumed by the same flame. You could smell the rebellion in the air, like the burnt edge of history being rewritten. Some spoke of the poet, some of the government’s brutality, while others still whispered about rumours of the bloodshed the night before. Dera gritted her teeth. *They have no idea yet how deep this runs*, she thought. *But I will show them.*

She turned onto her street minutes later. Just like in her dream, her neighbours trailed her as she pulled into the driveway. They stood at their doorways, silent, solemn. Their eyes bore down on her like prayers already mourning a loss. She offered a half-hearted wave to the closest ones, fighting back another swell of grief. Then she stepped out of the car.

She ripped the yellow police tape that fluttered across her front door. Inside, her house was a quiet, cold tomb. It carried an eerie silence with

the crime scene symbols all over the place. Dried blood had soaked into the tile grout like a permanent tattoo. Shards of the broken vase still littered parts of the floor. There were signs that the room had been methodically ransacked—drawers pulled, shelves emptied—but somehow, it still felt too pristine, too untouched, like a theatre after the final act.

Flashes of her dream returned. Kene was stiffly slumped on the couch, his arms wedged tightly between the cushions. She swallowed hard and walked to the couch.

She slipped her hands deep into the crevices on both sides. Her fingers brushed against something cold and rectangular, then another. Two mobile phones. As she pulled them out, she realised they were Kego's phones. Her breath hitched.

She powered them off immediately, yanked the back covers, and used her earring to eject the SIM cards. She placed the tiny chips into her purse and slipped the phones in as well.

She realised that Kene must have hidden them before the intruders came in the previous night. For her, like he knew they would kill him. She glanced around—her phone and Kene's were nowhere to be seen. The police must have collected them as evidence like the officer inferred, but these two were meant to be found by her.

She climbed the stairs to her bedroom. It had not been touched; nothing was tagged, perhaps they had not entered it. Her emergency phone still lay inside the drawer of her bedside table which was partially open. She let out a heavy breath she had not known she was holding back.

Still dressed in the blood-streaked clothes from the night before, she opened the camera on the phone. Her hand trembling as she started recording her house.

She went down and filmed the lounge. The broken vase. The floor, stained with the blood of the man who loved her. She stepped outside

and recorded the tattered yellow tape fluttering in the morning air. Then she turned the camera on herself. Her eyes were swollen, but her cheeks glistened. Her lips quivered.

“My name is Dera,” she said, voice raw but steady. “And last night, the government murdered my fiancé. They sent people to break into my home, and they shot him right here to silence the truth about what is going on, but they failed.”

She paused, inhaled shakily, and pressed on.

“I’m not a politician or a revolutionary. I’m a woman who has lost her soul mate, her lover, and I refuse to stay silent. This government has taken too much from too many in the last six years. Enough is enough.”

Tears spilled from her eyes, but her voice rose with a defiant fire.

“Are you not tired? Tired of sitting in your house, complaining on WhatsApp and X? Is this the Nigeria you want your children to grow up in? Are you comfortable living in fear, waiting for your turn to die in silence?” She leaned closer to the lens, and her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Me? I’m done being afraid. I’m heading to the Government House after this. Alone, if I must. I will stand, even if I stand alone, but thank God, the streets are already awake. So, I am not alone.”

Then she looked straight into the camera and ended with a final rally. “If you see this, join us. Don’t wait until Nigeria happens to you too.”

Doubt flooded her mind.

So like this now you want to face this ruthless government? What made you think protests will work under this regime? You would just die for nothing. The people will go on enduring their suffering as

always. And you? Dead. Forgotten. Nobody will even remember you existed.

Better think about your future. Your mother—how would she cope if anything happened to her only child? You have everything: a rich father, a good job, a good body. Wait a few months and you will find your true soul mate. What more do you want?

Her fingers hovered over her phone screen. She shook her head, rejecting the voice. *If everyone chickened out this way, nothing would ever change.*

Damn the consequences.

At 7:43 a.m., she uploaded the video to her Instagram page. She did not have many followers, but she knew where to send it. She tagged Instablog, Linda Ikeji, NaijaEverything, Sahara Reporters, and any other outlet she could think of. Then she tucked the phone in her purse, took one last look at her blood-soaked floor, and stepped out.

Her hands did not shake anymore.

She went straight to her borrowed car, slid behind the wheel, started the car, and drove toward the Government House. If death was on the other end, so be it. She was prepared.

On the road, more people were gathering. In Abakaliki. It was the same across the country. In Lagos, Kano, Yenagoa, Benin, Abuja, Awka—across every major city, people were already in the streets, and her words would soon become a kindling tossed onto a nationwide blaze.

She was no longer just a grieving woman. She had become the spark needed to light up the nation. And the fire began to grow.

Back at her parents' house, Dera's mother sat in her lounge staring blankly at the phone in her hand. Her father watched beside her, rigid

with fear. The video had found them too. They said nothing for a long time.

Then her mother whispered, “May God protect her.” Her father could only nod, too choked to speak. Their daughter had chosen war, and the country was listening.

In another part of the town, Ola stood still for a moment, watching the dust trail settle behind the SUV as it sped off with Tete and Gina inside. It was nearly 8 a.m. The heat was already rising, thick with the scent of tension and smoke from distant fires lit by early protesters.

She blinked against the morning sun and found herself disoriented. Her mind drifted—reluctantly—to thoughts of the two agents now riding together in search of the elusive poet. The tall, lean, experienced one and the slender fair-skinned newcomer. She felt a knot of something twist in her chest. It was not clear if it was jealousy, resentment, or dread. Perhaps all three.

Her temple throbbed. She shook her head hard, snapping herself back into reality. *It did not matter*, she told herself. *Whatever happens between them is not important.*

What mattered was this: she had been left behind. Alone. And she had work to do. In a city rising slowly to its feet in rebellion.

Around her, more and more people were pouring into the streets, quiet at first, purposeful, with faces hardened by the same disillusionment. The storm was swelling.

And I’m standing here in plain clothes, walking among them, she thought. *Among the same people I used to deceive and monitor in the city.*

She watched a group of three men and a woman walk past, casting suspicious glances at her as they went. They did not know who she was,

but something about her unsettled them. Perhaps her upright stance, the cut of her jeans, the careful way she scanned the area, her hoodie.

She knew what would happen if they did found out who she was. She'd be dragged, stomped, or worse. But still, a voice within her whispered, *I'm not your enemy. I want the same thing you want.* She shared the same hunger and exhaustion, but she had the same fear that every protest would once again fizzle out before the fire could consume the rotten structure they were trying to bring down. Would this be any different?

Not again. Not this time. Her hope was faint but it was burning still. Maybe this would be different.

She pulled out her phone and opened her social media feed—X first, then Instagram. She wanted to see the latest about the chaos online. Her thumb hovered mid-scroll as her eyes caught a thumbnail. It was a video of the girl from the previous night. Her heart skipped. She would be in trouble if her involvement was mentioned.

She tapped on it.

Her screen filled with chaos of what could pass as screams, dried blood, and Dera's voice—soft at first, then rising into the kind of pain that punches through the soul. The very girl she had protected. Now, the same girl was rallying a whole nation.

Ola staggered a step backward in shock, nearly colliding with an oncoming man.

"Get off your fucking phone!" He snarled, his voice sharp with fury and desperation. His arm flared as if to strike her. She spun around instantly, defensive reflexes snapping into place as her eyes met his. He hesitated, then backed off. In his eyes, she saw them: grief, rage, loss and anger mixed together. He was poor, that much was clear, but his clothes were clean. In this city, though, what did poor even look like anymore? Everyone wore the same exhausted face. Hunger and hope no longer had uniforms.

She stepped out of the road and crossed the shallow drainage onto the sidewalk, steadying herself. Her screen was still lit with Dera's tear-streaked face. The girl she had saved was openly calling for a nationwide uprising. Ola's breath caught in her throat.

That's bold, she thought. *Daring, but careless. This government would not tolerate.*

She was thankful, relieved even, that no one had recorded her at the scene the night before. Not in the moment of chaos, and certainly not when she shot Antler—when she chose to shield a civilian girl over her own teammate. That decision haunted her still, even though Gina had ensured Antler would not be waking up again.

She feared what the bullet would reveal, what investigators might uncover if they looked closely. But the silence from the police and the doctor at the clinic had bought her some peace. Dera had not said a word. *She would not,* Ola reassured herself. *She could not because it did not fit her narrative that the State didn't care.* Unless she forgot.

For now, she was safe.

She inhaled deeply and turned her attention back to the task at hand. *Do the job,* she whispered to herself.

She slid her phone into her pocket and began to move, this time with deliberate purpose. She scanned the stretch of the street, her eyes tracing the corners of buildings, rooftops, and lampposts, searching for CCTV cameras that might have caught Brahim's escape.

She found nothing. No cameras. No surveillance infrastructure. Just people—more and more of them—walking in twos and groups towards the gathering unrest.

She crossed to the opposite lane and followed another road, dipping past shuttered shops. Metal shutters rattled in the wind as she passed.

Fear could close businesses faster than any strike. Even the usually chaotic street side keke stops were nearly empty.

Still no cameras. She considered calling Tete to say it was a futile mission, but changed her mind. She had not exhausted the area yet, and going back empty-handed was not an option. *I'll comb the entire district if I have to*, she decided. *I'm not going back until I find something worth reporting.*

She pulled up her hoodie, blended into the crowd, and kept walking—a ghost in the heart of the city.

Along the Kogi-Enugu highway earlier that day, Brahim had driven through the long and shadowed night like a fugitive with nowhere to turn, running on fumes and fear. The dark, wide, open highway was a gift. No traffic. No checkpoint delays after he left the East. The notorious military roadblocks that usually peppered the highways in the East were his only challenge, heightened given the hunt for the poet.

He drove with burning hunger gnawing at his insides, weary eyes straining to stay open. The silence of the road was his accomplice. It helped him disappear, at least for the night.

By dawn, the sun was stretching gold across the Kogi sky as he arrived in Lokoja. His stomach churned—he could no longer ignore the emptiness clawing inside him. He pulled over at a roadside buka just across from a sleepy lorry garage where drivers were already stretching and washing their faces with cold sachet water. The air smelled of boiled beans, burnt oil, and peppered stew mixed with the musty scent of rubber tyres and diesel.

He ate quickly, a steaming plate of rice with stew and lightly-fried plantain. It filled the void in his belly but did nothing to calm his nerves.

Back inside his dusty car, he leaned forward on the steering wheel for what was meant to be a short rest. Sleep took him anyway.

He jolted awake around 8:02 a.m., heart thudding. A soldier in green fatigues and a beret was hammering at his window with a half-curved fist, the other hand pointing aggressively at the road. His pulse spiked. For a split second, he feared he had been discovered. His breath caught in his throat. Then he noticed the man's irate gestures and the occasional shout of "Oga, move this car!" The soldier simply wanted him to vacate the roadside.

He composed himself, nodded apologetically through the glass, and turned the ignition. The old car groaned in obedience and eased back onto the road.

The highway was now alive with motion. Protesters were trickling onto both sides of the road, building into steady streams. The swelling anger of the masses now had legs, voices, and placards. Police officers and soldiers were doing their best to hold the growing tide back from spilling onto the expressway and halting national movement.

Brahim drove with care and quiet tension. He knew to avoid anything that might require him to stop or offer identification. No eye contact, no honking, or stalling. He just had to disappear up north before they could figure out where he was.

Across Nigeria, homes still locked in silence and hesitation buzzed with the soft glow of televisions and smartphone screens. The drama unfolding in the capital offered its own spectacle. The president was on air second time in less than a day, seated on his carved mahogany decision throne, framed by the insignia of power and the tight faces of his security chiefs. He wore a face carved with synthetic rage—eyebrows furrowed, voice deceptively controlled. The live meeting, delayed till 8:00 a.m., began.

He interrogated each chief like a director with a cast of failed actors.

“What has been done to find the missing poet?”

Their responses came fast, loud, and practiced—vibrant yet hollow. The DSS chief declared they had one of the suspected assailants in custody, hinting at a broader conspiracy, pointing toward an obscure Eastern fringe freedom group as a likely collaborator in what he now described as a “coordinated abduction designed to make the government look evil.”

The Inspector-General of Police raised complaints about how the swelling protests were crippling the investigation. His men could not both manage the crowd and hunt down a bunch of ghosts. People should return to their homes if the police must focus on finding the missing poet sooner. Even Mr Bello pinched himself at the excuses.

The head of the military was confident—too confident. He assured the president that they were working “in synergy” with other forces, and that apprehending the poet’s abductors was “only a matter of time.”

The press, carefully filtered but not entirely toothless, raised pointed questions. They cited viral videos of eyewitnesses’ accounts, CCTV footage, and the mention of the government’s name in places where blood was spilled. They pressed on the new claim about the death of the social media influencer who happened to be the missing poet’s friend.

Flat denials and well-rehearsed lies followed each question. Blame was thrown like sand in the wind, at opponents of the State leadership, at fake news, at enemies within and without. None was reserved for the government itself.

The president’s lips curled. His disappointment was a theatre of its own. He stood tall, ordering all the security chiefs to abandon their desks and relocate immediately to Abakaliki. The new command centre was wherever the poet might be found—or *silenced*, he thought. Alive, preferably, he said. *Dead, by all means*, he willed.

No actor on earth could have rivalled the performance he gave—sorrowful, concerned, heroic. On camera, he was the president victimised by circumstance. Off camera, he was as calculating as the mastermind he was.

He declared he would be addressing the nation more formally by noon, a delay from the earlier 9 a.m. scheduled. The reason? He needed time to understand why damaging videos kept surfacing online, raw and uncontrollable, while his security heads still had no “favourable news” about the fugitive poet.

As the meeting broke, his eyes moved coldly across the room and landed on his two loyal handymen. With a quiet jerk of his chin, he summoned them to follow. They rose like shadows and trailed him into his inner chambers, away from the lights, the press, the quasi-democracy. Away from the acting theatre.

There, the real scheming would continue.

Fifteen

EARLIER THAT MORNING, Kego trudged through miles of fallow farmlands and overgrown footpaths. He had no idea how long it had been since he left the farmhouse, time having lost its rhythm in his mind. Dawn seemed to delay its arrival. He could have been on the move for an hour, or more, but he couldn't tell. He was hungry and tired from walking through thickets of bush.

The early morning cold clung to him like a second skin, lashing at his soaked, threadbare clothing. He shivered uncontrollably, his relentless motion his only source of warmth. Dew-laden leaves slapped against him from thigh to chest as he pushed through rows of tall corn, cassava and growing yam plants tangled with bushy shrubs. Every brush drained more of his lingering warmth, but he pressed on, driven by a primal instinct that overrode his physical exhaustion.

He thought of his suitcase, lost in the wreckage of the SUV. The nylon hoodie inside would have helped. His passport and his newly approved US visa were in there too. His access to the embassy—gone. But he did not dwell on that loss, not under the grip of this cruel cold. What use was escape if he died here, drenched to the bone and hunted, in the belly of this indifferent stretch of farmlands?

His bare feet were a constant reminder of his lost pair of slip-on—the one provided by the hospital. Every step drove knives up to his spine. The wound on his treated foot throbbed with a heartbeat of its own. He had unwrapped the bandage in the night when it began to stink of blood soaked with mud and sweat. Now the wound pulsed raw

against the ground with each footfall, pulling at the nerves all the way up his leg.

Through the thin blur of his unaided eyes—his glasses lost in the crash—he could still make out the eerie movements of life around him. Snakes slithered across his path, silent and quick. Furry brown rabbits vanished into hollows beneath yam mounds. Rats gnawing at young maize cobs darted away at his approach—he saw others digging into soft earth beneath yam mounds before scampering away. Squirrels and birds fled up the trees like guilty spirits as he passed.

Above, the waning moon still clung to the sky, a pale witness to his ordeal, casting just enough silver to etch out his path.

He wanted to stop. To collapse and surrender. His back screamed for rest, his legs trembled under him, his stomach had folded in on itself—growling and tight. He could feel the bite of the impatient worms within. The dew he licked from leaves while pushing through thick shrubs was all that had kept him from collapsing. His true life saver. He was, otherwise, too famished to walk on.

Regret surfaced again.

Was this suffering worth it? His voice was heard. Yes, his poetry collection would make him a multimillionaire. He was walking in his father's footsteps—finally, with the government on his heels. But if he died now, what would happen to his mother and sister? How would they cope? Who would uphold the legacy his father left him? He didn't even have a girlfriend, let alone a child to leave behind.

Here he was in the woods, stomach rumbling, at the risk of creatures lurking in these uninhabited farmlands.

Look at him. Blood soaked shirt. Tattered. His skin was a map of bruises he tried not to acknowledge, but peppered his arms, his legs, his back. His bones ached. The crash of the night before was claiming more of him by the hour.

Were any of these pains worth his poems?

If there was a button to return to his life before the book release, he would press it.

He was so lost in his head he didn't see the clearing in front of him.

A narrow earthen road appeared, curving from his left, then straightened ahead. It was sunken in places from years of erosion and abandonment, and utterly deserted. He stepped onto it, grateful to leave the bush behind.

He limped forward, passing through a wide pool of muddy water already drying into cracked earth. Fresh tyre marks streaked out of the draining puddle into the dry earth ahead, glistening under the weak moonlight. He frowned at them a moment, then pushed the unease aside. A village road, nothing more.

He followed the winding bend, hoping it would carry him further from the reach of death, away from the expressway where those who sought him prowled. Then he saw another bend ahead—sharper, pulling right, promising to lead him deeper into the unknown village. He began to question whether this direction was salvation or a loop back into the net of those hunting him. He cursed under his breath. *Maybe I would have been safer in the bush*, he thought.

Then came the low, rumbling growl of approaching engines.

He stopped. His ears sharpened. Headlights pierced the pre-dawn dimness from just beyond the bend, creeping toward him and close.

He did not wait to find out who it was.

In one swift, desperate move—just as the leading vehicle turned onto his path—he leapt off the road and into the bush beside it like a startled animal evading a predator's snare. His knees slammed into the wet, grassy floor of an uncultivated plot, and he slid further into thicker brush, crawling on all fours, burrowing into the shadows of the dense undergrowth.

The first truck thundered past. Then the others. Police vehicles—officers hanging off the backs, cold and quiet. The same men from the farmhouse search, or members of the same party. He counted at least seven trucks through the grass and his sweaty panic. The ground shook beneath him as they roared past. He held his breath and went completely still, his heart pounding against his ribs like a prisoner begging to be let out.

Their headlights swept over the roadside, casting long shadows across the fields. He squeezed deeper beneath the veil of leaves and old cassava stalks. If they had seen him jump, they gave no indication. The trucks thundered on and vanished around the bend ahead.

Just as he began to stir again, the high whine of a motorbike broke the silence. He dropped into a painful squat, his wounded foot screaming in protest. The bike sped past with two riders—a man and a woman. Their silhouettes were barely visible in the pre-dawn dimness. It was only the fading moon and the curve of the road that saved him.

