
PROLOGUE



THE GODS WERE not asleep that night back in London, from the suburban Richmond upon Thames borough to the M25 Orbital Motorway... blood, blood, everywhere. Sierra Leone now.

“There’s no heaven! There’s no hell!”

Whether in a dream or in trance, Smith Abernathy could not tell. However, the words left him for dead.

“The earth is the puny fête of the celestial.” The old man seated beside him slandered with the plod of dark breath that puffed from his nostrils. “Isn’t this what it is? The gods have turned us into a laughing stock? They gave us the concept of heaven and hell, then our inner weaknesses, and yet demand the very best of us? What a contrast!” The man scorned with an angry farce.

Smith frowned. He was beginning to grow impatient. They were headed for the Mont Yard on Freetown’s mainland – the decisive hall where he was pitching for the article on the revelations of hell emanating from this country, Sierra Leone, he wished to be published on the BBC and *London Weekly*, the national repositories, and other international papers... or forever be trashed. The last part of the thought came with that sense of horror gripping his chest and forcing him to tremble.

The man seated beside him was still scorning. “Man is a sorry being, and there’s nothing you can do to scrounge that. *Fait accompli!*”

The words pounded at the depths of his soul. He couldn’t have imagined the best of his works coming to a crashing halt, arousing such criticism. But then Howard had informed him of the older man with the scroll on the street. All the answers to Coleridge’s questions and the others that would arise during the course of the pitch. His heart lurched.

Our world was under siege, and unless God was just about to intervene with divine direct answers, man was doomed, he thought. It was the only streak of hope he could see. None the other was better. It had all the elations he needed, a ray of white skies for the continent of Africa – that kind of sky with the snow-dipped peaks of the seventh heaven rising into it like sober tendrils of garlands and object d’arts of snuggled-up gods, he thought.

Then like on cue, as the cab bumped and ribboned through the last lane on Leighton, he gawped and saw the older man. The man was in rags, shredded to his feet and laid over his shoulder with antique cambric. Unshaved. His beard was like his hair, all pallid, pooling down on his shoulders close to his chest. His whole body was weak, weak from age, from seeing too much of a fallen world. Times and times in age than Coleridge had come close.

And then he had a message rumbling from his lips, rumbling like the voices of many waters. It was a cliché even a year-old toddler could recite.

Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

The words flashed in his head, and fear gripped the base of his heart. It felt like the other gory scenes from the dreams and trances since the revelations, snippets of furtive words he fought so hard to unravel. He was an ardent believer of the Christian faith, and except he could lay hold on exactly what the intents were now, then he was truly lost in the process. Or maybe the world was coming to an end, and there were specific injunctions the churches had neglected; and just before it closed up on them, he was meant to fix it right.

Help me, Lord. Help me decode this.

Then Mont Yard lay in sight. The streets had begun to recede. Puffy clouds drifted past, changing shape as they moved in the direction of the last twilight breeze, and he could sense an uphill drizzle had begun to pick. He peered through the window and observed the older man again. He nodded. He’d retrieve the scroll, obliterate his inclinations, then walk into the pitch, he thought.

Then suddenly the older man began to move as heavy drops of rain milled on his head. “Stop!” Smith yelled at the cabman.

“For what?” Coleridge shot at him. “Or, I go with you. Nigel said so.”

Go with me? The man’s voice sank in his heart. The cabbie pulled over

on the wing. Then, like a thud from behind, his side door flung open, the force hurling him out, crashing his head on the cement sidewalk.

He winced from the pain, blood gushing from his head. He turned in panic. The cab was gone. The great storm now roared, and heavy raindrops thumped and drenched him. He was blindfolded. But somehow now, he could see a black Buick behind him. He squinted and tried to make out the exact shape from his fallen position. The picture was fuzzy, black as hell. *Where am I?* He thought and tried to look up. There were three other men now. One of them, a mountainous silhouette, drew closer and levelled the barrel of his pistol at his head. "Now, where is he?"

How could he possibly know this? Smith trembled to his knuckles. He looked around, expecting the older man to have long disappeared. But he was wrong. There in the distance the older man stood tired, drenched, and shivering like an African hen under cover. "Over there," he muttered, fear grabbing his guts. *Help me out, Lord.*

He could see the older man yet in position, the scroll in his hand, hanging loosely like all his strength was gone with the words, with the rain. He dared to move, but the nozzle of the gun now tapped his forehead.

