

# **Survival: Lost & Panic On The Streets**

*Book 1*

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# Introduction

If only we read about the Good Samaritan from the Holy Scriptures or read about countless humans who have, at one chronological dispensation saved a situation or an individual from the jaws of death, perhaps another life could have been saved on a daily basis. Perhaps another death could have been averted. Perhaps another pyre could have been saved till another day or dismantled and possibly never needed except for firewood.

The disturbing matter is no one wants to be in the news for one reason or the other. No one wants to shoulder another human's obvious responsibility while theirs is left unmanaged. No one desires to help the needy that languish in abject poverty around them. No one wishes to save a life if it is likely to endanger theirs. The truism remains incontrovertible: every human lives for themselves, every soul desires to fatten themselves and virtually no one puts the philoxenia of others before their personal comfort. By this 'philoxenia' I mean 'hospitality'. (And that is what I have just done: refusal to consider the layman who picks up this book, by intention or accident, to read!)

But as self-centred as the human species is, there are some characters that go overboard with their behavioural inclinations to trudge on other humans' life. The definitions and exercise of human rights may differ all over the world but whatever messages and warnings the majority of those rights preach are incontestably meant to be regarded as

supreme. The flouting of any, deliberate and inadvertent, must be considered criminal for it is an encroachment on another human's ability to life as they so choose.

Many of these violators then seek to 'cop a plea' their way out of the mess they had got themselves to in the first place as if they were not in their rightest frame of mind when they committed the act against their fellow.

The questions that comes to mind whenever another death is logged in by a 911 call or a case is reported is: *"Are there no more heroes that could save the day? Is there no human that could come a rescuing when no solutions seems proffered?"*

This inimical street behaviour sets off an alarm in the minds of those few left, who call themselves human rights activists that there is yet a lot left undone on the streets. Not all of us need a superhuman character to swoop in in their hideous cape or fanciful garb to rescue us from the gripping mandibles of the Grim Reaper. Not all of us are powerless to circumscribe a disaster. In fact, only a few are professionally equipped to come a saving when the need arises. But that does not stop the adrenaline of humanity that courses through us to kick in, spur us into a viable action and curb a dastardly act when the occasion demands.

After all, we are first humans before we began to attach the needless differences to ourselves. We are first humans before the slurs and discriminations set in. We are first beings of flesh and blood before many other insignificant things set us apart.

It is a fact that every man by default is selfish. And it takes extra cautiousness to keep that derisive characteristic at bay. One can only succeed for so long a time before it comes rearing its head again. Those who have attained a level of altruism augur that it is

no mere feat for every one of them battles that demon daily. And to think of others ahead of yourself portends that you are by no mean feat extra-human and definitely humane.

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## **Chapter 1: SINS OF THE PRESENT**

The scene that many people on Knick Avenue woke up to today was not pretty. Gory was an anticlimactic understatement. The daily hustle and bustle on the sidewalks had just begun to take shape. Road users hurried on foot to open their shops ahead of their competitors, the thoughts of making a reasonable buck than yesterday on their minds. Others who worked in big offices.

The sun was just creeping out of the plainly-colored crevice of the sky, bringing with it a champagne-white brightness that a few vagrants who tucked themselves behind stationary garbage trucks could not help but stare at with a smile. They were held transfixed by the sun's rays' trajectory as it beamed innocuously at them from the firmaments. They parted their lips and a smirk graced their cheeks. Not that it mattered to them. They were just glad to be alive to see the dawn of a new day in all its glory, although they expected not much from what the day has to offer them.

Vehicles of various makes trudged on the tarred roads. Their horns blared noisily. A traffic gridlock was right ahead, just about a hundred meters long. No one knew what the cause of the commotion ahead was and those who needed to get into the comfort of their offices had begun to feel tensed up. A few stepped out of their vehicles eager to discover what the issue was.



At that moment, a rickety car, drove into the thick of the congestion. The smoke from its silencer left the atmosphere shrouded in a firmament of thick smog. Those who were quite distanced from the location did their best to rein in their feelings. The toxic gas sidled insidiously into waiting nostrils. Those hit worst by the air pollutant cursed under their breath wishing they had left home earlier than they had.

But the oblivious sun glided happily through the clouds, insouciant of the events that unfolded down below. It glimmered on the roads, ricocheting on to the windcreens of the varying automobiles that puffed angrily as if competing in a track race. The sunshine's impact left a few drivers visually impaired as the throng of cars eased off on the roads lazily.

Madeleine was in one of the cars held up in the traffic jam and she swore under her breath. She was definitely in a state of discomfort. She glanced back hastily every chance she got, wary of her environment. Who would not be after having lost their job and had escaped luckily with their life concurrently the same moment when they had come to be in the know of what should have remained clandestine.

She had considered getting out of the taxi just to escape the peering eyes who seemed to take a bewildered liking to her appearance. She appeared disheveled and unkempt. Her hair strands were out of their locks and their tentacles swept across her face as the breeze teased them. Her make-up had become smeary. Her

lips bled and there was a reddish protrusion on her forehead that looked as if it was going to burst from the slightest of contact.

She was completely frazzled and her back ached for she had had to run without a breath for almost an hour, hoping she had lost her pursuers in the throng of heads that filled Blake Street. Her breath was shallow. Her eyes bulgy and swollen, she definitely had not had a good sleep, if she had even had time to sleep at all. Eye bags rocked her eye sockets and they gave her already lunatic a whole new caricature.

Yesterday was an already bad day for her and things might even get egregious at the moment if the cabbie does not conjure a magic to make her disappear from her current location, away from the duo who according to her thoughts might show up from anywhere anytime soon. She had only managed to evade a capture yesterday and things might worsen today if a deus ex machina does not come calling sooner.

Madeleine loved her job. She was an ergophile and a facsimile of diligence. Her hyper-maniac attitude and fastidiousness towards her employment made her workmates painstakingly abhor her. Where they lacked passion, she had obsession and a crazed love for whatever she did. She had no choice. After all, her job brought food to the table, constantly and insofar as that remained consistent, there should be nothing depriving her the immediate enjoyment she got from her work and consequently the quota she puts into the success of the system that had

believed in her in return. It appears her seven-month old fanatical devotion to her duties at Johnsons Firms and Companies might, according to all indications, might cost her an invaluable gift: her life.

Just last evening she had got ready to close for work and return to her one-room apartment which she occupied on the third floor of McHenricks Buildings. But her inquisition had been piqued when she had heard troubling noise emanating from her boss's area of the capacious hall. The hall doubled as her personal cubicle to welcome guests and delay them till her boss either sends for them or demand they may sent away; it also serves the purpose of a gallery where conferences are held.

Fearing her boss, Mr Donald, a stout bespectacled middle-aged man of fifty-seven was endangered, she had rushed out of her domain and made straight into the confines of the usually temperate man only for her to see a different episode unfolding in his office. She had walked in on him unannounced when she was supposed to have knocked as customary of a visitor. But her fright for his safety and concern for his well-being had made her react otherwise.

Her intrusion had caught him unawares but that had barely infringed upon what he had tasked himself with. He had a young man in a supine position and he was thumping away at him with all the strength she could muster as if he was his practice punching bag. She had caught him taking the life of a young man, a little over twenty with his bare hands. She had had to run for dear life when her boss

had caught whiff of her presence at the door. Their eyes met. Her boss was dazed and she was transfixed.

“Seize her!” Thundered the short, fat and baldy man who also had a potbelly to complete his laughable silhouette.

He was addressing the two men who stood with folded arms, seeming to enjoy as their boss rained hefty blows on the man beneath him. He had shown no soupcon of remorse and cared only for her life.

Madeleine was too awestruck to move and her boss’ men were almost upon her before she regained control of herself from the wave of shock and unbelief that had struck her dead for a second. The barrage of slugs left the poor man bloodied. His breath also was raspy. She darted away instinctively unable to down what his boss was about to carry out.

As she took to her heels, she looked back only to find that the two men were hot on her tail. She quickened her pace and they doubled up too. She knew the pair of stilettos she had on would impede her movement as she sought to lose them or lose her precious un-lived life. With hastened celerity, she disarmed her feet of them and felt a temporary rush of relief course through her as she made her way down the spirals of stairs, definitely ahead of the hefty men who were after her. She broke into a run and they mimicked her, hoping to cut her off before she got to the main exit, ten blocks down.

She knew a miscalculation would without delay cause her the essence of her life. And even if her current living situation was not what she would ever have hoped for, being sent to meet her creator in the wake of a day's closing hours was not in her books.

*At least not today*, she thought as she sprinted through the hall and made for the spiral of stairs that linked the floor to the min exit.

She hesitated as she was about to round the lengthy flight of stairs to begin her rapid descent. She halted and reconsidered her choice of escape route. A new idea guttered through her mind. It was at that instant that she saw the elevator lights flicker on suggesting someone or a group of people were coming to the floor.

“Perhaps I should use the elevator! That’d be quicker! But...” she paused to reconsider her stand for she knew before the elevator stopped, opened and continued its downward journey to the egress, her hunters would have caught up with her and the rest would be history.

*What if her boss had called for more help from the reception and more security personnel were on their way up to apprehend her?* She could not think straight.

Different thoughts inundated her mind just as a wave of renewed trepidation swept through her for she knew what she could guess what kind of fate awaited her if she were to be caught.

*No, the stairs it is!* She decided eventually.

Without a rethink, she zoomed off as fast as her legs would carry her. Her alacritous move almost made her run into the coarse precipice of the malachite door carving before her.

People cleared the way for her as she approached. To say they were shocked to see a woman sprint past them like a hunted gazelle in broad daylight in a multipurpose hall was an understatement. Many thought she was a brigand who had come to pilfer the building and had been caught in the act. A few believed her life must be in danger thus they made way for her as she darted towards them. Many an individual thought she was acting or she was a runner who was training for difficult landscape. Whatever they all thought, no one in their right senses dared stop her.

Madeleine was a fairly corpulent woman. She was also in her early thirties. But she was a fine sprinter. When she was younger, she had had to convince the sprint coach of the female team she was up to the task of representing her college in the state finals after having dislocated her ankle in the preliminaries. But she was tenacious and would never back down no matter how precipitous the situation looked. She had doubled her work rate while her mates, mostly white made jest of her and wished openly that she never made the final list. Despite their antagonistic attitude, she was nonpareil in all ramifications. She was not only studious, easy-going but she was also an epitome of discipline. She was virtually a no-nonsense being who worked hard for whatever it is she deserved and harder for what she desired.

One of the trainers, Miss Courtney, a finely cut young white lady, had taken pity on her seeing how she worked day and night to impress and make the cut against all odds. She volunteered to train her to the delight of the out-favored young girl and the displeasure of the others, coaches and sprinters alike.

The day finally came for the elimination rounds and it was not long before Madeleine registered her name in the annals of her school. She eventually went on to claim the trophy in the grand finale a month after, not only bringing honour to herself but to her school as well. The institution had had no choice but to award her a full scholarship, much more than a girl of her age would have merited.

But that was then, now she had a more challenging situation before her. Her head was on the bloc and the executioner's razor-sharp blade dangled pendulously overhead, ready to drop and have her head dance to the rhythm of the underworld for the first and last time.

Madeleine was a lanky lady when she was at the peak of her sporting career even though that had got her wagging tongues from both men and women, especially those who wished to court her. Men fled from her for she lacked her feminine shapes where necessary. Despite she was fully fledged, her mammary glands could not pass for that of a twelve-year old. And her rear was flat like a valley's. If not for her feminine voice, her once-in-a-blue moon make-over as well as her ear-piercings, many could have without a doubt mistake him for a male.

However she is now much sexy and delectable as far as the word appears acceptable to a man. She has become curvaceous and can easily be said she is large-breasted. Her legs remained long and she yet maintained her towering

height which some of her dates found intimidating. But she had only recently gained a bit of a weight after giving up the sport entirely, settling for a white collar job and garnering enough rest under her belt as much as could, when work stands not in her way.

She had had no choice but to abandon her much-loved sport. No one wanted her on their team for she was a record breaker and a setter as well. She was black, bold and beautiful and those who misconstrued her felt her browbeating.

The truth be told, not many of her colour made it that far in life before succumbing to the vicissitudes of life or the slurs they have had to be subjected to since they had had their first cry. She radiated of confidence and every sports team saw her as a threat to their underperforming crop of white runners. But hers was a world of mixed feelings. The more she desired to be left alone, the more trouble sought her out in her most confined spaces.

The automatic doors opened as she made contact with them bearing her into the thick of the street noise. Throngs of vehicles conveying people back to their different homes from their places of work plied the roads.

