
DEATH IS A
SPIRIT
"O death, where is thy sting?
O grave, where is thy victory?"
— 1 Corinthians 15:55
ANTHONY IJERE

Books by Anthony Ijere

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to those who have lost someone dear to them. May the Lord be your strength and comfort in this time.

And to those who have faced death in many forms and have chosen to rise above it. This book is for you. May it mark the beginning of your victory over the spirit of the grave, once and for all.

Episode 1

The Day Sorrow Entered Our Home

Some mornings are different from all other mornings. You feel it before you open your eyes. The air is heavier. The sounds outside are muffled, as though the world itself is holding its breath. On the morning that sorrow first entered our home, I remember waking to exactly that kind of silence. A silence that was not peaceful, but loaded, the way the sky turns that strange yellow-green color before a violent storm rolls in.

My name is Zoe, and I grew up in a compound house at the edge of a small town in the south, where the streets were red from laterite dust and the evenings smelled of wood smoke and frying onions. Ours was not a poor family, but we were not wealthy either. We were the kind of family that worked hard, prayed every Sunday, and believed that God was watching over us with a careful and particular love. My parents had built that belief into the walls of our home the way other people build in bricks — layer by layer, year by year, until

it felt structural. Permanent. Impossible to remove without bringing everything else down.

That morning, my Uncle Femi was found dead in his bedroom.

He had gone to bed the night before in perfect health, or so we thought. He had eaten dinner with the rest of the family, laughed at something my father said, washed his hands at the outdoor tap, and walked through the door of his room the way he always did — with his sandals slapping the concrete floor and his key turning once, twice, in the lock. He was found at six in the morning by my younger sister Ada, who had gone to knock on his door to call him for morning prayers. She knocked three times and received no answer. She tried the handle. The door was unlocked. She pushed it open.

Her scream reached every corner of the compound.

I remember running out of my room still barefoot, my heart already pounding before I knew the reason. The corridor was narrow and

dim, and by the time I reached Uncle Femi's doorway, my mother had already arrived and was pulling Ada back, pressing my sister's face into her chest and covering her eyes. My father pushed past both of them and went into the room. I stood in the doorway and looked past my father's shoulder.

Uncle Femi was lying on his back on the bed, still dressed in the clothes he had worn the night before, his arms at his sides, his face turned slightly toward the wall. He looked almost peaceful, except that his skin had taken on a grey, waxen quality that skin only gets when the blood has stopped moving beneath it. The room smelled strange — not of death exactly, not yet, but of something that was the absence of life. A stillness that had a quality to it, almost like a sound you couldn't quite hear.

My father pressed two fingers to Uncle Femi's neck and held them there for a long moment. Then he straightened up slowly, and when he turned around, his face was something I had never seen on my father's face before. Stripped. As

though every layer of certainty he had built across his fifty years had been removed at once, leaving only the raw and bewildered face of a man who did not understand what he was looking at.

'He is gone,' my father said. His voice was barely above a whisper.

The words hit the corridor like a stone dropped into still water, and the rings of grief spread outward immediately. My mother's wail rose before I was even aware she had drawn a breath. Neighbors from the other flats in the compound began appearing in doorways, drawn by Ada's earlier scream and now by my mother's voice. An elderly woman from the flat above us came downstairs still tying her wrapper, took one look at my mother's face, and sank to her knees in the corridor with her hands on her head. Children who had not yet been told anything began to cry simply because the adults were crying, following some instinct deeper than understanding.

I stood in the middle of all of it and felt, for the first time in my life, the particular quality of helplessness that comes with death. There was

nothing to do. No action that would help. No words that would make any difference. Death had come into our home in the night, quiet as a shadow, and had taken my uncle without asking anyone's permission, and all the weeping in the world would not bring him back or explain why he had been taken.

Uncle Femi was forty-one years old. He was my father's younger brother. He had been living with us for three years while he saved money to build his own house. He had no known illness. He had never complained of chest pain or any difficulty of the kind. The doctor who came to certify his death would later write 'cardiac arrest — cause undetermined' in the register, because there was no obvious explanation for why a healthy forty-one-year-old man would simply stop breathing in his sleep.

But even as the house filled with relatives and neighbors and the sounds of mourning, something was already beginning to stir in the back of my mind. A memory that arrived uninvited and sat quietly beside all the grief.

Because Uncle Femi was not the first.

Three years before, my father's oldest sister, Auntie Grace, had died in very similar circumstances. She was fifty-three, not a young woman, but not old either, and certainly not ill. She had gone to sleep one night and had not woken up. The family had grieved and prayed and eventually moved forward, the way families do. Two years before that, a cousin named Bola, who was only twenty-eight and had just gotten married, had died suddenly on his way home from work one evening. His colleagues said he had complained of a headache in the afternoon, had seemed unwell, and by the time the ambulance arrived he was already gone.

Three sudden deaths. Three people from the same family, all under circumstances that left no adequate medical explanation. And now Uncle Femi made four.

I sat in the corner of the sitting room that afternoon, watching the adults move through the familiar choreography of communal grief — the older women in a cluster near the kitchen, the

men gathered in low conversation near the front door, the younger relatives running errands and carrying things and trying to be useful — and I thought about the pattern I was seeing. I was thirteen years old, and I did not have the vocabulary to name what I was feeling or the framework to fully understand it. But I felt it with a clarity that was almost physical. Something was wrong. Something beyond the ordinary reach of bad luck or medical explanation was passing through our family, and each visit was leaving behind another empty chair, another name that would never again respond when called.

The funeral was held six days later, on a Saturday that was brutally hot, the sun pressing down on the mourners like a judgment. I stood beside my father at the graveside and watched the coffin being lowered into the red earth and felt the weight of something I could not name settling over me. The pastor spoke about God's mysterious ways and the peace that surpassed understanding, and I tried to hold onto his words, tried to find comfort in them the way I had been taught to find

comfort in scripture since I was old enough to read.

But as the first handful of earth was thrown onto the coffin lid with that hollow, terrible sound, what I felt was not peace. What I felt was the beginning of a question that would take me many years to find the answer to. A question that would change everything about the way I understood the world I lived in.

Why did death keep coming to our door?

And more frightening still: was it done with us?

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That night, after the guests had gone and the house had finally fallen into an exhausted quiet, I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling in the dark. My sister Ada was asleep in the bed across from mine, her breathing slow and even, unbothered by whatever was keeping me awake. I listened to the sounds of the house settling, the creak of the corrugated roof cooling in the night air, the distant bark of a dog somewhere down the street,

and I felt very strongly that sleep was not coming for me tonight.

The feeling that had started at the graveside had not left. It had followed me home and into the bedroom, and it sat now in the corner of the room with a weight and a presence that made the darkness seem thicker than it should have been. I was not imagining this. I was old enough to know the difference between childhood fears and something else, something that had no name in the language I had been given so far.

I reached under my pillow and pulled out the small Bible my grandmother had given me on my tenth birthday, the one with my name written inside the front cover in her careful, old-fashioned handwriting. I could not see to read in the dark, but I held it anyway. It had become something of a habit of mine, holding it when I was afraid — not as a superstition but as a kind of anchor. A reminder of something solid in the middle of whatever was shifting around me.

I held the Bible and lay in the dark and thought about my uncle, and about Auntie Grace, and

about Cousin Bola, and about the four graves in our family's history that should not have been dug as soon as they were. And somewhere between that thought and the next, without my being aware of the crossing, I fell into sleep.

And the dreams began.

Episode 2

The First Dreams of the Grave

The dream came that very first night, the night after Uncle Femi's burial, and it came with a clarity and a force that was nothing like the ordinary confused wandering of a sleeping mind. It announced itself differently. It had an atmosphere, a texture, a weight that ordinary dreams do not carry. From the first moment of it, I knew I was somewhere I had not chosen to go and from which I did not know how to return.

I was standing in a graveyard.

It was not a graveyard I recognized, though it had elements of every burial ground I had ever seen — the rows of concrete slabs and tilting headstones, the patches of brown grass growing in crooked lines between the graves, the heavy silence that cemeteries hold even in the middle of a busy city. The sky above this place was the color of dirty water, neither day nor night, lit by a sourceless grey light that cast no shadows. The air was very still and smelled faintly of rain on dry

earth and something else, something older and less identifiable.

I stood at the edge of the cemetery and I knew, the way you know things in dreams without being told them, that I was not supposed to be there. That I had arrived in a place that had not invited me and was not sure what to do with me. The rows of graves stretched away from me in all directions, and somewhere among them, at a distance I could feel but not quite see, something was moving.

I started forward between the graves, my feet making no sound on the packed earth. The headstones on either side of me were worn smooth by weather, their inscriptions difficult to read in the flat grey light. But as I walked deeper into the cemetery, the inscriptions grew clearer, and I found myself slowing down to read them, drawn by something I could not resist.

The names on the stones were familiar.

Not all of them, and not at first. But the further I walked, the more familiar they became, until I stopped dead in front of a stone that carried a

name I knew with every cell of my body. It was my uncle's name. Femi Adeyemi. The dates were right. The stone was new, the concrete still pale and unmarked by weather. I stood and stared at it, and a cold that had nothing to do with temperature moved through me from my feet upward.

And then I heard my name.

It came from somewhere behind me and to the left, spoken in a voice that was not quite any voice I recognized — not male exactly, not female, not old, not young. It was a voice that seemed to exist at the edge of hearing, the way you sometimes hear your name called and cannot be certain whether it was real or imagined. But in the dream it was unmistakably real, and it said my name again: Zoe.

I turned around. There was no one there. The path between the graves behind me was empty in both directions as far as the grey light allowed me to see. The headstones stood in their rows like silent witnesses, and between them there was nothing but air and shadow.