The street was deserted. The meeting had begun. The summary of his pitch – a warning from eternity for the entire world in the hand of one man whose existence was not sure in the next . . .

The gun roared. One second. He saw the older man drop to the ground, his blood spilling, and he was going to yell in shock and disbelief. *He's not of a celestial body?* The fear grabbed his chest to asphyxia. Then two seconds later, he heard the sound of the gun again, and the young newsmaker felt a searing heat as the bullet lodged in his chest cavity. He fell backwards, his eyes up . . . struggling against pain.

In the haze, with a very blurred vision, he saw Coleridge with the goons and the parchment from the older man, on fire. They chortled and mocked the Christian faith with a wild sense of Schadenfreude. "Now, morality is dead!" they roared. "There is no good or bad! Don't be afraid. You've got nothing to lose. There's no more hell to shun. There's no heaven to begin. Don't be afraid of death. We'll go and bury you, and the superman will just cross the rope instead of you."

Who was the superman? He grunted, recognising the words were sic of the German philosopher, *The Antichrist*, Friedrich Nietzsche. But why, what was the use now? He thought and struggled within his reins. Blood pooled from his mouth and orifices, yet he stirred himself. And

with all his strength, he summoned his last faculty. “If . . . if morality be dead, so be it. But . . . may the advent of a divine umpire define our very endings,” he mumbled and gave up the ghost.

Whether in a dream or in trance, he could not tell.

CHAPTER ONE



HIS EMOTIONS SWIVELLED between pleasure and remorse.

He scooped her unto his arms, and she seemed to thaw in his embrace. He kissed her again and again till she reeled from the pleasure of it. He pulled back slowly and let her snuggle up on to his chest. Then his eyes went shut. "Let's not do this tonight." He pinched his lips together. "*I'm a Man of God*" he didn't say. "I'm out of humour," he murmured huskily.

She pulled back and hung her head; then she winked at him in one way that showed she was not sure. She snuggled back in place, overwhelmed by the musky fragrance of his *Eternity*.

"Let's just say I'm worn from the day and need tonight off," he said softly, trying hard to offset her.

But she smiled. "We both know you're joking," she said and began to undo his buttons.

He tried to resist. "I think it's high time we called off this... *affair*, relationship." *The guilt's killing me*. It was an absent statement, especially the last part. He doubted if the words rose above a whisper. Once she was done, she snuggled up again on his chest till their bodies met. His eyes opened and saw her . . . naked! He wept. *Help me, Lord. I'm a sinner*. She kissed him, and his mouth opened gradually over hers, claiming the ripeness of her lips as his strong fingers stroked the back of her neck, tilting her backwards to make the most of the bawdy moment.

He pulled her toward the bed and swore under his breath. *Sex is a crazy thing. A compulsory sin*. The pain winced in his heart and recoiled in a frazzled thud. He shook his head bitterly. Then, with the dexterity of the act like he'd mastered it over the years, he pulled her closer and demanded a consummate response. But wished, in the end, she was not the one.

Not even his wife.

Someone as prim and proper as Eni Jacobs.



Present day . . . Abuja, Nigeria

Dr. Chris Jacobs got news of his daughter's affair the moment he entered the lobby of the synod summon that evening. He was at work in a press conference when his phone rang. Chris hadn't picked the call. But when it rang again and again – and again – Chris had the gut feeling that something was wrong.

Lord, what would this be? His heart thumped, and his mind reeled from the meeting. Of course, he'd had such emergency calls as this since leaving the general hospital in Wuse to work for the Nigeria administrative government, but something about this one came with an unusual rush of adrenaline.

Pastor Kenny Fatoye.

His heart seemed to stop. Ignoring further questions from the luminaries and the press, he took a step towards his office.

"Is everything all right, sir?" His secretary caught up with stack of papers to be signed.

"Yes, just got to make this one call, Andrew. Can I?" Chris smiled palely at the mid-aged man, shut his door, and left alone to call back Pastor Kenny. But just then, his wife's call came in. Chris sank into the swivel chair and shut his eyes; panic threatened to dissolve him to terror. *Lord, what's going on?* He thought and tried to calm himself. Slowly, he punched the green button.

"It's Eni, honey." His wife's voice, a whiny squeal, was direct, knocking the wind out of him. Her weeping tone indicated no specifics, just that their second daughter, Eni, had uploaded a lewd article concerning their bishop on the World Wide Web.