As she stepped foot outside the building, Madeleine felt a wave of ease slap her in the face. Fresh air billowed in her face and she thought for a minute that she was safe. The beads of sweat that had humidified her tight-fitted clothes temporarily dried off as the air coursed through her woolen top, relieving the most hidden of places on her body of their accumulated dampness.

Just as she began to take a breath, she heard a ringing noise, that of a gun. And as she swarmed round to check what was amiss, she felt a bullet whizz past her,



hitting the windscreen of a stationary minivan. That shattered instantly, shards of broken glass flung in the air roundabout her. The impact made her lose her balance for a second. She staggered backwards and crouched, dazed at how the two men had not given up and how they had brazenly shot at her in public.

“Stop her!” the fatter of the men hurled after her as people scuttled for safety. The other one who had taken the shot re-aimed his pistol for her middle and was about to let the trigger fly. She darted to her right and almost fell headlong.

She avoided a head-on collision with a corpulent middle-aged woman walking her dog past the entrance of the building. She could not mutter a ‘sorry’ as the woman hurled an imprecation after her. Without looking out for any oncoming car, she ran into the middle of the road. She still held on to her purse and tried feeling for her phone as a ‘cry-for-help thought’ came into her mind even as she scurried off into the dead of the night.

She prayed to run into a parked patrol vehicle. Worst still, most of the patrol policemen avoided these slums. Whenever they do, they always had their hands full with a lot of varying cases. High on the list is the group of those refusing arrest while those who engaged in small fights were not far off.

The day’s glint was fast wearing off. It would soon shed its bright skin totally and don the garb of the night. She knew she was not supposed to be out of the safety of her home by this time of the day for she knew the night is always filled with different terrors and a lot of unpredictable figures miche about, looking for whom to burgle.

She recalled her aunt had warned her against staying out late. She had even scolded her for having returned later than expected from a prom night, aged fifteen. Not that she made a habit of turning up at their doorsteps late. She was the prompt type. But she had decided to stay a bit late with Jack since her friends had also refused to leave the company of their boyfriends.

When she was returning home that night, a gang of louts had waylaid Jack and her to play a prank on them. The lovebirds were oblivious of the jeopardy that lay in wait for them. They held hands and kissed intermittently. Madeleine laughed at his jokes even though she was wary her aunt would berate her for coming late. Their assailants picked a wrong spot however since they had only schemed to scare the two off.

As Madeleine's home rose into view, about ten blocks away, the young men jumped out of hiding to prevent Jack and her from going any further.

"Hey nigga. Whatcha got in your hands. That's a pretty little ass!" One of them, tallest than the rest and assuming the airs of the leader of the team said, referring to Madeleine. Their plan would take another shape when Jack had tried putting up a fight. "Excuse me, asshole! Watch your mouth. That's my girl you're referring to, stupid!"

"Who you talking to in that tone, nigga? You've got some spirit in that chest of yours. Haven't ya?" Another thundered, with leery eyes, moving nearer to the couple and poking Jack in the chest.

All this while, Madeleine cowered behind Jack at his behest. But she knew if she did not step in, things might go awry faster than anyone of them would have precipitated. “Guys, we want no trouble. Mind not his tone, please. I’m sorry. If you’re kind enough to let us pass, we shall be on our merry way before you flicker your eyes.”

“Whew!” the leader whistled. “This girl’s got some brains on her unlike this ninny beside ya!” The other boys laughed at the insult and edged closer to the duo.

“Well, what we have got here!” He said, sizing up Madeleine with his hungry eyes. As he made to cup Madeleine’s rear, Jack hit out at him, the punch caught him in his middle and that sent him sprawling on the floor. Dazed, the others looked on, scared to advance on the audacious boy or retreat for dear life.

“Y’all crazy! Whatcha all looking at! Pounce on them!” He said from the ground, unable to get up. The others made to attack Jack but Madeleine stepped in between them. She reached out with her fist, catching the nearest of the advancing group on his mouth. The lip burst on impact and he took to his heels cursing her as he retreated into the cover of the night.

Jack was entangled with another who appeared a bit bigger than himself and was not advantaged to come out on top. The leader got up and drew a pocket knife. He lunged at Madeleine who backed away having sighted the weapon in his hand. “You’re dead gal! I’m gonna kill ya and your silly boyfriend!” He shouted in a pseudo-husky voice and made to stab her. She dodged the blade but she was not reactionary enough for the tip caught her upper arm, cleaning cutting through her sleeve and her flesh.

Fear leapt to the boy's face as he envisaged the red fluid pump from a serrated vein. He backed away, meaning no more intent of attack on her, content he had inflicted an injury on her but frightened at the sight of the blood. Crude pain seared through her as blood trickled from the wound down her arm. She recoiled and kicked as hard as she could with her leg, not minding the blood that flowed from the blade's nick. The kick caught the retreating boy on his cheek and he was back on his side, on the ground, again. Madeleine was upon him in no instant, kicking him, with all her strength, as much as she felt the pain in her arm. He pinned him under her tiny frame. She held his arms behind him, a death-gripped anger plastered her face. The boy's face had become blood-stained and the erstwhile vigour with which he had attacked her had fled him.

Jack's attacker seeing what Madeleine was making of his mate, wriggled free of Jack's hold and ran off into the canopy of darkness like a revived deer, recently rescued from a lion's mauling. Jack was scared of what Madeleine was doing and he wondered what could have enraged her so much that she would not stop. It was as if she had been possessed. He was shocked and he knew he had to do something or she could commit a homicide. "Madeleine, stop! You'd kill him!" He hollered. She still continued. He dashed to her side and pushed her off the battered boy. She gave him a homicidal look but under that veil, lay a smirk of gratitude for she herself knew her action was getting out of hand. The boy scampered to his feet, his face all swollen. He eructed blood and spat it out in

Madeleine's direction before hurrying off, tracing his departed comrades with the little energy he had left in his bones.

Madeleine made a move as if to chase after them but Jack restrained her. "Stop, they already had their fill of what was coming for them." As they trudged back to her residence in reticence, Jack could not but replay the episode in his head. He recaptured how Madeleine had downed two of their assailants with two quick kicks, one with her hand and the other with her smooth right leg. The scene would not fade away and he knew he had to be wary of Madeleine's temperament.

Madeleine on the other hand was scared of what she was becoming. She had been bullied from a tender age and had been forced to develop a thick skin against any form of abuse. For she knew if no one would come to her aid, she needed to step into the big shoes of a protector and shield herself from any form of violence directed at her. But she knew that was the end of her relationship with Jack. They had only recently got together but having seen how terrified he had become when he saw her on the young boy, she knew that was bound to be the last straw for the neo-assumed relationship.

Madeleine did not have time to ponder what lay ahead of her. She bolted into the traffic, mindless of her safety. Oncoming tyres screeched as they grazed on the surface of the tarred roads to a grinding halt almost hitting the deranged woman who was stupid enough to run into the middle of the road in the thick of passing vehicles. The pair of pants she had on made it easier for her to sprint over the cars who hooted angrily and shouted after her. She darted over one car and another as

if she had been prepared for this moment. No one would have believed she had been engaged in any energy-draining work all day. She tore through the crowd of cars as if they were not there. She could not reach for her phone and as she rummaged through her purse to retrieve it, the piece of technology fell into a drainage that definitely led into a sewer. She was engorged with rage. She ditched the purse for she knew carrying it along would only slow her down.

Luckily for her, her boss' block of office was domiciled in a ghettoized region. The area has been quarantined off a long time ago, not for closure from any epidemic but to restrict the blacks to a certain locale. It had worked then and now, blacks capitalised on the environment to carry out their illegal activities.

The enclave may come in handy for her on this occasion, especially if any roaming group saw she was being chased down by two men. For she had wormed her way into the nearest boondocks hoping she would be safe from the enraged pair who were hot on her heels. She was surprised how they had not been stressed out for the past hour that they had been sent after her. She guessed they were out for her blood and would not desist until they were certain she was riddled with bullets.

She looked about her but could no longer see the pair. She guessed she must have lost them as she rounded the bend into the black-populated zone.

## **Chapter 2: THE ROCK AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA**

The young moon coursed through the sky, naïve and ecstatic to show off her full appearance to all who cared to spare a gaze at her beautiful sight. It serenaded the throng of nocturnal creatures with its usual notes of elevated nocturnes, ensnaring them in its youthful energy. And while most were glad with the arrival of the night, even under different reasons, ostensible or genuine, Madeleine was not at peace. She acted agitatedly. Reacting to every sound she heard. A screech or a laugh made her jumpy and whenever strange lights flickered her way from any unknown source, she tucked herself behind or beneath the nearest dung alcove.

She saw a group of individuals clad in ragged overalls warming themselves with a huge lit can. Two of them looked a bit older while the others appeared to be teenagers. She felt a bit relieved. “They wouldn’t be foolish enough to track me down here let alone shoot at this lot of vagrants.” She said to herself. But then she remembered that teeming heads had not prevented them from shooting at her earlier and the darkness would provide them with the best cover to carry out their single shady quest: ending her young life!

She edged closer to the standing but tacit lot. She prayed they were not a group of knaves and she also hoped they would not regard her as a laggard. For that might not bode well for her. However as conscious of herself as she seemed, her

presence did not seem to rattle them. They only continued their task in silence. Either they were totally engrossed in the act or they only decided to ignore her eluded her. She did not mind for that was not her business and relating with strangers was not her strong suit as well. She stared into the enlivened fire, free, dancing and oblivious of the danger it posed to her if she were to be traced down here by her assailants. She knew the light would quickly give her away. And yet, there was something picaresque about its glows that enamoured her.

She ignored the fire for a second and focused on her surroundings as well as its occupants. She contemplated whether or not to engage them in a conversation. She decided against it for it would be unwise as she does not know any of them. Not that she prayed she did anyways. She could not place if they were all men, women or if they were mixed. What struck her about them was the way they stood round the fire, unruffled, fixated at its amorphous tentacles. One could easily think they were in a séance based on their uniformed taciturnity. And even though their present living conditions were a mile from being idyllic, it served the purpose of accommodation at the moment. It was littered with mounds of garbage and the air was filled with a rancid smell. She could not trace its source and so decided to deal with it.

The fire razed into the sky from the large can but the darkness hid their faces. Their shadows formed frightening figures on the adjoining walls of the dilapidated building. They appeared *dégagé*. So she left them to themselves. She looked at herself and knew without hesitation that she was out of place. She



convinced herself it would do her predicament a world of good if she tried to blend in. So she found a secluded corner where she quickly tore off a part of her pants, revealing her beautiful and smooth thigh skin.

She untangled her hair strands and covered her head with the piece of clothing she had ripped off her pants. Next, she found a pile of dirt and scoured some off with which she rubbed her arms and legs with some of it. She also tampered with her facial makeup, smearing it up in the process. The rouge she had painted on her cheeks and lips was giving her a tough time coming off as she was supposed to have washed it off with lukewarm water. That was nowhere to be found and her hosts did not seem interested in anything about her. So, she scrubbed at her cheeks and lips till they turned pink, soft and began to hurt her. She would not stop till she was convinced she had lost the wreath of spark that adorned her earlier this morning. So she scrubbed at herself with rigor. That was what she had wanted. Feeling satisfied with herself, she returned to the group surrounding the fire to warm her chilly itching fingers.

One of them made room for her as if to welcome her as one of theirs. She muttered a 'thank you' to which she received no response and quickly rubbed her palms against each other as the heat began to warm her blood. Another provided her with a polyester material, wide enough to fit her frame should she desire to get some sleep. She wondered how they knew she was not part of them but their xenophilic hospitality amazed her.

'Thank you so much'. She uttered loudly to the outstretched hand that had presented her with the warm sheeting, drawing the attention of the others to herself. A few raised their heads in her direction. She smiled at them but none of them returned her gesture. They only bowed their heads and continued to warm themselves as if observing a sacred ritual. She observed the one who had presented her with the material was wearing a monocle with a string holding the glass in place across the other eye. "Mind your business, Madeleine". She muttered to herself, definitely getting the message that they wished to be left undisturbed. She could not be too grateful that they had provided her with a makeshift shelter to pass the night, and possibly escape a looming death. So she kept mute and took in the music of the blazing fire.

Soon, she sensed that her body had begun to ache, sending spasms of jaw-wrenching pains through her brain and forth. Every part of her was in abject discomfort. Even though she made it a habit of jogging every morning before going to work and her body was forced to acclimatize to the daily routine of exercises she put it through, what she had had to go through the past few hours was more than a fiddle could withstand. If she was not fit, she would have been taken down since. If she was lucky enough, she could still be drawing breath by now. If not... She didn't allow herself conjure up the feeling so she closed her eyes to obliterate the thought that gathered in her head.