But the voice came again, and this time it was closer. So close it seemed almost to come from directly beside my ear, and I spun around fast and nearly lost my footing on the dry earth, catching myself on the nearest headstone. My hand pressed flat against the stone to steady myself, and when I looked down at it I saw that the headstone I was gripping had a name on it.

My name. Zoe.

No dates. Just the name. As though the grave were waiting.

I woke up.

I woke from the dream the way you surface from deep water — with a gasp, with the sensation of breaking through something, with the disorientation of someone who does not immediately know where they are or whether what they just experienced was real. My heart was hammering against my ribs with a force that was almost painful, and my whole body was damp with sweat despite the fact that the night was not particularly warm. I sat up in the dark and pressed

my hands over my face and tried to breathe slowly.

Ada was still asleep across from me, undisturbed. The room was exactly as I had left it when I fell asleep. Outside, a night bird called once from somewhere in the trees and fell silent. Everything was ordinary and familiar and should have been reassuring. But the image of that headstone with my name on it sat in my chest like a stone, and no amount of reasoning or reassurance was going to dislodge it easily.

I did not sleep again that night.



The dream returned the following night, and the night after that. It was not always exactly the same. Sometimes the cemetery was larger, stretching to the horizon in all directions, and I walked through it for what felt like hours without finding an edge. Sometimes the headstones were blank and nameless and I moved between them feeling watched from all sides, but seeing nothing. Sometimes I heard the voice, and sometimes the

night was utterly silent except for the sound of my own feet.

But every version of the dream shared the same heavy, saturated atmosphere — that grey, sourceless light, that smell of old earth, that absolute certainty that I was in a place I had not been invited to and that my presence there was being noted by something I could not see.

By the fourth night I was beginning to dread going to sleep. I would lie in bed and stare at the ceiling and fight off the heaviness of tiredness, trying to stay awake, knowing that sleep would take me back to the graveyard. By the fifth night the exhaustion won, and I fell asleep sitting upright against my headboard with my Bible open in my lap, and even in that position the dream found me.

On the sixth night, I told my mother.

I went to her in the kitchen after dinner while Ada was washing the plates. My mother was sitting at the kitchen table going through some papers, her reading glasses perched at the end of

her nose. She looked up when I came in and saw something in my face that made her fold her glasses and set them on the table with the particular attention a mother gives when she knows something is coming.

'Sit down,' she said simply.

I sat across from her and told her about the dreams. All of them. The graveyard, the grey light, the voice calling my name, the headstone with my name on it and no dates beneath. I told her carefully, watching her face as I spoke, looking for signs that she thought I was being dramatic or childish or overwrought from grief. I did not see any of those things. What I saw instead was a careful stillness that settled over her features as I spoke, and when I finished she was quiet for a long moment.

'How many nights?' she asked.

'Six,' I said.

She nodded slowly. Then she reached across the table and took both my hands in hers and held them firmly. 'Those dreams are not ordinary

dreams,' she said. 'You know that already, or you wouldn't have come to tell me.' She paused. 'We need to pray about this. Seriously. Tonight.'

That night she came to my room after Ada was asleep and knelt beside my bed and prayed over me for a long time. She prayed against every spirit that had attached itself to my sleep. She prayed a covering over me and Ada and my father. She prayed with the kind of focused intensity that is not performance but war.

When she finished, she looked at me and said, 'You are going to be all right. But Zoe, listen to me carefully. These dreams are showing you something real. I don't know everything that they mean yet. But I know this — something is happening around this family that we need to understand. Pay attention. Pray every night before you sleep. And tell me if anything changes.'

I nodded. She kissed my forehead and left.

The dream came again that night, but it was different. The graveyard was the same, the grey sky was the same, but the voice did not come. And

when I walked between the headstones, I found that the one with my name on it had changed. The name was still there, but beneath it, where the dates should have been, were the words — not carved, but somehow illuminated, as though lit from inside the stone: NOT YET.

I woke up with those two words sitting in the center of my chest like a heartbeat. Not yet. It was not comfort exactly. It was something more complex than comfort. It was a warning with an exception built into it. It said: this thing is real, and it has considered you, but you have been given more time.

More time for what, I did not yet know. But I understood, at thirteen years old, lying in the grey light of early morning with my sister breathing quietly across the room, that something had just begun in my life. Something that had nothing to do with my plans or my preferences. Something that had chosen me rather than the other way around.

I got up, knelt on the cold floor, and prayed until the sun came up.

Episode 3

Samuel's Strange Dreams

I met Samuel in my second year of secondary school, and from the beginning there was a quality to our friendship that I could not easily explain. He was tall and loose-limbed, with an easy laugh and the kind of effortless social confidence that made teachers and classmates alike inclined to like him before he had done anything to earn it. He was funny without being cruel, smart without being showy, and he had a generosity of spirit that made him the sort of person people wanted to be around.

I, by contrast, was quieter and more inward, and our friendship surprised people who knew us both. But friendship does not always make logical sense. Samuel and I had found in each other something the other needed — I gave him seriousness, a ground beneath his lightness, and he gave me laughter and the permission to not always be searching for the weight in things. We balanced each other in the way that good

friendships do, each pulling the other slightly toward the center.

It was about four months after Uncle Femi's death that Samuel first mentioned the dreams.

We were walking home from school together on an afternoon that was very hot, the kind of afternoon that makes the air shimmer above the tar road and drains all the energy out of your body before you have gone a hundred meters. We had been talking about nothing in particular — a test we had both found difficult, a teacher who had given Samuel an unexpectedly low mark, the football match that was being replayed at the weekend. Normal things. And then, in a gap between one topic and the next, Samuel went quiet in a way that was unusual for him.

I noticed it but did not push. With Samuel, you learned to let the things that wanted to come come in their own time. Pushing him only made him retreat into jokes.

After another minute he said, without looking at me, 'Zoe, have you ever had a dream about a cemetery?'

I stopped walking. He took two more steps and then stopped as well and turned around to look at me. The expression on his face was not what I expected. It was not his usual amused, slightly performative look. It was genuinely uncertain. Almost uncomfortable, which was not a quality Samuel wore naturally.

'Why?' I said carefully.

He looked away again, up the road, squinting against the afternoon glare. 'I've been having them,' he said. 'For about three weeks now. Every few nights. I'm in a cemetery and I'm walking between the graves and there's a voice calling my name and I can't find where it's coming from.'

The hair rose on my arms.

'What does the voice sound like?' I asked.

He thought about this for a moment. 'Like someone speaking from very far away,' he said. 'Or like someone speaking from underwater. Like

the sound is coming through something.' He shook his head and started walking again. 'It's just dreams,' he said, and even as he said it I could hear in his voice that he was saying it to convince himself as much as anything else.

'Samuel,' I said, falling into step beside him again.

'Mm.'

'I've been having those dreams too. Since my uncle died.'

He looked at me sideways. 'The cemetery dreams?'

'Yes. The graveyard, the voice, the headstones. Everything.' I paused. 'When I told my mother, she prayed over me. The dreams changed after that. They didn't stop entirely, but they changed. Something in them shifted.'

Samuel was quiet for a moment. Then he made a sound that was almost a laugh but not quite — a short, deflecting sound that I had learned to recognize as the noise he made when something unsettled him and he wanted to move away from

the feeling quickly. 'Ah, Zoe,' he said. 'Everything with you is spiritual. Dreams are just dreams. Too much rice before bed, maybe. Or exam stress.'

'Samuel'

'I'm fine,' he said firmly, and something in his tone closed the subject with a decisiveness that I knew better than to argue against in that moment.

But I did not let it go entirely. As we reached the point where our paths home diverged, I stopped and faced him properly. 'Pray about it,' I said. 'I'm not asking you to agree with my interpretation. I'm just saying — pray. It costs you nothing.'

He gave me a long, sideways look. Then that easy smile of his appeared, the one that could charm a teacher out of a punishment or a shopkeeper out of extra change. 'Always so serious,' he said. 'All right. I'll pray. See you tomorrow.'

He turned and walked away, his long stride eating up the road, and I watched him go with a feeling in my chest that I could not fully name. It

was not quite fear. It was not quite premonition. It was something in between, something that pressed against the underside of my sternum and would not be pushed down.

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In the weeks that followed, I brought up the dreams with Samuel two more times. Both times he dismissed them with the same easy deflection — they were nothing, they were stress, he had told his cousin about them and his cousin had said everyone had strange dreams sometimes. The third time I raised it, he was slightly impatient with me, and I recognized that I had reached the limit of how far his patience would stretch on this particular subject.

So I changed my approach. Instead of talking to him about the dreams, I began to pray for him privately. Every night when I knelt beside my bed, I included his name. I did not fully understand why I felt so strongly about this, why the urgency in my chest when I thought about Samuel's dismissal of those dreams was as sharp as it was.

I only knew what my mother had taught me: that some things you cannot argue a person into. You can only take them to God and ask God to do what argument cannot.

Samuel continued to be Samuel — bright, easy, popular, moving through his days with the uncomplicated energy of someone who had not yet been shown the weight of the world. And yet, on the rare occasions when we walked home together and fell into the particular silence that close friends share, I would catch a flicker of something behind his eyes. A shadow that was not like him. A brief, unguarded moment of something that looked, if I was honest with myself, like fear.

He never showed it long enough for me to address. But I saw it. And every time I saw it, the urgency in my prayers for him increased.

I did not know, then, what was already beginning inside his body. I did not know that the voice in the dreams was not simply a spiritual experience but a warning, the way a tremor in the ground is a warning before a larger movement. I

did not know any of the things that the following months would reveal.

I only knew that when Samuel laughed off my concern and said the dreams were nothing, something in me that had learned to pay attention to the invisible world disagreed with a quiet, steady, terrible certainty.