He stayed hidden until the silence returned and clung to it a while longer. When he finally emerged, he was panting, his body freshly drenched in cold sweat and dew. He did not trust the road anymore. He crossed it with his eyes darting in both directions, then melted back into the farmland before him, swallowed once more by thickets of undergrowth.

The hunt was still on, but he would not make it easy for them.

Elsewhere, the time was 5:40 a.m.

It was nearly 8:30 a.m. when Ola finally found what she had been searching for.

A tired-looking supermarket sat at a street corner, several poles down from Brahim and Antler's shared apartment. Mounted just above

the faded green signboard were rusted CCTV cameras—one pointing towards one end of the street, the other crooked slightly towards the other end like a sleepy eye that had not blinked in years. A third pointed directly at the shop entrance. She exhaled slowly. She had no idea how she had missed it earlier.

In front of the half-closed glass door stood the shop's elderly owner—skin darkened from years in the sun, arms folded behind his back like a man who had seen too much of the world and found none of it surprising. He was watching the growing river of protesters with weary resignation. Beside him a young man in a sleeveless top, held his phone up to film the tide of bodies and banners flooding the street.

“Your generation likes to waste their time instead of working,” the old man grumbled, catching sight of Ola standing in the road before them, foot on the curb.

From behind her, a woman's voice snapped through the air. “Won't you drop that and get out here?” She was gesturing angrily at the young man. “Or better still, come and record the protest where it's actually happening—at the government house!” The woman sighed and vanished into the crowd.

Ola tugged her hoodie down.

“Is this your shop?” she asked the older man.

“We're not open today,” he replied flatly, waving her off like a mosquito. “Please move on.”

She stepped off the curb and crossed onto the shopfront pavement without breaking stride.

“Shey you no dey hear? He said we're not open,” the younger man snapped, swinging his camera phone towards her face.

She lowered her head and raised her hand instinctively to shield her face. The elderly man began retreating inside the shop, one slow step at

a time, his eyes growing with fear and suspicion. Ola closed the distance fast.

“I’m not here to buy anything,” she said calmly.

“Then what are you looking for?” The younger man retorted, voice louder now, camera still trained on her.

In one swift motion, Ola reached forward and yanked the phone from his hand. “Stop recording me!”

The young man tried to wrestle his phone back and they locked briefly in a clumsy struggle, but Ola was better trained. She trapped him against her chest.

“Please leave my son alone!” The elderly man called from the doorway.

“I’m not here for trouble,” Ola said, holding her ground. “I just need to see your CCTV footage.”

The younger man, flustered, growled, “As who you be?”

She did not answer him. Instead, she turned to the older man.

“Why do you want to see it?” he asked cautiously.

“I’m police,” she lied, her tone firm and unhurried. “Let me just take a quick look and I’ll be gone before you know it.”

The older man blinked. She did not look like someone ready to take no for an answer.

“Alright, alright,” the younger man said, pulling back. “Just let me go, abeg.”

Ola released him and handed the phone back—after deleting the video with her face. He snatched it back like a child reclaiming a toy and returned to filming the protesters, fuming and complaining about losing important footage of the morning protesters. She followed the shopkeeper inside.

The supermarket was a narrow maze of shelves and chaos—one of those aging local stores where nothing had ever been reorganised. The shelves were packed wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling, with everything one may need. Powdered milk beside shoe polish. Bottle water beside a park of razor blades. The items clung to each other in odd pairings, some labels faded, others barely recognisable. Dust coated the tops of jars. Aisles broken by glass display shelves turned into dumping grounds for excess stock stacked over others.

She followed the man past a stack of mismatched slippers and bags of charcoal into a dim back room that smelled of camphor and engine oil. On a desk sat a flickering old monitor showing split-screen footage from four cameras.

One of them covered the aisles within the shop from above, though inadequately.

“Here it is,” the man said simply. “That’s all we’ve got.”

“It’s enough, thank you.” Ola pulled up a chair and went to work.

She scrubbed through the previous night’s footage. Most of it uneventful: shadowy figures, occasional cars, a few loiterers. Then, at a few minutes past 11:00 p.m., she caught a suspicious movement. An awkward-looking car crept into view from the far end of the street. She froze the frame. Then reversed slightly and zoomed in.

There he was.

Through the plain, undarkened windshield, under the soft glow of a nearby streetlight, Brahim’s unmistakable face appeared—tired, strained, alone. And in a hurry. He was staring back at the camera. He must have seen it as he sped past.

She exhaled.

She shifted the camera feed to the car’s number plate—barely caught in the corner of the frame. Faint, the numbers murky in the night, but discernible. She tried a second camera angle, capturing the plate from

behind. Then without a word, she pulled out her phone and took multiple pictures—his face, the front of the car, the plates, and the rear.

She stood when she was done. “Thank you,” she said, without looking at the shopkeeper, and walked out of the small room, through the store, and out the glass doors. Outside, she pulled her hoodie up and merged with the surging crowd.

Tete and Gina stood under the low morning sun, boots pressed into the soft earth just outside the mud farmhouse. Two police officers from the crash site checkpoint flanked them, eyes scanning the undergrowth for missed signs. The scene smelled of dampness and trampled grass.

They had combed every inch of the hut. The dusty outlines of a crouched figure still lingered on the floor. Disturbed cobwebs near the window. Farm tools pushed awkwardly against the far wall. Outside, the earth bore too many overlapping footprints from the search teams that had passed through earlier. It was utter confusion.

“I don’t think we can get anything here,” Tete said finally. The officers nodded.

“Was the village searched thoroughly this morning?” Gina asked, ignoring him and directing the question at no one in particular.

“Yes,” one of the officers replied, wiping sweat from his brow.

“We had over sixty officers scour every home and farm for more than an hour before sunrise,” the second added. “We still have men in plain clothes there.”

Gina turned to Tete. He gave her a subtle shrug of confirmation. She narrowed her gaze, then gestured towards the farm trail leading back to Abakaliki. “One thing I know,” she said, “he did not go that way.” Tete nodded, his weary eyes following the direction of her hand.

“And he sure did not go this way either,” she added, motioning towards the Enugu-Abakaliki expressway, then pivoted and pointed towards the village behind them. “Not even that way. He probably saw the search party coming.”

Tete raised a brow. “He could’ve entered the village before the search began.”

“I don’t think so,” Gina replied flatly. “He slept in this farmhouse all through the night. It’s obvious.”

“So where do you think he went?”

She pointed southwest—toward the forested hinterlands in the general direction of Enugu. “There. If he had any sense, he followed the path less watched. If he kept at it, he might already be in Enugu by now.”

Tete nodded slowly, approving. “You may be right.”

“He’s had a four or five hour head start, at least,” she added, glancing at the sun’s slow crawl above the tree line.

“He couldn’t have caught a ride,” one of the policemen said. “We’ve had every major exit blocked. All vehicles checked before they even got on the road.”

“He’s on foot,” Gina said, her voice like flint. “He saw what happened when he tried to escape in a vehicle. He’s not stupid.”

Tete’s phone buzzed in his hand. He checked it. Ola’s images filled the screen, clear. His eyes sharpened. “I think we got Brahim,” he said in a low voice, showing Gina the phone.

“Forward it to me. Now!” She was already unlocking her device.

Within seconds, she forwarded the photos to DG Bello with a short encrypted message:

Brahim has disappeared, sir. But we now have a lead. Recommend all road units watch for the plate number immediately. Can you

authorise the watch? We're closing in on the Kite. Antler is already taken care of.

She tapped send and looked up.

“Let’s get out of this bush,” she said. “Every second we waste here, he gets further away.”

In the polished inner chambers of the State House, DG Bello sat beside the Inspector-General of Police. Sunlight fell through slit blinds in streaks. The President, still detained in a meeting with some cabinet ministers in the main lounge, had kept them waiting for five minutes.

Bello’s phone vibrated. Gina’s message flashed across the screen. He read it silently, then to the IGP, and forwarded it at once to the Army Chief, marked: *Presidential Directive: Apprehend suspect, connected to poet’s disappearance anywhere found. Use force if necessary. Transfer custody to DSS. Be advised: suspect is armed and dangerous.*

The Police Chief was already on calls to his lieutenants, issuing rapid instructions to deploy more officers across highways. The nationwide manhunt had just been given a sharper teeth to chew more meat. Brahim’s images were to be spread among officers nationwide, especially across the Eastern region.

Five more minutes passed.

Bello’s phone rang. It was the Army Chief.

“My men sighted the suspect earlier this morning,” the voice said. “Same car, plates confirmed. Along the Lokoja expressway, heading north.”

“Understood,” Bello replied. “All units in the region should be alerted. Lock down the zone.”

The moment the call ended, he dialled Gina's number on the secure channel.

"Good morning, sir," she answered quickly, tone brisk.

"Your focus now is the Kite," Bello ordered. "We've got Brahim—sighted in Lokoja. He's out of your reach now, so we'll handle him. Just get the Kite out of the air."

"Noted, sir."

The line went dead. At that moment, the President walked in, his face hard and unreadable. Both men rose.

"Sit," he said, waving them down. He lowered himself into the high-backed seat behind the presidential desk and paused.

"What's the latest?" Is the poet dead yet?"

"We're very close to getting him," Bello said, pressing his thumb and forefinger together. "This close."

The President turned to the IGP.

"My men are on high alert," the Police Chief said. "We'll have him in no time. We're working hand in hand with the DSS and the military."

The President leaned back. "Who is this girl claiming we shot her boyfriend in Abakaliki? Where did she come from?"

Bello cleared his throat. "Sir, that was a by-product of the compromised agents. They were trying to recover the leaked footage and something went wrong."

"The more these videos keep showing up," the President growled, "the more fragile our grip becomes. One poet. Just one damn poet, and the country's already on fire."

He grabbed the remote and flicked on the television. News channels flickered across the screen with images of nationwide protests, headlines screaming about rebellion brewing, young people flooding

capital streets with placards and chants. In some areas, major roads had been blocked.

The protest outside the State House had grown louder. Chants of “We want Kego!” and “Ibe Banjo resign now!” filtered through the thick glass like distant thunder. The President stared at the footage of the crowd outside his own gate, his jaw tight.

“I can’t even leave this place now,” he said bitterly. “Look at the damn crowd.”

The two men sat in silence, heads bowed.

“Maybe it’s time,” the President muttered, “to send in the real fixers from the syndicate. I have them scattered across this country. They can spread fear faster than we can.”

The chiefs exchanged glances.

“If nothing good comes out of this by 11 a.m.,” he continued, “I’ll make that call myself. I had hoped our men inside could clean this up efficiently and quietly, but we’re now on the verge of uncontrollable civil unrest. That, I cannot allow.”

“We’ll get this done,” Bello said firmly, rising as The President stood.

“Then why are you still here?” The President snapped, venom in his eyes. “Get your men to finish the damn job!”

He waved them off. His patience was spent. The two men saluted with strained faces and turned to leave, rage simmering just beneath their composure, resolve hardening in their chests. Either they deliver or the president would put a noose around their necks.

By 8:30 a.m., Kego was slumped against the broad, moss-dusted trunk of a lone mango tree deep in the wild growth he had been wading

through since dawn. His back rested against a thick, gnarled root that curled above the earth like the coil of an ancient serpent.

He had fallen asleep over an hour ago—hunger, fear, and relentless trekking finally consuming him. Around his feet, the peels and seeds of half-eaten mangoes lay scattered across the spongy forest floor, mingling with brittle leaves, broken twigs, and small ferns whispering in the breeze.

The air was quiet, save for the distant hum of vehicles on the expressway—some honking impatiently, others roaring through the traffic building up ahead. Muffled shouts from military checkpoints drifted faintly through the trees. Kego had kept close to the road earlier, letting the sounds guide his course, remaining veiled by undergrowth and the natural hush of the morning.

He had arrived at the mango tree barely able to keep himself upright. His entire body ached with a pain that felt chiselled into his bones. The wound on his foot had dimmed from fire to a dull throb, ground down by cold and exhaustion. He had limped, and gasped, until the golden globes of mangoes hanging low from the tree pulled him forward like a final invitation.

He had reached up weakly, grabbing as many fruits as his trembling hands could hold. They were warm from the rising sun and sweet with dew. He ate like a man starved to the soul. Then, with his belly slightly soothed and his strength still abandoning him, he sank onto the exposed root and leaned against the trunk. The world blurred. His mind dimmed. Darkness took him—deeper than any sleep he had ever known.

Now he lay sprawled awkwardly under the tree, having slid from his seated position. His limbs were stretched loosely across the leaf-matted ground, his chest rising slowly, almost imperceptibly. From a distance, he looked lifeless—just another body discarded by fate into the bush.

About twenty paces away, a narrow earthen path nearly swallowed by overgrown grasses wound past the tree. Along it, two men

emerged—each clutching a cutlass over his shoulder, feet bare and dusty. Village farmers heading to their cassava plots deeper in the bush. The ripening mangoes had lured them sideways.

As they drew nearer, one of them stopped and pointed. “Wait. See something?”

They stepped closer, cautious, eyes narrowing.

“It’s a dead man o,” the first one said, lowering his cutlass. “Lying like that...he definitely looks dead.”

His companion frowned and approached carefully. He crouched, stretched out a hand, and held it gently beneath Kego’s nose.

“He’s breathing,” he announced.

The first farmer leaned in. “Let’s wake him. If he lies like this too long, he’ll crack his spine.”

He tapped Kego’s shoulder, gently. No response. He tapped again, more firmly. Nothing. He gripped Kego’s wrists and lifted them—both arms dropped back to the forest floor with a limp, unsettling weight.

“He must have fainted,” said the second farmer, now kneeling.

The first one stood still, looking worried. “Should we leave him here? What if he never wakes up?”

“No,” the second replied firmly. “The junction is not too far. Let’s carry him to the soldiers. They will know what to do.”

The first man hesitated. Soldiers? *What if they arrest them for a stranger they don’t know how he got into this condition?* He agreed.

Together, they lifted Kego—one hoisting his arms, the other taking his legs—and eased his limp, dust-covered frame onto their shoulders. With careful, measured steps, they began the slow trudge back through the bush towards the nearby junction, where beyond the tree line,

soldiers stopped cars with raised rifles, while a stream of protesters gripped placards demanding justice for the missing poet.

They had no connection to the Internet or the news networks. Earlier that morning, they had even been wondering what the young ones on the roads were protesting about.

They had no idea they were carrying the person the whole nation was searching for—the quiet catalyst of the uprising, the firebrand at the centre of the storm.

Sixteen

THE CROWD ALONG the Lokoja-Abuja expressway had grown into a boiling sea of humanity. Brahim had been on the road for nearly an hour since leaving Lokoja city. Traffic had become a sluggish artery clogged with dissidents—vehicular movement dragging to a near-halt. The constant whistle blows and sporadic orders barked by soldiers and policemen barely held the crowd at bay. Protesters waved placards over their heads that kept bobbing like flotsam on a raging tide—chanting loudly, hovering dangerously close to the road, threatening to spill into the lanes at any moment. Amidst this, Brahim’s car edged slowly into the nation’s capital.

He gritted his teeth, knuckles pale against the steering wheel. He had sworn to remain low-key. Not to attract the slightest attention. Yet here he was, hammering the horn with the heel of his hand, frustration rising like a hot bile in his throat, as he crawled behind sluggish vehicles and groups of protesters darting playfully across the road. He wished he had taken a different route from this one.

“Get out of the way, you fucking morons!” he barked, through clenched teeth, slamming the horn again and again. “What’s all this madness?”

A red ‘L’ sign stared mockingly from the back of the car ahead. A learner. Of all times and roads. *Why would someone still learning to drive choose this chaos? On a federal road? So much for the rule of law*, he muttered. The thought enraged him further.

He let out a long, loud, and venomous sigh. His patience had run out. These civilians, these wide-eyed dreamers, did not understand. He was not just another frustrated Nigerian trapped in the heat of nationwide protests. He was a marked man on the run. Every second in this crawling traffic could be the last stretch of freedom he would ever know. His mind raced just as his heart pounded.

The plan to drive north, cross the border, and disappear into the quiet fold of his mother's kin in the Niger Republic had felt like salvation when he set out. He was going to lay low and re-plan his life. Now it felt like the naive dream of a poorly fed child. Deep down, the brutal realisation was setting in: his life would never again be lived looking forward. He would now live looking over his shoulder. Forever. Unless something happened to the people in power.

A part of him wanted the protests to explode into a full collapse of the government, so the people chasing him would be swept away in the wreckage. He did not give a damn about the poet, or the cause that lit this nationwide fire. All he wanted was peace, survival, and freedom from a system that discarded its pawns the moment they broke, burned, or became inconvenient.

He was angry at everything. For the way agents were fed to the wolves after doing the dirty work for politicians who continue to walk free and perpetuate their evil. A career he had hoped would carry him into old age was now ashes in his mouth. It didn't matter that he came from drug dealing.

He drove on.

Up ahead, a military checkpoint loomed—soldiers with iron batons and orders cutting across the chaos. They stood guard in full gear. Every vehicle, regardless of size, was stopped and scanned. He cursed again under his breath. The firearm was still in the car.

Steering with one hand, he unzipped the small travel bag on the passenger seat with the other. He fished out the pistol and wrapped it in

layers of clothes with shaking hands and darting eyes. Then, with a final glance around, he stuffed it deep under his seat.

Car horns blared behind him. He had stalled a minute too long.

His turn came.

Two soldiers flanked his vehicle, scanning. A third stood directly in front of the bonnet, peering in like he had seen a ghost. Brahim forced a smile. The man's expression did not budge.

The soldier pulled out his mobile phone, glanced at it, then back at Brahim's bumper. Back and forth. Back and forth. Brahim's stomach dropped. *What is he doing?*

His chest tightened as the soldier called another officer over, showing him something on the screen and pointing at the car. No. No. No. His breathing slowed. He could not will the rising panic away.

They could not have traced the plates to me. It was never registered under my name. Never.

The soldiers walked towards him with deliberate steps, rifles ready.

A tap on the window. Brahim wound it halfway with trembling hands.

"Can we see your ID?" The soldier's tone brimmed with suspicion.

Brahim hesitated, then reached into his pocket and produced a card. The soldier examined it and frowned. "Is this your name?"

Brahim nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Solomon?"

Brahim hesitated again. "Yes, sir."

"It can't be." The soldier's jaw dropped.

Then, with finality: "Leave the road. Move aside."

Shit.

He knew what that meant. Detention. Interrogation. Possibly worse. He obeyed, slowly maneuvering off the road as the soldier cleared a path through the protesters. The moment he parked, the orders came.

“Step out of the car!”

He did.

“Face the vehicle! Hands up!”

He raised his arms, his back to the soldiers. His shirt was already damp with sweat. Gloved hands frisked him roughly. Then the unmistakable click of cold metal on his wrists.