The jolts of pain were excruciating and unbearable. She sat on a mound to examine herself and measure up the damage she had indicated upon herself

during the course of her unplanned sprinting. She rubbed at her now exposed arms and traced the line of scar that formed a special dark spot on her alabaster skin. She shuddered remembering how she had got it from a fight she had had to defend herself. She rubbed at her ankles and soles for they hurt the most having been faithful enough to bear her weight for the latter part of the day whilst she fled. She knew that was the price she had had to pay to save her life. And if that would be enough to make her see the dawn of another day, then her efforts were worth it and the pains would not be for nothing.

She wondered what could have happened if she had tried to brace a fight with the men. She knew she could handle a good portion of a challenge insofar as the odds were even. "Not in this case. You'd have terribly lost, Madeleine and by now your cold stiff cadaver might be either in a dumpster, if you're unlucky or tucked away in some unregistered morgue." She knew she might be able to handle one of them in a fair fight but two hefty men, no, she would dare not challenge. Not even when she would be bringing her fists to a gun fight. She would have hit the ground faster than she would have imagined when the first two bullets perforated her.

She sighed wishing life treated her better than what she was experiencing at the moment. She rubbed her nape which appeared too stiff to yield to her neck exercise. She stretched her shoulders and flexed her arms, hoping the pains would subside as soon as possible. She yawned and knew it was high time she slept. She looked around her, finding a perfect spot to lay her head. She saw none so she waited for the people rounding the fire to disperse so she could get herself tucked in their midst.

Luckily for her, no sooner had she wished they would disperse than they began to leave the fire space one after the other. She saw them begin to retreat to a corner, almost cleared of rubble and garbage. Each of them lay down and warped themselves with a thick polyester material. The material swallowed them whole and they all could have been mistaken for a large pile of dirt if not for the constant tugging at the material. Once she saw that they had all deserted the fire, she followed suit and found a space amongst them. She tucked herself in the material she had been given earlier and made to get some sleep.

As she settled down to rest desiring a placebo to ease her current pain, she traced the moon's journey in the sky above with her eyes under the cover of the material and wished she had enough freedom to waltz around just like the free moon. Calm enough to process some thinking, her mind suddenly frittered to the events of the day. She went over the eventualities of her day one after the other, with a view to checking out where she had made a mistake and possibly blocking it away from her memory. First, she wished she had not stayed a minute longer than she had been requisitioned to even though she had found the idea of deserting work before normal closing time not only repudiatory but also repugnant. She also wished she had accepted the offer of Jamie, her colleague who had propositioned her earlier on a date and had asked that he waited while she cleared her desk so he could take her out to dinner.

She regretted her decision to check on her boss when she did. If only she had foreseen that by doing so, her day and extensively her life would upended, she would have stood her ground where she was, she would have blocked out the noises that unsettled him and perhaps she would have been home by now, slumped in her wide settee on her balcony overlooking the busy streets, sipping hot coffee, and reclining. She could have slept off by now, she could have forgot all about her day by now as she could have been halfway into dreamland.

Tears welled up in her eyes and she began to cry silently unwary of her overt position. A grunt and a kick came her way nudging her to keep quiet. She complied. She quickly wiped her face for fear of unsettling her over-welcoming hosts. Intermittent sobs replaced her crying as she reviewed how she had ended up here, too far away from home, in a less copacetic area, sepulchred beneath the depraved of the society and sandwiched between the homeless.

“It’s gonna be alright, Madeleine. It’s gonna be alright. Just relax and get some sleep. You’d soon be outta here.” She soliloquised.

She wondered how she had never minded the crop of degenerates that slept about her now. All she wanted and appeared to have got was a roof over her head, away from the pursuing duo and if this could serve as a temporary saving abode, she would gladly pass the night there. After all, these were individuals who slept every passing day and woke daily to be about their businesses even if there was no hope of real survival for them. She was moved by their unspoken generosity. She hoped to see the light of the new day for she promised herself that she would return here

to show them her gratitude if she scales through her present unfavourable circumstance unscathed.

She sensed her stomach rumble but she knew she would have to contain her hunger. Even if she would not, there were no victuals around and she definitely suffered from an evanescent state of ageusia. Whenever she was apprehensive, she hardly had appetite for food. She might however gulp down a whole litre of water as that would not only serve as a hydrant, but it would also calm her nerves while she worked through her situation. Getting out of this quandary was her desire and she could not even discard the nibbling thought of becoming a recluse if push comes to shove.

Before long, she had become fast asleep even though her mind yet worried over her safety. Even though she felt a bit at home here, her environment was far from being enabling which posits that she might still be in harm's way. No longer from her chasers by now from her hosts. She suddenly had to become wary of her half naked body and different thoughts flocked through her mind. She prayed they were not rapists for they would easily overpower her and have their way. She definitely might try to put up a fight but that would not help. Crying for help would not do as well for no assistance could come her way here no matter how loud she called.

Unknown to her, those who welcomed her amidst them were a family of displaced immigrants who had had to make do with the austere living conditions of the

ghetto. They had fled their panache lifestyle, leaving behind their wealth and properties after an attempt was made on their lives as a whole.

### **Chapter 3: DEADLY FATE**

Meanwhile, the two armed men Donald had sent after Madeleine had lost when they had believed they had her cornered and pushed to a wall. They had eased up their chase, confident in themselves that they had had a comfortable catch. They were ecstatic for they knew their boss would have them to a special treat. They knew they could not afford to return without the main prize: Madeleine's life.

They had to return to their boss after what seemed to have been a frantic but futile search for that young stubborn lady. They knew Mr Donald would never take 'no' or 'we failed' as an answer but they still went back to him.

"You what!" He bellowed, her eyes protruded as if they would escape the embrace of their sockets when they returned empty handed bearing a sordid tale of how they had been given the slip around a corner. "You lost a lady! You two!" He thundered. "Of what use are you two if I can bequeath you with a simple task of "apprehend and retrieve" only for you to fail, not only fail but fail at it abysmally!"

"Boss, she was quick and she had almost made away before you sent us after her". That was the one who had shot at Madeleine twice explaining to Donald how it had all happened. "I'm certain I nicked her with a bullet as she made out of the building, boss."

"What the fuck! You shot at her yet missed! You shot at her, a puny human but you couldn't bring her down!" He accused. "And you boasted of better kills than



hers right here in my office, not long ago, to my face!” His voice was raised at them and the other kept quiet for he knew it would only be a while before he would totally lose his cool and do something rash and irrevocable. He also was quick to back away a bit out of harm’s way.

“She was very fast boss and she couldn’t run straight. Besides, I didn’t wanna hit someone else in the process, boss”. He responded as if to counter Donald’s challenge of their efficiency.

“Who cares who you haul down in the process? I want her found and I want it done now! Listen to me, if you dare return here without proof of her death, God help me, you’d be joining her on a pyre before dusk tomorrow!”

“But boss...” Before he could complete the statement, Donald whirled round to face him aiming at his forehead with a brandished pistol. It was too late for him, before he could react to dodge the bullet targeted at his head, Donald had squeezed the trigger. As the canister hit the ground, so did him too, dead before he touched ground. The bullet had hit him right in the middle of his forehead and had escaped to hit the wall. His brains splattered on the behind him, some getting on the suit of his shaking comrade.

Donald was not yet content. He kicked the lifeless body that lay at his feet. “Fuck you! I’m talking you’re arguing with me! Who the hell pays you to do that?”

The other man was rooted to a spot, dazed at his boss' reaction and fearing he was next. Donald pointed the steaming pistol at his head, singeing the spot on impact.

“Do you wanna join him, mate?” The other muttered a “no boss”.

“I can’t hear you, boy! Speak!” he barked.

“No boss” came the raspy reply.

“Good, that’s what I’d like to hear. Now get a couple of capable hands and comb this community. I don’t care if you have to comb this district. Madeleine must be found. Bring her in dead or alive! You copy?”

“Crystal, boss, I hear you!” the man burped.

“Now, get outta here and bring me some good news ASAP, boy!”

With that, Donald turned round, tapping the table behind him in anger. He quickly hid the pistol from sight.

“And get some men down here to throw this fool to the dogs and scrub this place clean of his mess!” he hollered after the disappearing guard.

He would not want his name in the crosshairs of the public again. And if only that nosy girl, Madeleine had not seen him snuffing out the live out of the idiot, he might sleep better tonight.

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## **Chapter 4: NIBBED IN THE BUD**

The sun was high in the clouds the following morning before Madeleine stretched and opened her eyes. She might have slept longer considering the kind of night she had had the previous day but for a knackered abatjour that sent a barrage of sight-blinding sunlight towards her. A wandering child had picked up the piece and had unknowingly glanced it in Madeleine's direction. She jumped to her feet almost instantly with red eyes. She fell back on her buttocks as she had totally rid herself of strength the day before. She gathered herself and scampered to her feet with difficulty. She slumped into a pole and rested on it. She batted her eyes and brushed them as if to prevent them from closing again.

She had totally forgotten where she was. She looked around, trying to adjust to her insalubrious setting. She saw a group of boys draped in fading mantles mocking her from afar. They were engrossed in a pirouette. A woman was seated nor far from them. She had a peignoir on her though its colour was no longer attractive. She had seem to be deprived of her nonce so she walked towards the woman to seek some clarification.

As she approached the woman, she sensed the plebeian ambience that nauseated her nostrils. Yet she walked towards her with a conjured air of confidence. Just as she was about to open her mouth to engage her in a conversation, she felt a sharp

pain in her sides. She howled and held her middle. As she balanced with the ground, she felt an arm encircle her, holding her back to her feet. "Are you alright?" The woman asked. "I think I am" came the response. "Well, I don't think you are, midyear. Sit awhile." She motioned her to a bedding seat. Madeleine yielded, holding her head as if she was suffering from a nagging headache.

At that moment, all that had happened yesterday came tumbling back into view. She remembered how she had got to work, how she had walked in on her boss and how he had sent some men after her. She recalled how she had ran out of sight and had walked into this isolated part of the district. She remembered how she had been treated with the little hospitality she could have merited anywhere even though they had never met her before. She remembered sleeping in a polyester material the night before.

She bolted right up. Her eyes accustomed to her environment. The woman tried to placate her into retaking her seat but she refused. "I'm sorry but I have to go right away. How do I get outta here?" She demanded politely. "The same way you had come", the woman replied, insulted by her uncouth behaviour. She tried to recollect how she had made her way unguided into the confines of this area and wondered if she would not get lost without a guide.

"Could you be kind enough to show me the exact way out, please." She pleaded, hoping the 'polite request' would augur well with the woman this time around. "But why are you in a hurry? You've only just got here. Haven't you?" The woman

retorted concerned. "You can't understand, please. Just show me the way out. I need to be on my way." She remarked, uneasy more than impudent.

The woman remained unrepressed. She wanted answers which Madeleine was not willing to part with for fear of endangering the woman as well. "When you came in last night, I knew something was wrong but my husband, Blake rarely take in visitors. We only treated you with so much hospitality as we could spare because you appeared innocuous to the children." She explained, hoping that would make Madeleine open up. But she hit a brick wall. "Thanks for the makeshift blanket." She said hoping she would drop the subject and lead her out of the boondocks rather than chat her to death.

"Who was chasing you last night? What did you do wrong? Why don't you go to the police? You should be safe there. Shouldn't you?" She further questioned.

"No one was chasing me. I must have lost my way after taking one too much last night." She tried to force a smile but the woman's expressionless face stifled her from smiling. "Just be careful. These areas are dangerous especially this time of the year. Tread carefully and don't answer any hail on your way."

"I'll put your invaluable words under advisement. I'm really grateful for the gesture."

The woman walked silently after beside Madeleine hoping she had not bitten off more than she could chew. They got to a bend and Madeleine recognised it to be where she had made her way to her abode. "That's your way out. Be careful out there, miss." She mouthed with a voice of genuine concern. "I will." With that, the

woman patted her on the back as she would a long-time friend and turned her back, not looking at her for a second more. Madeleine wished she could stay with her but asides the meagre conditions of the place, she could no longer feel safe. She also wished no harm to these vagrants thus she needed to leave.

Madeleine quickened her steps, looking left to right, obviously wary of her surroundings. She had not decided on where to go: home or the nearest police department. She was still contemplating on this when a cab passed her way. She had no money on her but she knew she had to get out of this unsafe environment. She flagged down the taxi and without telling the cabbie where she was headed, hopped into the back seat.

As the cab hobbled off on the road, Madeleine looked into the rear mirror watching the retreating figure of her previous host. It was just then that the taxi had made a turn on to the main road and was caught in the traffic jam. The driver could not back out nor go any further as the cab was squashed in between two other cars.

Madeleine knew she had to get away and as soon as possible it must be. She was in a bad shift and since she had lost her phone in the chase last evening, reaching out to anybody for help was almost impossible. Neither the cabbie nor she knew what the cause of the issue ahead was. The cabbie was furious for he knew making enough rounds round the metropolis today might be quite strenuous and almost infeasible. Their thoughts were antipodal: one was considering the buck he ought to have made before dusk while the other feared for her life.

