

LIGHTSEEKERS

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R A V E N  B O O K S
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SOURCE

The October sun is as hot as the blood of the angry mob.

John Paul follows the crowd as they chant and push the three young men. They've been stripped naked, their scrotums shrunken from fear as the beatings result in wounds that will never become scars. Sticks. Stones. Bricks. Iron. Bones break, blood flows. Tearing flesh draws short-lived screams from tired lungs. The men fall but are swiftly pulled up and dragged through the streets, towards a place no one picked out, but everyone seems to know.

It rained the day before, making the red earth muddy in several places. When the young men fall here, they're kicked further into the ground; their blood mixing with sludge. By the time tyres are thrown over their heads like oversized necklaces, and the smell of petrol wafts so strong that some in the crowd cover their noses, madness has staked its claim on what is left of the day.

The strike of a match births flame as a brick crushes the skull of one of the men, leaking brain matter and life, so he doesn't howl and writhe like the other two, when fire starts to lick their skin and hair.

The phone thrums in John Paul's hand. The battery indicator flashes red. He lowers the smartphone and looks around. He's not the only one bearing digital witness to the execution in progress. He considers using the cell phone he had taken off one of the burning men before the mob



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pounced, but the irony wouldn't be worth it. It's over anyway. Time to go.

As John Paul walks away, I follow him in the shadows, unable to unsee the nightmare he created behind us.

And because he doesn't look back, neither can I.

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ACT ONE

*light reflects in several directions when it
bounces off a rough barrier*

THE WHY, NOT THE WHAT

Unless I'm mistaken, a riot is about to break out in the departure lounge of the Lagos Domestic Airport.

'Someone should at least tell us what's going on!' an irate passenger barks into the face of an unruffled airline staff member, spraying her with spit.

Good luck with that, I think from where I sit with my meat pie and Coca-Cola. I'm at a table in the Mr Biggs's restaurant opposite the 9ja Air check-in counter, a position I carefully chose so I won't be left behind when the delayed airplane finally decides to fly to Port Harcourt.

'Sir, the flight is delayed,' the staff person repeats. 'I've told you -'

'What's delaying it?'

'I can't answer that, sir. If you'll be patient -'

'For how long?' This question is from another sweaty passenger who has no right to be this frustrated, considering I saw her come through the entrance less than thirty minutes before the flight was supposed to have departed. 'We've been waiting for ...'

Three hours, seventeen minutes. But if you count how long since the Uber dropped me at the airport, it would be five hours plus. I suppose the other passengers weren't

running away from their homes to avoid a confrontation with their cheating spouse. Okay. *Likely* cheating spouse. Truth is, the hurried way I packed my bags and left home in the early hours of this morning had little to do with punctuality and everything to do with my unwillingness to ask my wife the question that was uppermost in my mind.

Are you having an affair?

It had taken a lot of willpower to tamp down that question this morning, as Folake stood in her light cotton housecoat, arms akimbo. Her long locks were pulled back from her face, so there was no masking her disapproval as she watched me pack.

‘You’re really doing this?’

‘Yes,’ I grunted and made a show of counting some underpants.

‘And it doesn’t matter that I think it’s a bad idea?’

I placed boxers in my suitcase and responded in what I hoped was a well-crafted, neutral voice. ‘We’ve been through this, Folake.’

‘You’re not a detective, Philip.’ She stressed my name in the way she does when she’s trying, unsuccessfully, to hold on to her patience.

‘Your faith inspires and motivates,’ I replied ruefully.

‘Don’t play that card! No one has shown more faith in you than me.’

‘You reckon now’s the time to stop?’

‘You can’t go off to some village to solve a case that’s been cold for more than a year and expect me to throw a send-off party.’

I faced her, finally making eye contact.



‘I’m not solving anything. I’m investigating why what happened, happened.’

‘How’s that not solving a case? Surely you can’t understand why something happened without knowing *what* happened?’

Had I gone into an explanation of my work as an investigative psychologist, I wouldn’t be here waiting on a delayed flight. Despite supporting each other through our respective PhDs, my wife pretends to misunderstand my work when it suits her.

‘Folake, this is an opportunity to put my skills to use in the real world –’

‘A real and dangerous world,’ she cut in sharply.

