

Kelicha Ochonogor



A
Shadow
in the
Shade

Do cheats always have their way?

A SHADOW IN THE SHADE

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A Shadow in the Shade
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Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural references are from the New King James Version (NKJV) of the Holy Bible.

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DEDICATION

To people of integrity and diligence.
To students who strive for excellence.
To proponents of truth and morality.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The way the series of books by Kelicha Ochonogor is turning out, she is evidently bent on compelling a devoted reading audience. Weaving Bible teachings into a storyline has been the practice of many renowned Christian writers, and using secular themes to achieve that purpose is increasingly becoming the forte of this author. And I hail her candour!

As she explained to me at the start of this work, "I am keen at educating our children, youth and all else on the dangers of living a lie." She meant to do all she could with her works to stop people, young and old, from indulging in all shades of examination malpractices which she sees as a prelude to a life of deceit, fraud and corruption – a plague we all abhor in our present existence.

Her storyline is purely fiction, with no person or persons in mind; which makes all the names and institutions in *A Shadow in the Shade* coincidental, mere fictions and the figment of the author's robust and fertile imagination. There is neither any attempt at denigrating anyone person, tribe, institution, religion, nor has the writer any claim to any knowledge of any particular cheat or criminal.

A Shadow in the Shade is intended as a didactic exposé of the brutal consequences of any criminal activity. "Judgment is inevitable," the author is saying, a theme that is consistent with Ezekiel 18:4, "...the soul that sinneth, it shall die."

But the author is concerned even more about people that are currently trapped in the habit of cheating not to resign to the evil practice, but to come to a forgiving God in repentance and finding mercy, so that God's power of grace will help them to change their ways. This idea of hope for the penitent is therefore superior in the mind of the author than the damnation or harsh consequence of habitual sinning.

As Christian Book editor, I particularly delight in Ochonogor's theme in this book. I find it quite interesting and worthy of my editorial dexterity. As you read *A Shadow in the Shade*, therefore, judge me if I am wrong. What I'm sure about is that you will feel sorry for some of the characters in the book, some you will vehemently condemn, and others you will retain hope for, and even pray for their future prosperity.

Happy reading!

John Oseh

Managing Editor

International Christian Book Network (ICBN), Lagos.

Chapter 1

A JOURNEY INTO GRACE

How much God wants all acts of evil scrapped from the world is not in doubt, but getting all wicked people killed at once is not His immediate solution to the criminalities we see around us. What God has done and has been doing is provide everyone in the world the opportunity to change their ways and escape eternal damnation, which is the final consequence of the acts of evil.

Pity though, not everyone is listening to God. The world over, there are more people who are recalcitrant about their acts of evil, and would not stop though God had repeatedly warned them about the harsh consequences of their evils. That explains why there are still people who continue to be cheats despite moral and civil laws against cheating, whether in examinations or in general relationships, the dire consequences of the evil notwithstanding.

The story in this book concerns several people who have been sucked into a life of fraud, exam malpractice, cheating and falsifying documents to secure high grades throughout primary and secondary school. Now in university, they find ready accomplices, and the circle widens. For one, Sikira (not her real name), doesn't seem to have started cheating intentionally, initially that is. But her attempt to hide her crime over time has spun a true criminal intent and conditioned in her a lifestyle that shows not just a criminal pattern but also an unrepentant disposition. Right now, Sikira has lost her innocence; she can no more be exonerated from the crime.

The Dilemma of a Reader

As we read the story of Sikira and her associates in crime, the challenge that confronts us is what to do with them.

- Can we draw on our human sympathy for Sikira and co?
- Can we let them go free?
- An offence is an offence, an offender is guilty by law; but what's God's verdict on the matter?
- Is there any hope for the likes of Sikira before God?

First, there is the Scriptural teaching on Pardon, Justification and Freedom from guilt and the final eternal penalty of evil doing. As we shall see, it's all conditioned on REPENTANCE – a doctrine of the Bible that opens the door for everyone to enter into the life of grace and rest from all conflicts with God.

Hope for the Penitent

Wherever Sikira and her friends are now, they should read this and understand that God hates no one, not even those who have sinned against Him.

That may surprise you; but it's true.

It is true that God does not hate you, not even the vilest of offenders. It is because many offenders like Sikira tend to think, erroneously though, that God hates them, that God wants them in hell, that their sins are too many and unpardonable, that nothing can change their present state of enmity with God; these sort of thinking are the reasons certain people have abandon themselves to their evil practices.

But that's a very scary thing to do; to surrender and resign oneself to a life of doing bad things because one has lost hope of redemption. I can assure that no one is beyond redemption, at least not from the side of God. There is absolutely no one who repents – a word that needs clear explanation – that God rejects or turns back. Everyone who repents gets pardoned, forgiven and made anew to start a clean life with the help of God.

How else can I make this clear to you that God loves even the vilest sinner and wants to demonstrate this love by forgiving all your past sins – whatever they are! I mean just that: whatever your past sins may have been they are in God's list of pardonable sins!

The proof of God's willingness to forgive all sins is couched in various verses of the Bible; all of which are expressions of His love. God the Father expresses this love. God the Son, Jesus Christ expresses this love; and so does God the Holy Spirit expresses this love.

When in Isaiah 1:18, for instance, God the Father says to the sinner, *“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool,”* it is His expression of love to forgive and save the sinner who repents

and puts his trust in Him. Yes, your sins may be as “scarlet”, they become “as white as snow” when God is done with you that moment you penitently repent.

Jesus Christ, as God the Son, takes cue of pardon and forgiveness from the heavenly Father when in Matthew 11:28 He invites all that have sinned to come receive forgiveness and pardon. *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* Here, Jesus repeats the same invitation God gives: “Come”. He calls the sinner – whoever, and no matter the sins committed – to come to Him. He has forgiveness and pardon to give the penitent and grant him or her full justification, forgiveness and cleansing from all past wrongs (1 John 1:9).

You need to know that God the Holy Spirit did no less. He too gave similar invitation to all sinners, offenders, lawbreakers and everyone who by sin had fallen, condemned, dejected and eagerly awaited by the devil to drop into hell. *“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely”* (Revelation 22:17). It is the same word “Come”!

As you read this, you may wonder at the Triune disposition of love toward the sinner. *“As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live...”* (Ezekiel 33:11). All God requires from everyone who had sinned is Repentance: a 180-degree turn from following the devil and his ways, and turning to God confessing all sins with a set heart to sin no more.

Wherever Sikira, Nkiru, Bayo, Isiak and their cohorts are reading this, let them know that God gains nothing by condemning any of them. He has no pleasure killing or putting anyone in hell. God wants their sins removed and their hearts purged. He wants their guilt removed and the burden of their sins offloaded from their hearts.

It is for this purpose God gave Jesus Christ to all humanity so that all who believe in Him might be saved. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God”* (John 3:16-18).

Abounding Testimonies

Across the world today, many have repented from their sins, put their faith in God, received Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour, and have been saved; their past sins forgiven, their hearts purged and granted divine power that broke the power of sin from their lives. Yours sincerely is a recipient of such mercy of God.

I was not born a Christian – no one was. Like everyone else, I was born a sinner, not a saint. As David states in Psalm 51:5 on behalf of all of us, *“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”*

Indeed *“all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). From time immemorial, this has been the verdict of God concerning everyone born into this world. Psalm 14:2-3 makes God’s verdict clear: *“The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”*

By the sin of humanity, no one can of himself or herself escape the damnation of death and hell. *“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Romans 6:23). But I thank God because, though all have sinned, and no one can save himself, God through Jesus Christ has given me the gift of eternal life. I did nothing to merit this gift. God gave it to me as proof of His love and acceptance when I repented from my sins and received Jesus into my heart.

I believe that the likes of Sikira can also receive God’s pardon, forgiveness, justification, cleansing from all sinful habits and immoral lifestyle like many others have received God’s pardon. I sincerely believe that any sinner can be saved – I mean right now – if they truly repent and turn their lives over to Jesus Christ who died to save humanity.

A Call to All

As you read the story of Sikira, Nkiru, Bayo and their ilk, your attention may be drawn to happenings in your own life. I sincerely hope that you would see your own need of God’s pardon and forgiveness. Nkiru, Bayo and all accomplices of Sikira need to humble themselves, see the evil in their

conducts, yield to Jesus in true repentance. There is certainty that the penitent will receive forgiveness for their sins and obtain salvation of their souls.

Truth be told, it's not as if you have a better option anyway. How far can a sinner run? Can Sikira, Nkiru or Bayo run forever? They may escape criminal justice for a while, but who runs from God and succeeds?