Madeleine was apprehensive for she was in the open, an exposed position and she knew she could be caught if they were to come after him again. She knew the kind of man Donald was. He always got what he wanted. And what he could not get, he put to waste. He had a saying that he was fond of and usually referred to anytime he was in a good mood: 'if I found anything useless, that could only mean that such a thing is cursed and truly useless. And if I found it useful, then I must have it.'

He knew now that he wanted her head and she could go to the end of the world for all he cared, he would still locate her. The only option she had was to find safety in any safest place and put her head somewhere till things died down. She even nurtured the thought that Donald could call her dogs off if they were unable to sniff her out of hiding. By then, things would have returned to normal and everyone would continue with their lives.

At that moment she caught sight of an approaching figure in the mirror. The man looked familiar and she tried hard to place him in her memory. Four other men followed the previous closely. He halted them and barked out orders at them. Suddenly, she saw the men searching cars in the traffic and that jogged her memory. She knew he was one of the suited men who were chasing after her yesternight! She was scared and left in a trilemma. Should she tell the cabbie to lend her his phone to make a call? Should she scamper out of the cab and run off for cover in the nearest shade? Should she remain calm and pray they overlook the taxi thus passing her over undetected?



She opted for the latter of the options she had cooked up herself. The cabbie discovered she was restless and even though the weather was cool, she was seriously sweating. “You alright, miss?” He asked out of worry. Worry about a payment he could lose should this traffic persist. “Are you okay?” He asked again. She still did not answer. “Errm...please do me a favour. Would you? “Yes miss. Ask away.” He replied.

“Could you pull up the windscreens of your vehicle?” she pleaded.

“Are you sure you are perfectly okay, miss? Are you cold too? He sensed something was out of place with his passenger for if not, how would she ask that he rolled up the windshields when she appeared sopping from sweat?

“I think you need more air than enclosed spaces right now.” He decided. So he moved to roll down the windscreens. She was forced to shout at him. “I am cold. I want the doors bolted tightly and the windscreens up! Aren’t I gonna pay you?” She barked at him.

“Sorry miss. I didn’t mean to upset you.” He apologised. “He did as he was instructed for he knew his twenty bucks was at stake.” He then remembered she had not told him where she was headed to and he had not bothered to ask as well. That does not matter now anyways for they obviously were trapped in this annoying traffic.

Just then, the men were upon her taxi. They demanded that the cabbie roll down the windshields. But he wanted to refuse. Their leader hit the driver’s windscreen with the butt of his double-barrelled gun, the shards flew here and there. She

went frigid from fright. Her heart seemed to have stopped. For now she knew not what to do except hope that her life be spared.

The man spotted Madeleine in the backseat trying to step out of the car into the open. She shot at her and continued for a moment. Just then, his followers joined him and started shooting at the taxi, reducing it into a pitiable spectacle. The tyres of the taxi flattened as a round of bullets made contact with them. The noise of the deflating tyres was resounding. The car was riddled with bullets. The brake lights, bumper, bonnet, taillight, headlights, mud flap, splashguard, trunk, etc. all got their portion of the bullet pumps.

As bullets thundered from their cocked rifles into the backseat of the grey taxi, empty slugs hit the tarred earth, the staccato rhythm was enough to shatter eardrums and spur deaf ears back to life. Their leader ensured he emptied his magazine into the taxi, ensuring there would be no trace of life after they had departed. He wanted to see the job done and finish it he must for he knew his life and job depended on it. He moved in and opened the back door, the lifeless body of the once-animated Madeleine slumped out of the backseat to frightening shouts from the sparsely gathering crowd of heads. Her frame had been reduced to tatters by the bullets and all that remained was her perforated body. The man kicked her again just to be certain she was not left with any grace.

“That’s enough men. Let’s get outta here!” He shouted. Triumphant, he led the retreating men away from the scene. “Peel your eyes, men. We are on unfriendly grounds and anything could happen.” He warned his men.

They made away from the scene with her shoes and what could be made of her bullet-gorged wear for the man recalled Donald had demanded a genuine evidence. He saw a crowd gathering, those who were bold enough to step out of the shadows and watch all the scene. Others hid and peeped from the blinds of nearby windows, too afraid to come into the open.

The man barked at those too close to him, pointing the nozzle in their way.

“Whatcha all looking at? You want some of these? Huh? Y’all want some?”

The men rapidly shot uncorked shots into the sky to scare off any sympathizer as well as any prospective witness looking to testify.

Onlookers scampered into the nearest shade like a litter of meerkats fearful of being caught in the thick of the shooting by a stray bullet or from a direct hit.

They all had become rambunctious and the street was agog with uncontrollable noise.

## Chapter 5: OUT OF THE EQUATION

People hurried by without sparing as much as more than a glance to the man who lay in a puddle of his own blood beside the road.

He was dead. And he was not just lifeless. He had been bludgeoned to death.

The sight even made passers-by quicken their steps. Some, scared to their marrows, even turned back, preferring to go back the way they had come to walking past a dead man.

The now pale red fluid that trickled from different spots from his battered body smeared the walkway, giving it a rather gory look. An artist might disagree with such visual conjecture. Anyone amongst them lot of painters, sculptors, drawer, sketcher, cartoonist, and illustrator might review it to be a candid and graphic representation of core art in death.

Flies had begun to settle on the corpse, drawing more attention to it with their incessant buzzes. A few people began to take pictures of the body as it lay unmoving from its location. A few audacious ones even moved closer to it taking shots with the corpse. "What on earth are you doing man?" A surprised elderly man walking right past as one of the gathered teenagers posed to take a picture with the corpse interjected. "Mind your business, old man." He countered. His audacity shocked his mates yet they laughed. The man walked away, leaving the boy to his tantrums and his mates to their folly. A mother and her four-year-old daughter walked past the dead body at that time and the mother tried covering

her daughter's face with her hands but it was too late. "Mum, what is that?" She asked with her tender innocence, pointing to the dead man's unmoving body. "It's nothing baby." The mother replied. "He is acting, dear."

The woman hurried past hoping her inquisitive daughter would let it slide. But she would not. It was as if her mother had further roused her interest in what she had seen. "May I watch the play, mum, please? I want to." The mother did not slow down, she did the stark opposite, quickening her steps to ensure they left the situation behind as fast as her legs could carry and as swift as she could draggle her daughter after her. "Would you like some ice cream?" She threw that roll of enticing appetizer in her way, hoping that would do the trick and convince her growingly curious child to let the issue go.

Kids. If only she knew the reason behind her mother's premeditated interpolation. She also unknowingly swallowed the bait. "Yes, mummy! I want vanilla and strawberry!" she said galloping after her mum who held her tiny fingers in her left arm. She smiled to herself, proud her technique had worked on her gorgeous unsuspecting daughter. She glanced down the road frantically searching for an ice-cream vendor so she could perfect her daughter's desire. Luckily she spotted a stationary ice-cream truck down the lane and got her pretty girl what she wished.

A young woman approached, shocked that no one had logged in the incident. She lambasted the crowd and threatened to report them as well if they did not

disperse as soon as possible. “You heartless lot stood here taking stupid pictures, huh? What good would that do you, huh? Suited yourselves now. Haven’t you?”

She rummaged through her belongings and hurriedly dialed 911.

“991, what’s your complaint?” came the calm voice from the other end of the phone. “Yes, I’d like to report a possible homicide on Baker Street, Plot 11, beside Atkinson Driveway.” She relayed to the voice.

“What’s your name please?”

“Betsy Parlour” she confidently retorted.

“Are you there right now?” came the voice again.

“Yes, I am.” She calmly replied.

“Help’s on the way, Miss Parlour. Kindly stay where you are if you do not mind.”

“Sure, I will.” She rounded off and ended the call.

She locked her eyes on the standing persons who had not to be lexically informed before they dispersed, one after the other, just as they had gathered initially.

Before long, the space had emptied out like a stream petering into an open ocean. The place had become desolate except for those who stood across the road watching what would happen to the corpse and the birds that perched high above the driveway on a sycamore tree. Mobile individuals in their rides or on their bicycles spared a glance in the way of Parlour and the dead man. They found a living being communing in the company of a departed fellow otherworldly. “Perhaps, she was responsible and had decided to own up to the crime or she was his kin.” Some whispered amongst themselves. She paid no attention to the tittle-tattle around her. Now, she was already running late for her morning session with

her clients. She had only meant to keep the hounds away. “Hadn’t she gone overboard in protecting a dead man’s evaporated prestige and remains?”

She glanced at the wristwatch on her left wrist, impatiently. She had only volunteered to wait behind since no one was willing to brazen out the issue before the police. No sooner had she checked her wristwatch sensing the response was taking long before arriving than she heard sirens approach from afar. She readjusted and braced herself for their fusillade of questions for she knew she would be their first port of call. They would be keen to hear a first-account witness of the story from her before sending for a coroner or a medical examiner to perform the autopsy on the dead body.

The police cars reared into view. Three of them in the convoy. As soon as the first one parked, a female officer hopped out towards her. She sighed for she knew her day had just begun. She knew what she signed up for however and she was uncharacteristically ready to contribute her quota to see the matter laid to rest. But her face relaxed seeing the angelic figure that ambled towards her hidden in the garb of outfit. She was awestruck. She decided to find out what she did to keep herself so much attractive based on the demands of her job.

Parlour glanced up, her golden brows drawing together over a pair of marvelous emerald eyes that glued on hers. The approaching figure belonged to a tall, willowy, golden-haired young woman twiddling with her hair strands as they hit her on the face.

“Are you Miss Parlour?” The policewoman asked, flashing a smile in her direction. She revealed a set of white well-arranged teeth. “Yes, that’s my name.” The other answered.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting.” She apologized.

“It’s alright.”

She led her towards the bonnet of one of the police vehicles to question her. As they walked, Parlour took her time to check her out. She obviously looked nubile in her body-hugging police uniform. She wore gloves and in her hands was a file which Parlour guessed must be required for the session with her.

Just then, the wind blew and some of the sheets escaped from the loose-leaf file she was bearing.

As she bent to retrieve the fleeing sheets of paper, another spectacle awaited Parlour or she also stooped to help her. Her uniform which had two of its upper buttons free, also revealed a sizeable part of her cleavage which had Parlour wondering how she managed to do her job in the face of myriads of temptations that came her way from her colleagues and obviously her superiors.

A pair of oversized mammary melons pleaded to be let out of the brassiere pouch that held them firmly in place. Her eyes lingered on her oversized chest for a second. She felt much sorry for the host of the men on the force, in her department and elsewhere who would hardly keep their rod in place as they see her daily, sashaying into their presence in her usual free manner. She pondered on what they would consistently have to go through to ignore her gleaming golden



hair with its shiny features as she whipped them across her face, walking gracefully.

Her figure was shapely and she had her perfect shape in all places. She had an oval face and a bit sunken jaw that gave her visage an apple-shaped semblance.

Everything, about her was well over tidy and also casual. She wanted probably to put lipstick, but she had forgotten. Parlour even wondered if she ever had the time to titivate herself before leaving for work every day.

She had a pair of soft-looking ebony lips. Her natural curls also fell on her shoulders and extended beyond, almost touching her round ass. She had a great figure. One of those one would come by her place in a gym house. Her tummy was flat from diligent belly exercises and her muscles were moderately huge. Her abdominals must have gone through a lot of rigorous tasks before she could maintain her current shape not to talk of maintaining the practice to keep herself in desired form.

Her derriere was full and bulging from the edges of her pants and Parlour could not but wonder how she would appear in a mufti. Just that moment, one of her mates called out to her.

“Jane, have the lady come over as soon as you’re done with her. I’d like to have a word with her. Okay?”

“Loud and clear, Blake”, she responded back, with her usual smile.

As she turned her back to Parlour to answer her colleague, Parlour watched the mounds of fat flesh settle seductively on her thighs, bouncing against each other

as she adjusted her posture like a model taking a photo session. Parlour could not but help smirk her lips wishing she were a man. “What I wouldn’t do or give to win this nymph and have her all to myself!” she thought and laughed out loud. She never knew she was already daydreaming.

“Earth to Miss Parlour!” Jane, waved his arms frenetically in Parlor’s face. She clapped her hands together. That startled her and drew her attention back to the present. “Are you alright? I thought we had lost you there for a second!” She joked.

“Oh, I must have been lost in thought. It is not every day does one see a man lynched and his inactive body dumped by heartless humans on the street.” She lied. “I just feel for him, wasted like that.” A genuine break of concern seeping into her words as they formed in her mouth.