No doubt travelling to Okriki might be considered dangerous for someone like me, who until eight months ago had spent the better part of his adult life in the States, but it would’ve been nice if my wife had said instead: ‘Go, Sweets. If anyone can find out what led to the mobbing and burning to death of three undergraduates, you’re the one. You’ve got this.’

‘It’s a foolhardy scheme, and you know it! I don’t know what you’re trying to prove.’

‘That I’m more than a two-bit academic without tenure,’ I shot back, restraining myself from shouting.

‘Leaving your family to go investigate multiple murders isn’t going to get you tenure,’ she said, no less strident.

But it’ll take my mind off the sad possibility you’re cheating on me.

Of course, I didn’t say this out loud. I hate fighting, especially when it involves raised voices. Moreover, there aren’t a lot of people who can hold their own in a war

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of words with Professor Afolake Taiwo, the youngest Professor of Law at the University of Lagos. In almost seventeen years of marriage, I've rarely won an argument with my wife.

'Okay, Philip. Let's say you get there and you find out what really happened, or why it happened. What then? What do you want to do? Write a book?'

'This is Nigeria, Folake,' I scoffed. 'You don't chase down the details of a mob action in the hopes of writing a best-seller.'

'Then in the name of everything holy, tell me what you're hoping for?'

'I told you the father of one of victims hired me to –'

'Yes, yes, I know.' She threw her hands in the air and rolled her eyes. 'He wants you to write some report because he doesn't believe his son was a thief, even though it's all there on social media.'

'Have you seen the video?'

Folake shuddered.

'I've watched it a hundred times at least,' I continued, to stop her from recounting what she must have seen on any of the several sites where the deaths of the Okriki Three were posted. 'And you know what? Every time the same thought goes through my mind – people can't be so crazy as to burn three boys in broad daylight just because they are caught stealing.'

Folake sat on the bed, shoulders slumped, and I wasn't sure if it was from our argument or my reference to the distressing video.

'Nothing makes sense in this country,' she said, shaking her head.



‘Everything makes sense when you know why people do what they do.’

‘Psychobabble nonsense,’ she snapped and her hand rose quickly to her mouth as if to take back her words. She’d crossed a line and she knew it.

I made a production of zipping my suitcase till I was sure I could keep my face impassive. When I looked at her, my voice was as neutral as when we started the conversation.

‘Thank you. Now I’ll go apply my psychobabble on a matter for which I’m going to be well rewarded. Excuse me.’

I lifted the suitcase and walked out quickly before she gathered her wits.

Another passenger’s angry voice breaks through my reverie.

‘This is unacceptable! Only in Nigeria is this kind of –’

I give it another hour or so before irate passengers and rude airline ground crew exchange blows. For now, I turn my attention to the one thing I am trained to understand.

A crime scene.



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CHECK

Crime scenes can range from orderly to maddeningly chaotic.

I try to drown out the noise of the airport and reflect on the words of my old teacher and mentor, Professor Albert Cook.

‘Death is messy, Philip, but dying is a shithouse.’

Prof, as I still fondly call him, never subscribed to the idea that a crime scene could fit into a given set of typologies. He used to say: ‘People fuck up, and therein lies the clue to what really happened.’

Prof was my PhD thesis supervisor at the University of Southern California, my first boss and the person who introduced me to the then evolving field of investigative psychology. Although retired now, Prof remains active by ‘butting into other people’s shithouses’, as he calls it. Perhaps I should send him the YouTube link to the Okriki Three’s execution. It would be interesting to hear the old man’s thoughts on this particular shithouse.

I look at my notes. Under the section where I had written: *Organised crime scene*, I draw a large question mark.

When one considers how the mob’s rage seemed so focused on the three young men they were killing – murdering – at



least some of the conditions of a staged crime scene could apply. Take the aggression directed at the victims before they were burnt. Classic premeditation. And the tyres. Surely they couldn't have just appeared. Someone, or some people, had to have gone out of their way to bring them to the crime scene, which for this exercise I should limit to where the boys were finally killed.