The dreams were not nothing. And whatever they were pointing at was already closer than either of us knew.

Episode 4

The Junction of Accidents

There was a junction at the bottom of Alade Street, perhaps a ten-minute walk from our compound, where three roads met at an awkward angle that the town's original planners had apparently not thought through carefully. The roads converged in a way that made visibility poor from all directions, and because the junction sat at the bottom of a slope on one side and a curve on another, vehicles always arrived at it moving faster than they should. There was a traffic sign that had been there since I was a small child — a faded stop sign on a rusting pole — but drivers treated it as advisory rather than mandatory, which meant that every time you approached the junction on foot, some part of your body tensed up in a preparatory way, as though bracing for impact.

Everyone in the area knew about the junction. It had a reputation the way certain places acquire reputations, through the slow accumulation of

incidents across many years, each one adding another layer to a story that the neighborhood told itself about why this particular piece of ground seemed to attract disaster. By the time I was fifteen, I had heard of at least nine separate accidents at that junction. Some were minor — a scraped side mirror, a bent bumper, a cyclist knocked from his bicycle but unhurt. Others were not minor at all.

The accident that I am thinking of happened on a Tuesday afternoon in November, during my final year of secondary school.

I was coming home from school and was perhaps two streets away from the junction when I heard it — a sound that anyone who has ever been near a serious road accident knows immediately and can never quite forget. The sharp, explosive report of metal meeting metal at speed, followed by a fraction of a second of terrible silence, and then the cascade of secondary sounds: shattering glass, the skidding of tyres, the hiss of something mechanical giving way, and finally the first human sounds, which were not yet

screaming but something more frightening — a high, brief, involuntary cry, the sound a body makes when impact has taken away its ability to process what has just happened.

I ran.

I arrived at the junction less than a minute after the collision, and what I found stopped me at the edge of the crowd that had already begun to gather. A commercial minibus had come down the slope road and struck a saloon car that was crossing the junction from the side street. The minibus had hit the car almost directly in the driver's side door, which meant that the energy of the impact had been concentrated at exactly the most vulnerable point. The car had been spun around and pushed sideways into the base of a concrete electrical pole. The minibus itself had tipped onto its side and was lying across the road at an angle, its underside facing the crowd.

There were bodies.

I do not want to describe this in more detail than is necessary, but the truth is that three

people died at that junction on that Tuesday afternoon. Two passengers from the minibus and the driver of the saloon car, whose door had been the point of impact. Several others were injured, some of them seriously. The sounds of it — the moaning of the wounded, the wailing of onlookers who recognized among the victims people they knew, the ineffectual shouts of men trying to coordinate help before the ambulances arrived — layered themselves over each other into a noise that was almost unbearable to stand within.

I stood at the edge of the crowd and I felt something that I had first encountered in my grandmother's compound as a child but that I now recognized with a familiarity I wished I did not have. The atmosphere at the junction had a quality to it that was distinct from the ordinary atmosphere of disaster and chaos. There was something else layered beneath the noise and the commotion, something that the noise and the commotion sat on top of, something older and quieter and far more intentional than an accident.

The junction, I realized with a clarity that struck me like cold water, was not simply a badly designed road intersection. It was a place that had been marked. I did not have the precise language for this then — that understanding would come later, through years of prayer and scripture and careful reflection on everything I experienced. But I felt it that afternoon with a certainty that made my legs want to carry me away from the spot, that made the fine hairs on my arms stand up and my stomach clench with something that was not ordinary grief or ordinary fear but something darker and more specific.

Something inhabited that junction. Something had set up a kind of residence there, in the way that certain spirits, in the spiritual tradition I had grown up within, are understood to claim territories. Roads. Rivers. Specific plots of land. Places where the boundary between the visible world and the invisible one is, for reasons that are not always clear or simple, thinner than it is elsewhere.



When I got home that evening I was pale and quiet in a way that my mother noticed immediately. She sat me down and asked what had happened, and I told her about the accident. She listened, her face grave, and when I was done she was quiet for a moment.

'That junction has a history,' she said at last.

'What kind of history?'

She looked at me with the expression she wore when she was deciding how much to tell me — measuring my age and my capacity against the weight of what she knew. 'An old man told your father years ago,' she said carefully, 'that many years before we moved to this area, something bad happened at that place. Something violent. And that the ground there has never been right since.'

'What happened there?'

She shook her head slightly. 'I don't know the full story. But I know that place has always made me uneasy. I avoid it when I can, and when I can't avoid it, I pray before I cross it.' She looked at me steadily. 'You should do the same. Some places are

not simply geographical locations. Some places carry what has happened in them. And what has happened in that junction is not finished yet.'

Her words settled over me like a cold cloth. I thought of the three people who had died there that afternoon. I thought of the nine accidents I already knew about, and the ones I probably didn't know about because they had happened before I was old enough to pay attention. I thought of the particular quality of the atmosphere I had felt standing at the edge of the crowd, and I knew that my mother was right. Whatever had made that junction dangerous, it was not simply a matter of road design and poor signage.

Something was feeding there. Something had found in that specific convergence of roads a place where it could do its work with particular efficiency, where the ordinary conditions of the physical world — the blind curves, the slope, the inadequate signage — had created a consistent opportunity for the kind of destruction it preferred.

I went to bed that night with the images of the afternoon still vivid behind my eyes, and I prayed with a specificity and a determination that I had not brought to prayer before. I prayed about the junction. I prayed about the thing I had felt there. I prayed for the families of the three people who had been taken. And then I lay in the dark and thought about Samuel, whose cemetery dreams he had dismissed as nothing, and felt the urgency about him tighten in my chest until sleep finally came.

Three weeks later, Samuel was admitted to the hospital. And when the results came back from the laboratory, everything I had been feeling about him — every prayer, every flicker of unease, every moment of watching a shadow pass across his familiar face — collapsed into a terrible and specific clarity.

Episode 5

Samuel's Sudden Illness

The call came on a Wednesday morning, early enough that the day was still grey and cool, before the sun had properly established itself above the rooftops. I was in the kitchen helping my mother when my phone buzzed on the table with Samuel's name on the screen. I picked it up without particular apprehension — Samuel called regularly, for no reason beyond the ordinary enjoyment of conversation — and said his name into the phone with the cheerful ease of someone who is not yet prepared for what they are about to hear.

The voice on the other end was not Samuel's. It was his older sister, Ruth.

'Zoe,' she said, and there was a quality in the single word — a tightness, a barely managed composure — that shifted something in my chest before she had said anything else. 'Samuel is in the hospital. He was admitted yesterday evening. We

didn't want to call you until we knew more, but…' A pause. 'He's asking for you.'

I was at the hospital within the hour.

The ward where they had put Samuel was long and lined on both sides with beds separated by thin curtains that provided the pretense of privacy without any of its reality. The smell of the place was the particular smell of all hospitals — antiseptic layered over something more organic, the combined presence of many bodies in various states of distress giving the air a heaviness that you noticed within the first breath. I followed Ruth through the ward to the fourth bed on the left, and when she pulled back the curtain I had to keep my face very careful, because the person in the bed looked so different from the Samuel I had last seen three weeks ago that it required a genuine effort of will not to show the shock.

He had lost weight. Not the gradual, barely-noticeable weight loss of a busy semester, but significant weight, the kind that means the body has been spending its resources on something other than maintenance. His face was thinner, his

collarbones more prominent above the neckline of the hospital gown, his eyes, which had always been bright and quick with humor, carrying a heaviness that had nothing to do with humor at all.

But he saw me, and something of the old Samuel appeared — a warmth in his expression, a deliberate effort to reassemble something of his familiar self for my benefit.

'You look terrible,' I said, because Samuel would have been more alarmed by gentleness than by the direct approach.

A ghost of a smile. 'You're supposed to say I look well.'

'That would be a lie.' I pulled the plastic chair beside his bed close and sat in it. 'What happened?'

The smile faded. He looked at the ceiling for a moment. 'They ran tests,' he said. 'A lot of tests. Ruth has been here since yesterday. My parents are coming from the village tomorrow morning.' He stopped.

'Samuel.'

'HIV,' he said quietly. Just the two letters, placed into the air between us with a flatness that told me he was still working on finding a way to carry the word. 'The tests came back positive. They are running them again to confirm, but the doctor said she is very confident in the result.'

The ward continued its sounds around us — a cough from behind the curtain on the right, footsteps of a nurse in the corridor, the distant sound of a television playing somewhere. I sat with what he had just told me and let it settle before I spoke.

'Okay,' I said at last.

'Okay,' he repeated, with a slightly incredulous look. 'That's all you have?'

'Samuel, there's nothing I can say right now that will be the right thing. So I'm just going to sit here.'

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, 'I don't understand it, Zoe. I need you to understand that. I've not lived — I haven't had the kind of life

that should lead to this. I've not done the things. I have not been reckless. I went to one hospital already before this one and they asked me the same questions and I gave them the same answers and they looked at me the way people look when they think you're lying, and I am not lying.' His voice had developed a tremor in it. 'I don't understand where this came from.'

I believed him. This was not a reflexive loyalty born of friendship. I believed him because I had known Samuel for three years and knew the shape of his life with some accuracy, and because there was nothing in what I knew that contradicted what he was telling me. But beyond that, I believed him for a reason that I did not say to him that afternoon, a reason that would have required more context than the moment allowed.

I believed him because I had been praying for him for months. Because I had seen the shadow in his eyes that he did not show to other people. Because he had told me about the cemetery dreams, and I had not forgotten them even when he had tried to. And because somewhere in the

space between all of those things, a picture had been building in my mind, slowly and without my full awareness, of something that was not the result of ordinary choices or ordinary misfortune.