“Welcome to our world, Miss Parlour. Remember what you find strange is what we deal with day in, day out. We are used to this, considering how often people end their lives in gang fights.”

“You’re right.” Obviously enjoying her chat with her.

“In fact, this is the seventh 911 call to be registered in under twenty-four hours. Today is yet gonna busy if my predictions are correct.”

“I wonder how you do it being a female and all. If I were you, I’d have quit a long time ago.”

“Well, I love the job. It not only affords me some sort of closure, it also gives me a somewhat attainable level of achievement, Miss Parlour. So you see, not everyone

can make a living in this brutal world from the crumbs off the downtrodden. If you understand me.”

“I hear you. We’ve gotta survive, you and I. Don’t we?”

Jane remembered she had yet to put her through the works of why she was presently here at the moment so she cut her short.

“Why don’t you let me debrief you on the situation on ground first? We’d have all the time in the world to share experiences afterwards, provided you’re not in a hurry anyways.”

“On the contrary, Miss Parlour. I’d be lying if I confessed otherwise. I’m sure people would be waiting for me already. I’ve got appointments booked already. Was just unlucky to have decided to take a stroll down to my base when I saw the traffic jam as I stepped out of my house.”

“Oh, I see. My bad. I won’t take much of your time. Shall we?” Parlour glanced up again, her eyes calm, confident and friendly. Jane watched her as she tossed back the long honey-colored braid that fell over her shoulder.

Parlour nodded.

She walked Parlour through the normal questions, treading carefully and consciously drilling her so she would not frighten her only legible and credible lead away.

“Would you mind if we picked this up later, say, over a cup of coffee or preferably over dinner? She flashed her amazing set her way again, melting her very insides.

“It appears I’m needed over there.” She said pointing over to the men where they clogged round the corpse examining it closely.

“It seems they can’t do without me. Wouldn’t you agree?” she joked.

“Oh, you cannot begin to imagine how much they need you.” Parlour assented, stressing the ‘need’ part most of all. They both laughed.

“I do hope I’m free to go now. I am already running late.” Parlour pleaded, her voice definitely edgy. A frown drew Jane's elegant brows together, obviously not wanting her to leave just yet. But she quickly allows it dissipate and calmly responded.

“Oh sure thing. But first, give me your digits and I’d race to clear you with the team head. They should be done with you already.”

They both exchanged contacts. She raced off to the pack of investigators who stood detached watching the policemen do their job in company of the medical examiners summoned for the task. Parlour looked on, their words out of the confines of her ears. But she could pick that the fairly built man dissented with Jane on her request. A fresh flicker of uneasiness dampened her rising spirits sensing she might be delayed a little while.

She also knew it was unlikely that she would see the end of the matter soon.

*“You’d become an integral part of this since you decided to sign up for what obviously none of your goddamned business. Now, Parlour, be a woman and bear the responsibility.”* She soliloquized.

She raised her head and still found both police officers engrossed in a fit of argument. She wished she had not been the cause for that would put her in a bad light with Jane's boss who certainly has the dibs for the finely shaped Jane.

Parlour wondered how on earth anyone could have been reasonable enough to refuse this extraordinarily endowed woman anything she wished. "Her boss must really have a grasp of the ethics of his line of work unlike most on the force who jumped at an opportunity to pull down a woman's unmentionables. That's one of the things I'm going to find out about her should I get the chance."

"Although she was indignant with the way he addressed her, she yet saluted his sheer display of control to resist her inadvertent seductive approach.

Jane returned to where she left Parlour, her feet dragging behind her and her face was rid of the previous vigor Parlour knew. In its place now pedals a crestfallen mien. "I knew it. Just as I had feared." Parlour thought to herself.

"Is everything alright, Miss Jane?" she enquired, trying to distance herself from the looming reality of her not-soon-to-be-realised freedom from this murder case. Jane replied, forcing the words out of her mouth.

"It seems you're temporarily cleared to exit these premises Miss Parlour so you may go about your business." Parlour braced herself for the bombshell she would drop any moment for she knew that was the good news.

“And what’s the bad news, if I may ask?” she managed a straight face and even forced a smile, aimed in the way of the unmoved policewoman who looked at Parlour, her face forlorn.

She began to stammer but eventually found the words she was searching for.

“Errrm, yes. But...there seems to be a little snag with your release. It appears you might be needed to testify in court should this be filed as a homicide and a suspect eventually apprehended. Most especially if suspects are charged to court.” Genuine concern spread all over face as she rounded off her words.

Parlour was impressed. It had been a while since someone had cared about her welfare or her safety. Now she found a spirit being in a stranger whom she had managed to connect with on a grand symbiotic scale. She managed a grin and spoke to abate Jane’s fears but not hers for she was yet to comprehend how she would make it through the first day if the matter should go to trial.

“Oh, come on. Do not worry yourself about. I can handle it.” She reassured Jane who watched her with keen interest.

“I’m sure you do. It’s your kind this area needs. I salute you. Not many would call this in let alone tagging along to give a statement. And who would blame them. That might be the beginning of their unsafe life.”

“Really?” She asked, feigning to a gob-smacked air. “Yes. Really. Most end up in WitSec programmes, leaving all they cared about behind and taking up an entirely new life.”

“WitSec?” She quizzed, still feigning ignorance.

“Witness Security.”

“Oh, I see. I was thinking something else there.” she laughed.

Parlour and Jane hugged as they exchanged final pleasantries, each going different ways. Her intimate act dismayed her on-looking colleagues who expected Jane to have maintained professional contact with the key witness in the ongoing investigation and not mix personal relations with her work.

But before they could berate her for her uncourteous behaviour, their walkie-talkies came to life concurrently.

“Shots fired! Shots fired! All units respond! Shots heard on Baker Street! All units within reach please respond!” The patrol officer vociferated into the talkie strapped to his shoulder.

The desirable policewoman honked down on her own walkie-talkie to respond.

“Unit 231 responding to hail of shots fired on Baker Street. Over.”

“Your response acknowledged, Unit 231.”

“Is there additional valuable intel for me P.O? Over.”

“Be advised, assailants are still in the vicinity. Watch your six, Unit 231.”

“Thank you, P.O. Unit 231 out.”

## **Chapter 6: THE DETECTIVE'S BANE**

Detective Henry was a sleuth of many years. His experience on the job had always been hands-on. Many of his colleagues adored him behind him even though only a few tell it to his face. On many occasions, he had risen against all odds to salvage an almost inimical circumstance and fine-tuned it in the favour of his mates. The only challenge he had being on the force was his colour: he was black and that consistently raised eyebrows from different quarters.

That might had been averted if he was not black for no matter how good he was at his job, he never found as much favour with the District Attorney to be elected as captain of his police department.

And it did not seem that the odds were in his favor coming down to Texas to take on a job that everyone on the team had vehemently refused.

He could not tell which department was more corrupt between his previous post and the latest one, here, in Texas.

His first day here was not pleasant at all. He had been falsely accused of over-speeding by a supposedly drunk patrol officer. The cop had chased him for a quarter of a mile in his patrol car before Henry finally decided to pack by the road side wondering what he had done wrong to be deserving of a flag down.



Once he packed, he watched his rear mirror as the cop also pulled over some feet away from his car and wobbled out of the driver's seat.

Henry gasped with fright. Judging from the way he saw the cop approach, he had thought he was in danger as he seemed to have control of his feet. But on a closer check, Henry saw that he was actually holding a bottle of drink of which he was actually inebriated from!

He was literally haywire, seeing as the wasted officer yet gobbled some more of the hot liquid down his throat.

He was livid and almost alighted from his car to challenge him, but as was customary, he waited in his seat unless he was instructed otherwise.

Besides, he wanted to see how the scene would play out.

*It's best I kept my identity to myself, for now. I might just pretty much enjoy this, even though I'd obviously be behind schedule. But, it should be worth it overall.* He thought to himself as he saw the cop kick himself in the leg and fall flat on his face.

He almost laughed out wishing he was not the only seeing the ludicrous display of the cop.

Soon, the supposed law enforcement officer sidled up to the side of his car. And he gazed up to stare into his face. The sun temporarily shone into his face, obscuring his sight. He looked down for a bit to get adjusted to the intense sunlight.

The patrol cop who was not abashed by the bottle of rum he literally whipped in Henry's face when Henry finally packed by the road side for an inspection he could not even explain himself.

"Good afternoon, officer. How may I help you? I hope I didn't do anything wrong."

"Hey man, you were driving over 60. Let me see your papers." He blurted out to him even as he staggered backwards whilst trying to walk over to Henry's car.

"How could you be drinking in this kind of sun, even more so, being on duty?" Henry braced up to ask him.

He stared at him with unclear eyes and most likely a befuddled brain, snickering.

"Yeah right. You know what to do, I suppose." The intoxicated officer stretched out his left arm while he pretended he was checking up the contents of the car for any incriminating evidence that he could add to increase the *tip* he would give him once he refused to heed to any pleas, especially if he threatened to arrest him for any found contraband.

"What's with the hand?" he forced himself to ask, hoping the officer was not asking for what he believed he was actually asking for.

"Don't you live around here, mate? You should know what I mean already. Or are you trying to waste my time, huh?" he stood face to face with Henry who withdrew some steps back. The officer's breath stank and it could literally smother a fetus dead in its mother's womb.

As the man reached to hit him in the face, he stepped aside and watched him slump on the sideways.

“Yeah right. That’s it. You ‘ve had enough.”

“What are you talking about?” the drunk cop said from the floor, his face dug in the mud.

“I’m taking you in for gross break of the law. It’s a multiple charge.”

The cop was surprised. A trace of soberness flashed across his face. It seemed as if he had just heard double.

“What...what’d you just say to me?” he belched and began to hiccup repeatedly.

“I’m gonna take you to the precinct, *mate*. You are in no virtual shape to argue let alone watch those over-speeding on this lane.” Henry disclosed as he tried to maintain his coolness.

“You are...a cop?” he stuttered, still very much under the influence.

Henry did not respond to that. He instead brandished a pair of fisticuffs and took the cop’s hand as he was about to wobble back to his feet.

“It’s probably for your own good.” Henry said to him as he clipped the cuffs shut around his arms.

“You could have just told me you were a cop.” He hiccoughed again, a few times more than he had done the previous time.

“And where would the fun be in that if I did, huh?” Henry flashed him an unctuous smile as he reeled him around to the back of his car.

Tell me, what precinct are you with, huh?”

“Eighth Precinct, Tennessee Police Department. Squad on Special Crime Matters.” Came the readied response.

“Wow, I guess that should impress me. Huh?” he sniggered at Henry and belched at him involuntarily.

“I do not expect you to be impressed with my job. But I guess you’d be impressed with what the law would do with you when I get your ass back to your precinct. And as luck would have it, against you obviously, that is exactly where I am headed. I have just been assigned a couple of jobs that I need to take care of as soon as possible.”

“Oh really? I doubt you would last a day here, mate.” He taunted Henry.

“Well, we would see about that. Won’t we? I’m taking you in.”

“You know you can’t do this right? This is Texas.”

Henry laughed, shaking his head.

“Then I’d see who would stop me then, *mate*.” He replied sarcastically.

“Who goes about arresting an officer in Texas and lives to tell the tale afterwards, huh?” he asked with an inebriated voice, punctuated by a series of mortal hiccups.

“I guess that would be *me*, mate. Now, hurry along now. I’ve got a busy day ahead of me, if you don’t mind.”

It was axiomatic that he was not liked around here and there was nothing he could do about it. Although he did not ultimately café for his life, he yet did not wish to throw it away like it really did have no visible value.

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“I’d like to have every ounce of information connected with the cases here sir, if you don’t mind. I would prefer if they are timely delivered for me just like my captain had requested that you do.”

He did not wait for a response before he dropped the call. He did not have to, he would not get one. Besides, his boss was already feeling irritable enough towards him after the stunt he had pulled by reporting him to his Tennessee captain.

The folders were delivered to his desk earlier this morning after his boss from his base had called all the way from Tennessee asking him what he was doing about the cases he had been sent down to Texas to solve.

He was unable to provide him with any satisfactory proof that he had been working hands-on on the cases. He could not tell him either that the precinct was totally uncooperative with him.

His captain, although his hands were tied about getting him any deserved promotion for the workload he put in, knew he could do him a slight favor by putting in a word with the base's captain to get him what he needed to get the job done as quickly as possible.

The policeman that had brought him the folders was practically pissed with Henry that their boss had been roughened up for his case.

Henry sighed as he rummaged through the contents of the folder before him, switching the pictures from one end to the other. His intuition told him there appeared to be an inextricably and inexplicably entwined connection between the two homicides.