Chapter 2

A DANGLING SWORD

MAIN CHARACTERS

1. *Rev. Azimbe Aduka, pastor of True Redemption Church, Ikotun, Lagos.*
2. *Police Inspector Nurudeen Kiari (father of Sikira)*
3. *Police Constable Douglas Ajamu*
4. *WAEC Exam Officer James Obi*
5. *Exam Invigilator Mrs Muyiwa Adams*
6. *Faari School Principal Ndubisi Kanugwu*
7. *Dean, Faculty of Social Science, University of Ulam, Prof. Etuk Etinan*
8. *Head of Department of Philosophy, University of Ulam, Dr. Essien Etiene*
9. *Senior Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, University of Ulam, Dr. Mabel Otito*
10. *Students of University of Ulam: Erastus Madugo, Sikira Kiari, Nkiru Mbosi, Bayo Asunda, Edwin Ojukwu. Bethel Ife, Isiak Zaari, Mabel Aziza, Nnena Otubulu, Gladys Brown, Darlington Asuquo and Ndukwa Amulekwu.*

Prof Etuk Etinan has finally decided to report his discovery to the University Senate about Miss Nkiru Mbosi's reported cheating to secure admission into the University of Ulam and her disqualification from her studies. The search for cheats like Nkiru is a common procedure at the University of Ulam.

Until lately when computers and other gadgets for digital processing of candidates were installed in the relevant offices, the previous manual processing of candidates seeking admission into the university had been cumbersome and could drag on for several months, if not years, to crosscheck and verify qualifying results and certificates presented by candidates from different examination bodies and institutions across the country and overseas.

On many occasions, some students are discovered to have fictitious results and certificates; and it does not matter what level of studies they have attained, they are usually automatically disqualified and expelled from the

university. There have been many such instances at the University of Ulam; some of the culprits have even reached third or fourth year of studies before their crimes were discovered. And for those who even reached their final year of studies and are even scoring high grades, their dismissal is just as swift as others who are not pulling their weights academically. No one is spared; because, the university thrives on a motto of integrity and diligence.

The latest verification of results and certificates presented by the current Year 2 students for admission has been most successful, and that early too. The process benefitted from the automation of the Admission Office which now has digital and computer systems and other such gadgets other than the previous analogue procedures.

Also, unlike previously when verification took so long, the Internet with many search engines like Google, UC, Microsoft, Mozilla Firefox among other such browsers, have helped to speed up the process. That is why, unlike the past when the actual status of students will not be verified until their third or fourth year at the university, verification of the current second-year students have been concluded even before the end of the first semester.

As part of the verification exercise and to ensure thoroughness, the reports are first sent to the respective faculties, with the list of the students accepted each department, and those with questionable credentials who are to be dismissed. Each faculty then takes up each case for further investigation. Only the report of this second verification is presented to the university Senate – the highest decision-making authority of the university – for appropriate action.

As Dean of the Faculty of Social Science, Prof Etinan has personally supervised the second verification exercise of the affected students in the To-be-Dismissed list from the Admission Office. With all documents carefully checked, fifteen students in the faculty have been implicated in admission infractions. Some cases are minor, involving irregular spelling of student names, or adjusted birth certificates, or high grades in subjects other than the ones required for the courses offered in the faculty.

Apparently, none other cases have rankled Prof Etinan as the brazen act of blatant falsification of results attributed to both Miss Sikira Kiari, and Miss Nkiru Mbose, both students of Mass Communication.

As part of the second verification exercise, Miss Kiari had been invited to explain the discrepancies in her West African Examination Council senior secondary school examination result compared to the subjects offered at her secondary school, Faari Secondary School, Funtua, Katsina State, during the two years leading to her graduation. According to the School Principal Ndubisi Kanugwu, the school did not offer French, yet Sikira's WAEC results had a C4 credit pass in French. The school also did not offer Government but History. Yet she had A2 in Government in her WAEC result. Her claim that she took private lessons in those subjects could not be verified.

As for Miss Nkiru Mbosi, the matter is with the very WAEC certificate she presented for admission. It was forged, as the examination body, according to its Exam Record Officer, James Obi, has no record of her name against the subjects listed. The only record WAEC had of a Miss Nkiru Mbosi was for the General Certificate Examination of October-November 2013. Even at that, the certificate presented to the university was doctored; whereas WAEC record showed four created passes, two P7 passes and Absence in Biology and Government, meaning she did not present herself for both papers; the certificate Nkiru presented for admission had the correct Registration and Exam numbers, but recorded seven credit passes and P7 for Biology.

Prof Etinan is cocksure that Nkiru deliberately falsified her GCE results to gain admission into the university.

During the second verification of results, Nkiru's whereabouts suddenly become a mystery; she could not be found anywhere.

Did she get wind of what was afoot and absconded to save face?

But the exercise, both at the Admission Office and the Faculty had been most discreet; the handlers have been most professional. That Nkiru supposedly knew of the university's finding beforehand can only mean that she was well connected.

But who is aiding her?

Chapter 3

AN INNOCENT CHEAT

Sikira Kiari had been Nkiru's friend since their first year at the Department of Mass Communication, University of Ulam. It all started when Nkiru observed that Sikira was confused about the registration process on Day 1 of resumption at the university, and offered to help her complete her registration. Nkiru had seen Sikira standing by the door of the Department of Mass Communication office, somewhat jittery and looking worried.

"Hi," Nkiru had approached Sikira who was standing by the door of the department office, looking askance. "My name is Nkiru Mbosi. Are you new in the university?" When Sikira nodded, Nkiru continued. "I am too. Are you having difficulty with your registration?" Again Sikira nodded. "I can help you," Nkiru offered, smiling in a friendly way that Sikira liked.

"I am Sikira Kiari. Actually, I am confused about many things about the courses in the registration form," Sikira said, somewhat surprised at how gorgeous and self-confident Nkiru portrayed herself. She marvelled how a Jambeetos – as the newly admitted female students are called around the campus – could be so relaxed when she was not. "Are you done with your own registration?"

"Yes, I have a friend, a Year 3 student who helped me. I can help you too," Nkiru offered.

Not only did Nkiru help Sikira with her registration, she was willing to offer her more help to pass those courses should Sikira need the help.

"I've been told about some of the courses," Nkiru volunteered. "Those on Communication Theory have aspects that are related to Physics and Mathematics. Are you good in Math and Physics?" Nkiru asked Sikira.

"Do they do Math and Physics in Mass Communication?" Sikira wondered aloud, squinted her eyes, with her right jaw twitching, which indicated some fright.

"Don't worry," Nkiru assured Sikira, trying to make it sound that no matter the problem it would be handled.

Done with the registration process finally, Sikira was grateful about Nkiru's offer to introduce her to her friend in the third level who offers tutorial to new students at little or no fee at all.

It wasn't until the second week before Sikira met Bayo Asunda, a broad shouldered guy whose stubs show he does not keep his beard but does not shave every day.

Bayo does not look like a lady's guy, blinking his eyes so rapidly as though emotionally unstable. He had no direct gaze at the person he is having a conversation with. He looks very innocent though, but with a tinge of fright in his eyes. Sikira was wondering how such a dull looking guy could be so intelligent as Nkiru claimed.

"I'll be glad to help you with any of the courses," Bayo was finally saying to Sikira after she expressed fear about understanding the first lecture she attended the day before. "You don't need to worry about passing Dr Mabel Otito's courses, whether you understand the lectures or not. We have our way around here," he sounded so confident about what to do, even though his exterior portrays him as no brainy.

"What is giving Bayo such confidence about passing those courses?" Sikira asked Nkiru next day after they left the MCOM 104 class on The History of Mass Communication. The story part of the course she liked, but the dates of events are a little mixed up in her mind.

"Leave that to Bayo," Nkiru reassures Sikira. "Bayo will do anything for me and whoever I recommend. He likes me."

Indeed so, Bayo Asunda, a third-year student of the same department had known and liked the gorgeous Nkiru from their neighbourhood at Ikotun, Lagos where he had persuaded her the year before to apply to the University of Ulam to study Mass Communication, promising to help her settle in quickly.

"While I'm there, you have no problems," Bayo had promised, in hope that Nkiru would accept his attraction to her.

Bayo had noticed Nkiru when he returned home on holiday two years previous. On enquiry about her, he had learnt that her parents had just moved into the neighbourhood but the girl had been in boarding school and was home only briefly too. Bayo had a friend on the same block house where Nkiru's parents lived. He had then taken to visiting his friend more frequently than he was used to so to get close to Nkiru.

“Hi, are you done with secondary school,” Bayo had shouted to Nkiru from a distant the first time he had opportunity to talk directly with her.

“No, almost. What about you?” Nkiru has answered without stopping or slowing her stride toward her apartment.

“Already at Ulam,” Bayo shouted after her.

Nkiru slowed down somewhat just before entering her flat, turned to face Bayo and said, “Interesting,” and vanished indoors.

“That is a good sign,” Bayo thought, and refused to be hopeful even when James, his friend, told him not to waste his time on the girl. “She is snobbish,” James had said.

Bayo then noticed that Nkiru had taken to sitting in front of her flat at the times Bayo visited James. It was clear to Bayo that the lady wanted to continue their conversation.

A while later, it was Nkiru who shouted across the distance to Bayo, “What are you studying at Ulam?” The conversation had matured thereafter, but Nkiru continued to be aloof Bayo finally persuaded her to apply to Ulam, and to read Mass Communication like him.