Lewd? The word danced around Chris's nostrils, and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to decode the correlation between his daughter and a personality as big now as Bishop Lloyd Bello.

His heart dredged up memories of their younger days back at the church's estate in Gwarinpa, here in Abuja, those beautiful moments they'd shared together, growing up side by side in the fading twilights of the African sun; while her heart actually lurched for his younger

brother, he'd lingered on with her. Chris shuddered. But never again. He dislodged the thought. They were grown-ups now and far too established to scour up flames of their teenage relationship gone by. Eni was away in London working at the late Bello's upscale department store and was just married traditionally to Luke— Lloyd's younger brother. Lloyd was now the presiding bishop of the ministry, taking reins from his late father, while Chris served in the vineyard.

He straightened and knocked off his wife's fears that moment. "I guess it's just a little hiccup from their teenage days, honey. They're far too much apart now."

Besides, Lloyd was married.

Chris sighed, "There's nothing to worry about, sweetheart."

"Just hurry home, honey, please," his wife whimpered.

Chris felt the familiar rush of adrenaline return, hitting his chest. Again! Immediately, he wanted to drop to his knees and pray long fervent prayers like his late father had taught him when a hunter is faced between a clear shot of an antelope and a grisly cry of death from home, but Chris was too scared to mutter a single word. What had he to tell God? That he was incriminating his daughter when he hadn't got any closely what was wrong? Or that the synod had been too rash to summon a simple snag as this?

He was confused.

He only stood before the wall of his office like a fallen palm frond on its main and muttered in shattered tones, "Dear God, even now you know very well that I'm short of words and don't know exactly what to say. But the beauty of my following you through these years has been that assurance that before I even know what to ask, you already give an answer. Lord, whatever the situation is right now about my daughter Eni, I pray you take absolute control through Jesus Christ's name I have prayed. Amen."

Quietly, he bunched up his files, grabbed his suitcase, and walked through the door, far away, into the waiting arms of his loving wife.

Few minutes later, they lumbered with their heads bowed into the lobby of the church's conference room. Chris sighted Pastor Kenny at the other end of the hallway and dashed off towards him. "I'm sorry, Pastor, I missed your calls." He was panting.

The grey-haired cleric nodded and urged him to calm down, taking his trembling arms soberly. "It so sad, Pastor Chris," he said with an edge of sorrow, and Chris felt the swamp of fears flutter in his guts. "I

couldn't disclose the whole story to your wife and wanted to hint you before you came here." He paused and took a deep breath. "I wouldn't want to believe this like the rest of the young pastors otherwise, Chris, but... but I think your daughter's having an affair with the bishop."

The words hit a place in Chris's chest, knocking the wind out of him; and for five minutes, he felt like the dead.

In all his sixty one years of age, thirty-five fully spent in the house of God and almost same as an expert in the study of human sexuality and gynaecology, renowned pastor and doctor, Chris Jacobs had never thought in his wildest imagination that his daughter could be caught in such sexual scandal as sleeping with the bishop of his ministry. The thought pounded in his heart, and he dropped his head and hands on the wall, his guts shattered.

His wife edged towards him, even the more devastated, consoling him—or so she tried.

But all the more he wept.

Of their three children, Eni was the only one who hadn't aligned herself totally with the tenets of his Christian faith, drawing rear ranks on his convictions; she had pushed his competence as a father and a pastor to the wall. His meritorious service in the field of human sexuality had always celebrated him; earned him the sarcastic title of the nation's 'love doctor' since he took over as the nation's Director of the Society of Family Health and the National Director of Counselling of the church.

"Honey," his wife whorled her head beneath his arms on the wall, weeping, "they're waiting for us." She patted his shoulders. "We'll brave through this. Let's just assume for now that it's all a lie."

A lie? The thought slithered into his head, and Chris wanted to dislodge the accusations that moment, but another thought sank in, and he felt withered to his feet.

They'd all been happy that January last year when Eni finally agreed to join the church's workforce, the pastoral unit precisely; but on a late Friday afternoon during the ministers' conference, the bishop's wife had pulled Chris into a corner. "I don't think am convenient with Eni's closeness to my husband these days," she said in a strange tone that sank Chris's heart.

He'd shared it with his wife, and they'd both prayed about it and were happy when Eni flew back to London that same month and haven't had the time to spend near Lloyd again, or so he thought.

Even now . . .