His face was pale. He had not gained much rest since he took on this latest investigation. Most of his colleagues had refused the job due to its nature. One of the deceased was a victim of mugging whilst the other had been riddled into almost shreds of flesh with bullets. And worst of all reasons that there could be, the cases were all from Texas.

No matter how much he had tried to convince his partner and friend, Danny, back at his base in Tennessee, to help him out with the investigation so he could put the matter to bed as soon as possible, he had failed woefully.

Henry sighed again behind his sun-tanned desk. But this time it was about something different entirely. This would be the first time anyone would refuse him anything. The rejection blow coming from his friend had hit him harder than he could ever had premeditated. It was a harder pill to swallow for him being a sole hand on the case.

If he was not careful, the powers that be would see that he became exterminated before he could say 'Jack'. He knew he was not the first man on this type of job but so far, he was still standing. To him, that could be prolonged a little bit further should he be smart enough to play his cards right. But that would never involve him bribing his way through any defense. He would ensure that he got everything using the right and legal methods.

"I can do this on my own." He said to himself. "" Much better on my own, in fact."  
He quickly added.

He reached for his cup of already cold coffee and raised the demitasse to his mouth. He grumbled about the temperature but he had no choice. He was the one who had allowed it to become somewhat frigid as it had been brought in hot for him. He looked at the plate of quiche he had ordered to keep him company while he reviewed the cases on his hand. He could only turn the plate around, playing with its contents.

He stood up and began pacing. Henry did not have too endearing features. He was an awkwardly tall man. His eyes were dark. His hair was dark as well and the loose strands brushed over his ears, the back of his T-shirt and fell over his forehead nearly to his eyebrows. He never gave much thought to trends. His mien was cool, almost cold, and rough around the edges.

His face was deeply tanned, lean and hard, with strong bones dominating. His mouth was taut as he concentrated. There were lines spreading out finely from his eyes, etched there by what he'd seen and what he'd felt about it. Some would say there'd already been too much of both.

He opened his breast pocket and brought out a pack of new cigarettes. He dipped the end of one into his mouth and lit in with aplomb eagerness. He raised his head, tapped the table and expertly let out a few round puffs towards the ceiling. The fan blew the smoke in another direction and he temporarily watched as it disappeared out of his view.

He needed the smokes to make him relax. And he only smoked when he was ankle deep in thoughts, especially when he was in the middle of a case and every road seemed blocked.

Henry often smoked too much than necessary sometimes. And as much as he knew it could affect his lungs, he would never budge whenever he was being cautioned.

He always had a pretext with which he shielded himself whenever he was questioned by his superiors at his base. It was by far the only external duress he placed himself under and it was the kind of pressure he would never condone from anyone else.

He placed his buttocks tenderly on the edge of the table but the wood could still feel his weight. It creaked and he got up instantly and instead sat on his chair. He closed his eyes, relaxed and enjoyed his smoking.

His door opened and a somewhat younger man walked in. he would not have noticed the man's ingress but for the creaking of the door that had alerted him to the intrusion.

Half annoyed at the unwelcomed interruption and half puzzled at the man's temerity, he looked up at him with a scowl on his face.

With a brazen voice, he addressed him.

"Don't you knock at all, huh?" he asked, with a wicked grin plastered on his face.

"I'm sorry. But the information I had couldn't wait." The man replied, a bit unruffled by his attack.



Henry paused and studied the man's mien for a second. He could not make out any fear in him.

*He looked like the kind of man he could use on his team. He thought to himself. I should drill him further to see how he would fare under pressure.*

The cigarette was almost forgotten as he held it gingerly. It smoldered off some hot ash, burning his inner arm where he had rolled up his shirt.

He quickly put it out on the ashtray beside him on the tray and squared up to hear out the man that stood over him.

"Well, don't just stand there. Let's hear what you had that couldn't wait for me to finish my smokes, man."

"The remains of the humans involved in the two cases have disappeared, sir." The man related.

Henry fluttered his eyes just to ensure he had heard the young man correctly.

"What...what did you just say?" He bellowed.

"How frequent does that happen in a morgue, huh?" He leered in utter disbelief.

He hoped to heavens that this young man was joking. He could yet stomach his art of trickery by if two cadavers could disappear from a morgue without suddenly coming to life, then something was absolutely amiss and that requested quick intervention before things became awry.

"You may go. Thanks. I'll send up for you later."

He nodded and closed the door after him.

"How could this be?" He spoke aloud, wondering who could have taken so much interest in his cases. It was becoming more pellucito him that there were some forces at work who would stop at nothing to see him fail.

He knew already that some people might obviously be involved in the mess but he could not be himself to accept that the leak could come from the precinct.

They were after all interested in his solving the case unless he had been having undiagnosed misconceptions about them all this while.

He tapped his desk and stared back at his half-smoked cigarette. He suddenly hungered for one. As this was one of the situations where he often preferred to smoke to clear his brain fog. He selected another from the pack and hurriedly lit it, taking in the heat.

*But if this should be so, then there is a big conspiracy than I had hoped for here. It must be that the entire police force is rigged to explode anytime from now.* He perpended.

Now, he could comfortably surmise without further ado that the two cases were interlinked. If that had not been the case, there should be no one who would go to such extreme lengths to see that the corpses dematerialize from a secure facility.

Before he would take any step, he needed to see for himself.

He dialed the phone of Jamie, the young man who had walked in earlier.

"Are you free at the moment?"

"Yes sir." Came the voice.

"Good. How do you feel about wild goose chase, Jamie?"

The voice paused for a second before responding.

"If I'm not incorrect sir, they turn out to be the golden egg-laying birds."

Henry chuckled.

*Smart boy. I might yet make something concrete of you yet.* He thought.

"That's brilliant. Then meet me outside in five minutes time. I'm off for a coffee break. I'd like to make the most of it, provided you are game."

"Of course I am sir." Came the ebullient response. "I am honored sir." He rounded off.

Henry replaced the receiver and began to pace around, rubbing his moustache fervently.

In no time, they had found their way to the morgue. Henry had insisted on seeing the caretaker who was in charge when the theft occurred.

A despondent -looking old man was presented to him. He could not make much of his words as most of them were incoherent.

When he asked the man when he was employed, he told him that he had recently come into the morgue's employ for just a few days.

Henry and Jamie exchanged glances, suspecting a foul play. Henry did not have to be told by a seer for him to know the man was being used as a scapegoat should there be any investigation.

"I didn't know nothing about the missing bodies." He pleaded.

The man had nothing concrete to give them on the person who had been working there before he had been hired to fill his shoes.

Henry never fell for the ostensible reason that he had been taken. He knew he was too for the demands of the job and if there had not been an incongruity somewhere, the man should be home with his grandchildren, reclining.

He could bet on his life that the man before him must be a drifter who had just been made a temporary replacement for whomever was actually in charge of the morgue.

He must have been attracted to the generous offer that they had made him. He could bet as he profiled the man that he would be laid off as soon as they back off the case.

“I see. So, remind me again. What is your duty here?” Henry asked again, just to be certain the man was not giving them a doctored report.

The man narrated all that he knew of the burglary all over again. Satisfied that his responses had remained the same even though he had asked them in different ways, he let him.

He demanded to see the manager of the morgue. A bespectacled woman appeared before him. She was all smiles but Henry knew he could not be taken by her sheer amity. He had come to realize that those who appeared innocuous tend to be more secretive in the short or long run.

He quickly turned to Jamie as a thought came to his mind.

“Jamie, why don’t you go check out the boxes where the bodies had gone missing. Perhaps something could help us out there.”

Jamie hurried along.

He looked at the boxes but found no traces of any forced entry. It was as if it had all been pre-planned to look like a robbery.

The boxes had been scrubbed clean of any traces that there had been bodies kept in them heretofore.

He got back just about when Henry was about to let the woman go. He delayed her a bit and enquired about why they boxes had been scrubbed out before the police had come to check it out.

“That’s how we do things here, man. We scrub them clean in readiness for the next son of a bitch that needs to be put in there.” She explained, smiling.

When she saw that no emotion had been triggered in Henry by her words, she made the smile disappear.

“And you also do not know anything about the wanted corpses. Am I right?” he pressed again.

“Hey man, unless I am under arrest here, I suggest I be allowed to take my leave. How many times do I have to tell you?” she replied sharply.

Jamie backed off. Henry only smiled. His instincts kept nudging him to go look over the case files all over again.

“” Let’s be on our way back,” he informed Jamie.

“So what do you think: were they both telling the truth?” Henry tested.

“Well, I could speak for the man but not the manager. She seemed to have something to hide.”

As soon as the policemen were off, she called the man and paid him off, revealing to him that his job had come to an end with them.

“What’d I do?” the man protested.

She only walked off and took a call.

“It’s been taken care off. You have nothing to worry about any longer.”

“Are you darn sure?” the voice asked.

“Don’t doubt my words. By the way, two detectives just came by from your precinct asking after the corpses. I didn’t give you away.”

The voice could detect a tone of caution in the manager’s words.

“You’d better not do unless you’d want to risk your other side activities.” He warned.

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The captain was pacey. He was glad the woman had revealed to her that Henry had started to nose around. That should even make the job much easier for him.

But first he needed to brief Mr. Donald on the latest development and ask for clues on how he would want the matter to proceed.

He picked his phone and dialed his contact.

“Yes Mr. Donald.”

He heard the voices of Henry and Jamie as they entered into the precinct.

“Hold on a sec.” he locked his door and checked the blinds to see that they were closed.

He then crossed the office towards his study in a jiffy. Once there, he locked himself within.

“Yes, Mr Donald. It has been taken care of. The corpses have finally been incinerated. No questions asked.”

The man relayed to him that the money had been wired into his offshore account for taking the hounds temporarily off his back.

“Thank you, Mr Donald. I am here to serve, as always.”

As the man on the other end made to drop the call, he held him up.

“One minute, sir. There is a snag I’d like to discuss with you.”

He paused to await his response.

“Go on.” Mr. Donald instructed.

“Yes. There is a transferred detective from Tennessee here on the cases and he has been nosing around. I’d like you to take care of it ASAP.”

“Well, that wouldn’t be a problem. What’s his name?”

“I’d be glad to forward his details to you as soon as we are done here.”

“” Then, I’d like to presume we are done. Aren’t we?” The voice enquired.

“Yes, we are.”

The line trilled off instantly.

Meanwhile, the detectives were at their captain’s door, trying to gain entry.

*When did the captain begin to lock his door?* He thought, with suspicion.

He knocked repeatedly, turned the knob but it would not give way.

Just then, they heard footfalls and the handle turned open.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting.” He forced a smile.

“Not at all. We’d like to brief you on our findings with regard to the cases, sir.”

“Oh that’s alright. I trust you to do justice to it. You have all the resources you need, I presume. That means you can go ahead as you may plan.”

Henry was surprised a bit at the sudden disinterest in the case. He smelt a discord between his words and his previous actions. At first, i=he had been lethargic about releasing information and now that intelligence was being brought to him on a platter, he was totally disavowing it.

“Hmmm, if I may ask, is everything alright sir?”

“Super-duper!” he exclaimed.

“If that would be all, gentlemen...”

“Yes sir.”

He watched them as they made their way back to their respective stations.

*Couldn't he just stay where he was? I'm sure there's enough trouble where he came from already.*

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Two weeks passed. Nothing concrete resurfaced on the case. No matter how much he dug, he came up with nothing for his efforts. His boss back at home was on his neck to return home as soon as possible on the premise that he had cases awaiting his scrutiny.

Henry was becoming frustrated by the second. Everything had just seemed to have vaporized into thin air without any visible inkling.

He and Jamie retraced their steps thrice to the crime scenes till they were tired.

They re-enacted the incidents but nothing concrete came up for them.

A week later when all the traces had all but gone cold about the case. He received a call that there was a witness who was willing to come forward to testify with regard to the cases.

That was by far the most important news that Henry had heard in the entire month.

He took Jamie and off they went.

As soon as they approached the mall, he ordered Jamie to stay outside and watch out for anything that might appear out of place.

“Let me come with you. Who knows what lurks in there.” He argued.



“And that’s why I wanted you out so you’d react in time should anything go amiss.”

Henry approached the mall attendant who stood behind the counter trying to smile. He could know something was wrong.

“Miss are you alright?”

He quickly drew his gun and relayed to Jamie on his walkie-talkie to stay sharp.

Suddenly, he heard a silenced shot and the fidgety attendant was down, gunned in between her eyes.

Henry shot towards the gunshot had come. He heard a fall. He ducked to a side as more gunshots rippled through the mall, destroying the goods.

There were some customers in the mall when they entered. They had all darted in different directions as they heard the firing.

Just then, a man shouted for help.

“I have been hit.”

Henry tiptoed towards the direction of the sounds. He was on his belly, crawling to avoid any stray bullet hitting him.

“Jamie, maintain your position.” he sipped into the talkie.