Then since her admission into the university Nkiru had pulled close to Bayo, rather than the other way round, strengthening his hope that by giving Nkiru whatever she wants he would finally possess her.

The first test of Bayo’s ability came when both Nkiru and Sikira faced their first Term Paper challenge. It was their most feared lecturer, Dr. Mabel Otitu, who had seemed to dislike many of the female students in her class.

“I have noticed that some of you are not paying good attention in class,” Dr. Otitu had announced that morning the moment she stepped into the class. She was not smiling, not as if she smiled a lot; that morning she seemed harangued, perhaps a hangover from inadequate sleep the previous night.

“Maybe she’s having a mood swing,” Sikira suggested to Nkiru trying to explain what she thought was Dr. Otitu’s attitude that day. “We are women, and know the feeling, especially in our special periods –”

“It’s not that,” Nkiru interrupted Sikira. “That woman is wicked. A sadist. She gave that assignment on purpose because of some of us. She just does not understand our age difference. She hates us having a good time as girls, and just does not figure out that just two months into the semester some of us have not settled down for academic work. She ought to know that we have not

yet understood the course. Giving us an assignment now is her way of punishing us for being more beautiful than her.”

Sikira was not sure of her friend’s assessment of Dr. Otito’s demeanour. In her case the problem is different. She hadn’t understood the course at all, not because she spent her time doing make up or going to parties the way Nkiru delighted in those things; her problem is purely her inability to comprehend the terms used in the course.

For instance, when Dr. Otito reels out words like “conceptualizing communication, interpersonal influence, communication stimuli, audience predisposition, and opinion change,” all terms that the lecturer variously used in explaining Communication Theory, a course Sikira didn’t like anyway, she often felt lost, and merely gazed at the board to appear to be concentrating on the lecture. Sikira understood nothing!

Nkiru was slightly different. She understood almost anything any lecturer would say if only she could focus her mind on the lecture. But she was ever restless. Her handbag was always bulging with what she called “my kit”. She never seemed to be satisfied with her looks. Even though she wore heavy make up before leaving her room, she always had stuff – different kinds – in her handbag that she sprayed on her hair, applied to her face, especially her lips, even in class. She did so sometimes discretely while the lecture was on or when the lecturer wasn’t looking; sometimes brazenly without a care of who was in class.

Once when Dr. Otito saw Nkiru brushing her hair in class she furiously warned her never to do that again if she wanted to remain a student in her class. Though Nkiru obediently stopped what she was doing and put away her hair brush, Nkiru had on her face a defiant mien that got other classmates worried for her. That day she had explained to Sikira did her makeup always to be sure she was ready at anytime for the photographers on campus who could snap her pictures any moment for the *Campus Vogue* magazine. “I’m looking forward to earning some money by that,” she said.

“But if you’re so bothered about passing the term paper, why don’t you ask Bayo to help you,” Nkiru presently said to Sikira, “after all, he promised to help you with any challenge you have.”

“But how would he know what the lecturer wants, he wasn’t there when Dr. Otitu mentioned that she wants to see our explanations of those...em...em; what did she call them?”

“Terms that Prof Robert Craig of the University of Colorado used in his theory of communication,” Nkiru offered.

“Yes, that’s it.” Sikira remembered. “But if you already know that, why don’t you do your assignment yourself?” she asked Nkiru.

“Why should I waste my precious time doing a stupid assignment when Bayo can do it for me; after all, he is taking me out this evening, and should be made to pay for it.”

That part of Bayo’s deals was new to Sikira. “I thought he only collects money. Does he use people?”

“He uses nobody. He is interested in me. And I allow him to some extent. In fact, I’m the one using him. Before he graduates next year I want to get as much help from him before he leaves the university.”

Sikira did not understand to what extent Nkiru allowed Bayo, but she felt uncomfortable about the prospect of Bayo making any such demands from her. She had never liked Bayo as a guy, only that his offer to help with her course demands is making him so relevant to her.

“How much does Bayo charge for assignments like this?” Sikira asked Nkiru, not for want of money, since her father kept her well supplied with cash; she wanted to know if other than money Bayo places other demands.

“Don’t let that bother you. There is not you would be asked that you can’t afford,” Nkiru assured her. “Bayo is a cool guy.”

Before Bayo visited and handed Sikira the scripts of her Term Paper that weekend, she had called and asked Nkiru that if Bayo did both their scripts in a way the lecturer wouldn’t detect their similarity.

“Don’t worry,” Nkiru had said. “Bayo has his team. Different people work for him. He must have given yours to someone very competent as well. That’s why he charges very high. He pays the others well.” Nkiru also revealed that only her own work Bayo does himself.

Chapter 4

THE STORY OF LONG AGO

Sikira's roommate at Mary Slessor Hall, Bethel Ife, studies English, and had found Sikira more likeable than the four other mates with whom they share their six-man room. Sikira is from Katsina State, and her maternal cousin, Isiak Zaari, is Bethel's course mate. He is very funny, and when he visits Sikira in their room, he is fond of making the girls laugh and laugh. Bethel likes him because he is not only playful and popular but appears brilliant too.

The day Dr. Orito returned the marked term paper to the class, she had remarked to Sikira, "Brilliant! Somehow I didn't know you write that well." She had scored her 72%. Sikira smiled shyly but said nothing. She had called Isiak that evening and elatedly reported the result of her first term paper and the remarks of the lecturer. Somewhat taken aback, Isiak offered to visit her that evening in her room to see things for himself.

"*Asalamalekun*," Isiak announced at the door to signal his arrival after he had knocked twice. Usually, any of the girls in the room would open the door to Isiak. They all liked him, not only because he was friendly; they often felt comfortable with him because Isiak was very modest, and related well with them all like a relative. This time, Sikira was alone with Bethel in the room when Isiak arrived.

"*Lekunsalam*," Sikira answered from within and opened the door, beaming with smile. She said something in Hausa that made Isiak to giggle.

As Isiak stepped in, he saw Bethel at her reading table poring over a book. They had walked out together after their 4pm to 5pm lecture that evening and he seemed to understand Bethel's concentration in her work. She only said "Hi Isiak" without raising her head from her book as he came in.

"Are you already on it?" he asked Bethel. He meant the *Wuthering Heights*, a recommended European Literature text they were to treat the following week in class.

"I need to. Jane Austin annoy me with her twisting English," Bethel said. "I don't get to read and understand her as fast as I do other modern writers. Better to start early before you smart guys overtake me in class."

True, Isiak hadn't started to read any of the recommended high volume literatures. But whenever he does, he was sure to consume Jane Austin as he does other voluminous texts.

"I've not started reading yet, I hope to begin reading Sunday morning," Isiak said.

"But I thought you'll be going to church with us on Sunday morning," Bethel teased him.

"If you pray hard enough I sure would. But you are sure not praying enough," Isiak was his usual humorous self.

In another half hour the room was complete as one after the other Mabel Aziza, Nnena Otubulu, Gladys Brown and Ndukwa Amulekwu arrived. Everyone was happy to see Isiak in the room, and the girls really do not mind changing their clothes in their respective tiny corners in the room. They knew Isiak would not deliberately look in their direction. Even if he did, they girls almost equally regard him like a brother.

The convivial atmosphere in the room whenever Isiak was around left no room for the private talk with Sikira, which was the intent of Isiak.

Finally, at about 9pm, it was time to go, and Isiak said goodbye to the girls, deliberately asking aloud for Sikira to see him off, so the other girls would not bother to come along.

"Your news about your Term Paper result was interesting. How did you manage that?" Isiak asked Sikira.

He was asking because since Junior Secondary School 3, back home in Funtua, Isiak, among other people he knew about, had often helped Sikira to push papers and pass exams for her till she finally graduated from secondary school with a score he know too well about. Her admission into the university didn't quite come as a surprise since her father made sure of it.

"How do you mean?" Sikira asked quizzically. "I did it, and passed with a 72% score. The lecturer was very pleased and actually used the word "Brilliant" to commend me."

"Somebody helped you. Tell me the truth!" Isiak said this rather forcefully, turning to face Sikira and looking straight in her eyes.

She held his gaze for only a few seconds, and faced down.

"Yes, you are correct; someone helped me," she said in a voice laden with a mixture of shame and sense of helplessness. "But what could I have done?"

she asked rhetorically. "I didn't understand the course. I told Papa about it and he advised that I get whatever help I can get at whatever cost. So I did."

"Who helped you?" Isiak persisted.

"I can't tell you. It's not as you think," Sikira protested, her voice a little raised. "There is a team of senior students in Year 3 and final year who help students like me to do their class assignments and pass exams. I only know one of them and the classmate who introduced me to him. I only paid a few thousands of naira, and nothing else."

"Okay," Isiak said softening his gaze on Sikira's face. "I only want to be sure you are okay and that you do nothing to bring shame on the family."

When Sikira had called to inform her father only two weeks after lectures had started that she wasn't getting the teachings properly and requested for more money to get some help, her father did not ask what sort of help she was talking about. He seemed to know there are people his daughter, an only girl, had found at the University of Ulam who could help her with her difficulties and pass her exams at some fee.