Chris pushed himself to dislodge the thought and trudged with his wife po-faced into the conference room. The room was crammed. There were about forty ministers in the synod – a few Chris recognised – members of the elders' council and state pastors from Lagos and Port Harcourt that were as old as him in the ministry. Their heads bowed; some hung in distant thoughts and utter dismay. The adrenaline returned in Chris's chest, faster and more fiercely. He wondered how it felt in his wife's chest.

The synod was presided over by Lloyd's special assistant on administration, one of the young pastors also of the Western extraction of the country he'd engrafted once he took over that three and half years before.

The young pastor spoke with very authority and much sublimity for Lloyd. He read some scriptural passages that nattered on esteem and reverence for church leadership and those God had placed over them before he cleared his throat and went on to narrate what seemed to Chris as an incredible long-story where his daughter Eni had gone on the church's website to upload a terribly painted picture of her recent sex escapades with Bishop Lloyd there in London.

Chris felt the adrenaline return with a swamp of fear in his face, but this time, it came with much shame. How could he explain this? Why would Eni have done something as terrible and demeaning as this? Was she still being jealous about Lloyd not marrying her after all they'd shared those years while young? Was it all a make-up, or was she just trying to . . . ? *That was crazy!* Chris thought, unable to pull through with the last option. What was she thinking? Her church wedding was just around the corner, two weeks away, and to Lloyd's only younger brother.

Two weeks and she was still in the nooks with Lloyd?

Chris shook his head bitterly and felt the foundations of his heart quake. What was he going to tell his village kinsmen if the story was eventually true? Would Luke demand back his bride price as the tradition was? Was he even aware? The thoughts were slapping him right on his cheeks like June rains, and he stopped to control himself. He massaged his temples and crunched his head on the huge mahogany table, finding it difficult to lay any sense to the whole thing. He raised his head slightly and stole a peek at his wife. Her head was completely buried on the table, weeping very blatant tears. He saw very angry

faces staring at them, and his face darkened with anger. With rage! What for? What if the story was all a lie? What even if it were true? That his daughter had been misused by the bishop, and she'd found the only available space to cry out, the Internet? The wrath hastened his breathing rhythm, and immediately he wanted to grab his wife and walk out through the door and never return again. What was their role in the predicament after all? The young pastor said other hurtful words, and Chris almost sprang to his feet. If it were outside the church or back from where he came from, he would not take all these insults; but like his late father would always say that it was only foolishness that would make the palm wine tapper refute the incrimination of stealing the king's palm wine keg, at least before the village beggar walks in with exactly the same colour of the stolen keg. It was the wise saying of his race, the Igbo race, and he was attuned to that. He decided to stay, shutting his eyes and feeling the wave of shock and pain and shame ram his soul in two. The young pastor went on and on, recapitulating very sordid scenes in the article, leaving Chris dead.

Why, Eni, why? His thought lurched. Slowly the tears made their way in his eyes as he caught them within his one-day-old beard. He wondered why his daughter would have done such a terrible thing. Suddenly it was no longer about the affair now. It was about the fact that Eni had cooked up the terrible stories about such a man of God, one she was familiar with from the onset – or so the young pastor made everyone at the table understand. It broke Chris's heart in pieces. He'd always trusted Lloyd and his thrust for the fundamental Christian faith like his late father, the late bishop. And although Lloyd had scooped in some remodifications in the church's practices lately, exerting a huge pull on the toffs and society's pristine preserves, yet Chris was sure Lloyd would never have stooped so low to something as tawdry as sleeping with his daughter.

Never!

Lloyd was away in South Africa preaching the gospel as his usual manner was, and here were very baseless accusations from the one he'd least expected. Chris shook his head.

The young pastor mentioned a note of apology from him and his wife, and Chris looked up immediately in a glimpse of hope. Sure, they'd do that with all humility.

After Chris agreed, they all prayed, and he wept with his wife on their knees. They left later that night, weeping and begging God that whatever had happened between Eni and Lloyd he'd forgive and they'd pull through together as a family without rupturing the beauty of her forthcoming wedding.

They only could so hope.

CHAPTER TWO



FAR AWAY AT his Sheraton Hotel in Johannesburg, South Africa, Bishop Lloyd Bello, senior pastor and presiding bishop of the Kosher Believers Assembly, lay nestled against his church secretary, wrapped in the very sin he'd preached against time and time.