Personalisation of victim(s). Theoretically, it's safe to assume a mob killing is not personal and would, therefore, present the characteristics of a disorganised crime scene. Practically, given the intensity with which the Okriki Three were killed, a collective displacement can't be ruled out. If the young men were suspected thieves, a significant number of their attackers may have been victims of past robberies that went unpunished. But is that argument tenable for almost a hundred angry people?

I place several question marks against 'personalisation' and write: *Get data on the rate of robberies in the neighbourhood before or during the month of the killing.*

There are other indications of an organised crime scene; the demand for the victims to be submissive and the use of restraints at some point during the whole heart-breaking exercise are classic indicators. But this is where the staged crime-scene typology ends.

I look up to see whether any of the frustrated passengers has resorted to violence. Not yet. Then, back to my notes where I had listed the characteristics of a disorganised crime scene.

Bodies left at the scene of the crime. Check.

Bodies left in full view for anyone to see. Check.

Depersonalisation of victims. Check.



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I doodle around this. Can one be sure? Is it possible that no one knew the boys? What about the person who claimed he was being robbed?

I write: *Interview alarm raiser.*

Minimal conversation. Mobs don't engage in discussions or negotiations with their victims. So, Check.

Spontaneity –

Apparently, the mob had descended on the boys after an alarm was raised that they were robbing another student off campus. Since there was no way a hundred angry people were lying in wait to be summoned to participate in a neck-lace killing, this is also a check.

Indeed, dying *is* a shithouse. The mix of typologies in this crime scene is infuriating but can present unique possibilities for the task at hand. I must remember to keep an open mind until I get more data beyond the still images grabbed off YouTube videos and interviews with the victims' parents.

I write: *A singular motive masked by a collective purpose or bias?* This might explain the mixed typology, the most telling characteristic of a disorganised crime scene.

Unexpected and sudden violence against victims. Check.

I pause here. How unexpected and sudden was the violence, though? The human stories about a crime are as important as the crime scene itself. The motivations of the narrator –perpetrator, victim or witness – can shed considerable light on what really happened.

I flip my notes to where I wrote: *Emeka Nwamadi.*

FIRST CONTACT

‘Chiemeka Nwamadi,’ he said as he shook my hand.

‘Good to meet you, Mr Nwamadi.’

‘Emeka, please. Let’s not stand on formalities.’

‘Let’s not stand at all,’ said Abubakar Tukur, who’d have been my boss if my contract at the Police College was permanent rather than that of a guest lecturer whose services are procured strictly upon the availability of a budget. He ushered – more like ordered – us to sit on the front row of chairs that faced the desk from where I’d just delivered a lecture on crowd control. Abubakar is old school; the 32nd Commandant of the Police College who still harbours illusions of restoring the glory days of the Nigerian Police Force.

As we made ourselves comfortable on the sturdy chairs, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the name ‘Nwamadi’ was familiar.

‘Emeka is the MD of the National Bank,’ Abubakar said, and it clicked. The man is the head of the country’s third-largest commercial bank. As soon as that registered, another hazy detail now hovered on the fringes of my mind and, again, Abubakar came to the rescue.

‘I’m not sure if you know of the Okriki Three case ... ’
he began.

Shock was my first reaction, then compassion. Three weeks into my first lecture series on crowd psychology at the college, I had asked the cadets to present case studies of crimes committed by crowds. More than half of the student papers were about an incident in the south-eastern part of the country, which the media had dubbed the ‘Okriki Three’. Since most of the papers were disjointed – as most first-year presentations tend to be – I had taken the time to read up on the case in the media. That’s how I knew Emeka Nwamadi was the father of one of the three undergraduate boys beaten and burnt to death over a year ago in the university town of Okriki. His fight, along with the other parents, to bring the people who killed their sons to some kind of justice had been the stuff of headlines months before I left the US to follow my wife on her sabbatical at the University of Lagos.

What does one say to a parent who lost a child in such an unspeakably cruel manner?

‘I’m so sorry, sir,’ I offered awkwardly.

Emeka Nwamadi nodded, his face unreadable.

‘This is why we’re here, Philip. Everyone knows what happened.’ When Abubakar is excited, his Hausa heritage betrays him. His *p*’s turn to *f*’s and *r*’s roll into *l*’s.

