# CHAPTER 11

It was ten in the morning. Madam Caro was in the VIP section of the resort putting finishing touches to the planned new site in India with her guests when her phone rang. She excused herself. They were all busy people who were well connected and she was not the first person to excuse herself to take a phone call that morning. No one complained. Whoever made the unwritten law that no one should make or receive calls during meetings was, in their eyes, a politician and not a businessman. Businessmen understood that some things cannot wait. She went to a different section of the room and studied the number on her ringing cell phone. It was not one she recognised. She answered reluctantly and suspiciously.

“Hi sweetheart,” an excited male voice said. “I told you I’ll be back.”

Her heart began to race. Not even a hundred years apart would have made her forget that commanding voice.

“You?!” she cried in anger, frustration, joy, and excitement.

“It’s me baby,” he said. “I’m back.”

“Where on earth have you been?” she asked. “Not even a call? Where are you?”

“I’m in town. Listen, we have to talk but not over the phone,” he said. “I will explain when I see you. Where are you?”

“How do you know I even want to see you?” she asked. “What if I’m married?”

He laughed.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Tell me where you are and I’ll be there.”

“How did you get my number?”

“Come on now, this is your old number. You never changed it. If I drop this phone you may never hear from me again. You want to give me an address or not?”

“I will send someone to pick you up,” she said. “I live out of town. There is no address.”

“That explains it,” he said. “Ikoyi hotel. Tell whoever is coming to call me when he gets to the lobby. I do not want anyone knowing I am in town. My life depends on it. Do you understand?”

“No, I don’t,” she said. “You still have not explained to me why you never called me all these years. You had my number and never lost it apparently.”

“I was in jail,” he said. “Wait till we meet and I will explain. You never know who is listening.”

“Do you know you have a son?”

There was silence on the other end. She could hear his breathing. Men!

“I have a son?” he asked eventually.

“Yes.”

“We have a lot to talk about. See you soon.”

She stared at the phone in her hand confused and happy. Suddenly she became self-conscious. She had been young and shapely when they had last met. Now she was fat and, in her eyes, not as pretty as she used to be. What would his reaction be when he saw her? One of disgust and revolt? She wondered if it was even wise to bring him there. She had a house in town that only those who were considered family and true friends knew about. Robert was the only one from the resort who knew about it just because someone had to run errands there. Perhaps it would be safer to take him there. She called Robert and gave him specific instructions on how to get to the Ikoyi hotel and what to do when he got there.

“Do not say a word about me when you get there,” she warned. “If he asks you any questions just tell him you do not know. Your duty is to drive me around and nothing else. If he asks what it is I do, tell him I am into wholesale importing and exporting.”

Robert nodded. She doubted his intelligence in such matters but had no alternative. She could not go herself with her Indian partners there and did not want the others knowing about her personal issues. As soon as he was gone she returned to the meeting. She found it hard to concentrate on what was being discussed. He had not asked about the money. She was torn in two. On the one hand, she wanted to believe he had some genuine reason for not calling her all those years. On the other hand, she had come to distrust men.

She would use the money as a leverage. If he was back because things had gone wrong in his life and he saw her as a mere old chic to run back to then he was mistaken. He would not get a dime of his money. On the other hand, she yearned the brief love they had shared together. For some reason, all her relationships had been a disaster because she compared all her experiences to the one brief mind blowing encounter she had had with him. Even her friends thought she was unrealistic and unfair to her subsequent lovers. If he had stuck around, she would not have rated him that highly, they say.

The meeting ended way past midday. It ended well and documents were signed that she did not bother to read. In their circles documents meant less than words. Matters were hardly settled in court and they all knew this. They would start work in a week. Once the building was completed she and her team would take over the running of the Indian business. International guests were the target, specifically the Chinese and the Saudis. They had already estimated the profit to be in the millions and had toasted and drank to that.

As soon as they left she called Robert and asked him to take her to her house as fast as he could drive. On the way, she wanted to know what he looked like and if he had asked any questions. He told her he was quiet throughout the drive from the hotel. The only question he asked was who he was to her. She smiled. The jealousy was good even though she thought it a bit demeaning that he would even assume she would date someone like Robert.

“What do you think of him?” she asked. She had considered the wisdom of this question to someone in Robert’s position but could not help herself.

He shrugged.

“He looks like a decent man,” he lied. “Is he your new man?”