“Sir, I’ve called for more backup. I’m coming in right now.”

“No, I repeat, stay exactly where you are. It’s dangerous in here.”

Jamie had dropped the call. He saw a frame appear through the mirror form nowhere. He tiptoed in and shot him before he could have a clear shot at Henry.

But as Henry turned back on his belly to meet the man who groaned on the floor in a supposed pool of blood, the man ruined round, holding a gun to Henry’s belly.

Nery was dismayed but he could not respond in time to avert the danger. He shot Henry twice at point blank range.

Jamie appeared behind him at that moment. As he saw the man, he returned the shots quickly but he was not quick enough to save Henry, who was already on the floor, bleeding profusely.

He rid the dead brigand of the gun and rushed to Henry's side.

Henry was sprawled on the floor, holding his tummy. He tried to mouth some words to Jamie.

"Don't talk sir. Help's on the way." he admonished.

He breathed his last a few seconds later.

Once the news spread that Detective Henry who had come from Tennessee had given up the ghost, the captain withdrew into his study again after excusing himself from the disconsolate policemen."

He dialed the number again. He spoke in hushed tones as the man picked up.

"It's settled Mr. Donald."

"Oh, really?" an ecstatic voice enquired.

"It is, sir."

"Good...good...good. You indeed have delivered perfectly this time around. I shall have my *new* secretary wire your payment into the same account."

"Oh, you are most generous, Mr Donald." He responded bubbly.

## **Chapter 7: THE STATESMAN WHO BIT TOO MUCH**

The sun had risen this morning, with a smile. Its rays had frittered into the depths of the apartments of the tenants occupying the upper levels of McHenricks Buildings. Its fingers had prodded many of them awake, most of whom had slept last night, romancing their varied bottles in their arms and on their bellies. Most of them had snored their way to bed. No, they had not found the comfort of any bedding. They had slept as they could, not how they desired. Their rooms were not the state-of-the-art nor were they too impoverished. Most of them were partitioned to the ground with parquet materials.

They had sauntered into the supposedly blissful realm of sleep wherever they could lay their humming heads and inebriated minds, forgetting how the day had treated them and shaped their amorphous lives. Most of them lived like phantoms judging from their pseudo-meaningful lives. All that mattered to them was to wake, find a crumb to wolf down, find any piece of work, no matter how menial; and end up on the same bed in the wake of midnight.

Sylvia resided on the second floor of one of the huge buildings. She always counted herself lucky having secured the perfect spot to recline whenever she returned from her day job, usually before going out for her night shift. She was

always eager to make a quick buck irrespective of her safe and secure the circumstances surrounding the nature of the job.

Sylvia, unlike most of her mates was an early riser even if she went to bed extremely late. Today, she had gone to job with the hope of sleeping early like usual and be on the lookout for a new job. She needed more jobs on her hands to make ends meet. Unbeknownst to her, things would not quite go as she had anticipated.

She had hoped to return home for the evening to catch the sinking trajectory of the evening sun as it glides into oblivion to welcome the moon in all its orange splendor, as is customary of her. But not on this particular day. The unexpected had happened. Thank goodness! Sylvia was born ready for days like this but she took too much a bite of the unpleasant pudding and nearly regretted her decision. Her boss, Jack Rucks was one of the city's most (dis) honorable men, a grouchy and randy man had delayed her even though she had closed later than usual for the day.

Rucks had made his wealth of the poor, especially those who had entered the country illegally and were still battling the authorities for work and living permits. He was a curmudgeon but he strives to treat most of his tenants with equality, well those who respected him so much as to bribe him at the end of the month asides their monthly rent that he is fond of retrieving midway into the month. Rick was a man of special taste. His lack of temperance was equipollent to his lifestyle. The most disturbing of his behavioral dispositions was that he was an

unrepentant sourpuss. He hardly smiled, unless when he had a coin to make from you.

Sylvia sighed as she remembered the hell she had had to endure in the hands of her boss cum landlord.

Rucks also doubled as a politician and an instated congressman. He was a feared one having won the seat in a controversial and duplicitous election.

It had been twelve months since his installation yet he had hardly delivered on any of his promises for the good people of the city.

He had only been considered worthy to lead as he had openly decried unlawful possession of fire arms and that had been the crux of his manifesto which had culminated into the people refusing to demand for his head sooner.

But things had taken a different turn for the people when random shootings suddenly became targeted hits. Multiple deaths soon became the order of the day.

There were too many recorded gun fights than before he had been elected into office. And whenever he was asked to comment, he always forced a smile to reveal that *he was working to resolve the crisis*.

It soon dawned on the people that they had elected a phony character into power. However, they lacked the will and the voice to get him impeached.

Fortuitously, all that changed for the people seven months into his rule. His opposition, John Brands had suddenly returned to haunt him in broad daylight. He began to organize rallies in defiance of his reign. People soon turned out, embracing what he had to offer.

But like every individual who had a different motive up their sleeves, Brands was using the avenue to get himself enough votes to impeach Rucks from office. His canvass however did not stop until when he was involved in a near-death experience during one of his meetings; he had disappeared into thin air, never to be heard of again.

It had so happened that he had staged the last of his rallies and the biggest of them all just a few meters away from Rucks' office. It had been a deliberate attempt to flack for himself like never before.

He stood on a dais and began to address the gathering with a renewed confidence, like an individual who had been assured of a victory in an impending election.

"We are gathered here today to speak with our congressman and we hope he shall heed us and make clear some issues that we have been battling to wrap our heads around. We have here widowed individuals. We have here orphans. We have here parents who have become childless because of the continued gun fights and the unsanctioned gun trades on and off our land. We can no longer continue to watch whilst our people continue to suffer the failure of a government who refuse to deliver on a promise. We demand an answer from him. Let him come and address us."

Every time he spoke, the people cheered and he only utilized every second to get himself more audible.

Unlike his erstwhile opponent and incumbent congressman, Brands was a seasoned conversationalist and fluent orator who was versed in the art of

choosing the most apt words to describe a situation and express concern or worry about a status quo.

Ever since he had first spoken against him in public, he had set his eyes on him, hoping - for Brands own sake - that there would be no defensible reason for him to silence him forever.

But today, the opportunity could not be more advantageous as it had presented itself to him without provocation even in the tides of the clash of interests. Thus, he could turn the heat away from his doorstep for a while.

He gingerly held the microphone in his hand like an enlivened preacher.

"Shall we watch on while our children murder one another with the same guns we had thought we had banned from our lands by voting congressman Rucks into power? Shall we sit idly by watching our kids throw away their future with the importunate assistance of your venerable congressman? Shall we fold our hands and allow our efforts to go to waste, our chance at a free and fair system ruined for the sake of some money that would never find its way into the public treasury?"

Every time he asked a question, the people answered with a vehement *NO*.

Brands had suddenly come to limelight with his unclaimed personal vendetta against Rucks after the town was thrown into mourning on a chilly Tuesday morning. There had been a gun fight overnight between two rival gangs and a lot

of people had gotten critically injured whilst some had died, be it instantly, on their way to the emergency wards or after being conveyed to the hospital.

That had been the norm for the people but this particular had been somewhat peculiar as a family of four vagrants, three children and their mother had been caught in the crossfire between the two gangs.

Their lifeless bodies littered a corner on the street as they had not been seen as quickly as those who had been killed in public.

When an ambulance had eventually come for them, people had begun to peep out of their windows only to see the lifeless forms of three juveniles and their mother being bundled into the back seat of the ambulance.

That had incited the full-blown war against his rule as people had begun to protests without prior intervention from Brands or any of his coteries to help them fuel their grouse with his rule. No sooner had Brands arrived on the scene than he had known that he was in a lot of trouble.

It soon became apparent that Brands was a thorn in his flesh and he had to call in the cavalry.

Being a funny man, he needed to devise the most subtle method to carry out his machination lest the people point an accusing finger his way. He had arranged with a couple of gangs to stage a clash right around the vicinity of the rally.



Unknown to the people, Rucks had gotten himself a deal with different gangs whom he let off easily to trade in guns and use them as they please insofar as they disavow his involvement, direct or otherwise.

He had a pact going with the notorious of them all. Their leader was a muscle named Dawg. He somewhat had zero tolerance for pleasure. He fancied inflicting pain in substantial dosages. His proclivities bothered on the extreme. He desired to get by with people's agony and he always found new ways to ensure that happened.

He and Rucks would have been a set of identical twins had it been they were sired by the same parents. They understood each other and they got along well with each other unlike most of the other groups who dared to question Rucks' dominance.

He often used Dawg and his cohorts to keep them in check and those who dared proof too intransigent for his personality, he set Dawg upon them to take out of the equation.

Asides, the remuneration, he offers the people in his employ was enough to feed the entirety of the masses. But even at that, he still devised mechanisms to dupe his factotums of their legal pay, behind their backs.

He made himself richer not only with the purse of the people but the purse of his side dealings as well.

On this fateful day that Brands had decided to go topnotch with his self-forced campaign for his removal from office, Rucks had sat in his chair whilst he battled a bowl of nuts. He had had his legs stretched on his large desk, whilst he cracked the nuts with the aid of a small hammer on a stool.

He chewed noisily trying to sequester his faculty from the noise that seeped upwards into his ears.

He had put on some cool music to which he shook his head intermittently but that was not enough to block off the voice of John Brands who had begun to call him out.

He tried closing off his mind altogether from the noise but he could not concentrate on anything else.

"Fuck!"

He banged his fist on the table, fuming.

He put a call through to his secretary.

"Sylvia, I want you in here right now."

The nubile lady had walked in as briskly as possible.

Even though he normally had eyes for her and a soft spot for her big boobs and wide ass, he was more determined to take out the competition that had pitched its tent right on his porch.

He was not gazing at her. He feigned seriousness with the nuts he was cracking, making as much noise as he could. The incongruous sounds made Sylvia uncomfortable but who was she to say otherwise. She could not even distort her features. She had maintained her mien as much as possible.

"When did *Dawg* say he would be arriving?" He asked her slowly.

"Erm, I cannot answer that fully but to the best of my knowledge, but he did promise to show up in time for the best part of the day." She replied, politely.

"Haven't you put a call through to him and his *dogs* that I had made it sound urgent, huh?" He barked, yet without looking at her.

She had shivered at his baritone but she knew his question had to be answered and swiftly it must.

"I did, sir... they haven't got back to me."

"It appears you wanna return to the sound from whence you came quicker than I had imagined for you myself, huh?"

He did not utter another word to her, Deming displeased already.

He picked the receiver and dialed a number. It trilled a few times before it was answered.

"Dawg, and where are you and your *dogs*?" He stressed on the last word to express he was vexed already.

"We are on our way boss." The voice had replied.

"I thought we had an understanding. Do not complicate matters for me here, man. Get your ass down here as soon as possible or you wouldn't like my reaction."

"Understood perfectly, boss. Dawg out."

He had stared out of the window into the streets watching them brandish their placards high over their heads in the heat of the late morning sun. He could see that the crowd was getting larger by the minute and that was unsettling him. Even

most of them had theirs hung on posts, on windows, attached to their rides while some just wrapped it around themselves.

Although their presence had bothered him, he knew he had the power to direct the situation on its head or leave it to infest the entire town, if it had already not done that.

He tapped his desk gently as different thoughts convoluted his mind.

*I would have to make do with the prearranged deal, I guess, for now.* He decided.

Just about thirty minutes after he had placed the call to Dawg, vehicles flooded the streets with different armaments. Shots had begun to be fired into the crowd and they had scattered like seedlings of a ripe bunch of salt tree fruit upon hitting the ground.

The shots were calculated not aimed at killing any of the members of the crowd, but just Brands and his men.

Although Brands was lucky to run for dear life and escape, he did not without being scathed. He would have died if he had not been agile enough to duck a bullet that had been aimed for his head. The bullet had hit one of his bodyguards in the lungs. He had died before he hit the ground, blood had begun to gush from the bullet hole and despite clutching the space with his hand as he fell; the impact had thrown him backwards, leaving him exposed to flood the entire place with

blood. The man had writhed in the face of death for seconds before he had gone cold, dead.

For Brands, the bullet had grazed his right ear, almost cutting it into two. He had held himself together and scampered for safety while he could before the gangs returned to open another round of fire on them.

Although a few persons had been hit on that same day, no virtual casualties were recorded.

The place had soon become empty as if there had never been a session ever held there before.

Sylvia had stood by Rucks the whole time watching as he pleased in seeing the people suffer. He even made mockery of a man who had been hit by a stray bullet in the leg. He saw the smirk on his lips, the fire in his eyes and the life in his body as the people ran about like hordes of disturbed meerkats whose territory had just been invaded by an unwelcome enemy.