Actually, I didn’t know enough. After reading enough to get context for grading the cadets’ papers, I tried to shut it all out of my mind. My twin sons have just turned sixteen and it’s not hard to picture them at university, away from home and finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Self-preservation prevented me from



researching about the Okriki Three or even watching the video on YouTube.

‘I’m not sure where I come in, sir?’ I responded.

‘Tell him.’ Abubakar nodded at Emeka.

Emeka didn’t speak. Instead, he reached into his leather briefcase and brought out two bound documents. He placed them on the table between us, and I immediately knew what they were. The first was my masters’ thesis, poetically titled: ‘Strange Fruit: Understanding the Psychology of Lynch Mobs in the South’. The second was my PhD thesis, a continuation of sorts: ‘Strange Harvest: How Crowds Get Away with Murder’. Both printouts must have been downloaded from the online library of the university where I had researched and written them. I had also presented them as part of my résumé when I applied to the Police College.

I looked at Abubakar, but it was Emeka who spoke.

‘There are a lot of stories about what happened the day my son was killed. I don’t believe any of them, so I’m here to ask you to help me find out what *really* happened.’

I was no stranger to these sorts of requests, and I had my standard response. ‘You mustn’t mistake me for a detective, Mr Nwamadi. I’m a psychologist with expertise in studying the motives behind crimes and how they are committed. Most of my investigations are purely exercises in academic exploration.’

It was a speech well rehearsed from years of explaining the limits of my expertise to my ex-colleagues at the San Francisco Police Department.

‘I read these books,’ Emeka said, pointing at them.

‘They’re academic papers.’



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‘Brilliant in my opinion. I’ve never read anything like your analysis of crowd behaviour.’

‘They’re post-event observations. Hardly forensic.’ I tried to sound dismissive but I was pleased at the compliment.

‘Insightful nonetheless,’ Emeka insisted.

‘I told you he’s humble,’ Abubakar said to Emeka, then turned to me. ‘Phirif,’ his Hausa police-boss mode was in full bloom, ‘you’re the only one that can *feece* together what *haffened*. These *feeful* need your *herf*. As the only investigative psychologist in this country –’

‘That you know of.’

Abubakar waved his hand like he was warding off a ludicrous proposition. ‘*Ip* I don’t know them, they don’t exist. You, I know.’

If there was anything I had learnt from eight-and-a-half soul-numbing years of ‘piecing together’ the motives and modus operandi of some of the most heinous crimes known to man at the SFPD, it was that there are no winners in any crime involving the loss of life. I was quite happy being a lecturer. I was ready to voice a more determined refusal.

‘Have you watched the video, Dr Taiwo?’ Emeka asked.

‘Please, call me Philip.’

‘Philip,’ he conceded without missing a beat. ‘Have you watched the video?’

I shook my head and Emeka reached for his smartphone, tapped the screen twice and handed it to me, a challenge in his eyes. Seconds later, the last minutes of Kevin Nwamadi’s life played out in my palm.

For quite a while after Abubakar and Emeka left me in that classroom, the horror of what I saw stayed with me. After over a decade and half of studying human transgressions, I

have *almost* mastered the necessary art of detachment. But this is the first time I am witnessing a crime in progress, yet paralysed by the fact that it had already happened and could not be stopped.

I couldn't shake the images of the three young men as they were beaten, broken and burnt alive. It was difficult to fathom the pain Emeka Nwamadi and the other parents must feel. The loss of a child is unbearable enough, but to have that painful death – that *dying* – playing out in a continuous digital loop on the World Wide web must be the most terrible of existences.

There were many reasons why taking the assignment appealed to the researcher in me. One of them was the opportunity to localise some of my hypotheses on crowd psychology to the Nigerian context. It also would not hurt my chances of getting a more permanent consultancy at the Police College or an equally reputable institution. However, it was the father in me that made me want to help Emeka Nwamadi find the closure he so clearly needed.

I left work earlier than planned that day, and drove to Folake's office, eager to share my initial impressions of the project. But I never did.

In fact, it ended up being a complicated day; distressing and depressing in equal measure because it was from the parking lot that I looked up and saw my wife in the embrace of another man.