❦ ❦ ❦

The second test confirmed the first. Samuel's parents arrived from the village and there were hours of grief and confusion in that hospital corridor that I mostly stayed away from, respecting the family's need for privacy in their devastation. But Samuel asked for me again that evening, and I came.

He was quieter now. The tremor in his voice was gone, replaced by something that was almost calm — the particular calm that sometimes arrives after a person has passed through the worst of the initial shock and found, to their own surprise, that they are still breathing.

'I've been thinking about the dreams,' he said without preamble.

I waited.

'The cemetery dreams. The voice calling my name.' He looked at his hands on the blanket. 'I think I should have taken them more seriously. I think you were right and I laughed it off and I should not have.' He paused. 'Do you think it means I'm going to die?'

'I think,' I said carefully, choosing every word, 'that the dreams were a warning. And that a warning is given to someone who still has time. You still have time, Samuel.'

He looked at me for a long moment with those altered, weighted eyes. 'Then pray for me,' he said. 'Properly. The way your mother prays.'

'I have been,' I said. 'I won't stop.'

He nodded slowly. And then he turned his face toward the window where the evening light was dying against the louvres, and we sat together in the quiet of the ward, and I prayed silently with more intensity and more grief than I had brought to prayer in a very long time.

Because I was afraid. Not afraid in the way you are afraid of something you can prevent. Afraid in

the way you are afraid of something you can feel approaching, something vast and purposeful, and all you can do is hold your ground and believe that the God who holds life in His hands is greater than the thing moving toward the person you love.

Episode 6

The Circle of Black Insects

It was a Saturday morning about two weeks after Samuel's diagnosis, and I was sitting on the front step of our compound reading, when I noticed the insects.

They appeared without my knowing exactly when they had arrived — one moment the sky above the compound was simply sky, and the next there was a cluster of dark shapes circling perhaps thirty feet above the roof of the building that faced ours. They were black, and they moved in a way that was both organized and unnatural, maintaining a circular formation with a precision that was not how insects typically behave. Insects scatter, they drift, they respond to wind currents and individual impulses and do not move in deliberate, sustained circles above a fixed point unless something particular is drawing them to it.

I put down my book and watched.

The circle of insects maintained itself for perhaps five minutes, slowly rotating, dipping

lower occasionally and then rising again, as though whatever held them there was oscillating. Then, in a movement that was almost too coordinated to be natural, they descended together and settled on the roof of the building directly across from ours — specifically above the window of the ground-floor flat where a woman named Mrs. Adaora lived with her two teenage children.

I knew Mrs. Adaora in the casual way of compound neighbors — exchanged greetings, occasional brief conversations at the outdoor tap, the awareness of her daily routine that proximity imposes without the intimacy of genuine friendship. She was a widow in her late forties, a heavyset woman who moved deliberately and spoke quietly and kept her affairs to herself with a privacy that people respected without discussing.

After the insects settled, I waited. After another few minutes, they dispersed and were gone, scattering into the air in different directions as though whatever had organized them had been switched off.

I sat on the step for a long time afterward, not reading, thinking.

I was not completely certain what I had seen. I was aware that insects do sometimes gather in groups, that there are natural explanations for clustered behavior that have nothing to do with the spiritual world. I had learned enough, by this point in my life, to be careful about the difference between genuine spiritual perception and the tendency of a mind that has seen real things to begin seeing significance where there is none. Not every unusual event is supernatural. The discipline of this kind of discernment is an ongoing one, and I was still young in it.

But the feeling that accompanied what I had watched was the feeling I had learned to pay attention to. Not anxiety, not ordinary unease, but that specific heaviness — that weighted, intentional quality in the atmosphere — that I had first encountered in my grandmother's compound at seven years old and had been recognizing ever since.

I told my mother about it that evening. She listened without interrupting, and when I finished she asked me to describe the insects again, and I did.

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, 'Pray for Mrs. Adaora tonight. Specifically and by name.'

'What does it mean?' I asked.

'It means you should pray for her,' she said, which was her way of telling me she had a strong suspicion about the meaning but was not going to speak it aloud and give it any more reality than it already had. My mother had a careful relationship with the spoken word. She believed that some things grow when you name them and that wisdom sometimes lies in naming God's protection rather than the threat.

I prayed for Mrs. Adaora that night. I prayed for her the following night as well, with a specificity and urgency that surprised even me.

On the third morning after I had seen the insects, I was woken at just after five in the

morning by sounds from across the compound that I recognized before I was fully awake. The particular quality of voices that comes with sudden and terrible news. The sound of a door being knocked with the flat of a hand rather than the knuckles, with more force and urgency than ordinary knocking uses.

I sat up in bed in the dark and knew, before anyone told me, what had happened.

Mrs. Adaora had collapsed in her kitchen in the early morning hours. Her daughter had found her on the floor when she went to get water. By the time the neighbors and the ambulance and all the frantic, well-meaning human activity that surrounds such moments had assembled itself, she was gone. The doctors would later say it was a stroke. Sudden, massive, fatal.

I sat in my room and pressed my hands together and thought about the circle of insects above her roof. About the two nights I had prayed. About whether prayer changes things or only accompanies them. About all the things I had

asked God for on her behalf and the fact that the outcome had been what it was regardless.

It was one of the first times I truly wrestled with the theology of intercession — not as an abstract question but as a lived and painful one. If I saw something, and prayed, and the thing happened anyway, what was the point of the seeing? What was the point of the praying?

I did not arrive at a comfortable answer that morning. The answers to questions like that do not come quickly or cleanly. They come over years, through the accumulation of experiences and reflection and the slow development of a faith that is strong enough to hold questions without being shattered by them. What I arrived at that morning was only the beginning of the answer: that prayer is not always about changing outcomes. Sometimes it is about being present, spiritually, with another person in the approach of something that God in His sovereignty has permitted. Sometimes it is about ensuring that the approaching darkness does not come for its target unopposed. And sometimes — and I would see

this proved more than once in the years ahead — it does change the outcome entirely.

I did not know, that morning, which of these was true for Mrs. Adaora. I only knew that I had seen what I had seen, and that I had done what I could do, and that she was gone, and that the grief of it was real regardless of the theology I wrapped around it.

I got dressed quietly and went across to offer my condolences to her children, and I did not speak to anyone about the circle of insects above their roof.

Episode 7
Death in the Neighborhood

After Mrs. Adaora, the deaths came faster.

The deaths came in the quiet, unremarkable way that most deaths come — one at a time, each one attributed to a natural cause, each one mourned by its immediate circle and then absorbed into the general background of life continuing around the absence left behind.

But there were too many of them.

In the three months following Mrs. Adaora's death, four other people died in our compound and on the surrounding streets. A man named Brother Emmanuel from the flat above ours, who was sixty-one years old and had high blood pressure, was found in his chair one evening having apparently died without distress while watching the television — natural enough at his age, his family said, and perhaps it was. A young woman two houses down from us, who was twenty-four and appeared to be in perfect health, died suddenly of what the doctors described as an

unspecified cardiac event. A teenage boy from the next street, seventeen years old and known for his exceptional speed on the football pitch, collapsed during a game and did not recover. And an elderly woman from the corner compound, one of the oldest residents of the area, died in her sleep on a night that was, by all accounts, an ordinary one.

Four deaths in three months. In a neighborhood of the size of ours, this was enough to make people talk.

The conversations happened in the way sensitive neighborhood conversations always happen — in small groups, in low voices, in places where the person you were worried about was unlikely to overhear. At the outdoor water tap in the early morning. In the corner of the market where the provisions seller held court on an upturned crate. After the evening church service, in the yard of the church before people dispersed to their various homes.

I was present at several of these conversations, listening more than I spoke, the way I had always found most useful. What I heard was a

neighborhood working itself toward something it was reluctant to name directly. People spoke about strange things happening in the area. They spoke about dreams — cemetery dreams, voices, figures seen at night. They spoke about animals behaving oddly, about children having nightmares, about a general atmosphere of unease that had descended on the streets without clear origin.

An older man named Papa Bello, who was one of the longest-standing residents of the area and who was generally regarded as someone whose opinion on such matters was worth having, said at the tap one morning — to no one in particular, but in a voice pitched to be heard by those present — 'Something has been let loose in this place. Something that has found a home here. And until it is confronted, it will continue to eat.'

No one argued with him. No one laughed or dismissed the statement as superstition. They received it in silence, with the particular gravity of people who have been watching things happen around them and have reached, privately, the

same conclusion, but have been waiting for someone with enough age and authority to say it plainly.

I walked home from the tap that morning thinking about Papa Bello's words. Something that has found a home here. In my experience — limited still, in those days, compared to what it would become — spiritual presences that attach to places do not do so arbitrarily. They are drawn by something. By a history of violence or injustice or occult practice that has opened a door and left it open. By the accumulated grief and fear of a community that has not known how to close what has been opened. By the presence of people in that community who, knowingly or not, through their own choices or through choices made generations before them, have established some kind of agreement with forces that should not have been invited in.

I did not know, at that point, the specific history that had made our neighborhood what it had become. But I was beginning to understand that it had a history, that the present

accumulation of deaths was not the beginning of anything but rather the current expression of something that had been operating for a long time, perhaps long before any of us living there now had arrived.

And I was beginning to feel, with an urgency that I did not yet know how to translate into action, that something needed to be done.

I was seventeen years old. I was not a pastor or a prophet. I did not have any official spiritual authority or standing. I was simply a girl who had grown up seeing things other people did not see, who had been praying since childhood, who had a mother who had taught her to take the invisible world seriously, and who was beginning to understand that the seeing and the praying were not coincidental or decorative features of her life but purposes. Specific purposes, aimed at specific things.