“Mind your business!” she snapped. “And not a word of any of this to anyone.”

“Yes ma,” he said, his eyes on the road.

She was too engrossed in her own thoughts to realise he was in deep thought. He knew he had seen the face somewhere. There was something about the sharp eyes that was familiar. He just could not give up the thought. On her part, she toyed with the idea of calling him. She did not want to seem too excited. He was, after all, a man who had abandoned and ignored her for more than a decade. She was not supposed to go rushing back into his arms like he was coming back from some noble war in Iraq or Syria. Who had he dated all those years? Had he got married? Was he back because he was recently divorced? She had heard about how marriages in the diaspora never lasted and how the law meant a man could lose everything in a divorce.

She tried to tell herself that it did not matter. All that mattered was that the one man she had ever loved was back. She must not ruin her opportunity at rekindling what to her was true love. She would play the role of the angry and dejected lover but only briefly. She had come to know that playing hard to get was no longer as powerful as it used to be. Something mysterious was happening to the male species. It was possibly the fact that women had made themselves too readily available. She felt that women were becoming masculine and men feminine. She blamed the new trend in the romantic world on Hollywood and the porn industry. The mystery that used to be the female body had been blown wide open by cheap and immoral men and women who only knew about money and little else.

She tried to picture what he would look like. If he had been in jail, then he may look muscular. She would like that. She liked smart men who were fit and strong. A lot of the men she had dated had been weak. This was partly the reason she had dated them in the first place. They had thought their money was enough to win her over when all she wanted was their money. Many had been too eager to abandon their wives and children to be with her. Initially she had let them do that. Many had signed divorce papers only to find that she had absconded with a large chunk of their wealth. When she turned thirty she had a near death experience which frightened her. After the experience, she vowed never to date married men again. She believed a particular woman who had threatened her for cheating with her husband had been responsible for the accident that almost left her crippled. She had been in the hospital for over three months. That was when she gained a lot of weight, weight that she never had the motivation to lose.

She started dating younger men who were single. The fact that they found her attractive and preferred her to those closer to their own age group was a boost to her self-esteem. They gave various reasons for preferring her. Most believed the women of their time were self-centred, mannerless, lazy, and arrogant. She knew she was all that when she was younger. It was easy to be arrogant when you had beauty, youth, and a hundred men willing to die for you. The humility comes with the passing of time and the fading of beauty.

There was a time she used to make heads turn. Then she would wear the skimpiest of dresses and the highest of heels. She was one of the few with exceptional beauty and a great body to go with it and she had been unapologetic about it. Even some women envied her. Many wanted to be her friend. Unfortunately, she learnt not to trust women before she learnt not to trust men. It was a human problem.

When she first met Osun she immediately knew he was different from every man she had ever met. There was something in the way he looked at her that was unnerving and exciting at the same time. She described it to her friends as the look of a lion admiring a pretty deer. He exuded confidence.

She suspected from day one that he had criminal tendencies. He was always watching his environment as if he expected someone to jump him at any time. When they dined he never sat with his back to the entrance. She immediately suspected he was into something shady. At the time, he had a lot of money to spend. He had access to thousands of dollars at a time she considered herself lucky when a man gave her a hundred dollars. He talked like he knew exactly what he wanted in life. His sweet talking was mesmerising and she could listen to him all day even when she knew half of what he said was all made up nonsense.

Their relationship progressed quite quickly. Within a few days, they were as inseparable as siblings and knew most of each other’s secrets. It was his honesty to her even though he was not an honest person at all that won her over. She learnt from him that being a crook was like being a lawyer or an engineer. It was something you do and not who you are. He was a crook because he had to survive. When he handed her the money before his trip she had tears in her eyes not because of the money but because of the trust he had in her. She had pleaded with him not to go. She had seen men and women who went abroad thinking things would get better only to return years later broken and as poor as they were before they went. Home is where you get your respect. Once you are a foreigner in another land you are treated differently. They had enough money to start a genuine business and a family with.

He had his mind made up. He had gone too far to change his mind. He debunked all her arguments about home being the best place to be and gave the example of the kidnapped Chibok girls. The irresponsibility of the elite politicians who, in his eyes, were nothing but crooks, had reduced not just the country but the continent to a state of ruin and ridicule. He gave the example of the thousands of men, women, boys and girls who die every year trying to cross the Sahara or the sea to Europe. Desperation was something she had not experienced. Desperation was being without hope. It was desperation that drove thousands to make journeys that they knew could cost them their lives. When men and woman had come to a point of desperation, they would do whatever it would take to survive, including joining terror groups and gangs.