Panic exploded in his chest—wild and uncontrollable. He considered running, but two more soldiers had rifles aimed at him, eyes hard as steel. One wrong move, and he would be riddled with bullets in front of this crowd. One never knew what the Nigerian soldiers might do. He stayed put and cursed the day he became an agent.

They marched him to a waiting military van and shoved him into the back. Four armed soldiers surrounded him, weapons upright, their silence louder than gunfire.

As the van drove off, through the rear window he watched soldiers already tearing into his car. He wished he had stayed hidden in the East, at least, or taken a random person’s car.

The time was 9:15 a.m.

“Are we not tired?”

“Yes, we are!”

“Should we let this continue?”

“No o o o!”

“Enough is enough then. Say it!”

“Enough is enough!”

“Louder!”

“Enough is Enough!! Enough is Enough!!!”

“Yes! Ibe Baanjoo must go!”

“Ibe Baanjoo must go! Baanjoo must go! Ibe Baanjoo must go!”

Dera stood at the heart of one of the largest protest crowds in the country, leading the charge like a blazing torch in the dark. Across the nation, in front of local, state, and federal government buildings, the people were rising. In front of the State Government House in Ochoudo Centenary City, something different was happening. The protest had swelled into an ocean of heads and a myriad of voices so vast that those inside the government house trembled.

The police and military had been deployed in heavy force, lining the perimeter of the government compound and the buildings in anticipation of violence. But the sheer mass of the crowd made their presence seem like pebbles trying to dam a rising tide. More people poured in from every direction, flooding the area, refusing to be turned away.

Dera stood atop the roof of her mother's car, a makeshift podium, from where her voice reached thousands. An unending field of people pressed forward around her, chanting her words back in thunderous unity. Placards waved like battle flags. Fists punched the air in rhythm. Hundreds of phones were raised, filming and livestreaming, memorialising a moment already etching itself into history.

Then she raised a single hand.

Like a sudden hush from above, the storm of chants fell into stillness. One by one, voices quieted, bodies froze, hearts beat louder. Within moments, the sea of faces became a mirror-smooth lake, all eyes turned to her, waiting.

And then Dera spoke.

Her voice was steady, clear and sonorous, ringing out like a gospel hymn. In Abuja, a massive projected screen mounted at the gates of the Presidential Villa beamed her face before a dense crowd gathered under the watchful eyes of grim, silent soldiers. The tension was a wire stretched taut and trembling, yet no one moved beyond the allowed boundaries. All over the nation, people watched on their phone screens.

Her expression was fierce, but laced with grief. Faint traces of tears glistened on her cheeks. The rich and the poor tuned in. The disillusioned and the honest. The corrupt.

Everyone waited—aching, hoping, burning—for what this girl would say. The girl whose supposedly dead boyfriend had sparked a nationwide blaze less than twenty-four hours earlier.

Then she began.

“It is time for Nigeria to rise from the ashes of greed and corruption.”

A chill swept the land.

“Our nation is nearly 70 years past 1960’s independence, yet we still crawl like a baby nation that refuses to grow. It’s not that this baby lacks the body to stand. It can walk, run—but those tasked with feeding it, those meant to raise it, drink its milk and leave only drops in its bottle.”

A murmur of outrage rippled through the crowd, then silence again.

“How can a nation learn to walk when its legs are shackled by theft and betrayal? How can it grow when its caretakers starve it to feed themselves? How? How? Tell me—how is that possible?”

No one had answers. Only pain.

“My brothers and sisters,” she said, lifting her face, her tone laced with fury. “Our fathers and mothers, I don’t know how old you are or how long you have endured the wrongs done by our leaders, but this has to stop today!”

A thunderous “*Yeeessss!*” echoed across cities—from Calabar to Kaduna, from Ibadan to Jos. The walls of the nation rattled. The world was watching. The world had to watch.

Her speech lasted only five minutes, but every word sliced through the fog of dust and humanity in every major city in Nigeria. Every syllable landed like a hammer on the anvil of history about to be made. Her words echoed in palaces, government chambers, secret dens of power.

“If we cannot end this today,” she continued, her voice cracking with urgency, “it simply means we are all dead—every last one of us!”

The silence that followed was electric.

Then, she drove the final nail.

“We want the man of the people imprisoned for protesting a rigged election two years ago to be freed.”

The crowd erupted, not only in Abakaliki, but all over the nation. People screamed as if the request alone had already opened the prisoner’s cell gates. Dera raised her hand and the roar ebbed just enough.

“He is our only democratically elected president. We want him in that office today. The usurper must go! Ibe Baanjoo must go! Baanjoo must go...”

The chant thundered and rose like a wave building to crush a dam.

“Ibe Baanjoo must go! Ibe Baanjoo must go!! Ibe Baanjoo must go!!!”

Something different had taken hold. This was no longer just a protest for a missing poet. It was an uprising for the soul of the nation—peaceful, but war all the same. A war of resolve, of truth, of reclamation. A loud outcry from a people who had been impoverished

by bad governance fueled by greed. They were not ready to quit. Their aim must be actualised.

The time was 9:35 a.m.

At home, Dera's parents watched with pride as their daughter stood before the nation, but behind that pride was a rising tide of fear, laden with the dread of what might come to stop her. Not for what she said, but for who was listening.

They knew the country's leaders were wolves prowling the corridors of power. Men in polished shoes and bloodied hands, men who smiled on state television and gave kill orders behind sealed doors. Men who would stop at nothing to keep the throne they had stolen.

Their daughter was saying things that could make her their next target—the words that had driven the poet into hiding and got her beloved Kene gunned down in her own home. Words that were not supposed to be spoken out loud.

While their hearts burned with pride, their souls whispered in plea for her safety.

In her hostel room in Enugu, Kego's sister sat hunched alone, weeping softly, fearing her brother had already been taken from the world. She would not tell their mother yet.

At the State House in Abuja, His Excellency, President Ibe Banjo, was fuming in his private chambers.

He paced like a man shackled by his own delusions, surrounded by party stalwarts who still believed their ship of tyranny could weather this storm. His wife sat quietly in a corner, her presence barely acknowledged as her husband barked at the screens around them, where live social media feeds streamed the swelling protests.

He had ordered that morning that no state media should air anything related to the uprising. But the internet was far beyond his grip.

“Where the hell is the Chief of Army Staff?” he barked at no one. “These people should be teargassed! As long as it takes to dispersed them.”

Did he forget he's the commander-in-chief? The First Lady thought, biting her tongue. She would not dare say that out loud. Not with his temper at its peak. If only he had listened to her counsel and left the young poet alone when he had the chance. You don't attempt to crush a literary icon and expect a silent nation—not when their words had already taken root in the soul of a broken people.

Now she could see the empire her husband had tried so hard to build—a one-party state cemented by silence and fear—beginning to crumble. She feared for their son, quietly flown out of the country that morning for safety, in case the protests spiraled into bloodshed. The boy had become a symbol of arrogance—a spoiled, brazen mouthpiece of a decaying regime—and public hatred for him had grown into something no father's power could extinguish. His chances of ever becoming anything meaningful in the nation washed down the drain before their eyes.

The President stood, sat, then stood again, storming about, sweating in the air-conditioned room. He ordered someone to fetch the Army Chief, the DSS DG, and the Inspector-General of Police. His commands thundered through the corridor like war drums.

Of the three, only the Army Chief was not a syndicate implant in government, which made it hard to pull his strings.

The summoned men entered the chamber minutes later, walking one after the other into the storm.

“I want those protesters dispersed now!” The President snapped. “Forcefully, if they resist. Use the harshest teargas available.”

The Army Chief glanced uneasily at the IGP. The IGP turned to Mr. Bello. Mr. Bello faced the President directly.

“I believe the police can handle this, sir. It’s within their jurisdiction.”

“Then get on with it!” the President roared.

Immediately, the IGP picked up his secure device and issued the order to every state commissioner of police. The instructions rippled down the chain—commissioners to field commanders, field commanders to riot squads.

Riot shields came alive. Teargas canisters were unlocked and launchers loaded. Smoke began to rise across the nation. Across protest grounds in Abuja, Ibadan, Enugu, Port Harcourt, Kano, Makurdi, the air grew thick with irritation. Protesters clutched at their eyes and nostrils—some gasping, some screaming, most scattering in panic.

Only the commissioner of police in Abakaliki disobeyed. Dera was the daughter of his longtime personal physician and close friend. He could not bring himself to order her silence. Not with tear gas, not with bullets. It was not because he believed in their cause; he had seen dozens of protests like this one in his career and none had yielded results. The state governor had also spoken with him earlier that day and warned that the people must not be harmed.

Inside the President’s chamber, His Excellency watched the chaos unfold like a twisted opera. He saw people scatter. He saw helpless women cough and children wail. He watched as the once peaceful processions convulsed in smoke, laughing when one of the screens showed a stampede.

“If they fight back, use force,” he said coldly. “Shoot them like the last time.”

The Chief of Army Staff flinched. He had not recovered from the last massacre—the backlash from which had nearly cost him his career.

Now he was being pushed to dance the dance of death on national soil again. He said nothing, but prayed the people would not fight back with violence.

Because if they did this time, there would be no excuse.

The President was already sensing something he had not anticipated; this protest was not like the others. These people were rock solid and unmovable. They were already reassembling from places they had scattered to.

His paid agitators marching for him earlier had all dispersed for fear of the people. No government-aligned crowds waving banners of support as other times. Those from the syndicate tasked with creating chaos to discredit the movement abdicated.

This one was pure. Spontaneous. Dangerous for his administration. Happening everywhere at once—in the capital, in Lagos, Abuja, Abakaliki, Port Harcourt. Everywhere. In state capitals and small towns. From schoolyards to mechanic garages, from churches to marketplaces and mosques.

That terrified him. His teargas tactics failed. He was itching to order immediate military engagement, but the military appeared unwilling after the heavy sanctions they received for helping in the last riot where hundreds were killed, the atrocities pinned on their foot soldiers.

He slumped into his chair, boiling and silently cursing every man in the room and every citizen outside.

Out there, in front of the Government House gates, the people refused to break. Even in the sting of teargas, thousands stood. Eyes swollen, voices cracked, feet firm. Sachet water was distributed across many locations to ease the burn.

The uprising was no longer a flicker. It had become a fire that could not be quenched.

Back in Abakaliki, the protest grounds were electric with noise, heat and rising hope.

Word began to filter through the crowd—first as a whisper, then a wave. The poet had been seen.

Rumour had it that Kego was spotted unconscious at a military checkpoint near the Enugu-Ebonyi boundary. Eyewitnesses claimed he was found sprawled beneath a tree, barely breathing, before being lifted and carried away in a military van. His clothes were torn, his body limp—but he was said to be alive.

The message hit the crowd like fire on dry harmattan grass.

Someone waded through the wall of protesters and whispered it into Dera's ear. Her body stiffened. For a moment, she stood motionless on the car roof, eyes filling with tears—hopeful, painful, raw tears. Her lips trembled, but she did not break down. She could not do that here.

She raised her fist to the sky. Her voice cracked with pain but rang out like an alarm bell.

“Ibe Baanjoo must go!”

The chant tore through the atmosphere again and again and again:

“Ibe Baanjoo must go!!”

“Baanjoo must go!!!”

Her voice, sharp and trembling with fury, ignited the crowd again. The chant resounded from Abakaliki government house, echoing through streets, phones, livestreams, homes, and hearts across the country. A chant born of sorrow, now surging as a battle cry.

Across the land, a nation hanging on the edge leaned closer to the voice of the people. They were no longer sleeping with their eyes closed. The poet's prophecy was playing out.

Whether it would succeed was left for history to witness.

Seventeen

AROUND 9:00 A.M.

From the dense green wall of farmland, the two farmers emerged, staggering under the weight of Kego's limp body. The early sun filtered through the trees receding behind them, casting long shadows as they trudged up the clay path toward the junction.

At the checkpoint, the military men were on high alert, rifles slung and ready. They stopped and searched every passing vehicle. A growing crowd of protesters had gathered nearby, spilling out from surrounding villages—mostly young people of school age.

As the two men approached, two soldiers stormed forward with rifles raised, close enough it made the men flinch.

"What is going on here?" Barked one of the soldiers, his presence towering, voice cutting through the morning air.

"We...we found this man lying in the bush," one of the farmers stammered, his throat dry with fear, arms trembling beneath Kego's weight. They lowered him on the tarred roadside.

The second soldier stepped closer. "Who is he? Is he dead? What happened?"

"He's not dead," the other farmer cut in, his voice gruff with nervous irritation. "We don't know who he is. We just found him like this, alone in the bush."

A ripple of curiosity swept through the crowd behind the military barricades. People angled closer. Some with their phones raised. The soldiers pushed them back to no avail.

“That body looks a lot like Kego!” someone shouted from the crowd. “I’ve seen his pictures online, that’s him!”

The words struck like a bolt of lightning. The small crowd erupted in cheers, then quickly quieted into murmurs of doubt. Arguments spread through their ranks. Everyone watched from behind the makeshift barricades, straining for a clearer view.

The soldiers stood for a moment, scanning the unkempt, bruised man whose clothes clung to his frail form like discarded rags. His face was sunken from exhaustion and hunger. One soldier pulled out his phone and compared him to a recent online photo of the missing poet. The resemblance struck hard.

“It’s him,” the soldier confirmed, under his breath.

“That’s Kego,” the same voice from earlier rang out from among the protesters.

Chaos erupted. Protesters screamed and hurled accusations at the military. Soldiers responded with aggressive shouts, raising their rifles and ordering the swelling crowd to back off. More soldiers poured in from the flanks to contain the commotion, which was a hair’s breadth from turning into an all-out brawl. The people did not know if Kego was alive or dead.

“Take him to the van!” The officer in charge barked. “That’s the poet. He’s alive. Move! Take these two to the truck for questioning. Release them only if their stories check out.”

Two military medics came running with a stretcher. They laid Kego onto it and carried him to the van. He was unresponsive, the only sign of life being the faint rise and fall of his chest. One medic crouched over him immediately, checking his vitals, putting on an oxygen mask,

and administering fluids. The poet had been unconscious for over an hour. His face was pale, his lips dry and cracked.

More soldiers jumped into the back of the armoured van with stern faces and weapons ready. They doors slammed shut. The engine roared to life and the military van sped off southwards towards Enugu.

Behind them, the small knot of protesters broke—some in panic, others in prayer, many in rage. Phones were raised, recording and broadcasting. A wave of raw, unscripted emotion pulsed through the crowd.

The poet had been found. But no one could get a good shot of his limp body. Only whispers spread—he was alive, some said. Dead, said others. Barely holding on, said the rest.

Nobody knew who to trust with the government's shadows hanging over everything. Were the soldiers taking him to safety or to the slaughterhouse?

The people wanted answers.

Inside the darkened chamber of the presidency, the air had grown heavier. The curtains stayed drawn. The room felt like the belly of the fish that swallowed Jonah.

The Chief of Army Staff leaned slightly toward the DSS DG and whispered beneath the muted television chatter.

“He has been found.”

The DG's ears perked.

“My men,” the Army Chief continued softly, “located him near the state boundary road. He was unconscious, but breathing. They're transporting him to the military cantonment in Enugu now.”

Mr. Bello's face did not move, but his fingers tightened around the armrest of the chair.

"That's not all," the Chief added. "The other one—the second gunman—was picked up this morning here in Abuja. He's being held for questioning."

A flicker of satisfaction crossed Mr. Bello's eyes, but behind it, something else. Concern. This was not over. Not yet. Not until the poet was dead.

But the storm outside the gates had only just begun.

Tete and Gina had picked up Ola after leaving the two police officers behind at the checkpoint close to the farmhouse. Now, under Gina's firm and unrelenting orders, they were headed toward Enugu. She believed their best chance of getting hold of the poet lay within the city itself. Tete obliged, not that he had much power to do otherwise.

They were caught in a crawling wave of traffic backed up along the highway, leading to the same junction where, just minutes earlier, soldiers had received Kego's limp body from the farmers.

From the SUV, they could hear the distant uproar of the crowd ahead—hoarse chants and raised voices flaring, mixed with the commotion all around them—but they did not make much of it. Every intersection bore its own noise, its own gathering of protesters with placards and rage. This was just one more in the wave of the unrest brewing nationwide.

Silence hung inside the vehicle, solid as stone. Tete sat in the passenger seat, eyes narrowed. Gina sat quietly at the back, watching the traffic through the window. The SUV crept inch by inch, boxed in by buses, small cars, trucks, and the slow churn of impatient engines.

Suddenly, the road began to clear.

The soldiers had eased the blockade the moment they confirmed the unconscious man was indeed the missing poet. The search was over—for the moment. With their priority captured, the urgency to control traffic vanished. The barricades were pulled back, the junction checkpoint relaxed.

By the time their vehicle pulled into the clearing of the junction, the military van that had taken Kego was already a shadow in the distance. They could still hear the fading siren, a thin thread of sound slicing the morning air, disappearing down the expressway towards Enugu.

A thick cluster of protesters continued at the junction, chanting louder than ever.

“Don’t kill Kego! Set him free!” The cries rose and rolled in waves across the asphalt.

Gina rolled her window down halfway and called out to one of the soldiers trying to hold the protesters back. “What happened here?”

The soldier whipped his head around sharply, gripping his rifle—until Tete leaned out from the passenger side and flashed his DSS identification. The soldier’s posture softened. He stepped closer and motioned for them to park and follow him.

With silent urgency, he led them away from the crowd to the side of the road where a military truck was parked. Two scruffy-looking farmers were seated nearby, being casually questioned by a younger officer.

“We found the missing poet,” the soldier explained, gesturing at the two men. “These are the ones who discovered him out there in the bush.”

Gina cut in before he could go on. “Where’s the poet now?” Her voice impatient and urgent. Her eyes scanned the horizon as if she expected Kego to materialise in front of her.

The soldier blinked, surprised by her tone. *These DSS people*, he thought, *always in a hurry*.

“He’s not here anymore,” he replied. “He has been taken to the 82 Division in Enugu. The van left some minutes ago. He’s barely alive, but still breathing.”

“Good,” Gina muttered. Then to her team, “Let’s move. We don’t have time to waste here.”

Without pleasantries, they turned and disappeared into the SUV. The soldier stood there for a second, puzzled. *Wasn’t the job done? Why are these agents still so agitated?* He shook his head and turned to the young officer. “Let the farmers go. They did their part.”

Inside the SUV, Gina had taken the driver’s seat. Ola moved to the back.

She hit the accelerator like a woman possessed. The vehicle jerked forward with a grunt, tyres screaming briefly as they gripped the tarmac. Ola braced herself, one hand on the headrest in front of her. Tete said nothing—jaw tight, fingers clenching and unclenching.

No matter how fast Gina drove, she could not close the distance between them. The military convoy had a blazing lead and the full authority of the State. With sirens wailing and soldiers clearing the road like a blade through traffic, they had sliced far ahead. Gina cursed under her breath, hammering her horn at the slow drivers blocking her way.