THE SINS OF FATHERS

For days, Abubakar followed up, trying to convince me to take the assignment, but I couldn't tell him that the Okriki Three was the last thing on my mind. I ignored Emeka Nwamadi's text messages and refused to take his calls. I wasn't being difficult. I just wasn't functioning well enough to commit to anything until the day my father summoned me.

You could tell the gravity of a situation in the Taiwo clan by the time of day my parents chose to discuss it.

Family discussions ranging from scolding for subpar academic performances to grave infractions against the family name were late at night, when there was no danger of interruption by visitors. Serious conversations, which my dad called 'strategic meetings', were reserved for dawn. This is when career paths are discussed, worry is shared regarding the behaviour of any of my three siblings or the size of our financial contribution to a number of the family projects my father has committed his children to, usually without our permission.

When I got the text message summoning me to our family home on Lagos Island at the crack of dawn, I wondered if Folake had confessed her indiscretion to him



and asked his intervention in asking for my forgiveness, but I quickly dismissed the thought. My dad is Folake's godfather and they have been close since her childhood. There are few things I have done in my life to impress my dad, but marrying his god-daughter must rank as what my twin brother calls the 'checkmate of sibling rivalry'. Folake wouldn't risk tainting the image he had of her, except as a last resort.

Dad was waiting for me when I arrived. My mom was still in bed. Ever since she retired from being the chief nurse at my father's practice, she insisted on sleeping in; recovering, she claimed, from raising two sets of twins and managing a workaholic husband. When asked why my parents did not have more kids, my dad always joked that he was afraid the next set of children would be sextuplets! In his late seventies, he still works at his practice not too far from home, where I knew he would be heading as soon as our meeting was over.

'Kehinde!' he exclaimed, as he pulled me into an embrace and ushered me through the large living room into his study.

My father never calls me 'Philip'. He insists 'Kehinde' was the name I was born with and Philip was my mom's idea at my baptism. I was worried that he didn't call me by his nickname for me – Kenny Boy – which he coined to differentiate me from one of the younger twins, another Kehinde. She is 'Kenny Girl'. While I'm more forgiving of the old man's moniker for me, my sister baulks at being called a 'girl' at forty-four.

'I spoke to the boys last week,' my father said, as I settled into the well-worn leather sofa across from the shelves that held his admirable collection of books.



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I breathed in and waited for the old man to finish his favourite topic: his grandchildren's educational achievements or lack thereof. He lamented their handwriting which he described as 'spidery'. Ironic, coming from a medical doctor. He informed me he just finished reading the Harry Potter novel my daughter gave him – 'Witches and wizards! Is this what these children are learning nowadays?' He talked of my mother's recently acquired habit of removing gluten from their diet, 'I am seventy-eight! What is her point?'

When he finally paused for breath, I rose, heading towards the Nespresso machine in the corner of the room, before venturing to ask why he had summoned me.

'Sit,' Dad ordered.

I did, abandoning my plans for coffee, still clueless and nervous. He sat too and his expression became sombre, which heightened my unease.

'A good friend of mine says you're avoiding him,' he said finally.

'Pardon?'

'Emeka Nwamadi.'

'You know him?' I shouldn't be surprised. My father's network of friends and patients reads like a *Who's Who* of the Lagos elite.

'Yes. He and I play golf at the country club.'

'He failed to mention that when we met. He was introduced to me by the Commandant at the Police College.'

'I know. I think he didn't want to put undue influence on you.'

'Hmm, I wonder what changed,' I said, settling again into the sofa, more relaxed now that I had an idea where this was going.



‘It’s really sad what happened to his son and those other boys, don’t you think?’

‘Terrible,’ I said tentatively, not sure where my dad was going with the conversation.

‘I think you should consider taking the case.’ He held my gaze as he said this, his tone steely.

‘But, Dad, I don’t know what I can do. All the reports –’
‘– are speculation, rumours and conjecture. We need to get to the truth.’

‘We?’

My father gave a deep sigh, stood and padded to his bookshelf, where he retrieved a battered manila file. He took an old photograph from it and handed it to me.

I recognised a younger version of my dad – my twin sons bear an uncanny resemblance to him, and I could have been looking at any of them in the picture – surrounded by five other young men of about the same age.

‘Your university days, huh?’ I thought I recognised at least two young men in the picture. They were familiar faces from the alumni gatherings my father had hosted many times at the house.