It was the second round, and the pleasure was waxing out, or maybe he was losing his mood. Again. He was used to handling the guilt and insomnia that came with sleeping with every other woman than the one he married, but this one was becoming different.

News of his sex escapades with ladies of his ministry was beginning to drip into the public and was beginning to heave in on him, or perhaps this very one – his just-concluded affair with the daughter of one of the pastors of his ministry. He adjusted his now-dawdled pace, pinning his head deep on her chest. He shuddered in rather forceful undulating patterns, and the name came to his mind.

Eni Jacobs— the woman he should have married.

His mind fluttered. Why in the world would she have done what she did? Tell the whole world about their affair, so detailed and destructive? Or was it just a make-up? A joke? No, it couldn't have been. He shook his head. Definitely not! Or maybe it was someone else? Someone like? The article had been so precise and honest like told by the culprit that he was sure it was no other's handiwork but Eni Jacobs's.

But why?

Lloyd noticed his secretary now wince from his scrawny pace, and he scooped his head, wiping his forehead and stealing a peak at her beneath him, faking a grin. She smiled in return. He smiled with her and tried in every capacity to plant a kiss on her forehead, but sweat broke freely from his face, dripping down on her nostril. He smiled and

licked it up. She was one lady who'd grown with him since Lloyd took over the church from his late father, and when there'd been rancour about whether or not the church should be handed to Lloyd, she'd done better than to put his right foot forward.

Straight with his stints from the fashion trade, Beverly Grills lunged up his knack for the avant-garde. Lloyd was also a perfect breed of social effects and liberalism. His ability to respect people's opinion and stay that way.

Since they'd begun to sleep together last three autumns, Lloyd had tried to convince himself that it was his wife's lack of such characteristics that'd got him back to his philanderer way of life. But since the summer of last year when he finally got to sleep with Eni Jacobs in London, Lloyd convinced himself that the real reason was his own libido.

Besides, he was in love with Eni Jacobs. Deeply. Completely.

He would have her just any way he could. Lloyd paused. He thought. But with the news of their escapades now all over the Internet, what would the church think about him? His wife? Their barely two-year-old daughter, and then . . . then Luke?

Luke was his only younger brother. Luke was Eni's fiancé now; they were getting married in two weeks.

Two weeks!

The thought smeared with anger and guilt and splattered on his chest, deep down, far into a place yawning in his conscience, and Lloyd pulled away, dashing off into the bathroom, gripping his head. He shut the door behind him.

What a shame, his mind lashed at him. Was this what he'd finally migrated into, a sex freak? And yet a bishop? The thought hit him, and gently he slammed his back against the wall of the bathroom, sliding to his rock bottom, clutching his head on his knees. Then gradually, suddenly, in the moment that followed, Lloyd noticed something was happening to him, something that hadn't happened in a long time, many years before now.

He was crying.

The hot tears formed in his eyes and gradually began to streak down the sides of his face, and for once in the many years since he began to dishonour his matrimonial vows, Lloyd realised the depth of his problem.

The fact was, as slowly and insidiously as he'd begun to let his heart drift from the woman he'd vow to love forever, he'd decided to lose claim to his lack of responsibility, blaming God for putting such strong desire for sex in him.

The desire that'd first begun to brew with Beverly Grills.

They'd met straight on at his induction as assistant brand director at the Rio de Janeiro brand in Johannesburg. Like the South African Kwanzaa he was familiar with back in the United States, following recommendations from his previous brand in the Oxford area.

The party had just begun, and he was sitting over a round table with the executives of the brand when his brand director, a rotund towering South African, made that animated call in the Zulu dialect over his phone. Lloyd had wondered who the rocker the media maven had invited to the table.

And then she'd walked in, in such a way that held Lloyd spellbound. Their eyes met and locked for a moment before she came behind Vuzy Mikolhi, squeezed his shoulders, and whispered in his ears. Then Vuzy stood to introduce her to Lloyd.

"Hi!" Her voice was a sauntering whistle, straight, sharp, like a Kenyan Kookaburra.

Lloyd felt his throat suddenly grow dry, his eyes yet fixed on her. She was beautiful. And as he swallowed a lump in his throat, he sprouted to his feet, jutting his hand for a shake. "I am Lloyd." He smiled, "Lloyd Bello, Nigerian."