He did not like talking much about his childhood. It was locked away behind an impenetrable iron curtain that not even the best psychologist could reach. She suspected that somewhere behind that curtain was the key to unravelling his mind. There were times when he would sit down for hours smoking cigarette after cigarette or weed. During those times, it would seem as if a dark energy had come over him. Once it had passed he became his usual self again.

Her heart started beating faster as they drove through the gate. She looked at her face one last time in a mirror she had in her bag and retouched her makeup before exiting the car. She tried to walk casually even though she wished she could run.

He was in the sitting room watching Aljazeera news when she walked in. He stood and smiled at her. It was as if he had not aged at all. She forgot about her pride, self-esteem and all the hard questions she had prepared in her mind. Those would come later. She gave out a cry and rushed to hug him. They hugged tightly for what seemed like hours while she cried and shuddered.

“Look at you,” he said when he managed to disengage himself from her tight embrace. “Come, I have something to show you.”

“You have an accent now,” she said laughing.

“Inevitably,” he said as he led her to the sofa where they both sat down. “You still have that ring I gave you. Amazing.”

“What did you expect me to do with it?” she asked.

“I have a better one for you,” he said reaching into his pocket and producing a red box. He opened it. In it was the most magnificent diamond ring she had ever seen. “Hold out your hand.”

She tried to resist. He still had his way of talking to her as if she was his kid sister and expected no opposition. She was, after all, not that naïve young girl of years ago. She was a powerful and rich woman with dozens of employees.

“Don’t you think we should talk first?” she asked.

“How will the ring stop us from talking?” he asked. “Come on babe.”

She stretched out her left hand. It trembled as he slid the ring into her ring finger that was already crowded with rings. Her other hand was over her mouth in shocked excitement.

“Beautiful,” he said admiring the look of it on the finger. “Perfect. Now we can talk. By the way, do you have any drink in this house? I’m thirsty.”

“Beer?” she asked.

“Water will be just fine,” he said.

She wondered if he had undergone some New Age reformation as she went to fetch the water. From the look of the ring she could tell he had done quite well. He looked wealthy. He did not look like someone out of jail. She got some water from the refrigerator and returned with it. He drank like a camel in the desert and asked for more. This time she got a whole jug full of water and set it on the side table beside him.

“How was jail?” she asked. “You look too good to be coming from jail.”

“Jail was jail,” he said. “Nothing good about it except that you stay physically fit. Makes you tough mentally too. Finally started reading books. Found out they are not as bad as I used to think they were. Knowledge is power. I should have read more as a kid.”

“When are you going to answer my question?” she asked.

“Can we just enjoy the moment?” he asked a bit impatiently. “I know you have a lot of questions. I have a lot of questions too. We are going to talk. This is just not the right time.”

“When?”

“Tonight,” he said. “Come here.”

He tried to kiss her but she pulled away.

“It’s been ages,” she said. “The last time I let my heart lead me I ended up with a broken heart and a son who wants nothing to do with me. We need to talk.”

“Okay,” he said raising his hands in surrender. “Where’s my son?”

“We will get to that,” she said. “Let’s talk about you and I first. You cannot tell me they don’t have phones in jail. I need a good reason why you never called.”

Osun sighed.

“Do you have a smoke?”

“No.” she said. She had forgotten he was a chain smoker.

“I know this may sound funny but I was protecting you,” he said before taking another sip from his glass of water. “I knew they were monitoring my calls. I could not risk letting them know you. The people I am talking about have their tentacles everywhere, even here.”

“Which people?” she asked.

“You see why I said we should leave this for later?” he said. “It is a long story and for it to make any sense at all I have to start from the very beginning. There are still stuff too traumatic for me to talk about. Can we leave this for now?”

She could tell he was beginning to perspire and his breathing had got quite fast.

“Tonight,” she said. “You must take me to a very nice restaurant and date me all over again. I need to know that I still have a place in your heart.”

He nodded. There was a distant look in his eyes as if he was recalling some very frightening experience. She drew close to him and put her arms around him. He did not respond. He just sat there staring at the wall, a blank look on his face. She eventually disengaged. Her mind was as busy as his. It was not particularly the reunion she had hoped for. There were too many unknowns for her to settle right into his life or allow him back into hers. She was happy to see him and still felt like no other man ever made her feel when she was around him. Once he had cleared the air of every uncertainties she was sure they would have a wonderful time.