I went home and knelt down in the corner of my room and prayed for our neighborhood with more depth and more specificity than I had ever prayed for it before. I prayed against the spirit of

death that had established itself in that place. I prayed for the families of those who had died. I prayed that God would reveal to me what needed to be understood and done. And I prayed for Samuel, who was still in the hospital, who was fighting in the only way a person in his situation can fight, and who was asking for me more frequently now.

The neighborhood continued to hold its breath. And somewhere beneath the quiet of those familiar streets, something continued to move.

Episode 8

The Funeral Procession Dreams

The cemetery dreams changed.

They had been changing gradually since the night my mother prayed over me — becoming, if not less intense, at least less random in their content. Where once I had simply wandered among headstones in a grey twilight, the dreams now had more structure. More information. As though whatever was showing them to me had decided I was ready to be shown more.

The funeral processions began appearing in the fourth month after Samuel's hospitalization.

In the dreams, I would be standing at the side of a road — not always the same road, but always a road I recognized as belonging to our town, to our neighborhood, to the streets I had walked for as long as I could remember. And down the road, moving toward me at the measured, deliberate pace of grief, would come a procession. Men in dark suits, women in mourning cloth, the particular shuffle of a large group of people

moving together in sorrow. At the front of the procession, four men carried a coffin on their shoulders.

At first I could not see whose coffin it was. The processions in the early dreams were anonymous — present, weighted, real in every detail except the identity of the person being carried. I stood at the roadside and watched them pass and felt the weight of them in my chest the way you feel the weight of a large vehicle passing close to you, a vibration that is almost physical.

Then the names began to appear.

Not on headstones this time, but on the side of the coffins. Simple, plain lettering on the dark wood, no dates, just names. And on three separate nights, in three separate dreams, I saw the name of someone I knew on the side of a coffin moving slowly past me in a procession.

The first was a name I recognized as belonging to a woman who lived on the far side of our compound. I will not write her name here — these were dreams, and I have always been careful

about treating dreams as certainties even when their content is distressing. But her name was on the side of the coffin, and when I woke from that dream I prayed for her immediately and with considerable urgency, and I carried the unease of it through the following days like a stone in my pocket.

She did not die. Not in those weeks, and not for many years afterward as far as I know. Whatever the dream was signaling — whether it was showing me what was approaching and could be prayed against, or whether it was showing me something else entirely — that particular outcome did not come to pass. And I have never fully resolved the question of what that means, whether the prayer changed something or whether the dream was simply a warning that found its intended response.

The second name I saw on a coffin was a name from my own family. A cousin, still young, who lived in another town. I will say only this: within a month of that dream, she was ill. Within two months, she recovered. I prayed every day of those

two months with the specificity of someone who believes that prayer reaches across distance. Whether what I was doing contributed to her recovery or whether her recovery was always God's intention and the praying was my participation in something already decided, I cannot say. I know only that she lived, and that she later told me she had felt, during the worst weeks of her illness, that someone was praying for her — that she had felt held up, somehow, by an invisible support.

The third name I saw was Samuel's.

I woke from that dream at three in the morning with my heart working so hard I could feel it in my fingertips, and I got to my knees on the floor before I was even fully awake. I prayed for Samuel for two hours. I prayed with a desperation that was not quite panic but was the closest thing to it that I had brought to prayer. I named his name over and over. I prayed against the death that was moving toward him. I asked God — demanded, perhaps, in the way that one demands things from the only person who has the

power to help — that the coffin with Samuel's name on it not be filled.

When I finally went back to bed as the sky was beginning to lighten, I felt something that was not comfort exactly but was the quality of having been heard. That particular shift in the spiritual atmosphere that prayer sometimes produces, the sense of having moved from being alone with a burden to being alongside someone who is sharing its weight.

The coffin in the dream had not been filled yet. But it existed. And that meant something was working toward filling it.

I did not tell Samuel about this dream. Some things are not for the person to carry. I carried it for him, in prayer, in the way that those who love someone sometimes carry the heaviest portions of the knowledge about their situation so that the person themselves can be free to simply live the next day without the full weight of what might be coming.

He was weak when I visited him that week. Weaker than the week before. But he was still Samuel — still trying for humor, still asking about my life outside the hospital as though he wanted to maintain a connection to the ordinary world through me. And I sat with him and told him about small things, funny things, things from school and from the compound, and underneath the lightness of our conversation I prayed without ceasing.

Because I had seen his name on a coffin. And I was not ready to stop fighting.

Episode 9

Samuel's Final Fear

The hospital visits changed as Samuel's condition changed. In the early months, there had been a quality to our time together that was almost normal — two friends talking, the context of the hospital receding slightly during the good hours, the ordinary texture of our friendship reasserting itself. He joked. He complained. He asked about mutual friends and made observations about the nurses and told me he was sick of the food.

But as the months passed and the treatments did their complex, imperfect work — fighting the virus while also exhausting the body that contained it — the quality of our hours together shifted. The jokes came less easily. The windows of energy shortened. And Samuel began to spend more of our time together being honest in ways he had not been honest before.

He spoke about regrets. Not dramatic ones, not the kind that make for impressive confessions,

but the small, quiet ones that accumulate over a life and that a person usually only examines closely when circumstances have stripped away the distractions that ordinarily keep those examinations at bay. He spoke about things he had meant to do and hadn't. Conversations he had avoided. Apologies he had withheld from people who deserved them. His faith, which had always been present but largely theoretical, had become suddenly and urgently real, and the realness of it was both a comfort and a weight.

He told me one evening, about seven months after his admission, something that I had been half expecting and half dreading to hear.

The ward was quiet that night. It was after eight, past the official visiting hours, but the nurse who managed that section had known me long enough by then to wave me through without comment. The other patients in the ward were mostly asleep or resting, the curtains around the beds creating a series of small, enclosed worlds, each one containing its own particular version of struggle and waiting. Samuel's curtain was half

open, and the lamplight from his bedside fell in a warm, narrow band across the white of his blanket.

He was awake when I came in. He had been lying on his back looking at the ceiling, and when I appeared at the curtain he turned his head toward me with the slow deliberateness that his body now required for most movements.

'They come at night,' he said, without any preamble, without any of the easing-in that people do when they are working up to something difficult.

I sat down beside his bed. 'Who comes?'

He was quiet for a moment. In the soft light his face was thinner than it had ever been, the architecture of his skull more prominent beneath his skin, his eyes — still intelligent, still distinctly Samuel's, even now — moving to the corner of the room before coming back to me.

'Figures,' he said. 'Dark ones. They stand near the bed. Not always in the same place — sometimes at the foot, sometimes at the side,

sometimes right here—' he moved his eyes toward the space directly beside his pillow, '—right here by my head. They don't say anything. They just stand there.'

'When does this happen?'

'Around two in the morning. Sometimes three. The ward is dark and quiet and everyone else is asleep, and I wake up and they're there.' He paused. 'I know you're going to tell me it's the medication or it's the fever and I'm imagining things.'

'I'm not going to tell you that,' I said.

He looked at me. Something in his face that had been braced for argument or gentle dismissal relaxed slightly. 'No,' he said. 'You wouldn't, would you.'

'Do they frighten you?'

'Yes,' he said simply. 'They frighten me very much. They stand there with that waiting quality — I don't know how else to describe it. Like something that has been patient for a long time and is beginning to feel that the wait is almost

over.' He stopped. His voice had remained level throughout this, but I could see in the set of his jaw the effort that levelness was costing him. 'Zoe. Am I going to die?'

The question sat between us in the quiet of the ward. I had been preparing myself for it, knowing it would come, but preparation does not make the thing itself easier when it arrives.

'I don't know,' I said. Because there are questions that deserve honesty more than comfort, and this was one of them. 'But I know that whatever is standing in this room at night is not standing here unopposed. Every night, Samuel. Every single night I pray for you. And I am not the only one. My mother prays for you. People at church who have heard your name pray for you. There is a wall around you made of prayer, and what is standing at the edge of your bed at two in the morning cannot cross that wall without passing through God first.'

He was quiet for a long time. Then he said, very quietly, 'I should have prayed more myself. I

should have taken the dreams seriously when you told me. I was afraid of looking foolish.'

'You're not foolish,' I said. 'You're a person. We all look away from the things that frighten us until we can't anymore.'

'Pray for me now,' he said. 'Right now, while you're here. So I can hear it.'

I took his hand in both of mine and I prayed over him right there in the ward, not quietly or privately but aloud, in a low voice that was nonetheless intentional and clear. I prayed against the figures at his bedside. I spoke directly to them in the authority of a faith that was still developing but was entirely real, and I told them they had no permission, no right, no access to this life except what God permitted, and that I was placing Samuel under the blood and authority of Christ and commanding them to leave.

When I finished, Samuel's hand in mine had relaxed. He was crying, quietly, the tears running sideways across his face onto the pillow. He did not wipe them.

'Thank you,' he said.

I sat with him until he fell asleep, holding his hand in the lamplight of the quiet ward. And I stayed a while after that, watching the corners of the room with the particular attention of someone who is on guard, who has declared a position and intends to hold it.

The corners were empty. The figures, whatever they were, did not return that night.

But Samuel's time was running out, and somewhere beneath my faith, beneath all the prayer and all the determination, I felt the terrible, beloved truth of his mortality pressing against me like a tide against a sea wall.

Episode 10

The Bloodshed of the Past

It was Papa Bello who told me the history of the junction. I had thought about his words at the tap many times since he had spoken them — something that has found a home here, something that will continue to eat — and I had been looking for an opportunity to ask him what he knew without seeming intrusive or alarming him with the depth of my interest. In a community like ours, a teenage girl asking too many pointed questions about the spiritual history of a neighborhood could attract the kind of attention that made things more complicated rather than less.