New clusters of protesters continued thickening along the shoulders of the expressway. Flags waved. Placards rose. The air smelled of sweat and dust, and the promise of an unstoppable resistance.

“Move! Move!!” Gina growled, swerving past a lorry that had stalled mid-lane due to human traffic.

Her eyes stayed locked on the widening horizon ahead, willing the van to halt, to break down, to do anything but reach its destination. *Weren't they told to hand over the poet to the DSS once found?* She thought of asking Tete to message the chief, then changed her mind and drove on in silence.

She was determined to complete her mission before the president's scheduled address. Only then would she contact their boss. Deep down, she knew that time may have already slipped through their fingers, and with it, perhaps, control of the entire situation in the country.

Back in the State House, Mr. Bello quietly rose and leaned toward the President, whispering the news of Kego's capture by the military. The President's face, etched in fury just moments before, flickered with anticipation.

"Clear the room!" he ordered curtly.

Everyone filed out at once, leaving only the DSS DG, the Inspector-General of Police, and the Chief of Army Staff. Mr. Bello turned to the military chief and signalled him to confirm the report.

The COAS stepped forward. "Yes, sir. The poet was found unconscious near the Enugu-Ebonyi boundary. He's breathing and stable. Our men are transporting him to the 82 Division base in Enugu now."

The President sat forward, eyes gleaming. "You're absolutely sure he's alive?"

"Yes, sir. Extremely weak and unresponsive, but medics administered first aid en route. He's in good hands."

A faint smile tugged at the president's lips. "Well, that's at least one thing gone right today."

The suffocating tension in the room began to lift slightly.

“We’ll hold him in Enugu until he recovers,” the army chief offered, “then quietly release him—”

“No!” The President cut in sharply, then caught himself. His tone shifted, calmer but carrying the same icy resolve. “No. I want him brought to Abuja. Mr. Bello’s team will take custody the moment he arrives at the Enugu base.”

“Understood, sir,” the COAS responded without hesitation.

“Authorise the immediate use of a military chopper in Enugu to convey them over. No delays. I want him here before I step in front of the camera.”

“Yes, sir.” The army chief gave a nod.

“Go now!” The President ordered, waving him out. “Relay the instruction and ensure it’s carried out smoothly. Send me the flight schedule once it’s in the air.”

As the COAS exited, the President turned to Mr. Bello with cold certainty. “Assign only our best people this time. They know what’s required.”

Mr. Bello nodded gravely.

“I don’t want that boy surfacing online or anywhere else. Silence him permanently and make it look like an outside job. You understand?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

Without delay, Mr. Bello rang Gina.

“Yes, sir, we already know,” she answered, voice sharp with urgency. “We’re on their heels on the road to Enugu base. We’ll be there in minutes.”

“Good. Handle it and make it clean once you’re in the clear,” Mr. Bello instructed. “And bring Tete with you to Abuja. I want to see him personally.”

“Noted, sir.”

He ended the call.

The President nodded with approval, his shoulders easing slightly. Bello exhaled, relief washing over his tensed features. The IGP, who had been mostly ignored, shifted uneasily in his seat.

“Also,” the President said, turning to Bello again, “retrieve that other agent being held here in Abuja. I don’t want any loose tongues.”

“I’ll handle it, sir.” *Gina would handle that.*

Then the President looked squarely at the IGP. “Tell your men to stand down. No more chaos in the streets. All of this ends at noon.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll go on air,” the President said coldly, “and announce that the poet is dead. I’ll lift the ban on his ridiculous book, spin a lie about reconciliation, and I’m sure the public will lap it up. Anything to make them go home.”

He rose from his seat, eyes lit with the deadly desire to bury the truth. He was convinced he could still win this fight. But then, a question nagged at him: *why did the truth frighten him so much? Why must the poet die?* The young man was not even in politics. He posed no conventional threat. Even his recalcitrant rhetoric in poems hold no water.

But it was never the poet he feared. It was the impact of his words—written or spoken—on the people exposed to them. It could open up the ground for more dissidents to speak up. Unchecked, this would spiral out of State control. But the only way to keep the masses docile was to ensure there was no one to give them directions on how to deal with leaders they do not like. The poet chose that untouchable path and must be stopped before the cancer spreads.

He wouldn't deny it: not many loved his administration, but why should he care? That's why any voice strong enough to empower the people needed to be silenced—permanently.

It's the only way to realise his dream of turning the country into his family heritage. He would see it through to the end.

At the 82 Division Headquarters in Enugu, known in military parlance simply as *Eighty-Two Div*, the tactical van rolled into the medical wing with the urgency of a high-priority operation. It slowed to a halt at the rear access of the Division Medical Centre, where medical officers were already waiting, as they had been tipped off about the VIP in transit.

Two orderlies in olive-green scrubs and tactical boots wheeled Kego into the emergency unit on a stretcher, its wheels humming softly against the terrazzo floor. His body, limp but breathing, was slumped like someone yet to surface from a blackout.

The attending military doctor gave him a swift triage check. "He's stable," the doctor reported, flipping the pulse oximeter off his finger and checking his pupils. "Vitals normal. He's in a state of syncope, a stress-induced fainting, compounded by physical exhaustion. He'll wake up soon, but he needs rest."

Five minutes later, the black SUV pulled up at the checkpoint leading into the Division. Soldiers stood in force, keeping a large stream of protesters at bay across the entrance. The two-lane main road was partially cordoned off from commuters.

Gina was still behind the wheel, Tete beside her, Ola at the back. They flashed their DSS IDs to the armed sentry on duty, who scanned the documents, made a quick voice call with inaudible communication to someone inside, and handed over a temporary pass.

“You’re clear. Proceed to CP Admin,” the soldier said, tapping the SUV’s bonnet twice as a signal to open the gate. “Someone will take you there.”

An officer hopped into a side jeep and escorted them through the inner compound, past rows of camouflaged vehicles, fuel tankers, and a firing range echoing with distant drills. The base was in full operational mode, though most men were out overseeing the ongoing protest that had overwhelmed the nation’s security forces.

They pulled up at the Division Commander’s block. Inside, the air was sharp with the scent of polished wood and ironed uniforms. The Commander—a sturdy man with cropped grey hair and a Colonel’s insignia—rose from behind a polished desk.

“Is the helicopter ready?” Gina asked, her tone brisk. There was no room for delay or pleasantries.

“Yes,” he replied, reading the urgency in her eyes. “But he’s still unconscious.”

“I’m sure he’s stable enough for the flight,” Gina countered. “We don’t have time. This is coming directly from the Commander-in-Chief.”

“We’re already on it.” The Commander turned sharply to the orderly by the door. “Pass the order to the medical centre. Prep the subject for immediate airlift. He will be flying in full harness. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” The orderly barked, saluted, and was gone.

The commander adjusted his beret and motioned to the trio. “Follow me.”

They left the building and crossed the compound toward the helipad, a concrete lot cleared for rapid aerial deployments. A grey Bell 412 twin-engine military helicopter sat primed and idling on the pad, its

rotor blades churning the air into a misty vortex, throwing dust in dancing spirals around the tarmac.

Two flight-suited pilots ran preflight diagnostics from the cockpit's multi-screen console. Nearby, two armed special military operations escorts stood watch with their rifles slung, and alert. They looked every bit the part: eyes obscured by black tactical glasses, boots grounded, fingers never far from the trigger.

The Commander introduced the DSS team quickly. "These are your passengers. Orders are to fly them to the Aso Rock helipad, Abuja. No detours."

Gina nodded, shook hands briefly with the escorts, and said a curt "good morning" to the pilots while waving at them. Tete followed suit, while Ola acknowledged the men with a small nod.

Moments later, Kego was wheeled across the tarmac, fully strapped into a harnessed med-flight suit, with IV drip and oxygen support tubes attached. He was gently loaded into the cabin's rear section and secured in place.

Gina turned to Ola. "Take the SUV back to Abakaliki," she said over the rising turbine rumble. "Await your supervisor's next orders."

Ola gave a sharp nod. Tete stepped closer and gave her a brief look, a silent exchange only the two understood.

"I'll be back by morning," he said out loud afterwards. "Try and rest. This has been a long couple of hours for all of us."

Ola stepped back as the helicopter engines roared into full thrust. Gina was already inside, securing her gear. The military escort pulled the hatch closed after Tete climbed aboard. The rotor blades screamed and the chopper lifted, veering in a graceful arc as it took off over Enugu's skyline.

They were headed northwest. Destination: State House, Abuja. The estimated flight time was one hour, fifteen minutes. They took off at 9:55 a.m.

In the long and tortured annals of Nigeria's history bruised by coups, rigged elections, stolen mandates, and broken promises, never before had the land witnessed an uprising like this one.

By 10 a.m. that day, the entire nation was convulsing in unison. From Lagos to Minna, Maiduguri to Calabar, Kaduna to Owerri, the streets overflowed with fury and hope. What started with the Gen Zs swelled into a tidal wave. Millennials locked their shops and offices, and joined the march. Boomers shed their cynicism and stepped out. Elders emerged from their verandas and marketplaces, saying, "*This time, we must see it through.*"

In some villages, the youth marched side by side with old men and women carrying walking sticks and placards made from old carton boxes.

"We never chop, but we go march!" One man shouted in Pidgin in the Niger Delta area.

An old woman in her sixties, draped in faded Ankara raised a sign that read *We want our country back* and shouted, "I born during the war, I go die during this one if I must!"

Children chanted beside their parents in front of their homes, the innocent rhythm of protest turning into a generational hymn. Keke riders became escorts, shouting warnings and clearing the way for foot marchers. Molue buses abandoned their routes, blaring horns as passengers clapped and sang freedom songs inside.

"Banjo! Your time is up!" cried a shoemaker in Ilorin, his hands still stained with polish.

A trucker, still in his gear, took off his cap in the middle of the road in Port Harcourt. “I will not hustle all my life just to beg for diesel and dignity in my country!”

From Ajegunle to Zaria, crowds thickened like ocean tides—a sea of heads—gathering in front of every government building from State Assemblies to Local Government Secretariats, army barracks, police headquarters, markets, churches, and central mosques.

Even mad men wandering the streets with torn clothes and matted hair, picked up sticks and carried them like placards. One man, once mocked as the local drunk, stood on a bench in Gombe and shouted with tears streaming down his eyes:

“Na today! I swear na today this country go start to make sense!”

The country quaked. Countless. Innumerable. Unstoppable beautiful people who love their country and were fed up with answering to corrupt people in power. Yet, somehow, order held. There was no anarchy, looting or destruction in most protest grounds.

Natural leaders rose from the crowd like embers of divine instinct. Young men organised food for the weak and hungry. Older women gathered children that came out into safe corners. Local vigilantes directed traffic to prevent stampedes. The nation was furious, but people were still aware.

There were clashes in some locations—hoodlums who preferred the status quo to remain waded into the crowd with weapons, resulting into bloodshed. But violence was no one’s monopoly. The people fought back. Some attackers were caught, beaten, and burned with tyres around their necks while the crowd cheered. Others dropped their weapons and melted into the mass of bodies, swallowed by the same tide they had tried to stem. Such incidents were few, scattered across the country like sparks unable to catch.

In several states, governors barricaded themselves inside their official residences, their own aides unsure whether to stay or flee. Some

feared mob justice. Others feared political exile. But most feared the truth which had become impossible to deny: the people no longer needed permission to be free.

Power belongs to the people who are united. Freedom was their reward.

Behind thick glass and layers of armed security, President Ibe Banjo sat in his chamber, trembling in helpless rage. He gripped the armrests of his gold-trimmed chair like they might keep his kingdom from falling apart. He had seen protests before. Never like this. This had got out of hand under his watch.

He had ordered the national media to block all coverage of the protest. But it was a fool's errand. Channels, Arise, TVC and others buckled under pressure while CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, and France24 went live. Their reporters stood amid vast crowds, their words landing across the world:

"Unprecedented."

"A generational reckoning."

"The beginning of a revolution."

On radio stations, DJs dropped music and broadcast voices from the streets. Social media was saturated. X, Instagram, TikTok—everywhere.

The world was watching and listening—the people speaking in a voice no one could silence.

The President, face soaked in sweat, hands trembling, still clung to one last hope. He still had his last card to play. He turned to Mr. Bello beside him.

“The boy is on his way,” he muttered. The DSS DG nodded. “Once the nation sees his body, they will forget all this noise.”

But even he knew—somewhere behind the fury and the calculation—that when people who were oppressed rise in unity, they cannot be suppressed.

And this time, the people had risen, united.

Eighteen

FIVE MINUTES INTO the flight, the thrum of the rotors vibrated through the floor of the Bell 412, resonating in Kego's bones. The aircraft cut cleanly through the morning air, its tail rotor slicing against a windscape of haze and early sunlight as it sped northward. Six thousand feet below, Nigeria was a distant, sun-drenched map with streets filling to the brim.

Kego stirred, surfacing from a darkness deeper than sleep. His eyes fluttered open to the choppy vibration of the chopper's fuselage. The rhythmic beating of the blades rattled his chest and limbs. For a disorienting second, his mind was a blank slate. Then, slowly, it came. *In flight?* His mind raced. He remembered slumping weakly at the foot of a mango tree in the bush on his way to Enugu, but had no idea how long ago it was.

How the hell did he even end up in a chopper, especially one in mid-flight? He grimaced. Had his enemies captured him while he slept? He wondered who the people around him were, whether he was once again in danger like when he was in the SUV with the police officers. There were no handcuffs on him. That was a good thing. But then, there had been no handcuffs the previous night either, before the attack that led to the crash.

He bolted upright on the stretcher, pulse rising, eyes darting around the cabin without settling on anyone's face. He removed the oxygen mask from his face.

"Where are you taking me?" No one answered him.

Across from him sat two armed military escorts—rifles slung tight against their vests, dark shades hanging on their necks. Their expressions were unreadable, almost tranquil, but commanding still. They seemed to be holding smiles, a chilling counterpoint to his own rising panic.

To his right sat a woman he did not know. Slim, fair-skinned, her hair packed into a sleek bun, posture poised like a viper's. She wore no uniform, but carried an air that said more than epaulettes ever could. She looked at him with a stare that revealed nothing, and promised less.

He shifted his gaze back to the soldiers.

"You good?" One of them asked, raising his voice above the beating rotors.

Kego hesitated. He could make out the question even through the noise. It was not what he expected from a soldier. Were they his saviours? Captors? Executioners? Their faces were not unfriendly; they were almost polite and concerned, even. He opened his mouth but said nothing.

One turned towards the woman and signalled with a subtle flick of the hand. She ignored it, looked away—then, as if she had changed her mind, turned back toward him.

Still silent, she reached forward and adjusted the comms headset strapped over Kego's ears, then looked away again to watch the clouds through the porthole. The headset clicked on, filtering the roar of the blades into a dull background hum. A voice came through.

"They're asking if you're okay," said a calm, familiar voice.

Kego turned instinctively. Sitting just beside him, adjusting his own headset, was a face from his past—older now, fuller, with worn eyes that bore a smile he remembered from another life.

Tetenura?

It could not be. But he remembered him too well. Aside from when he had got Tete's number from his family, ten years had passed since they last saw each other—the ever-eager son of a small-time mechanic from their street who tried five times before finally making it into the DSS. Kego's breath caught in his throat.

He remembered the text message. The warning. This was the person who had sent it. He had saved his contact deliberately as '*my DSS friend*' on his phone.

Tete held a finger to his lips—a sharp funny gesture—and subtly nodded toward the cold-eyed woman seated nearby who was not looking their way. *Not now*. Kego understood. He kept his calm as his friend instructed, letting only his eyes speak the recognition.

Tete leaned in and spoke through the comms.

"How are you feeling?" He asked, his voice steady, with deeply worried eyes—as he had been since they started the operation the previous day.

Kego swallowed hard. "Refreshed," he muttered, "though rattled by the helicopter noise." His voice was quiet and full of contained relief.

Tete gave him a small knowing smile. "That's good to hear."

Gina turned. Her eyes caught both of them briefly, studying Kego, then Tete for a second too long. Then, she spoke.

"Everything good?"

The question was meant for Tete. Direct, piercing.

What did she mean?

"We're good," Tete answered smoothly, a strained smile stamped on his face.

"We've got a job to do," she said flatly. "Our responsibility is to see it to the end."

Tete nodded again, lips taut.

“We’re here to ensure it’s done,” one of the soldiers chimed in, leaning forward slightly, oblivious to the undercurrents. “Right, buddy?” He nudged his fellow guard.

“Na so,” came the dry reply.

Kego blinked, looking from one face to the next. He exhaled slowly. Tete’s presence comforted him. Whatever was happening, whatever storm still lay ahead, Tete being here meant he was not completely alone or in the dark. If anyone out there or here was still out to kill him, Tete would help. But the question of where they were taking him kept nagging at him. No one had said anything about it, and Tete’s gesture to stay quiet pointed to something dangerous brewing.

Maybe—just maybe—it was the U.S. Embassy Tete hinted at in the message. He hoped he would get there alive. He held on to that hope and watched clouds drift past the porthole as the world moved slowly by.

4:31 p.m., the previous day.

Brahim and Antler had just left the safehouse. Tete’s head was swirling. He couldn’t sit still.

He’d known Kego since they were boys. They went to the same school, until Kego’s father went missing one day and was found dead days later. Life shattered for them after that. Kego’s family moved to the village. Later, when both were grown, they’d visit each other—Kego to the city or Tete to their village. They stayed in touch until he joined the DSS and moved to Lagos. The distance widened. The job consumed him. When he transferred to the East six years ago, the nature of his job in the region made contact impossible.

Ten years had passed since he last saw Kego’s face.

Then came the book launch the day before. He'd gone in disguise, on Bello's orders, and secured a copy of the collection for his bosses. What he didn't expect: the president would see the poet as a threat that needed urgent elimination.

A threat Tete was now supposed to execute—one his men were already close to fulfilling.

He wouldn't let that happen. He needed to warn Kego.

He pulled out his burner phone—the personal line, the one only his family knew. His fingers moved fast, but the text wouldn't send. He stepped outside the safehouse. Nothing. Walked down the street. No show. He took the motorbike and rode back to the office. Still nothing. He tried calling. The line wouldn't connect.

On his work phone, he watched the SUV creeping toward the poet's compound. The guys had parked a street away afterwards.

Then it hit him: he had left the phone on flight mode.

He turned it off. The text went through.

He waited anxiously for a call from his men, dreading the worst might have happened.

Minutes later, he saw the post circulating on Kene's social media. He called Brahim to confirm.

He was super elated to learn that Kego had escaped.

He left the office, and rode the motorbike back to the safehouse to wait.

The President sat alone in his office, the air thick with the metallic tang of fear. The lights were dimmed save for the soft, flickering glow from the monitor on his mahogany desk. The screen displayed the chaos unfolding in slow motion across the nation—the tidal wave of citizens

flooding city streets, arms raised not in violence but in defiance to his administration. The chants through his low-humming speakers were like distant war drums pounding at his conscience.