Ever since then, Sylvia had avoided a one-on-one situation with him, especially when the day was still in business. He hardly dealt with him unless when she was summoned. And that rarely occurred, unless when he was either in a good mood or bad situation.

Although Sylvia was privy to most of his shady dealings, she had no effrontery to blow the whistle on him. She knew that it would only cost him a snap of his fingers and she would dematerialize. She was eager to please him by mostly all means - insofar as he kept his hands to himself - and continued to pay her remuneration without staggering.

But outside of the purview of that, she ensured she did her work diligently as required of her lest she had a problem with him.

She had never believed that she would be in such a disadvantaged terrain. The first time she had entered the States had constantly returned to her head and she often returned to the scene on her memory and had continued to replay the episode in her head like a pre-recorded video. She often had wondered where she had got it all wrong.

“Kindly step out of the car and place your hands on the door. We would prefer if you are not black.”

“What?”

“Avoid being Mexican or any other race asides pure American.”

*What! How does a pure American breed look like?* She had thought to herself.

But she had found their words amusing as much as she desired to be courteous just to avoid any trouble.

And she had needed to since she was without any virtual documents that could have proven beyond doubt that she was supposed to be in the country.

And it had been Rucks who had stepped in just in the nick of time to save her. She had thought him saintly. But the speck of wood on her face fell when he began to offer her more than she had been employed for. He always pestered her for sex or a blow job and whenever she turned him down, like she had been constantly doing till date, he had always been quick to remind her who she had been in the country. On most occasions, he would let off steam on his pursuit of her but she

herself knew it would only be a matter of time till he would come crawling back to her.

She could not even flee. That was how influential and dominating the man was. He would locate her and when he ever did, that might even be the end of her life.

Sylvia's normal shift had been over twenty minutes earlier. But her friend and co-worker, Susie had refused to show up to relieve her and take over. She had begun to worry, not for herself but for the safety of her friend when the manager had waltzed up to her and demanded that she began to give the account of the day's events.

She had tried arguing but had settled for silence over a brawl since she knew he would win, physically and mentally. He was that good, especially when he knew he had someone cornered. Sylvia had conjectured how she would escape her current situation but no viable solution reared its head. She could not shout for fear of being mugged. She could not also lay down her guard for she knew that was all he would be praying she would do and that would have left her vulnerable in the most unspeakable ways possible. That would turn the tables against her and she would have no witness to defend her in court should she accuse him of rape.

She thought for a second. "What if she gets herself killed while trying to refuse him, would she not get thrown out into the street and end up another unsolved murder case?" she shook her head, hoping a feasible way-out would present itself out of the blue.

“My death could even be simulated to be a suicide. And who would dare argue that since the rate at which Blacks commit the act is on the increase daily?”

She sighed as she eyed her advancing boss. The mall opposite them was deserted for now and nocturnal people would not begin to troop in to purchase their wares till another hour. That would give him enough room to try out his luck with her one more time.

And that might be all he needed to *hit* her jackpot.

Today, she only prayed to avoid any altercation with him for she needed the job even though the pay is meagre. Her financial equipoise is contingent on her ductile nature to adapt to varying situations.

She remembered how she had obviously made things much arduous for herself. She had refused his amorous advances times without number. Yet, he remained undauntedly persistent in his pursuit. And when he had caught her still delayed at her desk, he had thought to himself that it was his lucky day.

Most of the people in his employ were not oblivious of the events and the goings-on that unfolded in their milieu. In fact, most of them had come to accept it as a mundane activity. Its absence left a bad taste in their mouth so they rolled with the norm. They knew him to be a chronic philanderer who often stopped at nothing till he got what he wanted

Rucks sidled up to her, gawking at her in her body-hugging wear.

"Sylvia, well, I have you here, do I not?"



She backed away, trying to avoid any body contact with him. He groped at her, laughing hysterically as he approached. The lady soon discovered that there was nowhere to run, her back had hit the wall.

She wished it would open up and swallow her - or him as long as it would prevent him from having his way.

Just as his hands closed in on her, she closed her eyes wishing she was dreaming.

But nothing could be as real as the sense of his ale-soaked stench on his breath.

"Sir, please, not again." She pleaded, trying to get his hands away from her melons.

"Then, it is obvious we are going to have a problem with that." He said, stiffly.

She opened her eyes to discover that his smile had disappeared and in its place was a frightening picture of a man who would stop at nothing till he got what he wanted.

She tried to block his reach for her side, but he shoved her down. Her head hit a water dispenser, temporarily disabling her of her perspicuous thoughts. She landed on her back and he was upon her in no time, ripping off her wear and manhandling her chest.

She could hardly put up much of a fight now.

She had pretty hit her head against the dispenser. Her eyes were blurry and she had been incapacitated from the fall.

Rucks did not bother to check if she was alright. Hell, he did not even know if she had been wounded or not.

She was fast losing consciousness but she knew she had to do something to save herself.

She saw a giant staple machine under the table as Rucks grabbed and began to fondle her breasts having torn her bra too. She reached for it just as he was about to remove his pants. He was too heavy on her. She was hardly breathing yet she knew she could not give up, just yet.

She grabbed it in the Nick of time. As he rejoined her on the floor where she lay, she grabbed the machine and hit him hard on his throat. She heard a sound that made her believe he had had enough. But as he recoiled, gasping for breath, Sylvia pounced on him and continued to hammer at his lungs with the tool till she was certain he was gone. He wheezed for a few seconds and died.

It was then that it dawned on her that she had killed someone, not just anyone but a serving politician.

Frightened, she did not wait to pack her personal effects before running into the night, barefooted.

She knew her life would definitely tow a new path and as much as what tomorrow had for her remained veiled in mystery, she appeared lost.

She could not go back home, nor could she be seen roaming the streets especially now that she had become a prime suspect in a murder case charge.

She folded her arms across her chest as she walked, carried away by what might happen and not happen in view of all she had done.

\*

Just then she walked into the middle of the road without paying attention to oncoming traffic from both sides.

Two degenerates were in an over-speeding vehicle. And they had recently overdosed on cocaine. As the one driving swerved so they could avert the likelihood of ramming into a stationary vehicle, he hit a lady that could easily have passed for a deranged lady, icing her into an abutment. The impact alone was enough to cause her fatal internal hemorrhaging but she also hit her head pretty hard against the concrete.

She gave up the ghost instantly, her brains scattered beside the road.

"What the shit, man! You've just hit a human!" The alarmed aide traveler revealed.

The driver only whistled as the car sped on, its front lights already smashed.

"Yo man! Park!" He continued but the driver still ignored him.

"I am not sure about your claims nut that isn't a human, guy. That was a mad woman!"

He honked on the vehicle repeatedly as he drove on almost blindly through the night.

He heightened the volume of the car stereo and began to groove to its sound, the other one too soon forgot about the accident that they had just caused or the human that they had just hit.

Unfortunately for them, they were too stoned to see where they were going, an oncoming heavy vehicle flashed its lights ahead to see the road clearly. Consequent on that, the ray found its way into the stoned driver's face and he lost control of the wheel.

In a bid to avoid a collision with the oncoming vehicle, it ran straight into a black spot. The car somersaulted instantly flinging both of them out on to the road, they died upon impact with the road surface: the driver hit his chest hard and suffocated on his own air while the other hit his head hard on the terrain and broke his skull.

## Conclusion

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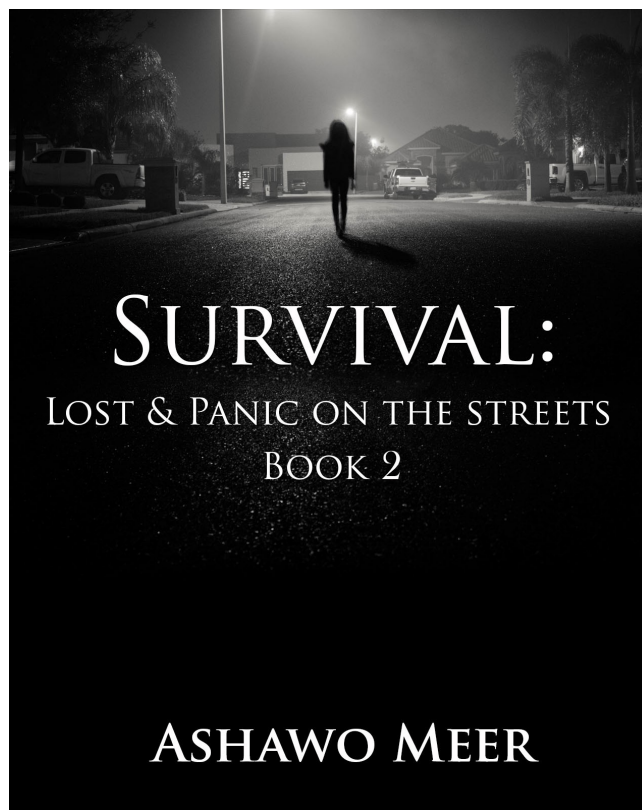
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STREETS – Book 2'**

*The dead don't talk: The sun plotted its course through the sky bed, diving in and out of the cerulean firmament. Perhaps, the day was too bright to be tristful. Perhaps, it was too tristful to be bright.*

*Two police officers stood aloof – at the extreme where people – the cortege – stood, clad in black to mourn and commit the dead to earth – watching the event unfold at the Bakers Cemetery...*

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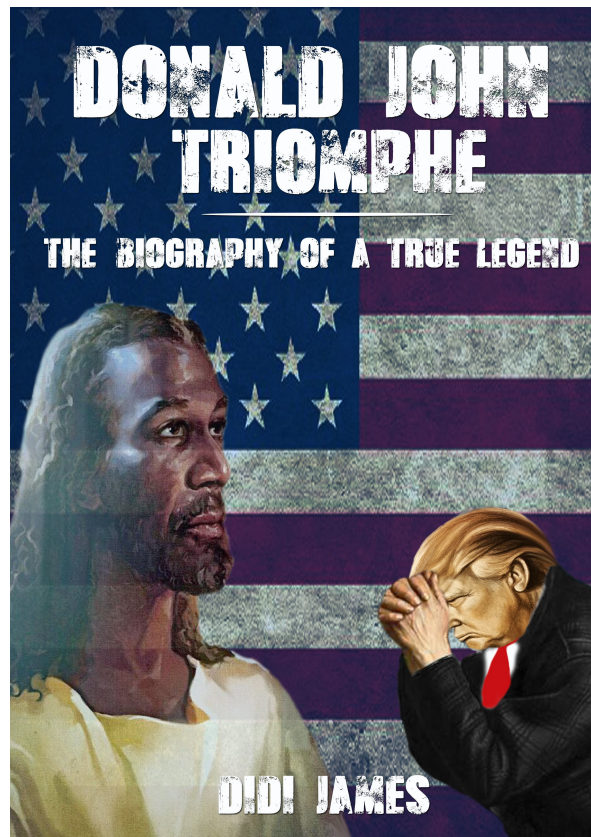


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*We live in a big world that has the capacity to contain the life and activities of so many humans. It is such acts of diverse people that form the standard for how other people end up seeing them. There are so many humans today that have been able to set a standard of respect and recognition for themselves through their own actions. We have tales of legends but, ....*

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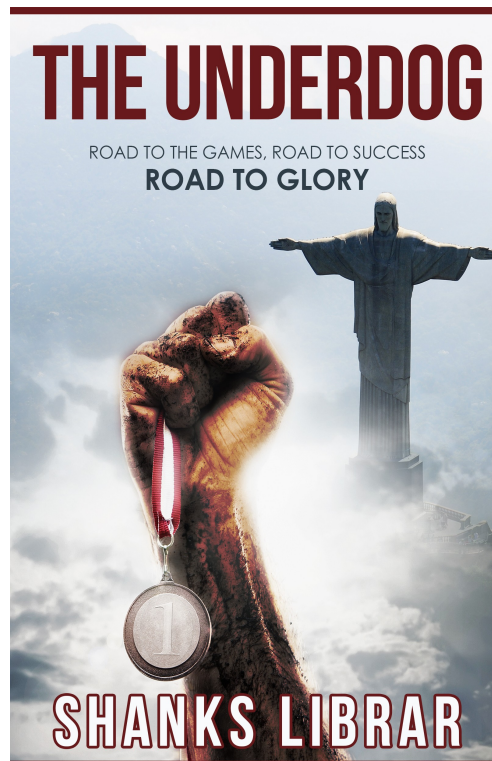
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*The blind, helpless man was trapped in a sea of voices that were peculiar to him. Though he couldn't see it, he could feel the heat of the light that seemed to root him in place. He was a stagnant water weed swaying to the rhythm of the sound and movement, against his will and out of his control. A trusted voice told him it was time to go and face our fears head on, no one died from it though thousands would kill to be here.....*

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