Nothing was new anyway; they had been on this a long time since he insisted on having Sikira decorated with a university degree in hope, that first, she would be made a commissioner in Katsina State, before getting her a federal political appointment in Abuja in the near future.

That day the father, Police Inspector Nurudeen Kiari, had simply asked, "How much do you want?" The amount she requested for one assignment was three times more than what Bayo had demanded for five Term Papers. And the money was posted via e-banking in less than two minutes. She knew her father would waste no time, so the credit alert from her bank didn't surprise her. Right now, though, the behaviour of her cousin, Isiak, is beginning to piss her off.

"Look, Isiak," she finally said to him after what seemed like endless awkward moments, "I know you are concerned for me. But sometimes you need to understand that we are all grownups now, and just like you, I also know what is good for me. And you don't have to watch over me as though I can do nothing on my own."

"Sira," Isiak called to her in a mild voice. This was a special and fond way Isiak had called Sikira from childhood. "I do not mean to offend you."

That's it. Whenever Isiak uses that name for Sikira, the special endearment between them worked like magic on her. He is her favourite cousin, and had helped her immensely over the years with his exceptional academic brilliance. When fortune smiled on her and they sat side-by-side to write their joint admission and matriculation (JAMB) exam earlier that year, it was certain she would pass with his help.

"I'm sorry I sounded offended," Sikira spoke in equally low and sympathetic voice. Isiak was just as touched as she intended.

He reached for her two hands and firmed his grip a little.

All of that was three semesters ago. Whether by crook, apparently not by any dint of academic work, both Nkiru and Sikira had scaled their first year at the department of Mass Communication. They got into the second year of their four-year course and hoped to ride whatever storm they would face till they successfully graduate.

Chapter 5

THE RISING STORM

Bethel was a devoted Christian and had returned from the campus fellowship one evening looking very sad. Meeting Isiak in their room talking with Sikira and two others of their roommates, Bethel greeted them all, but rather casually and unlike before. She dropped the books in her hand rather listlessly on her bed and quickly turned to leave the room.

Everyone noticed that Bethel was distraught about something; but what? No one knew. She was not in the mood for discussions or the laughter that usually enwrapped the girls whenever Isiak was there. As Bethel made for the door to go out, Sikira wanted to know what the matter was.

“Haba! Bethel,” Sikira spoke to stop Bethel leaving the room. I know you have no other class to attend this night. You just came from your fellowship; where could you be hurrying to now?”

“I’m sorry,” Bethel hesitated. “I thought not to disturb anyone, I’m just a little not myself this evening.”

“Did somebody die,” this was Mabel Aziza, one of the girls in the room renowned for her down-to-earth, straight-to-the-point manners.

“Nobody died, but what happened makes me feel so,” Bethel said, still standing by the door. But her sombre mien had permeated the atmosphere in the room, and everyone became attentive.

The story Bethel told the three girls and Isiak changed the mood in the room.

“Something happened,” Bethel tried to explain. “My fellowship lost one of our brothers who we all had got so pleasantly used to.”

“But you said no one died?” This was Mabel again, sounding alarmed and rising from her sitting position on her bed.

The other girls and Isiak were shocked too and gazed at Bethel expecting an answer.

“No. No one died,” Bethel finally killed the suspense after what looked like a tensed moment. “He left the school, gave up his studies voluntarily because he cheated to pass the qualifying examination for admission into the university.”

“What do you mean he voluntarily left; you mean he was not caught?” Mabel asked sounding very bemused.

There was an unusual quietness in the room thereafter. Only Mabel was asking all the questions. And the more answers Bethel provided the deeper the sword of guilt pierced Sikira’s heart. Isiak seem to know how deeply wounded Sikira was feeling.

“I don’t understand,” Mabel said to no one in particular. “If he was not caught cheating, why did he have to report himself?”

“It’s a long story. At resumption of this semester,” Bethel began to explain, “my fellowship invited a guest preacher, one Rev. Azimbe Aduka, the pastor of True Redemption Church, Ikotun, Lagos, who happened to be an alumnus of this university, and a past president of our campus fellowship when he was here. His message that day was “A Shadow in the Shades”. I have never heard a message so fiery as that all my life. The whole fellowship was touched.”

Though everyone in the room listened to Bethel, it appeared she was talking to Mabel only now. Sikira was sitting on her bed but with a fixed gaze on her fingers which were not moving. She was askance, distant and seemed lost in a worrying thought. Isiak too was looking straight on over Sikira’s side table where he sat astride a chair with both arms resting on the back rest of the chair.

“I understand the exco of the fellowship invited Pastor Aduka,” Bethel continued, “to warn the believers against the danger of exam malpractice and to state the evil inherent in living a lie. It is not only God who will punish the evil of any such act, the devil who lurks in the shades is ever eager to pounce on any unwary sinner to destroy their souls by sudden death and destruction in hell.”

“Oh, oh, oh!” Nnena Otubulu, the other girl in the room who hadn’t spoken a word since, raised her hand in a sudden gust of realization. “You mean the student who cheated was there at the fellowship that day and heard the preacher. Then, rather than wait for the judgment of God to fall on him, or for Satan to destroy him, he volunteered to report himself and forfeit his admission and studies in this university?”

“You see!” Mabel raised her two hands in a show of exasperation, as she turned from the door where Bethel was still standing, to return to her sitting position on her bed. “That is what happens when preachers come to those

fellowships you attend to frighten innocent students with Judgment Day, Hell, Fire and Brimstone sermons.”

“But it’s the word of God,” Bethel protested.

“What word of God?” Nnena’s aversion for holiness preaching was not new. Severally in their room, she had engaged Bethel with impassioned arguments about the non-existence of Hell. “Hell is in this world,” she would vehemently say, and stress that the way one lived in the world constituted heaven or hell. “Those who suffer in poverty in this world are in hell. That’s why the Bible says money answereth all things. Those who don’t have money suffer a lot. That’s their hell. If you have money, and I don’t care by whatever means you get it, you enjoy life, which is heaven for you.”

While Mabel and Nnena posited their understanding of heaven and hell, and Bethel refused to be drawn into their sacrilegious arguments, Sikira and Isiak remained quiet and seated where they had been. Only Mabel and Nnena kept talking.

A while after Bethel had finally left the room, and Mabel and Nnena had tired themselves with their versions of the ethics of wrong doing and restitution, Isiak finally said something in Hausa to Sikira, and got up to leave the room.

Chapter 6

A CHOICE TO MAKE

The news had spread like wild fire. Edwin Ojukwu, a final year student of Philosophy, a recent convert to Christ and now member of the Ulam Varsity Christian Fellowship (UVCF) had just left the university, foregoing all four years studies. He said he had to seek proper admission to a university other than Ulam.

The story was that he had cheated at both his WAEC and Admission exams five years earlier, and had now realized his action was wrong, his admission was false, and could no longer bottle up his guilt. He had personally reported his moral infractions, making restitution, as he described his moral action; and the university had responded by withdrawing his studentship.

Bethel, whose minor course was Philosophy and had recently sought help from Edwin to explain to her the principles of inductive reasoning and syllogism – both aspects of her course in Logic – had been most distraught about Edwin leaving the university. She was not sad because of the good response of Edwin to the conviction of the Holy Spirit in his heart; she was sad because Edwin had started to be a sweet member of the fellowship, and, as it were, a lot of the brethren had begun to miss him.

Until about a week after resumption at school in the current semester, Edwin had lived all his previous 24 years without God in his heart. At the special Welcome Fellowship when students returned from the long vacation about two months earlier, Edwin was among the new comers to the campus fellowship. He had spent the holiday with his parents at Enugu, and as he told the story, his mother had urged on him to start attending church again.

Apparently, he had attended church with his religious mother from childhood. But at secondary school, Edwin had lost interest in church after some of his peers – majority of whom attended no church on Sundays – lured him into activities that preoccupied him. It wasn't long before the residue of interest he had in God vanished; then he plunged into acts and conducts he knew were against God, but he didn't care.

"I joined my friends to smoke cigarette," Edwin said in fellowship when he gave testimony of his salvation awhile later after he started attending the

fellowship fairly regularly. “Later, I was introduced to snuffing certain hard drugs.”

Of course Edwin ended up a failure at his WAEC exams. He had credit passes in just two subjects – Government and Economics – and ordinary passes in four other subjects, failing the rest. None of his close friends made it either. They largely failed too. Alladin, the only mate that had six credit passes at the exam did so, apparently, because his father, a soldier, prevented him leaving the house throughout the exam period; so he would read his books, voluntarily or by force. His father had threatened him with severe punishment if he failed.

For Edwin, his poor WAEC result was a wake-up call. He knew he could attend no higher institution in the country with his mere two credit passes. He wanted to withdraw from his friends and try to retake the general certificate of education (GCE) exam. While he thought of that, Muko, one of his friends who equally failed his WAEC visited one evening to show him something.

It was a forged WAEC certificate with his name clearly printed on it.