He had ordered that no one disturb him—only Mr. Bello was permitted entry and only if he came bearing what the President called “the good news:” that the poet was no more, that the beating heart of the movement had been silenced.

Only then could the uprising be smothered. Only then would order return.

But now, doubt clawed at his chest.

Bello’s men had proven incapable. Their repeated failures were a testament to that effect. The Police had proven equally useless—three officers dead, their lives wasted, and not a single result to show for it.

He clenched his fist. “What is so damn hard about killing one boy?” he whispered through gritted teeth. His mind spun.

Was he that smart? That lucky? Or just protected by a force greater than men? Or was the mole in their ranks helping him all along?

Back in his cartel days, failure—especially one associated with the possibility of a mole—had always been swiftly and ruthlessly punished. By disfigurement. Or death. Mr. Bello knew that. He had tolerated too much incompetence, and once everything was over, he would clean house himself.

Little time remained before his noon speech. Should the protests spill into the evening and over into Sunday, the tide might become irreversible. Even a government armed to the teeth could not survive a war against its own people.

Who would I lead if everyone was dead? He thought bitterly.

One death could still save them all. The poet had to go. At all costs.

He reached for the secure line and dialled a number stored only in his memory. The mercenaries in Abuja—his cartel’s expatriates. If the poet arrived on his feet instead of in a body bag, they’d be waiting.

The time was 10:40 a.m.

IN Abakaliki, DERA sat like a sentinel on the roof of her car, eyes wide with tears yet strong with conviction, scanning the ocean of protesters blanketing the entrance to the State Government building. It was no longer just a crowd; it had become an immovable force. And they were not ready to give up.

The tarred road was barely visible beneath the weight of thousands—men and women, young and old—seated side by side, not simply out of exhaustion, but in solemn unity. From resolve. The nation had failed them, and if it meant they must die here to reclaim it, so be it.

Vehicles were wedged tightly along adjoining roads, forming barricades of solidarity. The gates of the government house stood like a nervous monarch before a revolutionary court. Heavily armed soldiers and police officers held position within its walls. No one moved in or out.

Then a ripple moved through the crowd.

A group of local security escorts gently parted the masses and led Dera’s parents through the seated bodies. Applause and cries of joy followed them. When they reached their daughter and she climbed down to embrace them, the moment turned solemn.

Within seconds, phones across the crowd captured the moment—videos, photos, livestreams flooded social media. Parents across Nigeria saw it. One by one, those still inside their homes stepped out, tied their wrappers, adjusted their scarves, donned caps and slippers, and joined the uprising. They were not coming to protest as

they had in times past. They were coming to fight for their children's future.

A charge led by the young grew formidable when the older generation showed up. It was a fight for the people—old and young—one that would define the fate of their generations to come.

Along the highway to Abakaliki, The SUV crawled through a slow-moving wave of humanity. Protesters had filled the road shoulder to shoulder, their voices rising in song and chant. Soldiers and police officers stood by—no longer in command, but in witness. Overwhelmed—not by force, but by peace.

Ola gripped the steering wheel, her face stained with tears and dust. In her heart was a mix of fear, hope, and grief.

Maybe this time, she thought. Maybe this time, it would truly work.

This was no EndSARS, but it was a great homage to it. Not a scattered protest lost to the winds of time. Not post-election outrage with burnt bodies and buried truths. This was nationwide, simultaneous and relentless. It was the day of the uprising—when the people rose and became a flock of kites untethered to the strings of bad governance and political corruption. It was a reckoning—those who oppressed the people must now face the people.

But her joy was threaded with the fear. What if the regime responded the only way it knew how—with bullets?

She prayed the soldiers would not obey if the command came. She prayed the people would not panic. And she prayed fiercely for Tete—that he would succeed and protect Kego. That he would find a way to stop Gina, who was sitting beside the poet in the helicopter, more silent and deadlier than death itself.

She had tried to understand Gina, but the woman felt like a machine—duty-bound, heartless, unyielding. Ola wept again, quietly. For Tete. For Kego. For herself. For her country.

When Tete first told her of his attempts to stop the hit the president had ordered against his childhood friend, she had been scared. She had feared it was impossible to pull off. Who would dare defy a ruthless regime? There was almost nothing anyone could do to stop them. They had eyes everywhere.

She believed the poet would be dead the moment those in power wanted him dead—it was only a matter of time. Going against them would make one's life miserable, and most likely end it. She had never imagined the people would respond this way across the nation.

But while it may be too early to rejoice, she knew this demonstration was nothing like those easily thrust into the wind in the past. It was already sending shivers down the spines of those in the corridors of power—judging by the number of denials and briefings they had put out in only a few hours.

Hunger tugged at her. She yawned, but drove forward. She had to make it to Abakaliki. This time, she would join Dera and the people and stand on the side of history. She understood the dangers for people like her if it all came undone, but she would gladly go down if it came to that.

Across the nation, a force continued to surge—not of bullets or bombs, but of people and their awakening—in every town square, every dusty junction, and every creaking street. They came like rivers pouring into a swelling ocean. They came singing, chanting, and marching. They came united.

Celebrities stood shoulder to shoulder with the common man in their neighbourhood. Musicians climbed atop trucks and buses turned into

platforms, their voices blaring through loudspeakers not to entertain, but to keep the people focused. They performed with voices hoarse from chanting and clenched fists raised high—rousing the weary, fortifying the brave, daring the broken not to quit.

Not even the blistering northern heat could break the protesters, nor the fear of menacing bandits in their forests, nor the thunderclouds looming over the South. In some regions, the heavens cracked open and rain fell in torrents. The crowd did not scatter. They embraced it like a baptism.

Drenched, they locked arms and chanted louder. The cold was no match for their fire. Hunger shrank beneath purpose. The weak became strong in the warmth of a people who finally stood together, all tribal differences thrown to the wind.

Inside prison cells, news drifted like whispers through concrete. Hardened criminals and falsely imprisoned alike pressed against their bars, hearts ablaze with longing. Some wept. Others sang. But they all whispered of the historic reckoning unfolding beyond their walls.

Across the world, the screens of major networks lit up with colour and thunderous chants. Global audiences watched in awe. For the first time, the world stood still—not for a war, but for an uprising of will.

In palaces and presidential residences from Beijing to Moscow, from Europe to Africa, authoritarian leaders watched in nervous silence. If Nigeria, a country they had long mocked, could rise—what chance did they have with their own subjects? The wave could spread beyond Nigeria's borders if not stopped.

The West, like the United Kingdom, where democracy had become a theatre, leaders grew restless. They too saw the truth shimmering through the crowds: that oppression does not wear only one face, and resistance knows no borders.

While the people stood in awe, their rulers were riddled with fear.

In the helicopter above Nigeria's boiling capital, the poet's life hung in the balance like a kite without string.

11:00 a.m—Above Abuja

The helicopter cut through the sky like a blade through silk, its rotors chopping the thick morning air as it descended toward the heart of the city.

Kego sat wedged between Tete and Gina, every muscle taut, his thoughts racing. His heart thumped, not entirely from fear, but also for the fact he didn't know what may happen.

He watched Gina's eyes flick left and right, then to the porthole—like a predator cornered, her mind clearly working fast. Tete was unnervingly still, his right hand never leaving his thigh, where the hilt of a pistol was barely concealed beneath his jacket. His eyes never strayed far from Gina. He seemed to have ignored the soldiers completely.

The military escorts sat opposite them, fully armed, but they were oddly relaxed—too relaxed, Kego thought. They did not seem to sense the tension coiling beside them, trusting their uniforms too much or the safety they promised, and making jokes that none of the three found funny.

"You think say these protests go stop if dem know say you dey safe?" one asked, eyes on Kego.

Kego said nothing.

"Of course," said the other, "I believe they would return to their homes once the president gives his speech with the poet standing by him."

The President? Kego looked at Tete, then Gina. None were paying attention.

“O boy, e crazy oo,” said the first soldier. “Na just one man miss and the whole country don dey go bunkers.”

“He’s the people’s voice,” the co-pilot shouted over the comms from the cockpit.

“The people’s voice?” The second soldier asked. “What about the military men who give their lives every day fighting for citizens in terrorist-torn communities? What are we?”

“Na their heroes we be,” said the first.

“Unsung heroes we must be then,” retorted the second, “Because no one gives a fuck about what we do.”

“No wam shaa. Na wetin we sign up for be that.”

Kego had already tuned out since learning he was being taken to the president. He had noticed Gina growing increasingly tense and uneasy. Tete, on the other hand, was more alert than ever, eyes shifting between her and the soldiers with quiet calculation.

Kego was tempted to ask if anything was wrong, but kept to himself instead. He inched closer to Tete without drawing attention to it. He did not know what was coming. He only hoped to be on the right side of it when it arrived. He prayed silently to get out alive.

From the cockpit, the two pilot’s voice cut through the comms.

“...we’re now approaching the Defence HQ. ETA: ten minutes.”

Defence HQ? Kego muttered in disbelief, but before he could say anything further, the moment snapped.

It was exactly 11:05 a.m. when it erupted.

Gina moved first. Like lightning, her hand flashed, drawing and levelling her sidearm at the soldier in front of her. Almost simultaneously, as Kego turned, Tete drew his weapon and aimed at the second soldier.

Both soldiers froze, fingers hovering over their triggers in instinctive panic. They had not seen it coming.

“Don’t try anything stupid,” Gina said coldly. “Drop your weapons. Now!”

The soldier nearest her hissed. “What the f—”

“Wetin dey happen, guy?” The other demanded, bewildered.

Both men hesitated, but they were not stupid. They unhooked their rifles and let them clatter to the cabin floor.

In the cockpit, the banter ceased. The co-pilot twisted over his shoulder, eyes widening at the drawn weapons.

“What the hell is going on back there?” he shouted through the comms. “Who the hell plays with loaded guns—?”

“You want to know who?” Gina cut in, voice flat, eyes gleaming with ice. The look sent shivers down Kego’s spine. He thought she must have changed her mind about what to do next. “Watch!”

She pulled the trigger. The soldier in front of her—who had been slowly reaching for a hidden firearm tucked in his gear—jerked violently as the round tore through his throat. A wet gasp escaped him. Blood sprayed across the cabin and pooled on the floor like a damaged sprinkler in a farm.

Kego flinched violently, stomach lurching. His heart leapt into his throat and he clutched at Tete. Gina’s eyes were red with thirst for more blood.

Before the second soldier could reach for one of the pistols hidden in his gear, Gina turned and fired again. A head shot and the soldier folded like his mate.

“Jezus Kraist! What the hell!” the co-pilot screamed.

Gina was not done. She aimed forward and fired a clean shot behind the co-pilot's ear. The bullet tore through the thin panel and blood splashed across the main pilot's temple as the body slumped forward, face smacking the controls. The chopper shook briefly but the pilot wrestled it stable.

"What the fuck is happening?!" the pilot cried, voice trembling.

"Change of plans," Gina said. "Land. Anywhere near here. Or your brains will decorate the windshield like your mate's."

"Okay! Okay, just don't shoot!"

Behind her, Kego sat paralysed. His gaze bounced between Gina's deadpan stare and Tete's unwavering gun. But Tete's weapon had shifted. It was no longer aimed at the fallen soldiers. It was aimed at Gina.

"We're not landing here, Gina," Tete said. His voice was stone.

She turned slowly, eyes wide. Disbelief crept into her expression—the look of someone who had suspected this somewhere deep down, and now she knew for certain. Tete. What a big betrayal, carved into the twitch of his jaw and the steel in his hand. He was serious.

"You..." she whispered.

He said nothing.

"If you so much as blink wrong," he said coolly, "you'll join them. You know me well."

He spoke to the pilot, without lowering his aim. "Divert. New destination. American Embassy front gate. Now."

"Roger that, sir!" The pilot shouted.

Gina stared, her mind spinning. She had been outplayed. She did not lower her weapon, but she could not raise it either. She was calculating.

Is he bluffing? Can I take the poet first? She could die in the process, but this was not supposed to be a suicide mission.

The helicopter flew lower. Below, a sea of protesters blanketed the roads, their chants rising in rhythmic thunder. Kego pressed his face to the porthole on Tete's side and saw the crowd for the first time.

"What is happening?" He whispered, too stunned to move.

No one answered. The silence that followed could breathe.

His life still hung in the balance while the gun remained in Gina's hand.

In his office at the State House, Mr. Bello sat frozen behind his expansive desk, eyes locked on the large screen mounted on the wall. The live broadcast showed the swelling crowd outside the presidential gates—a human tide stretching farther than the eye could measure. Traffic had dissolved into a standstill, not just in the capital but across every major artery of the nation. Where roads had been, now there were only people.

The people were ready to reclaim their freedom as a nation. Freedom from tyranny, government neglect and starvation.

Mr. Bello's fingers twitched nervously on the polished surface of his desk. For the first time in his career, a deep tremor of fear slid into his bones. He stared at the secure-channel mobile phone sitting like a landmine inches from his hand, then back at the screen, deciding which glowing rectangle held the greater threat. He was waiting—tapping the desk in fast, anxious raps, for a message from Tete or Gina.

It had been over an hour since they took off. They should have landed in Abuja by now. The poet should be dead.

He clenched his jaw. Gina was a machine when it came to execution. She was ruthless, surgical and precise. She had never failed before.

This final mission had to succeed, or the entire regime would crumble before noon. Before the president could even give his speech. Yet all that surrounded him was silence.

He thought briefly of the President, who had retreated into complete solitude after hearing of the poet's capture and giving the order to end things. That alone was unnerving. He knew the man too well. President Banjo only withdrew into solitude when planning his boldest, bloodiest moves—last-minute decisions that had toppled opposition and buried entire scandals in shallow graves. Now, as the weight of the nation shook the gates of power, Bello knew he was watching it happen again. Something was coming. The commander in chief had something up his sleeve.

Then, from somewhere beyond the walls, the faint drone of a helicopter sliced through the city's chaos. Bello stiffened. The sound grew sharper. Closer. Like a blade scraping across the sky. His instincts screamed. *Was that them?*

He reached for the phone—fingertips grazing the surface—then stopped. No. He would wait.

He sat there, eyes flicking between the glowing phone and the furious sea of heads at the gates. The sound of the chopper receded.

"Where the hell are they going?" he said to no one.

Nineteen

“TOSS YOUR GUN to me,” Tete said.

Gina hesitated, a quiet storm gathering behind her eyes. Her finger twitched near the trigger—a fleeting impulse. She knew better than to gamble with her life. Tete’s reflexes were more lethal, his resolve unmistakable. Her rank and reputation would not count in a gunfight inside a narrow, vibrating chopper cabin. A misstep here meant a bullet in her skull. This was not a suicide mission. She would comply for now.

“Do it already,” Tete insisted.

She exhaled hard. With slow deliberation, she gripped the weapon by the barrel—with the tip of her thumb and middle finger—and tossed it toward him. It skidded across the cabin’s floor and landed near his boot. Her silence afterwards was palpable, thick with humiliation.

It made sense now, she thought. How the poet had slipped every net. Tete had been the leak. While pretending to hunt Kego, he had been stalling, misdirecting the team, tipping the target off. A cold, hollow space opened inside her.

She sighed, sinking slowly into the seat across the cabin where one of the soldiers lay. Without further protest, she shoved the limp body aside and made room for her feet on the floor of the cabin.

Tete tossed a pair of steel handcuffs toward her and waved his gun. Wordlessly, she clicked one cuff onto her wrist and clamped the other

to the steel support bar affixed beside her seat. The cold metal bit into her skin. She did not flinch.

Kego sat rigid beside Tete, his hands trembling, eyes bouncing between them like a trapped animal—wide with confusion, fear, and disbelief. His lips parted intermittently, but no sound came out. The shock of the earlier gunfire was still lodged in his bones.

Gina noticed the way he stared at her—like a man horrified to recognise someone he once took to be a neutral presence. She herself could barely reconcile who she was in this moment. A government asset. A soulless assassin? A failure in cuffs.

She looked away, jaw tight.

Obeing orders had always come easy for them—both were always a tool for carrying out State repercussions against dissenters. There had never been a concern for the people they dealt with, deserving or not.

This is why Tete's betrayal bewildered her. Did he think this would end well? Had he forgotten how the system handled rebels? Look at Antler. Look at Brahim. They had not even betrayed the mission—they had only failed—and now they were ghosts. One dead at her hand, the other in shackles with no idea what was coming.

"You know this won't end well," she said eventually, breaking the silence.

Tete did not answer. He kept his gun close, tracking her movements.

Kego still had not spoken. He clung to the bench like it was an anchor for his body in a rising storm.

"They'll come for you," Gina added, her voice low and steady. "And pray it is not me they send."

Tete glanced at her. "Send you?" He scoffed. "You'll be locked up for this by nightfall."

She chuckled coldly. “You’re naive. I’m not going anywhere. I followed orders. You are the one who pulled a gun on the State.” She leaned back against the vibrating wall. “This will all fall on you.”

“That government?” Tete snapped. “It won’t last the week. If it does, they will throw you under the bus to deny ever starting this.”

Gina’s laugh was bitter. “You’re risking your career and your life for someone you knew years ago? Or is it for protests that will soon die off?”

The pilot’s voice crackled over the comms. “Approaching the U.S. Embassy. ETA three minutes. Be advised.”

Tete nodded, his eyes on Gina.

“You don’t have to do this,” she pressed. “It’s not too late to finish the job.” She gestured with her chin towards Kego. “Redeem yourself. Prove your loyalty and I won’t mention this to anyone.”

“I’ve known Kego longer than I’ve known any of you,” Tete said. “I’m done with this madness.”

Then the pilot’s voice exploded into the cabin.

“Walahi! We’re cooked!”

The chopper lurched violently, throwing everyone forward. Gina slammed into the reinforced cockpit divider. Tete braced himself and Kego gasped, clutching the seat rail tighter. He felt the IV drip disconnect.

Through the cockpit windshield, Tete saw a second military chopper hovering ahead, its gun bay open, rotors chopping the air—hanging there like a steel predator.

“What the fuck?” Tete breathed.

Kego rose instinctively, peering through the glass. His legs began to tremble. A repeat ambush. He was sure they would succeed this time.

This was the end of the road for him. What he was looking at was inescapable. Where could they go in that split of seconds available to them?

Gina turned her head just in time to see three men leaning out of the gun bay, rifles trained on their aircraft.

RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT!

The pilot swerved away from the incoming fire, the cockpit filling with deafening noise. Gina ducked, her cuffed wrist yanking painfully. Tete threw himself over Kego, pulling him flat to the floor, and shielding him with his own body as bullets screamed overhead.

The cabin rattled violently. The wind howled in from fresh holes ripped into the tail section of the helicopter.

Gina's thoughts scrambled. These were not military. Not DSS. Not police. But Tete already knew. *Mercenaries*. The final card of a desperate president.