“Robert?!” she called.

He came into the living room. He had been standing outside and had overheard everything. He had also remembered who the mystery man was. He knew people who would pay good money for information regarding his whereabouts. He had already devised a plan that would solve his financial problems. He needed to be free to roam the earth once more. The people who wanted him dead may want their old foe dead even more. If he could trade his freedom for the information he knew they wanted more than anything else, then the biggest nightmare of his life may not be as impossible to resolve as he had imagined. All his plans involved running away from the country and never coming back. He knew the plan could have serious implications when he started having kids. Home would always be home.

“Why are you staring at him like that?” she asked. “You like to embarrass yourself all the time. Go to that Calabar restaurant and get us some garri and afang soup. Hurry up.”

“Yes ma,” he said and left.

“I hope you still remember Mama Calabar?” she asked.

“She still alive?”

“Very much alive and her restaurant is still there,” she said.

He smiled as he remembered how they used to have their lunch there. His favourite was her vegetable soup. It was a delicacy that brought the wealthy from even other states.

“I have asked my driver to get us some food from there,” she said. “Your favourite.”

“You really know the way to a man’s heart,” he said.

“I try to teach these young girls of today,” she said boastfully. “They think it’s about going to the gymnasium and starving to death to maintain an impossible figure. They don’t even bother to ask the men they claim to be doing all that for what they really want.”

“A man’s heart is through his belly,” he said resuming his usual jovial attitude.

“I’ll give you some good massage once we are done eating. I’m sure your flight was stressful.”

“Muscles do ache,” he said. She had no idea he had been in the country longer than he was telling. “I’m really gonna need that massage.”

“Do me a favour and lose that accent,” she said grimacing. “You are back home now.”

“I’ll try,” he said grinning.

“I’ll go take a bath,” she said standing. “Feel at home.”

“I am at home,” he said.

She found herself humming to herself as she went, something she had not done in years. He observed her behind for some time, leaned back to rest his head on the sofa, closed his eyes and smiled. He had not felt this relaxed in a long time. He wondered what life would have been like if he had remained and married her.

Ever since he left the country he had never felt relaxed. There was always some issue that needed to be tackled. It had been one problem after another. Sometimes he believed karma was paying him back for what he did to his friends. Being abducted and tortured was the last straw that broke his back. He still had flashbacks of the most horrific moments. He wanted nothing short of revenge on the culprits but first he must bide his time and do their bidding.

Life in the west was wild and free. They had freed themselves from the shackles of culture and religion and were led by the pleasures of the flesh with no restriction whatsoever. Even he found the feeling strange at first. He eventually unshackled himself. He dated any girl who caught his eye. She was far from his mind while it lasted. The night life was surreal. Nothing was taboo and he wondered why some extremists believed they were a Christian nation.

He hooked up with a bunch of crooks who dealt drugs and any contraband that was in high demand. They lived life on the edge knowing that death or prison could come at any time. It was the thrill of his life while it lasted. He was always high on adrenaline or some other drug. There was no dull moment with them and the cash and the women flowed like a wild river. Something kept telling him it would all end badly. He tried to dismiss the inner voice as the remnants of his conscience, a conscience hard wired on a culture that believed in reward and punishment for deeds done. If his conscience had been as loud as a sonic boom while in Africa, it was a mere whisper in comparison in the states.

When it ended, it was abrupt. He was sleeping on his couch after another typical night of hard partying and booze when some evil looking men barged into his home. What seemed like a hundred flashlights almost blinded him. His hands were tied and he was led into a waiting car. Thinking they were cops, he knew jail was inevitable.

“Do you want to join me?” she asked from the shower.

“I’m too tired,” he lied.

“Remember how we used to shower together back in the day?” she asked.

“Those were good old days,” he said nonchalantly.

“We still here,” she said. “There’s time to revisit the good old days.”

He did not reply this time. He was thinking of the best way to approach the issue of his money. He needed it badly. The diamond ring she was wearing was stolen property. It was marked which meant there was no way it could be sold. The last thing he wanted was for her to think he was only back in her life because of it. If he had come to learn one important fact it was that women were no fools and do not like being taken for a ride.