But one afternoon I found Papa Bello alone in the compound yard, repairing a section of fence that had come loose from its post. He was a methodical man, slow and careful in his movements, and he worked with the focused patience of someone who had long since stopped being in a hurry about anything. I offered to hold

the fence post steady while he worked, and he accepted without comment, and we worked together in silence for a while before he spoke.

'You've been watching the neighborhood,' he said. It was not a question.

'Yes,' I said.

'And thinking about what you see.'

'Yes.'

He tightened a bolt and examined his work before responding. 'You're not the first to notice. Your mother has been here long enough that she's seen things. Old Mama Chioma before she died — she talked about it sometimes. That some places are marked.' He paused. 'That junction at the bottom of Alade Street. You've heard about the accidents?'

'Many of them,' I said.

'Then let me tell you about the one that started everything.'

He set down his tools and straightened up slowly, with the deliberate care of old joints, and

came to lean against the fence post we had repaired. The afternoon light caught the grey in his hair and the lines in his face, and he looked, in that moment, very old and very certain about the things he was going to say.

'Before this area was what it is now,' he began, 'before any of these houses were built or these roads were paved, this whole area was bush. Farms, mostly, and paths through the bush that connected the farms to the market town. The people who farmed here were ordinary people. But there was a man — I knew his son, many years ago, and the son told me what he knew of his father's history, which was not much, because it was not the kind of history a family discusses openly.

'This man had a dispute with his neighbors about land. Land disputes in those days were different from what they are now. There were no courts you could easily appeal to, no land registry, no legal framework that could resolve things quickly and peacefully. Disputes were settled by negotiation, or by the authority of village elders,

or, sometimes, by methods that had nothing to do with negotiation or authority.

'This man chose the third method. He hired people — men who were known for the kind of work that pays well and leaves a person with blood on their hands and money in their pocket. And those men came one night and they killed three of his neighbors. They killed them at the junction of the paths — the place where the three farming paths met, which is the same place where the three roads meet now. They killed them there because killing at a crossroads has a particular meaning in the old traditions. It was not simply murder. It was a spiritual act. A covenant made in blood at a place where boundaries meet.'

He stopped speaking for a moment. The afternoon sounds of the compound went on around us — a radio from somewhere upstairs, a child calling to another child, the ordinary music of people living their lives — and they seemed, in that moment, very thin over the silence beneath them.

'The man who hired the killers believed he had secured his land by what he did,' Papa Bello continued. 'And perhaps in the immediate, physical sense, he had. The neighbors who disputed his claim were dead. Their families, frightened and grieving, did not press the matter further. He kept his land. He built his farm. He lived his life.

'But the killing at the crossroads — the blood that was spilled at the junction of those three paths — that was not simply a crime that could be buried with the bodies. A door was opened at that place. Something was invited in, through the blood, and through the particular spiritual significance of the location, and through the fact that the people who were killed there were killed unjustly, without recourse, without anyone to answer for what happened to them. In the traditions of our people, blood that cries out from the ground is not a metaphor. It is a spiritual reality. And blood that cries out is answered.

'What answered that blood,' Papa Bello said, 'has been at that junction ever since. It is why the

accidents happen there. It is why the accidents are never small. It is why the junction claims more than an ordinary badly designed road junction should claim. Something lives there. Something that was nourished by what happened all those years ago and has never been properly addressed.'

He pushed off from the fence post and bent to pick up his tools. 'I've told you this,' he said, 'because I think you're the kind of person who needs to know it. Not everyone does. Some people are better off not knowing. But you—' he glanced at me with those old, clear eyes, '—you've been seeing things, haven't you? For some time now.'

'Yes,' I said.

He nodded as though this confirmed something. 'Then knowing the history will help you understand what you're seeing,' he said. 'And understanding what you're seeing is the first step toward knowing what to do about it.'

He picked up his toolbox and walked back toward his flat, leaving me standing in the compound yard with the weight of what he had

told me settling over my shoulders like a garment I had not known I was being fitted for.

Blood at a crossroads. An old covenant made in violence. A spirit that had fed on that original injustice for decades and had grown fat on the accidents and the deaths and the grief of everyone who had passed through that junction without knowing what was waiting there.

I stood in the yard and felt the scale of it pressing down on me, and I understood for the first time that what I had been encountering in my neighborhood was not a series of isolated events. It was a single, sustained story. A long, dark story that had been written in blood at the beginning and that had been adding chapters ever since.

I also understood, with a clarity that was almost vertiginous, that I had been brought to this understanding for a reason. That the seeing had always been leading somewhere. That the dreams and the cemetery visits and the circle of insects and all the rest of it were not random experiences inflicted on a particular person by a capricious

universe, but were the deliberate equipping of someone who was being prepared for something.

I just did not yet know what that something was. Or how much it was going to cost to do it.

Episode 11

The Midnight Attack

The attack came on a Thursday night, in the third week of January, during the harmattan when the air was dry and cool and the sky was hazy with the fine dust that blew down from the north at that time of year. I had spent the evening reading and praying and had gone to bed at around eleven, which was later than usual. Ada was already asleep in her bed across the room, and the compound outside was quiet. Our parents were asleep. The whole house breathed with the deep, even rhythm of a household at rest.

I fell asleep quickly, which was unusual — I had been sleeping less easily in recent months, the weight of everything I was carrying finding its natural expression in restlessness and interrupted nights. But that Thursday I went down fast and deeply, as though the sleep was pulling me under rather than letting me drift, and for a while there was nothing. No dreams. No graveyard. No grey

light. Just the clean darkness of deep, dreamless rest.

Then something changed.

I became aware of it before I was fully conscious of being awake — an awareness that arrived in my body before it reached my mind, the way extreme cold or extreme heat registers in the skin before the brain processes it as a sensation. Something had entered the room. Not through the door, not through the window. Through no aperture of the physical kind. Something was simply present that had not been present before.

I tried to open my eyes and could not.

This was the first thing that told me the nature of what was happening. I was not simply asleep. I was in the state that some people describe as sleep paralysis, but that I have never been entirely satisfied with as a description, because sleep paralysis is a neurological explanation for a physical phenomenon, and what I experienced that night was not primarily physical. My body was locked, yes — lying perfectly still on my back,

unable to move any limb, unable even to turn my head. But the locking was not the product of my brain's sleep mechanism misfiring. It had a different quality to it. A deliberate quality. The quality of something being held down rather than something failing to wake up.

And then the weight came.

It descended onto my chest with the slow, terrible inevitability of something that has all the time in the world and knows it. It was not a physical weight in the way that a person sitting on your chest is a physical weight — there was no body, no limbs, nothing that would have been visible to anyone watching. But the pressure was real and it was increasing, pressing down on my sternum and spreading outward across my chest and shoulders, and with it came the beginning of difficulty breathing. Not the dramatic, gasping difficulty of someone drowning, but the slow, creeping insufficiency of someone being gradually prevented from drawing a full breath.

The fear that arrived with all of this was of a specific kind. It was not the ordinary fear of

danger or pain. It was older than that. It was the fear that lives beneath all other fears — the fear of being unmade. The fear that recognizes an encounter with something that exists in fundamental opposition to life itself. My body understood it in the cells. My spirit understood it at a level that was older than understanding.

I could not move. I could not open my eyes. I could barely breathe. And it was getting worse.

And then, something else arrived. It was a word. Or not exactly a word, but the thing that words are made of — the impulse of meaning moving from somewhere into the part of me that processes language. And the meaning was: pray.

Just that. Just the single, clear, unornamented instruction.

I could not speak. My mouth was not cooperating with my will. But I had been taught, by years of practice, that prayer does not require a voice. Prayer begins in the spirit, in the place that is below language and before it, and the voiced words are simply the vehicle through which the

spirit's intention travels outward into the world. You can pray without speaking. You can pray without moving. You can pray while being held down in the dark by something that does not want you to.

I prayed.

Silently, fiercely, from somewhere deep in the center of myself that the thing on my chest could not reach. I called on the name of Jesus with the specific, deliberate intention of someone who is not calling on a name as a formula but as a person. I called on Him the way you call on someone you know is present and who has the authority to intervene. I prayed with everything I had, every cell of faith that all those years of watching and praying and learning had deposited in me.

The weight did not lift immediately. This is important to say, because there is a version of these testimonies where the name is spoken and the enemy flees in an instant and everything is resolved in three seconds flat. That was not my experience that night. The weight lifted gradually, the way a storm passes — first lessening, then

pausing, then lessening again, the pressure decreasing in increments while I continued to pray, continued to call on the name, continued to insist from that deep, unreachable center of myself that I was not alone in this room and that what was on my chest had no rightful authority over me.

At some point that I cannot precisely identify, the weight was gone. My body unlocked. I drew a full, deep breath, and then another, and then I was sitting upright in my bed in the dark of the room with Ada still asleep across from me and the compound still quiet outside and the harmattan night still pressing its dry, hazy weight against the windows.

I sat there for a long time, breathing, existing, being grateful for the profound luxury of being able to do both of those things without obstruction.

Then I slid to the floor beside the bed and knelt on the cold concrete and prayed for another two hours. Not out of obligation. Out of a gratitude and a clarity that had never before been as sharp

or as total as it was in that moment. I had been attacked. Something had come for me, deliberately and with intent, and I had survived it. Not through my own strength, but through the intervention of the name of Jesus.

Episode 12

The Death of My Sister

Ada died on a Sunday.

She had been ill for eight days before the end came. A fever that arrived on a Tuesday evening and that we all assumed, in the way families assume such things, would respond to medication and rest and be gone within the week. She was seventeen, strong and energetic, the kind of person whose body seemed built for recovery. We gave her paracetamol and sponge baths and cold water and told her to sleep, and we waited for the fever to break the way fevers do.