Her palm was soft and her grip tender in one way that convinced him she'd be supple if . . . if he decided to push in on her. And as the tendrils of restriction pillowed on his conscience, the still small voice, he grappled with. Lloyd had never cheated on his wife before then. But he was no prude. Not just before he'd walked the aisle with Layo last two harmattans. Layo had gracefully braced him back into the faith. It was why he'd married her. And she'd stayed him till that very moment.

The moment Beverly walked into his life.

In the weeks that followed, Beverly had proved him right. She was supple. Fair-skinned with smoothed face, she wore a silk-screen long-sleeved prêt-à-porter folded roughly at its ends with a fitted blue jeans and thin strip of leather Rio de Janeiro for a belt with yellow Weejuns on her feet to match. It was the kind of freestyle fashion Lloyd had always admired. He loved ladies that kept it simple, pure, and . . .

"Xo ndoda! She could pass on for your temp any time, man," Vuzy had said that day to break their handshake. Lloyd had nodded absent-mindedly, smiling bashfully at himself.

Then Vuzy had said emphatically in Zulu, “Ayikho inkinga, umngani wami omuhle,” he said. “No problems my good friend. You like her? You’d sure have her. She’s got all the contacts you’ll need to suss out the competition here in South Africa.”

That was the part that skulked in

Lloyd. And so it was.

His triumph soon rose to the early awakening and realisation that if he was to continue with his toehold on the Brazilian brand, then he needed someone to help grow his contacts there in South Africa.

And Beverly Grills was that lady.

Besides, Beverly admired him too. He saw it in her eyes the next day when she walked into his office “just to say hi”.

She stared around the little office makeover, catching a glimpse of the framed photo of his wife and daughter on the wall. She turned full length in that direction and stared with adept keenness. “You married?” she asked, feeling the texture of the wooden frame, and Lloyd hesitated. He didn’t want to sound ditching like he never at least welcomed the advances of a mutual relationship.

She turned at him and ignored his horror. “She’s beautiful.”

Her voice was soothing and sincere. Truly, Layo was beauty from the ashes, and Lloyd had never failed one day to appreciate God for letting him find such a beautiful wife in the entire world. It was only one part of her he could blame, though.

Layo was not a teaser.

But that was never Beverly Grills. And although he couldn’t match her up with Eni Jacobs, Lloyd loved the way Beverly at least appreciated him. The way she brushed his arm during lunch breaks or while she laughed at his jokes.

The lunch dates came in regularly in the first two weeks, and in the third week, Lloyd had invited Beverly over for one of the youth meetings where she’d adapted with the pastors and had since become a consistent member. They spent time chatting after church hours and soon over drinks or dinner with co-workers.

It was when Vuzy Mikolhi left later in the spring of that year and Lloyd rose to the height of the brand director and Beverly his secretary that Lloyd realised that her presence around him was one he was sure to change his life drastically, forever.

Especially when they began to travel . . . together.

Lloyd wiped his cheeks, and memories of that very moment came to his mind. That very moment he was convinced that issues about his Christian faith were better left out of the corporate circle and his capers with Beverly put forward.

It was in the autumn of the year his marriage had barely clocked two years, and Lloyd's defence for the faith was yet brazen.

But when a more hideous issue had been raised and Lloyd had protested in defence of his faith, Beverly had hijacked him during the meeting. "You want to lose your job?"

"Hell, no!" he'd screeched. "I love my job, Bev. I's only—" Beverly had grabbed his mouth with her hand while Lloyd hassled her in that rather sucked-in tone. Beverly clenched his elbows and tucked him away into a corner from the celebrities that crashed into the boutique hotel of Giannini Clover in Brasilia.

"But you are gonna have to play it down here, Lloyd." Beverly's voice was beseeching. She peeked around him, identifying top-notch artistes and style executives who'd graced the occasion. "Lloyd, please?" she pleaded.

What had he done? Just a row with one of chief executive Nicole Frida's models, Luigo Rez Montgomery— the aged Brazilian rock musician from the Italian Florence Dashboard Confessionals, who wore a tight-fitted Levi's and a barely-there Brazilian flag shirt with a big tattoo on his chest. He'd asked Lloyd why he wasn't gaily dressed like himself, and Lloyd had chuckled in one unbelievable manner, saying it was just his style keeping it simple, and the man had taunted in return.

"Holy father of the Eucharistial," the man jeered, and Lloyd had levelled his gaze at him.

"Yes, but actually of the evangelical."

"What?" The man had paused. Flabbergasted. "Like a pastor? In the fashion world?"