“How come?” Edwin had asked Muko who explained that someone did it for him. He was told though that he could only seek employment with the certificate where the ruse may never be detected or take decades to detect. But if he presented it for admission into a higher institution he risked being detected quickly. Muko had accepted to forego university education and seek employment in Lagos with the forged certificate. He made good his word and soon left Enugu for Lagos.

Unwilling to abandon his desire for higher education, Edwin said he opted to register for the GCE exam and try to pass the exam by whatever means possible. So when someone told him of “Expo”, the leaked WAEC examination question papers, which are worked and distributed to willing buyers, Edwin had easily fallen for it.

He sourced the money and paid his way to acquiring the leaked papers and their answers, which he sneaked into the exam hall and presented to the WAEC invigilator.

The malpractice was so concealed the WAEC invigilators at his exam centre saw nothing and reported nothing, thanks to a well organised scheme that made them look the other way while the exam malpractice was being perpetrated by the select candidates who adequately greased the palms of the go-betweens.

When the results were released a few months later, Edwin had been elated to have obtained three A's and five credit passes, a good score for university admission.

At the time, it didn't matter to Edwin that he never truly wrote those subjects nor passed any by his own effort. Although the whole arrangement made it impossible for WAEC to disclaim the results, but deep down in his heart, Edwin knew the excellent GCE results were not truly his.

To make amend, he thought to better prepare for the university admission exams (JAMB) and the post-Jamb by the university of his choice. He thought not to go for a highly competitive course that would require higher scores at both exams. His choice of Philosophy from the JAMB Brochure was not because he knew anything about the course nor knew where it would lead him.

He did pass the JAMB exam by his own effort, barely scaling the minimum pass mark of 200 score. He also passed the post-Jamb and his joy knew no bounds when he was admitted to read Philosophy at the University of Ulam. His parents were happy too, unaware of his shaky foundation at the WAEC level. All of that was four years ago.

At the university ever since, Edwin had taken his studies fairly seriously, applying his heart to his lectures and private studies, accumulating a scattering of A's and mostly B passes. At his final year he had a cumulative grade point average (GPA) that sat him comfortably at second class upper grade. He looked forward to graduating soon and securing a job that would start for him the good life of a graduate. At no time since those events five years ago did Edwin ruminated on his cheating to acquire the GCE scores he presented for admission into the university.

Two months into his first semester, fourth year course, he yielded to the plea of his mother that he should start going to church again. And just on cue, his roommate at Akpabio Hall, Darlington Asuquo, had been persuading him to attend the campus fellowship. That Sunday morning he yielded to the impulse to follow Darlington to the fellowship.

Though he felt nothing special at the service that day, he willingly attended the Bible Study on Tuesday. By Friday evening at about 7 o'clock he was at the Prayer meeting on his own. The following Sunday morning, without knowing

why, Edwin was up as early as 6 o'clock and began to prepare for church. He got there even before many of the regular members of the fellowship.

Whether it was the sermon of the day, or the singing and praying, Edwin could not make out what was happening to him. He sensed a deep pull in his heart toward God. When the service ended and people were leaving the Atlas Hall where the campus fellowship held its services, he could not move from his seat, nor did he want to go away. He felt the nudge to pray to God about his need of salvation.

How long Edwin was on his knee praying, he could not tell; but as he prayed, confessing his sins and calling on God to forgive him, his heart, like a fountain of love, yielded to God eagerly as he called on Jesus Christ to come into his heart immediately and be his Saviour.

By the time he felt relief in his spirit and ended his prayer, the sun had started to deep in the Eastern sky. It was evening already, but in his heart Edwin felt the day was bright like never before. The certainty of being born again, justified, with all his past sins forgiven and washed away in the blood of Jesus Christ was so clear in his heart, the feeling was strange to him. It gave him unspeakable joy.

He walked back briskly to his room hoping to find Darlington to relay the story of his salvation. Not finding Darlington, and suspecting he probably had gone to town as he often did on weekends to see his parents, Edwin went looking for any other member of the fellowship in his hall. Someone got him to see Bro. Erastus Madugo, the current president of the campus fellowship, a post-graduate student, who on hearing Edwin's story was so happy he prayed and prayed so long to appreciate what God had done for Edwin.

Since that glorious Sunday, two months earlier, Edwin had not just become a regular member of the campus fellowship, he also could not cease preaching Jesus Christ at the least opportunity around the campus. His joy was palpable. He had become such a challenge to other members of the fellowship that his testimony of salvation had been repeated from mouth to mouth as everyone liked and told it to others over and over again.

But the Sunday Rev. Azimbe Aduka preached on *A Shadow in the Shades* turned out to be a watershed. Many in the audience that night waited to see the preacher, including Edwin, who had waited for counselling how to correct the error of his past misdeed. He told the preacher that since the Sunday he

gave his life to Jesus, he had nursed a guilt that refused to go away from his heart. He recounted to Rev. Aduka how he cheated to acquire his GCE result with which he secured admission into the university, and how he sensed God asking him to obey Him and make his way right before Him.

Until that day, Edwin had not heard any specific teachings on the doctrine of Restitution. After hearing Rev. Aduka explain the doctrine very clearly, Edwin made up his mind to confess to his crime, report his misdeed to the university authorities, and even more critically, quit his studies and the University of Ulam.

Rev. Aduka, Bro Madugo and a few other exco members of the fellowship had gathered around and prayed for Edwin that Sunday before Edwin was to effect his plans the very next day Monday.

Rather than go for his lecture scheduled for 8 o'clock that Monday morning, Edwin first went to the office of the head of department, Dr. Essien Etiene. Not meeting him, because he had not arrived as his secretary stated to Edwin, he decided to wait outside at the corridor in front of the office.

His classmates who saw him standing outside the HOD's office rather than attending his lecture as they rushed to take the class, openly wondered at him.

A minute after 9am, as his lecturer left the lecture room and passing by, he saw Edwin standing by the department office and asked why he was not in his class.

"There's an urgent matter I need to see the HOD about, Sir," Edwin replied, leaving the lecturer walking away bemused.

The HOD arrived only five minutes before he was due for a lecture of his own at 10 o'clock. "I can't see anyone now he loudly told his secretary." Then facing Edwin who he figured was waiting to see him, said to him, "See me at 12 when I'm done with my classes," as the HOD entered his office.

Thereafter, Edwin neither attended his lectures in the intervening periods, nor went to his hostel. He went instead to the "Grotto", a secluded place behind the Engineering Faculty; it is so called because believers often resorted there to meditate and pray. There Edwin continued to pray until about ten minutes before noon.

The HOD carefully listened to Edwin. But rather than be angry at Edwin's infraction, the HOD told Edwin to return to his classes and say nothing to anyone until he called him again.

“Return to my class?” Edwin asked, somewhat confused.

“That’s what I said,” the HOD reiterated.

A week passed, and hearing nothing from the HOD, Edwin went again to him, but this time to announce he was quitting his course and returning home to prepare for the next GCE exam.

“I will seek fresh admission to another university, Sir,” Edwin said to his HOD who looked on but said nothing more.

Chapter 7

MEMORY OF THE LOST

The night Bethel told the story of Edwin to her roommates and Isiak, who was visiting Sikira that evening, was an epoch moment for both Sikira and Iziak. Both had realized that their shared secret shall one day be exposed, and they shall pay for their cheating escapades both at Faari Secondary School, Funtua, Katsina State and now at the University of Ulam where Sikira had found new accomplices still at large.

That night, Isiak had announced he was leaving. But rather unusually, Sikira did not get up from her seat on her bed to escort Iziak out. She sat there gazing rather blankly at the floor. She seemed like in a dream. What was playing back in her mind goes back from her childhood, from her primary and secondary school days.

She had not initially wanted to go to school. She wanted to help her mother to prepare and sell kunu, the local cereal drink her mother sold in the morning market near the central mosque at Funtua. But her father had a different agenda, and had insisted that she attended school by all means. She was among only a few girls in her primary school. Among those girls, aside Binta, the headmaster's daughter, none other girl could read or write any clear sentence at Primary 6.

They wrote no exam at the end of a term; they simply came to school, infuriated their teachers with pranks and noisily leave school when the closing bell rang.

Even at junior secondary school where they had been admitted without any entrance examination, she only began to catch the letters of the English alphabets, and to attempt stringing words to make simple statements at the close of junior secondary school 2; and that was because the school principal, a white woman, enforced strict rules about study and regular tests and examinations.

At Faari Senior Secondary School, Funtua where she was posted, things changed for her under the school principal, Mr Ndubisi Kanugwu.

"After a series of punishments for failing my tests," Sikira continued her reverie, "and after the school principal had warned my father not to come to

the school to demand special treatment for me, my mother persuaded Isiak's father, her older brother, to let Isiak come stay with us, and attend my school. We were age mates, and were in the same class. The idea was to have Isiak cover for me by whatever way he could be of help."

But whether Isiak's coming was ultimately a blessing or a curse for Sikira, she was not to know until the thought dawned on her recently.

Isiak was a wonder kid. He was funny but very brilliant. He could talk and listen at the same time. He had a magnetic brain and can easily grab things like a sponge. He wrote so fast, he could use one period of exam to complete two papers, and can vary his writing from his usual cursive style to the block style which was Sikira's style.