Below, people on the streets looked up. Cries erupted. The sky had become a battlefield. Panic spread like wildfire—many believing the government had opened fire on them from above. Screams filled the air. A stampede broke out, some protesters running, others freezing—until they could see it: one chopper fleeing, another in pursuit, gunfire echoing between them.

Inside the cabin, more rounds ripped through the fuselage as the pilot fought to keep control.

“We’ve been badly hit!” he shouted. “I repeat, badly hit! We’re going down! ABANDONING SHIP!”

He reached for his harness, unstrapped, and leapt—and was cut down mid-air by rounds from the trailing helicopter. His body spiraled downward, swallowed by the trees that ringed the compound below.

“BRACE FOR IMPACT!” Tete screamed.

Kego buried his face in the uniform of one of the dead soldiers and prayed. Gina crouched behind the seat frame, eyes wild, mind racing. Tete kept his weight across Kego, gripping the emergency latch behind the cockpit.

The helicopter spiraled then plunged toward a fenced lot scattered with scrubby undergrowth and an uncompleted structure.

The crash was violent—a burst of fire somewhere and scattering steel, a deafening slam as the chopper hit the earth. A shockwave rolled through the clearing, spitting dust and flame. Warped metal screamed. A rising plume of black smoke curled into the sky, marking the site like a mourning flag. Above, the mercenaries' helicopter hovered in a low circle, the side bay open, the hunters scanning for survivors.

Inside the wreckage, haze and smoke filled the cabin. Sparks flickered from exposed wires and shattered equipment lay strewn across the floor. Miraculously, all three passengers were alive—faces bruised by glass fragments, ears ringing with the echo of impact. They lay in the rubble, stunned. A protruding rod from one of the benches had missed Kego by inches, grazing Tete's side instead, narrowly missing his lower ribs.

Tete coughed violently, wiping smoke and grit from his face, then turned toward Kego, barely able to make him out in the hazy smoke.

“Are you with me?” He rasped, gripping the poet's shoulders.

Kego nodded weakly, limbs shaky, adrenaline blinding him to whether he was hurt or not. He was breathing. He was alive. His body ached when he tried to move, but he did.

From behind them came Gina's panicked voice.

“Tete, Please! Get me out of these cuffs!” She shouted, her voice cracking with frustration and pain. Blood ran down the wrist cinched to the bar. “Tete!”

He did not respond. His mind was moving fast; time was dissolving too quickly. With a soldier's precision, he reached down, snatched up the pistols he could feel within his reach and tucked them into his waistband, then grabbed the two rifles lying beside the soldiers' dusty bodies, slung one across his shoulder, and cocked the other. The steady beat of the enemy rotor blades throbbed above, getting louder as they circled for a clearer view of the fallen chopper.

He rose, kicked the damaged cabin hatchway on his side and the door clanged open, revealing a grey-blue morning sky tinted with ash. The air stank of aviation fuel and hot steel. The smoke in the cabin cleared fast. It was a windy morning.

"Stay behind me, Kego!"

Kego was already on his feet, swaying a bit but ready to move.

"Tete, don't leave me here!" Gina cried out again. No reply.

Tete braced himself and leaned out of the doorway, scanning the sky above. He caught sight of the mercenaries—three men dressed in tactical black gear—descending rapidly on a ladder rope from the enemy helicopter. The first one, halfway down, already had a rifle slung across his chest.

Tete opened fire. The muzzle flashed. Shots cracked, sharp and fast. One mercenary screamed as a bullet tore through his hip—he twisted mid-air, lost his grip, and fell, his body slamming into the compound fence below before slumping in a broken heap. The others reacted, struggling to hold on to the rope with one hand and fire with the other. Bullets ricocheted off the chopper's frame, a few pinging near where Tete and Kego crouched.

The enemy pilot veered sharply away, pulling the bird out of the line of fire, banking on circling back shortly.

Tete did not wait. "Let's move!" he barked.

He dropped from the wreck, landing on one knee before rising into a crouch. Kego followed, jumping down into the ash-covered grass, heart pounding, breath ragged. His ears still rang from the crash, but his focus had returned. He did not even glance back at the wreck as they moved away from it.

“Stay behind me,” Tete repeated, rifle raised as he backed up, eyes darting from the sky, the fence line, to the corners where danger could emerge.

The mercenary helicopter was out of sight for a moment, buying them some time. Tete spun around and sprinted towards a rusted gate that led into the next compound. It was a private compound with a cluster of low buildings, one of which had a torn green-white-green flag hanging on its side wall—likely a school or some government office.

Kego did not ask any questions; he just ran after Tete. They made it through the gate just as the wind from the circling chopper roared behind them.

Inside the wreckage, Gina groaned as she straightened from her crouch, the sharp burn of bruises crossing her face and limbs. She watched Tete and Kego as they left the wrecked chopper, abandoning her. She could not find the pin she used to work Brahim’s door earlier that day. She had to move before the chopper ignited further.

She shifted to one of the dead soldiers, expression cold, and pried open his jacket with her free hand. She retrieved a small steel utility pin from his inner pouch.

She had it wedged into the lock of her cuff within seconds.

Click. The cuff snapped open.

There was no time to waste. She exhaled and moved fast, searching the fallen soldiers’ gear with a professional’s efficiency. She recovered

two spare sidearms, both loaded and still warm from body heat. She chambered one, tucked the other into her waistband, and crept to the open cabin door.

As she edged forward to peer out, a whip of bullets screamed past her face, shredding the door frame. Sparks flew. Carbon fibre splintered beside her head.

Gina jerked back with a hiss, raised one of the pistols, and fired blindly upwards, forcing the attackers to recoil momentarily. The air was vibrating with rotors and gunfire, but through the disorienting noise, she caught a voice above.

“They’re fleeing! Through the small gate on the west fence, the targets are moving!”

Seconds later, Gina squinted upwards and saw a bunch of metal balls tumbling from above and her reflexes kicked in. Grenades. Not one, not two, but a cluster, expertly tossed.

Two crashed into the broken cabin behind her, one landing right next to her. Another clanged loudly on the hull. There was no time for hesitation. She bolted.

She leapt from the wreck, and threw herself into the low brush and grass several feet away, landing hard and rolling farther away from the wreckage. Several blasts detonated behind her, lifting a plume of flame and shrapnel skyward. The entire helicopter shook and erupted in flames. The blast wave chased her, pushing her farther across the ground. She kept moving, now racing on hands and knees.

Behind her, the chopper exploded again—a secondary burst from the fuel tank igniting. A fireball shot into the sky, and with it the last trace of the aircraft. Overhead, the enemy helicopter peeled away in pursuit, heading west towards their fleeing targets.

Gina sat up, coughing, chest heaving, skin streaked with soot and ash. She turned and stared at the burning skeleton of the aircraft, black

smoke rising in a pillar against the morning sky. For a moment, she just sat still, simmering.

Tete had left her to die like cannon fodder in a trap that was not even hers, but beneath the betrayal was something darker. The real fury was not at Tete; it was at those who had ordered the hit. Their plan had never been to spare anyone, not even her. The attempt was clean, surgical even, with no regard for agency or loyalty. They wanted to eliminate all witnesses. She drew a hard breath. That crossed the line for her.

“No,” she hissed aloud. “This is unacceptable.”

She crawled to her feet and limped towards the fallen mercenary near the fence. His torso twisted unnaturally, his pelvis was shattered and blood seeping through his black gear, but he was still alive—barely. She knelt beside him and searched his vest.

She found his ID.

He wasn’t Nigerian.

“St. Lucian?” she murmured. *How could that be?*

He tried to speak, eyes flickering. His mouth moved but no sound came. She leaned in.

“Who sent you?” She demanded.

No answer came; only a gurgle before he convulsed and slumped into stillness. He was dead before he could betray his paymaster.

She stood up.

Without looking back at the wreck, Gina made her way across the compound to the larger gate on the opposite side—the end furthest from where Tete and Kego had gone. It was locked from the outside. She paused to listen to the thunder of chants and voices of the ever-swelling crowd of protesters on the main street.

She holstered both pistols securely and moved to the far end of the compound, scaling the fence with quick agility, landing squarely on her feet amidst curious onlookers and protesters craning their necks just to glimpse the fallen aircraft. Some had seen her jump, while others did not even register her presence. It was a daylight frenzy and she easily vanished into the crowd.

Time was 11:20 a.m.

At the far side of the next compound, Tete and Kego were on the move.

They raced towards the front gate, one still creaking from whoever had last passed through it. Tete reached it first. The enemy helicopter roared again, the sound of its rotors drawing nearer. Tete paused and looked back. There was no time for a firefight. Besides, he would not win one. Keeping Kego alive was his only priority.

He unslung both rifles from his shoulders, letting them clatter noisily to the concrete, then gave them a final nudge aside with his boot. He pushed the gate and it flew open. Grabbing Kego by the arm, he pulled him into the sea of people outside.

“Stay close,” he said, releasing his grip.

The crowd was dense in the street, furious and menacing. They were swallowed instantly. Heads turned briefly; some noticed the urgency in their pace and their bruises, but the sheer size and movement of the protesters made it impossible to identify them.

As they pushed forward, the chanting rose around them like thunder. The city was burning with rage, and within it, two fugitives were now ghosts, invisible to their hunters. Their eyes were set on one destination: the U.S. Embassy. It was more than ten minutes away on foot, possibly longer given the crush of humanity surrounding them.

Kego lowered his head. His voice was gone. Tete stayed close, shoulder to shoulder, eyes scanning every movement around them, his body tense as steel as they waded through the crowd.

The chopper reappeared above them, but they were lost in the crowd. It circled the area for a minute or two then flew away.

Deep within the walls of the State House, Mr. Bello still sat rigid at his desk, fists clenched, his brow dark with fury and disbelief.

His screen was flooded with viral clips—dozens of shaky phone recordings, drone feeds, and livestreams from protesters across the capital. Many showed the same haunting moment: a military chopper being chased mid-air by another aircraft, both weaving dangerously over the sea of people gathered below. Gunfire crackled from above and panic erupted on the ground as a stampede surged through the protesters.

Bello's lips tightened. He had not authorised this. The pursuit smelt unmistakably of mercenaries—and not just any, but his boss's men. He immediately reached for his secure line and called the Chief of Army Staff. The call connected on the second ring.

"Hello, sir," the COAS responded, almost breathless under the pressure of the last few hours. Bello wasted no time.

"Is it true the helicopter from Enugu was intercepted?"

"Yes. That was the aircraft transporting the poet at the president's request, with two DSS agents onboard and four of my men."

"Then whose aircraft was in pursuit?"

"Unknown, sir. It's not military. At least not one on our logs. We lost the one from Enugu on radar near the U.S. Embassy. The chopper vanished after a brief mid-air directional change."

Mr. Bello's heart sank, but he kept his voice composed.

“Are there plans to search for the downed aircraft?”

“Affirmative. A rapid response unit is being prepared. We’ll find the crash site and sweep the perimeter. We’ll find them, sir. I only hope they survived.”

Bello grunted. He did not care about the poet. What gnawed at him now was the fate of his men aboard that flight—the agents, his asset Tete, and Gina, ruthless as she was. He needed confirmation, but he said nothing of this to the Army Chief. *What has the president done?*

Just then, there was a knock at the door. A staffer stepped in at his command and whispered. “Sir, the President wants to see you. Alone.”

Mr. Bello stood without a word and walked briskly down the hall, flanked by silence and dread. He entered the inner chamber, where the President was sitting reclined, his eyes fixed on the monitor on his desk, grinning like a man watching a private circus.

A freeze-frame of the two helicopters hovered on-screen, captured mid-air above a sea of screaming civilians. He was gloating.

“We finally got him, Bello,” the President announced with satisfaction, eyes still on the screen. “Now, I need a speech. Something bold and strong. I’ll address the people in thirty-five minutes.”

He leaned forward and began to dictate for Mr Bello.

“I need something that goes like this: We found the poet. We are so sad he’s dead. A few suspects are in custody. Others remain at large, but not for long. Our security agencies are on the matter. There will be no escape for the killers. This government does not silence dissenting voices. To prove that, I’m unbanning the late poet’s book and ordering the government to purchase ten million copies for distribution to libraries nationwide.”

Then he turned, finally, and tossed a compact laptop towards Bello. It slipped from Bello’s hand for a second and almost crashed to the floor, but he caught it with nervous fingers.

“Type. Craft it, make it clean and believable,” the President commanded.

Bello forced a nod, masking his storm of emotion beneath a thin layer of mechanical obedience. He sat down and opened the laptop. The cursor blinked, awaiting the lies. Then he asked quietly without looking up. “Have you confirmed the death?”

The President smiled, half-pitying, half-patronising.

“Didn’t you watch the video?” He answered. “Those weren’t your boys; they are elite professionals. No one ever survives their pursuit. Relax, we’ve neutralised the problem.”

Mr. Bello nodded again, the air around him thick with silent uncertainty. His fingers hovered over the keyboard.

The President kept talking, his voice thick with smugness. “Soon this protest will fizzle. The crowd will wear out. They will go home exhausted and disappointed, but they will remember that I gave them something...I gave them the worthless book. A book without its author is just like a headless lion prancing about in the wild, until its eventual collapse.”

He paused, then added like an afterthought. “And at the end of the speech, let’s observe a minute of silence for the poet. It will make it more believable.”

Mr. Bello continued typing, but in his gut, he knew the story was not over. Or was it?

Twenty

OLA CRAWLED THROUGH the choked arteries leading into Abakaliki, making repeated detours through narrow village roads, twisting through muddy paths and gravel-strewn bends to close the distance faster.

The Enugu-Abakaliki expressway had transformed into a solid wall of humanity. Tens of thousands of protesters stretched for miles in every direction, chanting with hoarse throats and fists raised high. Vehicles stood almost at a complete standstill.

By the time she reached the city's fringes, it was 11:25 a.m. The radio crackled faintly between news updates. A calm voice announced the President would address the nation by noon. The federal government, the announcer said, was working "tirelessly" to address the concerns fuelling the nationwide protests. They mentioned the missing poet, assuring the public of their readiness to ensure his safety—and justice should he be found dead.

Ola believed none of it. She needed to hear from Tete. He had promised to call the moment the chopper landed in Abuja. They had taken off over ninety minutes ago. The flight should have taken just a little over an hour. She was sure they would be in Abuja already if there were no challenges mid-air. No calls or texts from him meant something was wrong. She needed to be notified of the outcome of their flight. Were they safe? Did they get to their destination? She feared the worst might have happened.

She dared not call him. Silence might be their only defence if they were in some kind of danger. She typed out a brief, coded text and sent it to his secure line. Then she waited, eyes fixed ahead on the road, her heart pounding.

At the city entrance, the human tide became completely impassable for vehicles. Protesters filled every lane and sidewalk, with a line of buses and cars barricading the motorways. Chants and songs of defiance thundered across the landscape. Even the birds above circled restlessly, refusing to perch.

Ola pulled her SUV to the roadside near the Ishieke campus of Ebonyi State University and locked it. She stepped out. Protesters streamed around her like water. She slipped her sidearm discreetly under her shirt, raised her hoodie, and moved fast—elbows tucked, weaving through the mass of bodies. She had to get to Ochoudo Centenary City. She had to find Dera. There was something urgent she needed to share, something that would deepen Dera's conviction, and give her hope.

She vanished into the crowd.

In Abuja, at that same hour, Defence Headquarters deployed two helicopters on a reconnaissance and rescue mission—this time without direct presidential order. With the President in isolation, the Chief of Army Staff made the call himself, citing the urgency created by viral footage of an aerial pursuit involving the military helicopter from Enugu. The DSS Director-General was informed. This was no ordinary aircraft—it had been carrying the poet, the symbol of a resistance the President sought to contain. The military, unaware of his involvement in the attempts on the young man's life, assumed, in good faith that his safety remained the government's top priority.

Their helicopters sliced through the capital's airspace and reached coordinates near the embassy district, where the chopper had been last sighted and its signal last registered. From above, they spotted its blackened wreckage smouldering within a fenced compound. Shards of rotor blades, tail fragments, and twisted steel parts were scattered across the terrain like war relics. Smoke still curled from the collapsed cabin.

Soldiers rappelled to the ground. The air stank more of scorched fuel and metal—heavy.

The central wreckage lay brutally twisted, charred, and a crumpled mess on the ground.

They identified three incinerated bodies. One appeared to be the co-pilot—fused to the cockpit's skeleton. The other two were reduced to heads and fragmented remains, burnt beyond recognition, scattered within the cabin. Military-grade helmets lay near them, their plastic parts melted into the debris. Presumed to be the two armed escorts from Enugu.

The body of the fallen mercenary was missing from the scene.

Four passengers were missing too: the poet, the two DSS agents and the main pilot. Did they eject before impact? Jump mid-air? Were they captured or killed elsewhere? The soldiers had no answers. Ground teams fanned out across the area, scouring adjacent compounds and streets as the heat of the sun beat down on the protesters flowing endlessly around them.

The body of the pilot was recovered from a tree in a nearby compound.

The reconnaissance team lead relayed their findings to the military chief in real time.

Back at the State House, Mr. Bello sat hunched over the laptop, editing the President's speech—a public relations masterpiece carved out of state-sponsored chaos, laced with half-truths and blatant denials. Opposite him, the President leaned back in his chair, watching footage of the protests with unsettling calm.

"I never imagined these people could become so united," he muttered, almost to himself. "Nobody's talking about tribe or religion anymore. The very tools we used to control them have vanished in a flash."

He chuckled—not at the people, but with quiet admiration for his own perceived genius. *Did they really expect him to sit back and watch one small boy derail his lifelong plan to turn the country into a family inheritance?*

"Where sentiment fails, deterrence must prevail," he added darkly. "Once word gets out that the poet is dead—and that we had no hand in it—the protests will evaporate. Fear will send them home. They'll either beg for government intervention in their miserable lives or retreat to their usual complaints on social media. Those, I can live with."

Mr. Bello remained silent. He had read of such delusions before, from tyrants drunk on their own mythology—but his instincts as a former assassin told him otherwise. He feared the opposite. The people's fury would burn hotter than ever if they suspected treachery. And they had always suspected treachery. As much as he feared the President, he knew their attempts to silence the poet and crush the protest were becoming futile, and likely to inflame even greater unrest. The poet's death would incite, not placate them. The momentum they had built with this protest did not seem like something to throw to the winds if the poet died.

He was finishing the final edit when his secure line buzzed at around 11:35 a.m. The Chief of Army Staff. He answered and put the call on speaker.

“We’ve located the helicopter,” the COAS reported. “Completely destroyed. We recovered three charred bodies from the crash—one is definitely the co-pilot, the other two appear to be our military personnel. We found the pilot’s body outside the scene. There’s no sign of the poet and the DSS agents. We believe they either jumped to their deaths or were intercepted on their way to Abuja.”

“Any visuals on the attackers?” Bello asked.