Lloyd had been mute with a hangdog grin. He recalled that rather cynical look from Frida and the other men from across the table. But when the rock musician went back on the banter, anger had pumped through Lloyd in immediate conditioned response, giving the old man full load. Beverly bit her lower lip and quickly found a point out of the argument before pulling him into the corner. It was a social gathering and not a religious one. She'd made him understand that.

Lloyd had reasoned with Beverly and then came to a compromise. When the next issue of a serrated shoot on *the Pipoca Moderna* came the following day, Lloyd had lost his feet to state categorically that instead of holding forth on the issue of the magazine, this time he would rather let his silence and their unpiloted evaluation decide on its merit.

Beverly had congratulated his sense of indulgence.

They'd shared dinner that night by the hotel poolside and then went into the thrash gallery, which paid homage to the fab four.

Winning their spot for cover page of the magazine the following day, Beverly tipped him for the model as the brand's Man of the Year for grounding himself the previous night. Lloyd welcomed the idea with mixed feelings even as the rest of his crew cheered. They spent the couple of moments that followed in the musical section of the hotel, dressing up, teasing and laughing, and sharing sentiments of mutual admiration while Lloyd savoured the way she touched him as she kitted him with every detail of the outfit.

They talked on a whole lot of secular issues that night. Issues like his take on sex outside marriage. What if it were borne out of mutual admiration between both partners? A strong pull, yearning, and binding and harmless on his home? He mumbled and prevaricated till the end. But her expression, her demeanour, her eye contact that very moment signalled the rising passion of a teasing palette of want.

And so it was.

They went back into the hall and joined in the dance to the *kwaito*, and then they shared a double shot of local Madeira and as they staggered back to their rooms, not parting ways; he'd ended up in hers. And in the couple of minutes that followed, Lloyd was sure he'd lost the place of commitment not just to his wife but to the God he'd vowed his entirety. Even till this moment.

A tear slipped from his cheeks, and he cut it halfway.

Maybe he should have stayed with his brand and never thought of taking over the church. But Beverly had given him full lead. "We're all sinners after all, ain't we?" she asked in one terrifying tone. He'd shook his head, and she'd pushed him to that rear conviction that yes, in the end, no matter what his deepest convictions were on the issue, he could by some means dole them together, side by side.

There was a knock at the door. "Are you all right, Lloyd?"

He rushed up, wiping the tears from his eyes. “Yeah . . . yeah,” he mumbled, clearing his throat. “I’m fine, baby. I’ll be with you shortly.” He trudged in the direction of the tap, flipped it full open, and splashed water on his face. He drew a ragged breath. It was just how Beverly gripped him, right at the base of his heart like a dying ant on the throat swab of its victim. Gripping his entire being and holding him spellbound. He pulled his hand through his head and willed the tears in his eyes to stop. He’d done his very best to live right, stay right, act right. But his very nature was just not in consonance.

His libido. His sexual appeal.

And what had God got to do with it? Hadn’t he tried times and times to be free from these sexual immoralities? Where was God those moments? Hadn’t God put these feelings inside him in the first place? Why should he feel guilty then? He sighed. He was just acting the way he was meant to act from creation. Or wasn’t he?

He dried his face and tried to focus. He was in this now, and there was no need crying. God wasn’t interested in him after all, he could tell. Even though he was convinced somewhere deep down inside him that redemption was for his asking if only he’d humble himself and pray now.

Lloyd knocked off the thought. What was the use if he’d return to the same sin in the self same hour? he thought. And as the dreary night signalled the reluctant dawn over the blue skies, the only remedy he could see was scuttling on his escapades. Managing his weakness very well. Very well, he’d say. Nothing else. His mind drifted to Eni Jacobs. He’d done well to discipline her father back in Nigeria, but that was not enough. He was going to punish her for such an unscrupulous act.

Coming out boldly on the Internet to divulge their escapades.

He bit the inside of his tongue, and a plan came to his mind. If he was going to continue to retain his pride as the bishop of the ministry, then there was one more thing he must do. Something more destructive, one he was sure would shatter her life now and forever. The thought slithered into his heart and nibbled hot tears back at the base of his eyes.

He flung the tears even as more rolled on, pushing him to that sudden realisation that as much as he held such high-esteemed position in the church, his heart was now far away, torn, shattered, and blown away from God.

Blown away . . . like dandelion dusts.