"During exam," Sikira remembered, "Isiak would produce two answer sheets, one for him and one for me. We always found ways to sit not far away from each other at those exams; so it was easy to slip to me the script meant for me while he kept the other for himself. We were never caught throughout our secondary school days."

Something mysterious however happened at Faari Secondary School just before Sikira and Isiak entered the final class, senior secondary school 3. The population of the school had become so large, the school was split in two; a set, which include Isiak, was taken to the new school while the rest of the students remained in the old school. The implication for Sikira was for her to sit up and read for her final WAEC exam all by herself or crash out of school.

With no influence whatsoever to sway the school procedures and arrangement, Sikira's father, Alhaji Nurudeen Kiari, came home one day and proposed a scheme that would help Sikira secure the relevant pass marks in her WAEC exam.

It worked, as a certificate was issued to her with subjects like Government and French which she had never done before. No one noticed the discrepancy.

With other manipulations and schemes her father expertly perpetrated, Sikira had finally entered the University of Ulam on the merit list. Isiak was admitted too, but to read English while Sikira was offered Mass Communication, a course that had sounded very strange to her from Day 1.

Then, since meeting Nkiru on her first day in university, just when she needed help to process her registration at the department's office, the trajectory of her life had taken a new twist.

She had first thought it was a twist of fortune when Bayo, a smart aleck, showed up and began to help her with her term papers, and even exams in all the instances when she had been able to sneak the papers Bayo gave her under her scarf into the exam.

All of that scheming had suddenly begun to evaporate; everything is nearing their end with the university speedily closing in on all exam cheats, past and present. For the first time, Sikira began to sense fear of her past and present life of lies. The weight of guilt pressed heavily on her heart the moment the import of Bethel's story of Edwin Ojukwu dawned on her.

The Ojukwu story has spurred the authorities of the university to intensify a campus-wide search for all exam cheats and admission scams. The vice chancellor is reported to have been so furious about reported preponderance of exam malpractices and admission corruption at the university, he had vowed to fish out all the culprits and bring them to justice.

The news of Edwin's repentance and restitution, his withdrawal from his studies, and his willingness to lose all four years of studies, had a mixed reaction from the university community.

Some students blamed the Christians who promoted the doctrines of Repentance, Restitution, Judgment Day, Heaven and Hell. And the chief offender in their eyes was the former President of the Ulam Varsity Campus Fellowship, the now Rev. Azimbe Aduka, pastor of True Redemption Church, Ikotun, Lagos.

He is blamed and labelled Fundamentalist preacher, Holiness preacher, Uncompromising preacher; all because his fiery message broaches no compromise or association with sinful conducts.

His name comes up with the Edwin Ojukwu's case as some have said the student would probably have gone on with his Christian life without making any restitution; and none of the present brouhaha about cheating and exam malpractices would have arisen.

Of course those with this view expressed fear that the Edwin saga was going to spark off a series of investigations into the admission documents submitted by many students, and many Pandora boxes are bound to open up.

There are others who praised the fiery preacher for his forthrightness, steadfastness, as stickler for truth and a faithful minister of God. On that score

they are proud to identify with the preacher as a product and former student of the University of Ulam.

Those with this favourable disposition are sympathetic with Edwin Ojukwu, and urge the university not to be angry with Ojukwu if he should reapply to the university after securing his right qualifications, more so when he had been reported to be a good student, with his HOD even thinking of encouraging him to return for his postgraduate studies in hope he would join the teaching staff of the department had this incident not happened.

It explains the initial reluctance of the HOD to process Ojukwu's voluntary confession of his exam malpractice at the GCE level, and willing forfeiture of his fourth-level course in Philosophy and willingness to retake his GCE and university admission exams anew.

Though full of pity for Ojukwu, his restitution had opened the way for the university to clean up its acts, set things right and maintain its motto of integrity and diligence.

The university is not leaving any stone unturned as HODs and Deans of faculties have been given sweeping mandate to interrogate and report on any student or staff found culpable in the criminality.

As a result of the ongoing investigations, fear is rife on the campus among implicated students and staff involved in admission racketeering and exam malpractices. The alarm bell is ringing so loud, cheats like Sikira, and evil doers like other accomplices are no longer at ease.

Chapter 8

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

Sikira decided to see Nkiru and Bayo at once!

At about 11pm on the night Bethel relayed the story of Edwin Ojukwu, Sikira found she could not sleep; she was restless, worried and hunted by her past, and even present complicity in exam malpractices. She could see the end was near, and needed to do something quickly. She tiptoed from her room so not to disturb her roommates. She left the hostel to Room 311, Queen Amina Hall, to wake up Nkiru.

But the gorgeous lady was not in her room.

Sikira had thought to meet Nkiru at the odd hour without prior notice, but now chose to call her by phone to know her whereabouts.

Nkiru's cell phone number was 2 on Sikira's speed dial, only next to her own father's number. She hit 2 on her mobile phone, and on the second ring a merry-sounding Nkiru answered.

"Hey, Girl! What's up?"

When Sikira brashly asked, "Where's Bayo?" Nkiru could immediately tell there was trouble.

"Calm down, girl," Nkiru tried to sound casual and unruffled. "What's the matter?"

"Where is Bayo?" Sikira stretched out her question again.

It was Nkiru's turn to play serious. "He is here but indisposed. He is drunk and can't talk to you. What's the matter? Talk to me, girl!"

Sikira has no fight with either Nkiru or Bayo; they were friends who tried to help her. What she really wanted was to forewarn them against exposing her. She wanted to extract a bond of secrecy from both, especially Bayo, that whatever may happen, they must not mention her name or reveal how they had helped her to cheat during her Term Paper assignments and exams.

She had no doubt that her cousin, Isiak, would be discrete about their mutual bond, and let their secret, past and present, remain in their deep hearts. She worried that Bayo, though deep in the cheating business and had tentacles among other students and staff of the university, could turn lilly-livered under pressure and begin to name names.

“Tell Bayo when he becomes sober that I need to see him immediately about the Edwin Ojukwu matter,” Sikira tried to be vague since she was not sure if someone else was listening in or not. “I don’t want any trouble, either for me or for anyone.”

“Oh, oh, oh! Is it the brouhaha buzzing around the campus that is making you to tremble like chicken?” Nkiru speaking clearly and not drunk like she said Bayo was, was offhanded, standoffish and unperturbed, or so she wanted Sikira to think of her confidence.

“That’s a good sign,” Sikira thought. She was sucked in. It meant to her that under pressure Nkiru can hold her own, and probably can influence Bayo to keep his own mouth shut, no matter what.

The real truth about Nkiru’s predisposition in the whole matter was that deep within her was fear. She was in fact scared to death and worried that Sikira, if her fear was allowed to run wild, could expose her and Bayo. She was therefore sounding tough to buoy Sikira’s confidence and dispel her fears and worry, and ultimately to hold her own against whatever investigations may be going on around the campus.

On his part, Bayo had perfected ways of making himself rich by buying leaked questions from willing lecturers, through their cronies, of course, just before exams in whatever departments, get those questions worked out by the lecturers themselves for higher fees, or by senior and bright students; these are what are then sold to willing and desperate students with deep pockets or purses, students like Sikira, who since starting her studies had never attempted any term paper or exam on her own. Bayo always ensured she got the results she handsomely paid for.

At all levels, he always tried to cover his track. He had never worked alone. He had evolved a complicated web involving a few lecturers and administrative staff of various departments as a way of implicating as many people should the bubble bust. His policy was, anyone who would expose him should have something implicating them that should caution them against telling on him. On that score, Bayo felt no fear about being investigated.

This much he had told Nkiru, a reason she could feel some confidence that the gale of investigations would pass over them both, and like the bulrush, they would stand tall again after the rushing tide had passed.

But there was a little snag at the corner of Nkiru's heart; something even Bayo was yet to be aware of.

The rumour mill had it that the university authorities were not satisfied with infractions committed within the campus, but were actually reaching out to verify the background of suspected students involved in exam malpractices or admission fraud.

Something that had happened in 2013 still hunted Nkiru.

After being expelled from her boarding school for recalcitrance, truancy and "sneaking" – the name students at her Chude Girls Grammar School used to describe leaving the hostel without permission to attend parties with boys – she had stayed with friends without returning home. So her parents had no idea she was out of school and did not write the senior secondary school WAEC exam. Instead, she had secretly applied for GCE without the knowledge of her illiterate parents.

For that GCE exam, she had been tutored by some contacts she made to wear full hijab so could sneak answer sheets under her veils into the exam hall. For the period that exam lasted, some observant invigilators had pointed to her name, Nkiru Mbosi, as Ibo name, and had said no Ibo person is known to be Muslim, much less to wear hijab. But she had shouted at the top of her voice that she was a Muslim, and no one should discriminate against her.

"My religion is Islam, and nobody should take off her hijab," she had insisted.

For fear of stirring a religious fracas, the WAEC invigilator who had boldly confronted her was, Mrs Muiyiwa Adams; but she had let go. She noted the incident though, and reported it against one Nkiru Mbosi.