But this fever had a quality that was different from ordinary fevers, and I knew it from the second day. I knew it the way I had learned to know certain things — not through diagnosis or clinical observation, though I was observant enough, but through that deeper awareness that had been sharpening itself in me for years. There was something attached to Ada's illness that was not simply illness. There was a presence in it. A

thickness in the atmosphere around her bed that I recognized and that made the skin on my arms prickle every time I entered her room.

I did not say this to my parents. My mother was frightened enough by the practical fact of the fever, taking Ada's temperature every few hours with an anxiety that she kept controlled with considerable effort. My father made quiet phone calls to relatives and contacts, arranging a hospital visit for the following morning, being practical and purposeful in the way he always was in a crisis. Neither of them needed me adding a spiritual dimension to their already considerable burden.

I prayed instead. I prayed with everything I had. I sat outside Ada's door in the corridor and I prayed, and in the evenings when I sat at her bedside and held her hand while she drifted in and out of the shallow, restless sleep that high fever produces, I prayed silently and without ceasing. I prayed against whatever I felt attached to her condition. I commanded it to release her. I

covered her in every prayer, every Scripture, every act of faith I had in my arsenal.

On the fifth day, the fever seemed to ease. Her temperature dropped. Her breathing was less labored. She opened her eyes and recognized me clearly for the first time in two days, and she said, in her hoarse, weakened voice, 'I had strange dreams.'

'What kind of dreams?' I asked, keeping my voice level.

'The graveyard kind,' she said, and looked at me with eyes that were still glazed from the fever but suddenly very serious. 'Zoe. The graveyard kind. Like you described once, years ago.'

Something cold moved through me. 'You never told me you'd had those dreams.'

'Only now,' she said. 'Only while I've been sick.' She paused, and her eyes moved to the ceiling with the unfocused look of someone searching for words. 'There was a voice. Calling my name. I couldn't see who it was.'

I held her hand tighter. 'Ada, listen to me. Whatever you heard in that dream, you do not follow it. Do you understand me? Whatever calls your name in a graveyard, you do not go toward it. You walk in the opposite direction. And you call on Jesus.'

She looked at me and nodded slowly, and I believed that she had heard me.

On the sixth day, she was visibly better. On the seventh day, she sat up and ate a small meal. My mother exhaled with a relief that was physical and total, the relief of a person whose body has been braced against a blow that now appears not to be coming.

On the eighth day, Sunday morning, at approximately seven-fifteen while my parents were at the early church service and I was in the kitchen making tea, Ada died.

There was no warning. No preceding deterioration. No sign that the improvement of the previous two days had been anything other than real. She was simply, suddenly,

catastrophically gone. I found her when I went to bring her a cup of tea. She was lying on her back in her bed in the same position she had been sleeping in all week, but the quality of her stillness was the quality I had learned to recognize. The quality of an absence.

I stood in the doorway of her room and the cup of tea was still in my hand and I understood, before I touched her, before I called her name, before I did any of the things that a person does in that moment to confirm what their body has already told them — I understood completely and totally what had happened. And the understanding broke over me like a wave breaks over a person who has been standing in the surf, knocking them sideways, robbing them of breath and bearing and the ability to determine which way is up.

I called my mother's phone with hands that were not entirely under my control. When she answered with the bright, unsuspecting voice of someone who was at that moment worshipping in a place of joy, I heard myself say the words that I

had heard other people say and had never imagined saying about my own sister, in my own voice, at seven-fifteen on a Sunday morning.

'Mama. Come home. Ada is gone.'

The silence on the other end of the phone lasted only a second. And then my mother's voice changed into something I had never heard from her before and hope never to hear again. Something that was below language and above it at the same time. The sound of a parent receiving news that the mind cannot immediately contain.

The hours that followed are not fully linear in my memory. They exist as a series of images and sounds rather than a coherent sequence — my mother arriving through the front door and going directly to Ada's room without stopping, without removing her shoes; my father standing in the sitting room afterward with his hands at his sides and his face very still, in the particular stillness of a man choosing between collapse and composure and barely choosing composure; relatives arriving, and neighbors, and the sounds of communal grief filling the compound again, the

same sounds I had known since Uncle Femi's death, the same sounds that had become, with terrible familiarity, the soundtrack of loss in our family.

I sat in the corner of the sitting room and I did not weep. Not yet. The grief was there but it had not yet found the form of tears. What it found instead, in those first hours, was a terrible, clarifying anger. Directed not at God, or not primarily at God, but at the thing that I had been seeing and fighting and praying against for the past year. The thing that had come for my uncle and for Samuel and for Mrs. Adaora and for the neighborhood and now for my sister.

It had reached into my own family again. It had taken someone I loved. And the question that had started forming when I stood at my uncle's graveside and felt the pattern beneath the grief was now, with Ada's death, more urgent and more specific than it had ever been before.

Not just: why does death keep coming to our door? But: what is going to make it stop?

Episode 13

My Mother's Passing

Grief changes people. Not always visibly, not always immediately, but in the deep structure of a person grief makes alterations that cannot be entirely undone. My mother, who had been the most consistent and anchored person in my life since the beginning of it, changed after Ada's death.

She became quieter. Not in a retreating, withdrawing way — she was still present, still functional, still managing the household and the practical demands of daily life with the competence that had always characterized her. But the particular quality of her engagement with the world shifted. She was more inward. Her prayers, which had always been intense, became even more so, and longer — I would sometimes wake at two or three in the morning to the low, steady sound of her voice from the room she and my father shared, praying in the dark with the urgency of someone who is standing between

something she loves and something that is coming for it.

Six weeks after Ada's death, she developed a cough.

At first it was minor — a dry, occasional cough that she attributed to harmattan dust and treated with warm water and honey and the mild disregard we all extend to minor ailments when we are too absorbed in grief to give proper attention to our own bodies. But the cough did not go away. It deepened. It became more frequent. And it began to be accompanied by other things — a tiredness that was more than ordinary tiredness, a gradual loss of appetite that she tried to conceal from my father and me but that I noticed because I noticed everything about her now, watching her with the specific attention of someone who is afraid.

I was afraid. The fear had been building since the morning Ada died, quiet and constant, alongside the grief, alongside the anger, alongside the prayers that I brought to God every single night with a desperation I had never felt before. I

was afraid because I was beginning to understand the shape of what was happening to our family. Not just as a series of separate tragedies but as a single, sustained assault. And the one person I feared for most was the one whose loss I felt I could not survive.

Three months after Ada's death, my mother was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer.

The doctor who told us was a quiet, careful man who delivered the news with the measured gentleness of someone who has had to do this many times and has learned that there is no good way to do it, only a less bad way. He spoke about the stage of the cancer, the options available, the likelihood of various outcomes with or without treatment. My father sat beside my mother in the doctor's office and held her hand and asked questions in a steady, controlled voice that cost him more than I could measure. My mother listened and nodded and was, throughout, more composed than either of the doctors or her husband expected her to be.

On the drive home, she reached over from the back seat and took my hand.

'You already knew,' she said. It was not a question.

'I was afraid,' I said. 'That's not the same as knowing.'

'You've been watching me.'

'Yes.'

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, 'Zoe. Whatever happens. You stay close to God. You hear me? Whatever happens to this family, whatever you see and whatever comes — you stay close to God and you don't let go.'

'Mama'

'I'm not saying I'm giving up,' she said, firmly, with something of the old steadiness in her voice. 'I'm going to fight this. I'm going to pray and take the treatment and fight. But I am also realistic, and I am also your mother, and there are things I need to say to you regardless of what happens.' She paused. 'The things I've taught you — about prayer, about the spiritual world, about what it

means to carry the kind of eyes you carry — those things are not decorative. They are your assignment. You understand?'

'I understand,' I said.

'Good.' She squeezed my hand once, firmly, and released it.

The treatment began. There were weeks of hope, weeks when the numbers moved in the right direction and the doctors spoke with cautious optimism and my mother's energy was almost what it had been. And there were weeks when the illness asserted itself with a force that the treatment could not match, and she would lie in her bed in the afternoon light looking at the window with an expression that I recognized as the expression of someone who is doing their accounting. Reviewing their life. Making peace with what they find there.

She lasted eight months from the diagnosis. Long enough to see my father hold himself together through a difficulty that would have destroyed many men. Long enough to pray with

me for the last time, sitting together in the sitting room on a Sunday afternoon two weeks before the end, her voice thin but her words clear and specific and full of the authority that a lifetime of genuine faith deposits in a person.

She died on a Tuesday morning in April, with my father on one side and me on the other, each of us holding one of her hands. She did not struggle. She breathed more and more slowly, and then she breathed once more, and then the breathing simply stopped, the way a song stops when it reaches its final note.

I sat beside her for a long time after, still holding her hand, which was still warm. The room was quiet in the way of all rooms after a death, a quality of silence that is different from ordinary silence, that has been altered by the departure of something that was particular and irreplaceable and will not come back to this specific room in this specific form.

I thought about all the things she had given me. The prayers. The teachings. The steady, unornamented example of a faith that did not

require anything to be easy in order to remain. I thought about what she had said in the car: you stay close to God. You don't let go.

I was not going to let go. Not because I was not in pain — the pain was enormous, larger than anything I had yet known — but because she had taught me that faith is not the absence of pain. It is what you hold onto while the pain is doing its work.

And I was going to need it. Because the worst was not yet over.