“The sky’s quiet now. But we’re expanding the search perimeter. Herculean, giving the blocked streets, but we will keep looking. Hopefully, we will find them.”

“Good. Keep us updated. The President is expecting confirmation of the poet’s safety.”

He ended the call.

The President was no longer smiling. A dark cloud had settled over his face. “You think they might have escaped?” His voice suddenly brittle.

Bello gave a noncommittal shrug. The truth was: no one knew. The prospect that the poet might still be alive felt more dangerous now than ever. For Mr. Bello, it carried a flicker of hope that his agents had survived. For the President, it carried dread that everything could still fall apart.

“What do you think, Mr. Bello?”

Mr. Bello measured his words carefully. “I believe your men are in the best position to clarify that, sir. Like you, I’m eager for the facts.”

The President reached for a different secure device and dialled his cartel’s mercenary contact. The conversation was brief.

“...It’s done,” came the broken, staticky voice on the other end.

It was enough for the president. It was always done when these men said it was done.

“I’ll need some proof if that’s possible.”

“We’re...it...and will forward shortly.”

He hung up, leaned back and smiled again.

“Relax,” he said to his right hand man. “We’ve overcome this.”

He motioned for Bello to read the speech aloud. The words sounded hollow, even as they echoed through the hallowed walls of power—words meant to rewrite reality, to silence a truth that, unbeknownst to them, had found wings that day.

The truth had refused to die. Instead, it would fly.

Tete and Kego arrived at the main gate of the U.S. Embassy to find it no haven—just another wall in a city fast running out of safe ones.

The entire perimeter was barricaded and heavily guarded by U.S. Marines in combat gear, standing like impassive statues of war—masked, unreadable, and unnervingly still. Their rifles gleamed under the late morning sun. Their eyes, hidden behind dark glasses, offered no assurance. Only warning.

Before the barricades, a dense cluster of people had gathered—Nigerians, foreigners, journalists, families, activists—all pressed together in desperate hope. Some waved documents, others held placards. Most looked upwards, not for helicopters, but for miracles. No one was allowed past the barricades. Others were simply protesters chanting for the Americans to witness that the nation had reached its boiling point.

Tete forced his way to the front, Kego behind him. He reached the steel blockade and raised a hand to one of the marines. The soldier did

not flinch. Tete called out, his voice loud and firm. Nothing. He reached into his pocket for his DSS ID, and found it gone. Lost in the crash or left behind somewhere in the confusion. He clenched his jaw. Signposts reading ‘No Entry’ hung from the barricades, mocking their hopes. He gestured toward Kego—the man he was guarding with his life, the man the whole world spoke about. Bystanders assumed he was seeking attention and did not bother to look. The soldiers did not move. Did not blink. It was as if they were not there.

Tete considered something drastic. A warning shot into the air would get their attention—but the risk was catastrophic. The armed guards might seal the area entirely. The already fatigued protesters could explode into stampede. He let the thought go.

They waited. Two minutes. Five. Nothing came of it.

Kego let out a long breath and stepped back. “I’m not going in,” he said, almost to himself. “I believe this is a sign.”

Tete turned, startled. “What do you mean?”

“They won’t let me in—and honestly, why should they?” Kego said, his voice calm but laced with resolve. “America only protects its own. I’m not one of them. They don’t even care about me.”

“Kego, this is your chance to get away. It’s safer here. We could try to scale these barricades.”

“No.” He said firmly. Final. “I’m done running. Besides, the barricades are barbed wire and solid metal. How do you plan to scale them?”

“Just trust me on this. You don’t know the people I’m working for. They’re more dangerous than anything you’ve seen.”

Kego looked around at the faces surrounding him—the voices, the fists raised against decades of suppressed rage. The chants, the signs, the unwavering defiance of people who had become more than

protesters. They were his people. He could no longer stand apart from them.

He had been running since the day before, convinced the people were still docile—until he saw that sea of heads through the helicopter's porthole. That was the first moment he knew that running was no longer his path.

What he had wanted with his poems was never for himself to escape. He had wanted the people to understand the power they held over those who governed them. The one thing politicians feared was a people who understood that power—the power of unity, of truth. No government could withstand when the people truly rose as one.

With all the lies he had heard and the things he had seen, he understood now that he could be a catalyst in ensuring the success of the uprising. All he needed to do was to expose the truth they were working so hard to destroy. He was ready to give his life, if that was the cost, to see what the people had begun brought to completion.

“If I hide now, behind gates and foreign soldiers, what does that say to all of these people?” He asked, eyes moving across the crowd. “That we fight only until fear wins? That I survived everything just to run into the arms of another power that won’t care tomorrow?”

He turned back to Tete. “I need to speak to them. In their midst, with no walls and no glass podiums. I want to look them in the eyes and tell them this must not stop until those who oppress us are removed.”

Tete's stomach turned. “You want to stand in the open, in front of the State House? Kego, they will come for you again. Snipers. Drones. The mercenaries. Your face is the reason they are afraid right now. If they get to you, this movement collapses.”

“Let them come,” Kego replied. “If I die there, I die with my voice ringing in their ears. I’d rather fall speaking the truth than live in a

silence caused by fear. There's no glory in abandoning the people who filled these streets to stand up for me and for their country."

Tete stared at him for a moment. He saw no hesitation, no flicker of doubt, in his old friend's eyes. The Kego he once teased for hiding in libraries had grown into something unshakable. Not dangerous to the people—but to those who feared the power of truth. Somewhere within himself, Tete realised he wanted this too, though he feared the cost. It was not his call to make.

"Then I'll take you," he said.

He would be his shield and witness. He hoped it was worth it. He hoped Gina was wrong about this backfiring. He feared for his own life if it fell through. But he nodded to it anyway.

They turned away from the embassy's towering barricades and the cold eyes of foreign soldiers, and walked back into the heart of their own storm, wading through the mass of voices and bodies, each step carving their path toward the centre of the uprising.

They were heading to the doorstep of the government that had sought to make an example of the poet's blood—toward the final stage where the truth would either ignite the revolution further, or be silenced forever.

Back in Abakaliki, the sun hung directly overhead, casting the state capital in a searing brilliance as the clock crept toward noon. Ola was achingly close to the epicentre of the protest, but progress had slowed to a crawl. The crowd here was unlike anything she had witnessed since morning—a wall of bodies, fists, and roaring chants surging to the timeless rhythm of words that had become both anthem and prophecy.

"Ibe Banjo must go!"

The cadence filled the streets, echoed against government building walls, and carried like a battle cry across radio frequencies and social

feeds. From her position, Ola caught a glimpse of Dera standing atop the roof of a car a few dozen meters ahead—her slim frame like fire on a mast, resolute and unshaken, hair dancing with each surge of her arm.

Between them was the ocean of heads, placards, clenched fists, and national rage. Ola pressed forward.

Dera stood on the makeshift podium, sweat glistening on her brow, eyes bright with defiance. Her voice cracked as she screamed into the megaphone, leading the crowd through wave after wave of chants. Her fist rose and fell—a rhythmic metronome guiding the anthem of resistance.

Grief still gnawed at her, but she would not falter. Not now. Kenekwue may have been taken from her, but her love for him was now woven into the soul of this movement. Whether Kego was alive or not, both men had become the nation's conscience. This uprising was their legacy.

She wished she could be at the heart of the revolution in Abuja, but the footage streaming into her phone told her that Abakaliki's voice was just as loud, just as vital, as everywhere else in the nation.

Word spread that the President would address the nation at noon. She glanced at her phone. 12:02 p.m. *Typical. Delay as tactic. To manipulate.*

She knew what was coming—pacification wrapped in diplomacy, a carrot for the rabbits about to be butchered. This would be their final attempt to lull the people into surrender. She would not let them.

Pulling out her phone, she opened Instagram and went live. Her voice, trembling with raw conviction, poured through screens and into history. "He will lie to you. Don't listen. This is their final gasp, their

last trick. Stay in the streets. Do not give up until we take back this country.”

Within seconds, her voice rang from the giant screen in front of the gates of Aso Rock in Abuja—beamed live as if fate had demanded it.

Kego saw the face on the screen as he approached the central stage in Abuja and stopped short.

Dera. He recognised her immediately, though her face had hardened—matured by grief and courage. It hit him like a blow to the chest. Kene’s girlfriend. She had become the heartbeat of the movement. The pain in her voice mirrored his own. He briefly wondered what had happened to Kene—he had not even thought to ask Tete during their escape. He hoped he was standing with her nearby.

Tete pulled him forward. The screen faded as they neared the podium, unnoticed amidst the continuous roar of the crowd.

Inside Aso Rock villa, the President fidgeted with visible irritation.

“Why is that girl still alive?” He hissed into the DSS DG’s ear.

Mr. Bello said nothing.

They were en route to a freshly prepared podium, surrounded by bullet proof glass, just inside the front gate—a public address chosen for visual impact. He wanted to be seen as brave, compassionate and present. Noise-cancelling microphones would carry his voice above the chants. State television would stream it live. His digital pawns and social media aides would do the rest. The speech would seal the crowd’s surrender.

At 12:15 p.m., the President stepped onto the platform, flanked by military brass and security chiefs. The flags behind him stood rigid, like the old ideas he refused to discard. Beyond the gate, the people were still chanting.

He began, voice solemn, pacing methodical.

“Fellow Nigerians...we found the missing poet.”

He paused. The crowd beyond the gate quieted just enough to hear.

“Sadly, he was already dead when we reached him.”

Boos erupted, disbelief thick in the air. He pressed on.

“We have arrested some of the culprits involved, and others remain at large. We are pursuing justice swiftly. This government does not silence dissenting voices...”

More boos. He paused and waited.

“To prove that, I am announcing the immediate unbanning of the poet’s collection.”

He paused again, hoping for cheers. Instead, he got silence.

“To support his family, we will procure ten million copies of his book for distribution across libraries nationwide. And now—in honour of this great voice that enemies have silenced—let us observe one minute of silence.”

He bowed his head. So did everyone around him. Some of the people also bowed their heads.

The silence lasted five seconds.

Then the uproar erupted. A thunderclap of gasps, screams and cries that sliced through the silence like a blade. The President raised his head and turned.

On the giant screen behind him, Kego’s face appeared.

Mr. Bello froze. The military chief smiled—*he survived afterall*. The President’s face darkened with rage.

Kego—bruised, rough, dressed in a borrowed military med-flight suit—was undeniably, incandescently alive. The crowd outside erupted first in disbelief. Then in triumph.

The poet lived.

Kego raised a clenched fist. The uproar dropped like a falling current, settling into quiet awe. The people pressed closer to the podium. The whole nation was listening. The whole world was listening too.

“I am Ihekego Nwachukwu,” he declared, his voice booming through the loudspeakers. “The Kego you’ve all been seeking and yearning for.”

The ground shook with cheers. His image beamed across phones and screens worldwide. The President’s face had faded from the stage screen. History had chosen a new narrator.

Beside Kego stood Tete—grim-faced, eyes wild, the bearing of a protective detail. A wall of protesters, young and unflinching, immediately formed a human shield around them both.

Over the gate, Mr. Bello flinched. He would never have seen this one coming. *Tete was the mole*. He looked at the president, who was visibly fuming, furiously dialling from a phone in his hand—oblivious to the fact that state media cameras were still trained on them.

Kego spoke again. “I stand here today, though this government tried to kill me in my home. You’ve all seen the videos of the assassins the day before, the crashed helicopter this morning, and the bloodshed that accompanied it. Those were their last attempts to silence me and break your will through my death.”

“But I live because one of their own warned me, and protected me from within their ranks.”

He pointed to Tete. Cheers rang anew.

Then, like death, the mercenaries' helicopter returned—for a final bite of blood.

It came from the far horizon—black, low, and vengeful. Two men leaned out in full armour, carrying military-grade rifles. They opened fire on the podium.

Pandemonium broke out within and outside the gates of the State House. The President's stage exploded into chaos as everyone scampered to safety. The DSS agents swarmed the president—circling him, lifting him—and whisking him away into the safety of the building, the military at their heels with weapons drawn. Mr. Bello ran alongside, shielded by his orderlies, then peeled away from the president's detail and made for his own office.

Outside the gate, Kego fell to the stage floor, the microphone clattering from his hand. Tete threw his body over him. Protesters on the podium dived to shield them both from the onslaught of gunfire. The screen behind them tore under a rain of bullets.

Then the unthinkable happened.

The military that had been holding the protesters back from the gate turned their weapons skyward and opened fire on the helicopter. Soldiers loyal to the nation—not just the President. Bullets ripped through the air. Some protesters fell and screams rang out.

Four military helicopters emerged above, surrounding the rogue chopper mid-air. In a ballet of vengeance, they hit it with heavy fire. Both gunners took rounds and fell from the bay into the crowd below. The pilot fled in the aircraft, two military helicopters in pursuit.

Below, the sea of protesters surged with primal fury. The President's lie and deception had come undone in real time . It could no longer be hidden behind State denials and controlled propaganda.

There was no need for fear anymore. When a people are violently attacked, they respond—to prove to those in power that the monopoly of violence was never theirs alone to wield. The moment had come. To take back what belonged to the people.

They breached the gate within two minutes. That was all it took. The military and police at the gates stood down. The people surged into the State House grounds—flooding the corridors of power like a tide that would never recede. The soldiers within also stood down and let them through.

The people had taken back their country.

Twenty-One

FIFTEEN MINUTES EARLIER, Gina had arrived at the front gate of the State House dressed in stolen jeans and a simple top—clean, nondescript. Her previous outfit, dust-stained and torn from the crash, now lay forgotten behind the counter of a boutique she had quietly broken into along one of the streets on her way. The chaos of the swelling protest had provided the perfect cover. No one noticed her slip in after picking the lock with the pin she had taken from the dead soldier. Inside, she had changed swiftly, breathing hard, her heart still hammering from adrenaline and the near-death experience of the crash.

She steadied herself for a few minutes, then walked back into the belly of the beast.

At the gate, a hardened phalanx of armed soldiers and police formed a wall between the seat of power and the people who sought to tear it down. Gina still had her DSS badge and security pass—tucked deep into the pocket of the new jeans, safely transferred from the discarded pair. She stepped forward, calm and unblinking, and showed them to one of the soldiers. With no questions asked, a short nod and a radio message, they let her through the narrow pedestrian gate flanked by steel shielding and men with fingers on their triggers. She walked in without a second glance behind.

Inside the grounds, armed guards eyed her as she moved with her badge raised and her pace sure. Some recognised her and saluted subtly. No one stopped her. She noticed the makeshift podium in the courtyard near the inner gate—a last-minute performance platform hastily

erected, no doubt, for one final act of statecraft. The President was preparing to deliver his address, to play the puppet-master in one last attempt to rein in the people, but the crowd she had seen outside would not budge to this. She was sure of that.

She passed the area without breaking stride, heading to Mr. Bello's office. When she got there, it was empty. She guessed he was with the President, preparing the speech. She knew because she had helped him do the same enough times in the past. She walked in, closed the door softly behind her, and slumped into the leather chair behind his desk. No one paid her any attention. She relaxed, but her mind stayed taut. She was there to get answers.

On the television mounted on the wall, scenes from across the country flickered like a revolution in real time. Crowds. Flags. Tears. Fists. Defiance. Rage, and a growing, unstoppable tide. Indeed, it was a revolution playing out before her eyes.

She thought of Tete, and what he had done that morning on the flight. To her own surprise, she smiled.

Perhaps he had been right all along.

She had been seconds from pulling the trigger on Kego. Why? Because the creed said: *Never disobey the last command*. The orders from the top said: *Eliminate the Kite*. She was not one to question orders. She never had been.

Now, watching the storm the government had unleashed, she saw the absurdity laid bare. The young man had written poems. *Poems*. Raw, piercing, honest words. And for that, the entire state machinery had been turned against him.

She shook her head. When she joined the DSS, it was not to become a pawn in the games of tyrants; she had believed she was entering an elite force to protect the people and their elected representatives—to uphold a fragile democracy. Six years under the current regime had turned her into something else entirely. She had become a spectre in

service of suppression. A trigger for silence. A puppet for the power-drunk. She hated what she had become.

Could she have done anything differently? Could anyone, actually? In a system like this, refusing orders was a death sentence. Everyone followed every order from their superiors. No reasonable person in any security agency questioned orders even if they didn't agree with them. It was not weakness, it was survival.

Still, she wished she had aligned with Tete from the start. Maybe if he had told her his plans, she would have understood. Or maybe not. Either way, it would be worth a try.

If she could not walk away, then perhaps she could do what Tete had done: stay inside the system, but no longer be of it. Play the role. Gain their trust. But work against them from within. Become a ghost in the machinery of power.

She sank deeper into Bello's chair, eyes on the screen. The President's address was about to begin. The protests were larger than she ever imagined. When she left Abuja that morning, the streets were almost empty. Now, every road pulsed with humanity.

It reminded her of something crucial: the world only seems empty because people hide indoors. That illusion of absence—of complacency—was what politicians feed on. When the people rose, the myth shattered. Today, it had shattered for Nigerian politicians. Citizens could smell and see the fear in the ruling class. It had always been a game of numbers—politicians versus the people—but the people had lived with the illusion that the politicians were more powerful than them. They were not. They never had been.

The protests were not like they used to be. This time, every soul seemed to be present and every voice was chanting. The air was different; something irreversible had begun. It no longer seemed like something that could simply die off because of a speech, threats or not.

The answers the people sought were not something this administration could provide. Its dread was already sweeping among the staff in the State House.

On her way in, she felt it in the corridors of power. From the way security men exchanged glances to the trembling hands of secretaries she met in the hallway who were taking coffee to their ogas. There was thick and undeniable fear in the air, and somewhere behind it, there was hope. Those who wanted a better country would have hope.

Then the screen shifted. The President's face appeared, smug and rehearsed as he began reading. He always read his lies. She nearly laughed at the absurdity coming from his mouth: Kego was dead, he claimed. Or was he? Could they have got to him already?

She thought about Tete again. If Kego was truly dead, then Tete probably was too. She sighed. Maybe Tete had miscalculated, maybe she was better off following orders after all. Maybe being a puppet was safer. Maybe it was the only way to survive a monster without being devoured.

She bowed her head for the moment of silence the President had called for. A hollow gesture, an empty performance. If not for Kego, then for Tete, it would suffice. She had warned him but he did not listen.

Then, an uproar hit the air. She lifted her head. On the screen was Kego. Alive, and standing right in front of the gate.

Her jaw dropped.

Tete...you mad, magnificent and suicidal bastard...you actually pulled it off.

The madness of it struck her like a slap. What were they thinking? What kind of suicidal defiance was this? Right in front of the lion's den? Right after the President had announced the poet's death on live television? She did not even hear Kego's words. Her mind raced

through every possible disastrous outcome. They should have gone to the U.S. Embassy or anywhere safe, not here. They could have taken cover and stayed hidden, anything but this.

Then she saw the shift in Kego's face. The fear and the glance skyward. A helicopter's drone. She wondered what it was.