When the result of that exam was released, despite her well orchestrated cheating, Nkiru ended up with four created passes, two P7 passes and was absent in two papers: Biology and Government. The result fell short of the required five credit passes for admission into any Nigerian university.

Then a proposal was made to Nkiru by the same clique who sold her the hijab idea: a forged certificate if she could pay for it. Nkiru, like a hapless stooge went out to sought the required amount. She paid, and it was done. Finally she ended up with a better result: seven credit passes and P7 for Biology.

The scam was so expertly done, the new certificate carried the same registration and exam numbers as the authentic result from WAEC. She was assured that the new certificate was foolproof, it could never be detected.

She did secure admission into the University of Ulam with that forged certificate. But of late she was beginning to have misgivings about that forged result.

“What if that certificate was verified against the copy at WAEC?” she kept asking herself. The scam was beyond the line of business that Bayo does; so she had never mentioned it to him.

Presently, Sikira’s enquiry about Bayo because of the troubles at school is rooting up all Nkiru’s worries about her past; and though she had put up a strong disposition in the answer she gave Sikira on the phone conversation, fear of what could happen was gnawing at her liver.

Nkiru is not prepared to report Sikira’s hysteria to Bayo. Not only could the ripple effects engulf her and Bayo, thereby smearing the reputation of their unwary parents; the amorous affair between the pair could be jeopardized.

Yet, getting Sikira to calm down was becoming a herculean task that Nkiru was not used to. She had never seen Sikira so fearful.

Then the thought flashed through her mind.

“I did it before, Sikira should be able to do that, even more easily,” Nkiru reasoned.

Nkiru called out to Sikira to join her at the drinking joint where Bayo had obviously become so drunk. She intended to get Sikira to agree to a plan. Sikira should start wearing fashionable hijab to conceal her cheating schemes without fear of being caught. After all, if she, an Ibo girl did it before, and was successful, a Hausa Muslim girl should do it better.

Chapter 9

FALLING APART

After a series of investigations into exam and admission scams, with implicated students and staff dismissed, normalcy appeared to return to Ulam. But unknown to many, the university authority had continued to investigate some others on the watch list. New discoveries have pointed fingers to some highbrow culprits.

Now Prof. Etuk Etinan, dean of the faculty of Social Sciences, was set to take action. The report before him had implicated Miss Nkiru Mbosi, Dr Mabel Otito, two staff at the Admissions Office, and a staff of the department of Mass Communication. Some mention is made of Miss Sikira Kiari. But a sudden phone call from a contact of one Police inspector Nurudeen Kiari, who, apparently, had something to do with Sikira, is asking Prof. Etinan to suspend further action for some unspecified time.

The matter about Sikira did not arouse so serious a suspicion until that telephone call. The caller had simply said, "I am Police Constable Douglas Ajamu. I'm calling from the office of the Inspector General of Police. I am calling on behalf of Police Inspector Nurudeen Kiari whose daughter studies Mass Communication in your university. Until further notice, you are advised to desist from all interrogation of this student in respect of any investigations into her admission or whatever other infractions alleged against her. The police are on top of the matter."

Until that call, Prof. Etinan could not remember ever mentioning findings of the suspected cheating in exams levelled against Miss Sikira Kiari to anyone, not even members of the Senate who were yet to receive any report from him. He was curious to know who this Miss Kiari was.

"Yes, my father is a senior police officer," Sikira had responded when Prof Etinan had asked why a call was made to him from the Police about her. "But as to why I wear hijab only during exam and not at other times on campus, I think it's more about what I am comfortable with in the practice of my religion; which I don't think is the business of anybody, not even the University of Ulam."

“You may have a point there,” the Prof said, “but I’m just curious; at your Faari Secondary School, and throughout your first year at this university, you were not known to wear the hijab. What changed?”

“I’m growing in the knowledge of my religion,” Sikira retorted defiantly.

When Sikira started wearing hijab in her second year at the university, some people indeed saw it as appropriate for a Muslim girl. But it was observed that Sikira wore her hijab only close to her exam. All other times, she was her usual self.

In a secular university environment where everyone was free to exercise their faiths and freedoms, nobody challenged Sikira nor felt strongly opinionated about her religious comportment and inconsistency. Only now that that religious inconsistency had become a factor in the investigations into her alleged examination infractions that the school authority had begun to look at Sikira more closely.

So, with his eyes trained on the eyeballs of Sikira who was not wearing any hijab at that moment, Prof Etinan calmly asked, “Are you a friend of Miss Nkiru Mbosi and Mr. Bayo Asunda?”

Her sudden unease was palpable.

Sikira was beginning to shake a little.

Her jaws were trembling and twitching in what could be the release of fright emotion.

After what looked like eternity, Sikira finally said, “Nkiru is in the same class with me. I know of Bayo Asunda who had just graduated from my department. I don’t know either of them intimately.”

“Okay, you may go, Miss Kiari,” the dean said without removing his piercing eyes from Sikira until she left his office, closing the door behind her.

If the interrogation by the dean had happened at another time, Sikira would not have bothered much. But with Nkiru nowhere to be found, and Bayo only working with her now through surrogates, people who made no direct contacts with her but only dropped documents and papers in places for her to pick up after she had paid moneys into different bank accounts, Sikira now had growing concerns that the noose was tightening against her, making her jittery and uncoordinated.

Usually, a simple call to her father would assuage her fears. But the actions of her father lately had begun to raise the ante of suspicion against her.

“Why use the IG’s office to intimidate the dean? A friendly call would have worked better,” Sikira thought about her father’s approach to handling her matter with the university.

“Nothing is even making any sense anymore,” Sikira thought as she left the dean’s office. “Maybe I should just go away, vanish and abandon this course like Nkiru probably has done,” she was thinking and gazing blankly ahead of her when Isiak accosted her suddenly on the staircase.

“Why, you are wearing a worried look, what’s the matter?” Isiak asked, still some distance from her.

“Oh, is that so visible!” Sikira replied, trying unsuccessfully to smile at her cousin. “Indeed, I am. I just left the dean’s office to answer suspicious questions about my hijab during exams, and who my father was.”

Apparently, Isiak knew what could be afoot; only that he had hoped the matter of Sikira’s cheating to pass exam would just pass away; if only she would take to studying by herself and begin to pass exams on her own efforts. His cousin’s lazy attitude to reading was beginning to infuriate him somewhat; just that he had no way of reprimanding her. They liked each other much and he did not wish to offend her.

As for Nkiru, when the investigation team of the University of Ulam visited her parents, they were surprised to be told that Nkiru had never cheated in any exam.

But reports at WAEC had noted the suspicious behaviour of one Nkiru Mbosi during her GCE, the result of which she presented for admission into Ulam University. But no action was taken by WAEC at the time because the report only said Nkiru wore hijab, and refused to be searched, claiming her religious rights. But the movement of her hands under the hijab had made the exam invigilators suspicious.

The hijab-wearing Nkiru Mbosi for that GCE exam was obviously unlike the Nkiru Mbosi now who neither wore hijab, nor a professing Muslim. The mystery of her inconsistent behaviour had prompted a more careful look at the certificates Nkiru had presented for her admission into Ulam, an aspect that had been skipped in previous investigations, rather mysteriously.

The outcome of that curiosity had stunned the university authority. Nkiru had been a fraud hiding in plain sight.

Presently, her aged parents don't even know Nkiru's whereabouts; and no contact had been made with her known telephone lines.

All fingers had been pointing at a course mate, Miss Sikira Kiari.

"She ought to know Nkiru's whereabouts," one investigator suggested.

But Sikira had denied knowing the whereabouts of Nkiru who had stopped attending class since the week before the investigation team visited her parents.

Chapter 10

PENDING BUSINESS

The commotion arising from the discoveries of exam cheats among many students of the University of Ulam had engulfed the entire operations of the university.

So far, many students, including Nkiru, have absconded from school. Some, like Sikira, are not yet sure what the university authority would do about their cases.

Cases already decided have seen many students rusticated and thrown out.

The marvel of the whole episode had been that amid all the confusion about exam cheats, admission fraud, investigations and dismissal of students and staff culpable, those students and staff with no case to answer had been like shining stars, continuing their work and studies under the careful and admirable tutorship of the core administrators and teachers of the university who are bent on redeeming the established good reputation of the institution.

Each day that had passed, Sikira and Isiak had continued to feel so much unease. Sikira, in particular, for what she knew was wrong and the fear that something drastic could happen to her suddenly. As for Isiak, he ought to fear about nothing, ordinarily, since he got his admission squarely on merit, and had not been involved in Sikira's latest crimes. But he worried for his cousin.

The University of Ulam frowned at any whiff of suspicion against its senior staff or lecturers in the on-going investigation into exam and admission crimes. The case against Dr Mabel Otito had been a one-sided allegation by one of the dismissed students that she paid the lecturer some money to pass her course. But nothing had been concretely proved. For the meantime, therefore, Dr Otito gets to keep her job.