‘My fraternity at University of Ibadan.’ My father’s tone was softened by nostalgia. ‘We were inseparable. Live together as brothers or perish as fools. That was our motto.’

My eyes registered the red bandana around all of the young men’s heads and it hit me. ‘Dad, were you a cult member?’

‘Don’t say that,’ he retorted sharply. ‘Never ever call us that –’
‘Fraternity, cult ... What difference does it make?’

He bristled. ‘We were distinguished gentlemen.’ His voice was imperious and brooked no argument. ‘We were nothing

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like these university boys now. We were brothers; politically aware, academically excellent and, above all, gentlemen.'

I looked at the picture and my hand shook slightly at the realisation that I had to revise the image I had of my dad, no matter what he said.

'I am still that person,' he said as if he could read my mind. He sat down next to me and took the picture. His voice softened as he looked at it. 'And so are all the men in this picture.'

'This,' he pointed, 'is Dr Chukwuji Nwamadi. He was one of the pioneering lecturers at the University of Nigeria, in Nsukka, and we lost him during the bombing of that campus during the war. The rest of us have pitched in to look after his family ever since. His wife, his children –' He looked pointedly at me, 'especially his eldest son, Emeka.'

'And that's why you want me to take the case? Because you knew Emeka's father?'

'I feel a sense of responsibility towards him. All of us in that picture feel the same. His father was blood. But this goes beyond that. These children today, running around with weapons and killing each other; they've tarnished our legacy. The laws we fought to get passed, the awareness we raised about injustice, our protest against the civil war, all of that gone because when people think about university fraternities now, all they see is mayhem.' He shuddered, shaking his head sadly. 'And when something occurs that's as violent as what happened to those boys, one can't but wonder what role we had in all this and if all the bloodshed could have been avoided. This wasn't the plan. Our vision was heroic in the beginning.' He let out a deflated sigh.

‘Does Emeka know this about you? You know, with the ... er, fraternity.’

My father nodded. ‘Everyone in that picture pitched in to send him to university here and to the US for his MBA. He knows.’

‘Do you think his son was killed because he was in a cult?’

‘What do you think?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know enough to think anything of consequence.’

My father nodded again. ‘There’s so much that’s unknown. But maybe, just maybe, if the facts came out, the unfortunate events that led to the death of Kevin and those boys would never be repeated.’

I stood up to create some distance between us. ‘You want me to prove the killings were not gang-related, so you and your friends can sleep better at night?’

‘I want you to help a grieving father, to give him some closure. I want you to find out the truth, and if the truth is one more thing on my conscience, then so be it.’

Gone was the jovial doctor, the affectionate father, the affable grandfather and loving husband.

‘I still can’t picture you ... ’ I shook my head. ‘The things I’ve heard about what these gangs get up to on campus.’ My eyes widened as a memory came to me. ‘I remember you calling Taiye and me when we were thinking of studying here. You told us, no, you warned us not to even think of joining a cult.’

Dad wagged a finger at me. ‘I never used that word “cult”, when I spoke to you and your twin brother. I said gang.’

I snorted. ‘Is that not what your fraternities have become? Violent gangs that you warned your own children about joining?’

My father shook his head, but could not give me an answer that cleared my confusion.

‘We’ve tried, Kehinde. All of us, alumni of different fraternities in different campuses all over the country. We have tried to end this violence. We’ve consulted with university authorities, served on advisory boards and even helped to formulate laws to control what everyone calls “secret cults”. But nothing has worked.’

‘Why didn’t you say something? Even when you were warning Taiwo and me, why didn’t you tell us you were in a fraternity yourself?’

‘If you saw the way you’re looking at me now, you’d know why.’

I left my childhood home that morning with a heavy heart. In less than a week, the two people closest to me had shattered some of my core beliefs. My wife made me question my faith in our union, while my father planted doubt about what I knew of him for the past forty-six years.

While I wasn’t ready to deal with Folake, I had the skills and training to take on the Okriki Three case. I needed the distraction. So, the day after my meeting with my Dad, I called Emeka Nwamadi and agreed to take the assignment.

I didn’t mention my father, but I knew he knew. We were bound together.