Then the bullets came. Kego dropped to the floor of the podium.

Her stomach lurched. There was pandemonium even in the coverage. Gunfire filled the air and chaos erupted everywhere. The camera trembled more violently as its bearer fell, the screen shook and screams echoed through the walls. Gina froze. She could not see the shooters. She did not know what would happen next, but her hand instinctively reached for the cold steel tucked inside her jeans.

And she waited.

There was pandemonium in the heart of Abakaliki's uprising.

When the image of Kego crumbling under gunfire flashed across their phone screens, the crowd convulsed. Only minutes ago, they had welcomed his presence on the podium with chants of joy. This had quickly turned sour.

Screams ripped the air from the angered crowd and grief erupted like a volcano. People clawed at the sky, at the barricades, at anything within reach—as if their bare hands alone could avenge the fallen poet. At the centre of it all stood Dera, atop her makeshift podium, the roof of a now dust-smeared car.

Tears streamed freely down her face, her chest heaving. She reached for the microphone, but her voice cracked beneath the weight of heartbreak.

“They’ve killed him!” She screamed, again and again, the words torn straight from her soul. “They’ve killed him! They’ve killed him! Right before our eyes!”

Her grief roared through the sound system, seizing the moment like fire catching dry grass. The crowd froze, transfixed by the rawness of her pain. Then something changed; her rage turned red.

A fury welled up behind her tears, turning her sorrow into a storm. She lifted her fist to the sky, as if summoning judgement itself.

“Today,” she bellowed, her voice clear, fierce and unmistakably resolute. “I urge you not just to feel this rage, but let it shape your actions henceforth. Let it roar through your bones. Let it speak through your footsteps as you march!” She pointed towards the looming Government House before the crowd.

“Posterity will not forgive us if we stand here chanting while the seat of tyranny remains untouched. We will not repeat the cowardice of our elders. This time, we will take back what belongs to us!”

Her voice quivered—not from weakness, but from power.

“This country belongs to us, not to those who murdered my boyfriend! Or to those who silenced our poet! All in cold blood.”

She paused for one breath. Then she said. “Do it now. Let’s storm every secretariat that mocks the people’s will and misrepresents us!”

The dam burst.

All across the nation, her voice echoed like a warrior’s battle cry. In Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kaduna, Ilorin, and Ibadan, protesters surged towards government houses like rivers let loose from a broken dam. In every state capital, the people became a tide, overwhelming barricades and outpacing fear.

Police stations were abandoned and security forces stood down or vanished like mist at dawn. Soldiers melted into the crowd or raised their rifles high in surrender. A last-minute directive from the Chief of

Army Staff to not engage the protesters had already stripped the state of its final weapon. He was seeking a part to redemption since the massacre he allowed during the previous protests two years ago.

Freedom was no longer a hope; it had become a storm. It had become a livable experience.

Most state governors fled in private helicopters and Local Government chairmen leapt over back fences. Civil servants at work that day mingled with the masses, indistinguishable in their panic. National Assembly members vanished from their offices. Airports and secret hangars buzzed with the frenzied exodus of the political elite from the country.

Yet, in a few corners of the country, rare exceptions existed.

In Abakaliki, as the crowd surged through the gates, their fury breathing fire into the streets, the Governor did not run like many of his counterparts. Instead, he stepped out onto a balcony above the government house, his hands trembling, his face pale with fear. He had never witnessed such a great movement of people in his political career. He was afraid they would not listen to him, but the people paused when they saw him.

They watched as he stood in fear and in awe of the people's resolve and perseverance, waiting for him to speak. The Governor's voice was shaky but sincere as he began to speak.

He reminded them of what his government had achieved over six years. He admitted life had not been easy, coupled with being crippled by federal mismanagement and corrupt systems. He acknowledged their pain and vowed to do better if the people continue to give him chance to fight alongside them and honour the memories of the Ebonyi sons killed during or before the protests, especially Kego who had been shot on livestream.

The people did not cheer, but hey did not boo either. Instead, they listened. They had not come for him. Not exactly. He was duly re-elected as governor in the last election. Their anger had never been truly local. It was for the beast in Abuja, the crown of corruption and the palace of death.

Yet, for now, in this city, they allowed the man his moment. He had done an amazing job for the people but he needed to rise higher and double his effort. The people would not accept any more excuses from their leaders.

Not far from the stage, Ola pushed her way through the roaring crowd, desperately making a pathway to Dera's car through the growing chaos. She was close to Dera now. Around her, the crowd swelled like a flood as the protesters angled closer to the government house to hear what the governor was saying. She kept going, elbows tight, swinging left to right, eyes sharp.

She did not take her eyes off the car.

Ola reached Dera and stopped. Dera was still standing atop her car, eyes scanning the mass of bodies, chest still heaving from screaming earlier.

Then she saw her. The girl who saved her the night before. She recognised her immediately. She wondered what she came back for. *Was she back to finish me off now? Had those in Abuja ordered her to silence me like my boyfriend and his friend. Like the many caught in the fire before the State House in Abuja.* For a moment, she feared for her life.

Their eyes locked. Dera thought she saw something different in her eyes that was not the murderous look she had when they first met. There were tears in her eyes.

Dera did not seem shocked by Ola's appearance. She did not want her to see. Not even a show of surprise. She did not want to appear weak for whatever this meant. She was shaking inside, but she just stared, tears still burning on her cheeks. In her gaze, Ola saw the questions, the plea, the accusation, and everything else unspoken. She stepped closer and Dera reached out.

Their hands met—Ola's trembling, Dera's unflinching. Dera stepped down from the car and they embraced each other. It was a long, silent, shaking embrace. Their arms locked around each other like survivors clinging to the last boat.

Ola whispered. "He's alive."

Dera pulled back, stunned. "Who?"

Ola hesitated and her eyes shifted past Dera to the open window of her car. Her parents were sitting inside soaked in sweat, but proud. Their daughter had become the heartbeat of a movement. Even in the midst of the chaos, they beamed with joy.

"Who?" Dera asked again, more urgently.

Ola turned back to her, eyes still wet. "Your boyfriend," she said softly. "He's alive."

Dera staggered back, shaking her head. "No. Don't lie to me. I held him. I felt the warmth leave him. He was dead."

"I know," Ola replied. "I know what you saw, but listen...we saved him. Apparently, he was only unconscious."

Dera's lips trembled as a faint light returned to her eyes, like dawn peeking over a battlefield.

"But how?" She asked, almost breathless.

"I haven't seen him myself," Ola admitted. "But I got the confirmation that he's recovering. Our guys are with him."

“Recovering?” Dera whispered. “Is that even possible?”

Ola nodded. It was hard to believe, but it was the truth.

“I’ll tell you everything about that night. He lived.”

As the people listened to their governor, Dera turned to Ola, listening too—because the news she had just received was the real miracle for her.

The survival of love, defiance against death. Kene was alive. Even death had no grip on the fire the revolution had kindled. This fire would transform a flailing nation to a fast growing one.

The night before the day of the uprising, when Ola arrived at Tete’s residence breathless, her news sent tremors through him. Without delay, he had tapped a secured line and reached out to the two DSS agents assigned earlier to clean up at Kego’s house. His orders were terse and urgent: find the poet’s friend and retrieve him dead or alive. If he was found alive, make sure he was given a chance at survival.

The agents had moved quickly, arriving at the police station under the shield of their DSS credentials. The officers did not dare refuse them. Kene was handed over at their request, limp and still as stone. The government doctor had already written him off as dead, without proper examination. The shot was so close to his heart and he’d lost so much blood, but the agents refused to give up on him.

They transported him to a safe house on the outskirts of Abakaliki, a location designated for the recovery of wounded operatives. One of the agents, Musa, who was trained in battlefield medicine, cut into the bleeding chest of the young man under bright lighting and with trembling hands to retrieve the bullet. It had missed his heart by half of an inch.

“This guy has nine lives,” his companion muttered.

The procedure to save Kene was brutal and they worked through the night until at last, there was a pulse.

His chest rose, shallow but sure. They cleaned his wounds, and placed him in a coma-support unit for operatives in critical conditions. Kene remained unconscious, but he was breathing well and bandaged up. He was safe.

Back in Abuja, Tete dragged Kego from the blood-splattered stage floor minutes after the mercenaries' helicopter disappeared into the sky, chased by the roaring blades of military choppers. Kego was untouched, again—like a cat with nine lives. But his body trembled, his eyes wide and wild, mirroring the chaos around them. He was standing in a pool of blood that others had spilled for him.

The podium had become a war zone. Two protesters who had shielded them lay dead at their feet, and another groaned nearby, barely clinging to life. Tete felt warmth spreading down his back, where something had struck him. His shirt was covered in blood. He did not check it. He did not need to. The sting told him it was only a graze, nothing fatal.

The soldiers who once stood guard now aided the injured as choppers landed outside the gates and presidential ambulances arrived. Medics hauled the wounded and lifeless into the bellies of steel. A young soldier turned to Kego with reverence in his tone.

“Where are you taking them?” Kego shouted amidst the noise.

“To the military clinic, sir,” the soldier answered, saluting.

Kego blinked. Sir? He was no soldier, but he had become something more. A symbol for freedom and a peaceful revolution. When they asked to check him for injuries, he waved them off. He told them to

treat Tete instead, but Tete refused. He would carry his pain like a badge.

Then Kego turned to face the wide open gates, breached by the will of a nation. The people had taken the seat of power, but what about the tyrant? Where was the usurper?

In the State House, the President was pacing about madly inside the emergency chamber of the State House, sweat streaming down his face like oil over a rusty machine part. He barked into the air, hurled curses at the walls of DSS agents, and demanded blood.

“Shoot them!” He shouted at the silent DSS agents standing guard. “Go shoot every last one of them! Where is Bello? Where is the IGP?”

No one answered. The DSS detail stood still. He spun to the Chief of Army Staff, pointing a trembling finger.

“Do something! Goddamn it! Retake the gates! Kill them like you did before!”

The military chief had already given the one command that mattered: stand down. There was no going back now. Across the country, soldiers complied. Orders were orders, but this time, it was obvious they were not from the President. Ibe Banjo would not ask the military and the police to stand down amid the sudden bursts of chaos within his borders.

The world had shifted. The President was no longer in charge. Could this sudden burst of riots across the country lead to a military takeover? That was not the goal. The people wanted a more representative government; one that promotes only the people’s will. A true republican democracy. Nothing else would suffice.

The president, frustrated, pointed out six of his bodyguards—his cartel boys embedded in the DSS. Loyal to a fault. “I am your commander. Go take down those usurpers.”

They moved to obey, rifles ready. As they made for the door, soldiers blocked their path. Rifles came up on both sides—DSS against military, the air between them thin as a wire about to snap. A mutiny in the heart of the State House.

“What are you doing?” The president’s voice was tight, eyes locked on the Army Chief.

“The violence is unwarranted, sir.”

“Says who? You’re challenging my direct order?” He looked around the room, frantic. “Where’s Bello? Someone call Bello. Call the IGP.”

“No one is going anywhere, sir,” the COAS said. He turned to the other DSS operatives—not the six, but the rest. “If you wanted the people killed, you would have done it when he first asked. Are you going to let these six men walk out there and mow them down now?”

Silence fell over the room like a held breath.

One by one, the other DSS agents swung their weapons —away from the soldiers and toward the six rogue agents. It was decisive and swift. They were disarmed, handcuffed, and marched out by the military without a word spoken.

Ibe Banjo stood alone in the centre of the room, his fury burning without power.

Soon, rotors thundered as the presidential helicopter touched down on the emergency rooftop helipad. The President’s wife clutched his arm, her eyes hollow with fear, as DSS agents escorted them to the aircraft. Moments later, they lifted into the air, flanked by only four agents. They were headed to his luxury estate in the French countryside. The presidential jet was already waiting.

The order was clear: Fly him out. The presidential fleet would return without him.

Ibe Banjo did not realise it yet—but he was no longer president. The people had made their choice. And the Chief of Army Staff had helped them enforce it.

Elsewhere in the building, Mr. Bello and the Inspector-General of Police rushed down a corridor like men on borrowed time—breathless, disheveled. They burst into the DSS DG’s suite. Behind them, the people surged through the State House. They went into Bello’s office and bolted the door.

Gina was waiting.

Seated calmly behind Bello’s desk, she looked up, tightening the dark silencer around the mouth of the pistol, arms resting on her lap. She did not blink.

“You’re safe,” Bello breathed, more statement than question. He sank into a cushion, the IGP beside him, both wiping sweat from their necks. Their orderlies waited outside the office, locked out.

Gina stood. Her steps were slow and purposeful as she moved to stand before them, the gun pointed at neither man—somewhere between their shocked faces.

“What are you doing?” They stammered together. “Gina, what—”

She saw the IGP’s hand move toward his sidearm.

Pfffffft!

The muffled shot hit his forehead. Blood splattered the wall behind him and his corpse slid to the floor like dead weight.

Mr. Bello gasped, shocked to his marrow. “You and Tete—”

Pfffffft!

Blood sprayed across his cheeks and he fell backward into the cushion, his last breath gurgling at the back of his throat.

“You don’t treat me like a fucking loose end,” she cursed under her breath. “Go rot in hell.”

Gina stepped forward, emptied both men’s pockets, and claimed their secure phones. She slid the pistol into Bello’s cold lap—to make it look like he had snapped—though that was barely her concern now.

For the first time in years, she smiled sincerely.

Tete would be proud. If the tyrant had somehow survived the tide, he would find his inner circle gone—his shadow no longer falling over the people. She doubted he would. For her, she was done with being a pawn politicians could use for their evil and discard at will.

She stepped into the corridor, now crowded with protesters, and disappeared into the crowd.

Outside the gate, Tete and Kego watched the helicopter rise and vanish into the distance. Shouts of joy erupted through the crowd. Across Nigeria, livestreams blazed with videos, chants, and the euphoria of a long-awaited dawn.

Kego took the microphone and faced the nation.

“This is now a free country!”

The cheer that answered him cracked the air like thunder.

“And we, the people, have only one final request,” he continued, voice resolute. “The true winner of the last election—former Governor Halinu Zima of Plateau State—must be released from his incarceration and sworn in as the rightful President of this Republic!”

The uproar shook the nation. Across borders, world leaders watched uneasily.

The U.S. President posted on X: *This is what freedom smells like. Congratulations to the Nigerian people. Your country is no more a*

disgrace. The United States will fully support the upcoming administration.

Kego exhaled. His chest was heavy, his hands shaking. His dream—their dream—was no longer just an idea. His prophecy had become reality.

“They sought to kill a poet,” he whispered to himself. “But the people banished them instead.”

That afternoon, Wolf Blitzer’s voice echoed from CNN. “This is unprecedented. The fall of a regime, sparked by the audacity of a poet.”

In Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison, inmates rattled the bars and chanted with joy.

Down the corridor, the real president-elect from the last election, Halinu Zima, was led out of his cell by military men and DSS operatives. His eyes had met theirs with suspicion when they first appeared. He had been in isolation—no idea of what was unfolding beyond these walls.

They saluted him. He followed, unsure of where they were taking him.

For the first time in two years, he walked out into freedom. A large crowd greeted him outside the walls of the prison with chants of ‘*President Zima! President Zima! President Zima!*’ He had no idea what was happening, but he smiled as he entered the armoured car reserved only for the man at the helm of national affairs. The swarm of DSS detail was unprecedented.

They were not ordering him or pushing him along. Instead, they were protecting him.

He was living a dream he had long since lost hope in.

Back in Abuja, and across Nigeria, government houses stood hollow—offices abandoned, chambers emptied. Wicked politicians had vanished on their way into exile, their long-standing grip broken, but the vacuum was temporary. The people's president would be sworn in that same evening. Fresh elections would follow to fill vacated positions. A new constitution would be enacted—one that truly mirrored the heart of the people. This time, the people would stay awake. There would be no more silence, for when the people rise—not for greed, or tribe, or religion—but for truth and justice, no power can suppress them. Power belongs to the people when they unite.

At last, the people knew it. They had seen it and tasted it.

They would never be enslaved again, for a truly free people build the best nations.

free

Epilogue

TWO MONTHS AFTER the uprising, on a breezy Saturday afternoon, the revolutionaries reunited at Kene's house in the hills near central Abakaliki, close to Waterworks Road. The air was light, fragrant with grilled fish and palm wine. The sun sat mildly above the treetops, bathing the compound in soft gold.

Tete arrived first with Kego, both men in light kaftans, their faces glowing with peace. Ola came with the two agents who had pried Kene from the cold hands of death weeks earlier. Dera greeted them with teary eyes and open arms. The laughter that followed left the kind of calm that only comes after a storm.

Under a canopy in the garden, they sat in a loose circle while Kene rested comfortably in his wheelchair, a knitted blanket across his legs.

"Who knew a poet could cause such wahala?" Musa chuckled, biting into a grilled fish skewer.

Kego raised a brow. "Don't blame me. I just wrote a couple lines of truth. You all made them prophecy and brought them to reality."

Tete clinked his glass of palm wine. "Let's be honest, Gina would have had you in pieces."

"Facts," Ola added with a sly grin. "That woman vanished like mist on a hot roof."

“At first, she seemed to me like the sharpest of you all,” Kego said, then looked across at Tete. “But you...you gave me a second life. So, I’d give you that.”

Tete waved him off. “You gave us a new country. Even though we all know Dera and Kene brought it home while I was following some stupid orders.”

They laughed.

Dera brought more drinks and danced a little to the Burna Boy track playing from the speaker. She pulled Kene gently to his feet.

“You’re not too revolutionary to dance, abeg.”

Kene obliged, twirling her in the garden slowly, her laughter ringing like chimes in the breeze. He did not move much himself. Tete and Ola soon joined them. They looked good together, but no one knew for sure if they were seeing each other. The single ones sat in quiet amusement.

Later, as dusk spread its pale blue hands across the sky, they sat again in silence, watching the sun surrender to the evening.

“We did it,” Ola said quietly.

“Not just us,” Kene added. “The people did. I wasn’t even there to witness it.”

Kego nodded, staring out into the horizon. “Let’s not ever forget that silence can cost us our freedom, and that our voices can only win when we’re all united.”

And so they sat in celebration—simple rebels who had dared to shake a broken republic. Now they were just happy people eating, laughing, living and free in a country that would judge them by the merit of their actions.

Even in the warmth of the laughter and wine, Tete’s thoughts strayed. Ibe Banjo had since been arrested. Though in custody for his

supposed crimes, he was being shielded by a judiciary still steeped in the rot of his old regime. None of the evidence brought against him had been damning enough. Judges kept adjourning the case, asking for something final, something more concrete.

Tete sipped his drink, the laughter around him fading in his mind. Something needed to be done soon—or the court would cut the man loose to run wild in the land again.

The uprising was over, but as long as justice stayed unserved, the reckoning was not over.

The weight lay heavy on Tete's shoulders.

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I give glory to God.

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