The allegations against the recently graduated Bayo Asunda had hit a brick wall because no one had pointedly stated what he had done wrong other than the handwriting of the term papers and some exams submitted by Nkiru Mbosi was strikingly similar to Bayo Asunda's usual handwriting, an argument that was neither here nor there.

Aside the faculty of social science that was yet to submit the report of its own investigations of suspected cheats, all other faculties of the university had

done theirs and the Senate was billed to deliberate on the findings within the week.

Meanwhile, Prof Etinan was undecided whether to proceed with the report he already had in hand involving all those implicated in the social science faculty or accede to the harsh demands from the police.

“How am I to know if that call from a purported Police Constable Douglas Ajamu is not a ruse,” thought Prof Etinan, “one cooked up by one of the suspected cheats to delay action while they make good their escape or perfectly cover their tracks?”

As part of proactive steps by the University of Ulam to pre-empt any future occurrence of cheating or manipulation of admission requirements in the school, the authorities had outline various programmes to orientate both students, lecturers and administrators in the mindset of integrity and diligence; a step many adjudged to be the right step in the right direction. “Prevention is always better and cheaper than cure,” all agree, and the mantra of CHANGE is deliberately being induced into the activities of the university.

For instance, seminars, symposiums and workshops are planned for the next semester with all stakeholders of the university community involved.

Chapter 11

UNAVOIDABLE DEMAND

Rev. Azimbe Aduka had always followed news reports about the University of Ulam, his alma mater. But he is very troubled about news of mass cheating at the university because, as president of the Ulam Varsity Christian Fellowship on the campus in his day, he had spent much time studying and teaching on God's displeasure against all acts of exam malpractice. Even now as pastor of True Redemption Church, Ikotun, Lagos, he continues to vehemently preach against all shades of corruption, malfeasance and exam malpractices to keep youths of his church properly aligned with God's word.

After the incident of Bro. Edwin Ojukwu over a year earlier, who discovered his past sin of exam malpractice after he had preached at the Ulam Varsity Christian Fellowship welcome service, Rev. Aduka had received no other invitation to the university. He was therefore pleasantly surprised when two emissaries of the vice chancellor of the university visited his church to personally invite him for an interdenominational conference on exam malpractice.

He gladly accepted the challenge to be the keynote speaker at the event.

The event, on a Friday morning, had the university main auditorium filled to capacity. Many of the students had come, more for curiosity about the preacher who stirred the furore about exam malpractice and the massive investigation that had enwrapped University of Ulam for the past two years.

The Christian community on the campus had made sure of the publicity of the event in hope that the speech of the fiery preacher would cause repentance and massive conversion of sinners in the school.

On the set date, organizers of the event had left the keynote address for the last, and participants had waited through the two hours it took for the preliminary activities to be concluded.

As Rev. Azimbe Aduka was introduced and invited to the podium, a resounding applause welcomed him and the ovation was held for whole two minutes before his booming "Amen!" quietened the audience for the speech to begin.

“The Vice Chancellor,” the preacher began the protocol greetings. “The Registrar, the Bursar, the Dean, Student Affairs, Deans of different Faculties here present, All Professors, senior lecturers and all lecturers present, students of all categories, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.”

Once again the applause rang out.

The campus community seemed happy about the high sense of protocol displayed by one of their products, a popular alumnus of the university. What an oratorical speaker Rev. Aduka had turned out to be!

“I thank you all for the opportunity to address this august gathering.

“Considering the motto of this respected citadel of learning: Integrity and Diligence, I believe the fight against all forms of exam malpractice and cheats of all categories is one fight the university must not lose.

“I am particularly glad to inform you today that this is a good fight; because, the Almighty God is in support of this fight and is willing to supply all the needed grace and favour to all those on the side of integrity and diligence.”

As a practiced preacher, Rev. Aduka is renowned for his appropriate cadences, paralinguistic features, and force of oratory. He was a proud graduate of English and Literature from Ulam, one who had mastered his skills very well.

His preambles done, Rev. Aduka invited his audience to note what the Bible says about Integrity and Diligence, about the sin of cheating in all ramifications, but in particular exam malpractice. He did not just define the terms but laid it thick with respect to the judgment of God awaiting all cheats.

As he spoke, Rev. Aduka left no one in doubt why he was regarded a fearless and fiery preacher. He was highly cerebral too, analytical and posited a logical argument, citing different scriptures in the Bible and empirical evidences of cheats who for many years thought they had escaped justice but who eventually came into the full grip of the law and suffered shame and even imprisonment for their crimes.

“Even God,” he continued, “has left no one in doubt that “the soul that sinneth, it shall die,” a quotation he cited from the Bible in Ezekiel chapter 18 verse four.

When Rev. Aduka cited the relevant criminal laws of the country against all manner of fraud including exam malpractices, his facial expression was tense,

appropriately pontifical and fierce. Even his voice was raised, the pitch was so high it boomed like thunder.

But suddenly his voice fell. The speech became slow, tenderly and approachable.

“If God merely leaves you with the awareness of your sins and His judgment against sin,” the Reverend said softly, “if He offered no remedy, no room for pity, no promise of salvation; then that would be grossly unlike God. He is not interested in merely condemning people with sins, but loves to show the sinner His love and plan of redemption.”

Unlike criminal justice that offers no mediation except the enforcement of the law, the preacher explains the approach of God to include, essentially, “pardon for the penitent, who He grants grace for a new beginning.”

At the dot of one hour since he started speaking, Rev. Aduka concluded the way he had started.

“The Vice Chancellor, Sir. The Registrar, the Bursar, the Dean, Student Affairs, Deans of different Faculties here present, All Professors, senior lecturers and all lecturers present, students of all categories, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

“All I did during my days as a student of the honourable university, and all I have done ever since, had been to draw men and women, old and young, away from the path of crime against God and man, and call people to the path of righteousness, justice, integrity and diligence.

“It is my hope that this university will not back out, and its graduates will continue to be proud recipients of untainted degrees, diplomas and certificates that are products of true integrity and diligence. I thank you all.”

The ovation this time was loudest and longest.

Chapter 12

THE DECISION

Isiak and Sikira were among the throng of participants at the event the Friday Rev. Aduka gave his rousing speech at the main auditorium of the University of Ulam. That night Isiak asked the question that Sikira had feared would arise.

“Don’t you think it’s high time we stop living a lie?”

Sikira said nothing for a long while as they walked away from the crowd of people milling out of the various exit points from the auditorium. Either because she did not want anyone eavesdropping on his answer to the question or she thought the answer was obvious.

But suddenly, gripping Isiak’s hand halting and looking straight into Isiak’s eyes in the dim light of a walkway, she said, “I will not confess my crime to anyone, but I will cheat no more.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Isiak said, “but that still leaves the question, how will you pass your subsequent exams?”

The answer Sikira gave was not new, she had often promised that she will start to read and take her studies seriously; only that she had never followed through on her word. This time, though, there was some colour in the iris of her eyes that twinkled hope, a measure of sincerity and determination.

Isiak didn’t need to press further, he simply nodded to Sikira, and they continued to walk towards Mary Slessor Hall, her hostel.

It turned out that not only Sikira had made a personal pledge to change her ways after the event that Friday at the auditorium. The speech of Rev. Aduka had resonated around the campus and the high echelon of the school’s authority had ensured that the highlights of the speech are printed bold and posted on major signboards around the university.

Lecturers made reference to the speech thereafter, and students discussed the message.

The strategy was to begin afresh, kill from the roots any motivation among the students to cheat in their future exams. It was also to engrave in the minds of teachers and staff that the University of Ulam has zero tolerance of all forms of cheating and exam malpractice.

And, as Rev. Aduka had rightly posited, the graduates of Ulam are to be proud recipients of untainted degrees, diplomas and certificates that are products of true integrity and diligence.

THE BOOK

A Shadow in the Shade is a didactic book that tells the insidious story of examination cheats and the dire consequences of living such a life. The author's goal is to help children and youth, in particular, but all and sundry seek excellence in life, but not by fraud or cheating in any form.

With its moral lesson constantly in view, the book is largely a story about certain university students who had led a life of examination malpractices even from secondary school. The culprits are as diverse as they are representations of the usual cheat one meets out there.

The idea is to open the door for anyone living in a lie to see through the mirror of *A Shadow in the Shade* that cheating leads nowhere; rather, it attracts harsh consequences, shame and damnation. But repentance and restitution, or a changed heart and life guarantee a life of peace and progress.

THE AUTHOR

Mrs Ochonogor, Odinichi Kelicha has published ten books already, and some more in the works. Her drive is to affect lives positively with moral lessons in order to raise godly families, establish peaceful homes and create decent societies where everyone live in mutual love and joy.

Kelicha is a simple Christian who teaches moral lessons through her writings and desires to imbue her readers with the bounding love for God, and through His word develop hope and faith that see no insurmountable obstacles in the way of serving God to the fullest and doing His will.

Mrs Ochonogor holds a masters degree. She is married with three young children, and happily serving God in the fold of Living Faith Church, aka Winners Chapel at the headquarters of the church in Ota, Ogun State. She makes her home in Lagos.