Episode 14

The Loss of My Father

My father was not the kind of man who unraveled. He was built, structurally, for endurance — broad through the chest and through his convictions, deliberate in his speech, economical in his expressions of emotion in the way that men of his generation and his culture tended to be, while being unmistakably, genuinely loving in everything he did. He had been steady through Uncle Femi's death, and through Ada's, and through my mother's long illness, holding himself together with a quiet, daily faithfulness that I understood, only in retrospect, had been costing him more than anyone saw.

After my mother died, he grieved.

He grieved privately, as was his nature, mostly at night and in the early mornings. But I would sometimes hear him through the wall — the sounds of a man in pain doing his best to keep that pain within the privacy of his own room — and the sounds were worse than any weeping because of

the restraint in them. He was a man trying not to burden his remaining child with the full weight of what he was carrying.

He continued to function. He went to work. He came home. He ate the meals I prepared and sat with me in the evenings and talked about ordinary things with the discipline of someone who has decided that ordinary things must continue, that the framework of daily life must be maintained even when the people who gave it its meaning have been removed from it one by one.

But something in him was receding. I felt it the way you feel a tide going out — not dramatically, not all at once, but steadily, quietly, the water withdrawing from the shore in a movement that is so gradual you might not notice it if you weren't watching carefully. He was withdrawing from the life he had built with my mother, not because he wanted to but because the life he had built with my mother no longer fully existed, and there was a part of him that did not know how to occupy the space that was left.

Four months after my mother's death, he fell ill.

The illness came quickly, the way his brother Femi's had come — without clear warning, without the buildup of symptoms that allows a person to prepare themselves and their family for what might be coming. One evening he sat down at the dinner table and said he had a headache. The following morning he could not get out of bed. By the afternoon, his speech was slightly slurred and his right hand was trembling with an involuntary, fine-grained tremor.

The hospital said it was a series of small strokes. They spoke about blood pressure, about the long-term effects of sustained stress on the cardiovascular system, about the way grief, which seems to inhabit the mind and the spirit, is also entirely real in the body and can be understood in physiological terms as a sustained assault on the body's systems. They spoke about treatment options and rehabilitation.

I stood in the hospital corridor and listened to the doctors and inside me there was a stillness

that was not calmness. It was the stillness of a person who has gone beyond the point where they can process new information through ordinary emotional channels and has moved into a different mode entirely. A functional mode. A mode where you hear what is being said and you ask the necessary questions and you make the necessary arrangements because there is no one else to make them, and you grieve later, privately, when the arrangements have been made.

He lasted six weeks in the hospital. The strokes continued, each one taking a little more — first some mobility, then some speech, then some recognition. Toward the end, there were moments when he would look at me and his face would light with the clear, uncomplicated love of a father who recognizes his child, and those moments were both the most precious and the most difficult of my days.

He died on a Saturday evening, eleven months after my mother. The ward was quiet. The sun was going down outside the window and the light coming through the blinds was the color of warm

copper, the particular light of late afternoon that has always seemed to me the most tender time of day. I was beside him when he went, holding his hand the way I had held my mother's, and as I had done with her I stayed after — not leaving him alone in the first minutes of his death, maintaining some presence with what had been him until the formal business of the world required otherwise.

I was twenty years old. Both parents gone. Ada gone. Uncle Femi gone. Cousin Bola gone. Auntie Grace gone. Samuel, who had died in the hospital three months after his diagnosis, gone.

My family had been reduced from a full, noisy, crowded life to a silence that I inhabited alone.

And in that silence, something crystallized in me that had been forming for years. A determination that was no longer merely personal or private, that was not simply about surviving or understanding or finding peace with what had happened. Something larger and more purposeful than any of those things.

Death had been working in my family. Not accidentally, not randomly, but with a consistency and a pattern that I had been observing long enough to know was not coincidence. Whatever had started at that junction, whatever had been feeding in our neighborhood, had at some point turned its particular attention toward the people I loved most. And it had been extraordinarily effective.

I was the one who was left. I was the one who had been given eyes to see. I was the one who had been tested in the night and had prayed through the paralysis and had survived the encounter in the dark.

And I was not done.

I began to make plans. Not the ordinary plans of a twenty-year-old girl who has just buried her father — plans for the house, plans for money, plans for the next practical step. Those plans existed too, and I made them. But alongside them and beneath them and more important than all of them was the plan that had been coalescing since Papa Bello told me the history of the junction and

my mother told me in the car that I had an assignment and my grandmother's teachings came back to me across all the years in the clarity of a person who can finally see the whole landscape from a height they couldn't reach before.

I was going to leave the village. I was going to university. And while I was there, I was going to learn everything I needed to learn — not just the academic curriculum, but the deeper curriculum that had been preparing itself my entire life. The curriculum of understanding, and confronting, and ultimately defeating the thing that had been eating my family and my neighborhood for as long as anyone could remember.

I did not know, yet, exactly how. But I knew the first step. And sometimes, when you are beginning a journey whose full length you cannot yet see, the first step is enough.

Episode 15
Leaving the Village

The morning I left for the city felt like many things at once. It felt like an ending and a beginning, which is what all departures feel like when you are young and paying attention. It felt like an act of courage and an act of cowardice simultaneously — courage because I was going toward something, cowardice because I was leaving behind a compound full of graves that I did not yet know how to address. And it felt, beneath all of those more articulate feelings, like an act of obedience. Like a person walking in the direction they have been pointed, even without knowing clearly what waits at the end of the road.

The house had been arranged. A cousin would come to maintain it in my absence. The furniture, my parents' possessions, the accumulated objects of a family life — all of it was still there, present and silent, waiting in the particular way that things wait when the people who gave them meaning are gone. I walked through each room

one last time that morning, touching doorframes and windowsills and the backs of chairs, saying something that was not quite goodbye because goodbye implies you do not intend to return.

I stood for a long time at the door of Ada's room. I had not changed it since her death. Her school shoes were still beside the door. A small bottle of her lotion was still on the dresser, half used. A photograph of the two of us from the previous Christmas was pinned above her bed — we were both laughing at something the camera couldn't see, caught in the particular unrepeatable light of a moment that we had no idea, then, would be one of our last.

I took the photograph down and put it in my bag. Left everything else exactly as it was.

The taxi came at seven. I had one bag, packed the night before with the efficiency of someone who has decided that traveling light is not just a logistical choice but a spiritual one. I was not going to the city to be comfortable. I was going to learn, to understand, and to carry whatever I found back with me when the time came.

As the taxi pulled out of the compound and turned onto the main road, I looked out the rear window at the familiar buildings and streets receding behind me. The junction at the bottom of Alade Street slid past my window, and I looked at it steadily as we went through it — not flinching, not looking away, but looking at it with the eyes I had been given and acknowledging what I felt there. The heaviness was still present. Whatever Papa Bello had described was still in residence. But something in the quality of my attention to it was different from what it had been the first time I understood what I was feeling at that place. The difference between a person who has seen a dangerous animal and runs from it, and a person who has seen it before and now walks past it with knowledge of its nature, knowing that knowledge itself is a form of power.

I prayed as we drove through the junction. Not loudly, not demonstrably. Just a quiet, intentional prayer of the kind my mother had taught me — not against the junction in that moment, not a confrontation, but a marking. An

acknowledgment: I see you. I know what you are. And I am not finished with you yet.

The city appeared gradually on the horizon as the taxi covered the distance between the town and the university, and with it came the particular quality of energy that cities have — a density of human intention and activity that you feel before you see it, a thickening of the air that has nothing to do with pollution and everything to do with the concentration of many lives in one place, all of them wanting things and working for things and fearing things and hoping for things simultaneously.

I had lived in the city before, in the years of secondary school. But this arrival felt different. I was different. The girl who had left for secondary school had been a person to whom things were happening, a person shaped by forces she was beginning to understand but had not yet learned to engage with from a position of knowledge and intention. The person arriving at this city now had been shaped by those same forces but had passed through them, had survived the midnight attack

and the graveyard dreams and the deaths and the grief and the long years of watching and praying and learning, and was arriving not as a subject of those forces but as someone who intended to understand them well enough to resist them.

The university campus was large and sprawling, green in a way that surprised me after the dusty town I had come from. I was assigned a room in the student hostel, carried my single bag up the stairs, set it down in the center of a small, bare room that would be my world for the foreseeable future, and stood for a moment in the quiet of it.

Then I knelt on the unfamiliar floor and dedicated the space. I prayed over the room, over the bed, over the walls, the way my mother had prayed over our home each time we moved or each time something significant changed. I laid a spiritual foundation in that small room before I put any of my physical possessions into it. It felt important. It felt, in a way I would later understand more fully, like the first act of a

chapter whose subject I was only beginning to make out.

When I was done, I stood up and looked around the room. It smelled of institutional cleaning fluid and other people's histories. Through the thin wall on the left, I could hear music playing. Through the wall on the right, a conversation in a language I did not immediately recognize. The corridor outside my door carried the sound of feet and voices and doors opening and closing in the unrepeatable music of a dormitory coming to life around a new term.

I unpacked my bag carefully, placing each item with a deliberateness that was almost ceremonial. The photograph of Ada and me went on the small desk, propped against the wall where I would see it every morning. My Bible went under my pillow, where it had lived for most of my life. My notebooks went on the shelf.

I was ready.

I did not know what was waiting in this place. But I had learned enough, across twenty years of

living in the world with the eyes I had been given, to know that where there are concentrations of young people, far from home, in buildings with complicated histories, the invisible world tends to be as busy as the visible one.

I was right about that, as it turned out. More right than I had bargained for.

Episode 16

A Pattern in the City

I settled into university life with the alertness of someone who is not simply attending an institution but reading it. I attended my lectures and completed my assignments and participated in the ordinary social life of the campus with as much normality as I could manage, because I had learned that the kind of work I was also doing — the quiet, continuous work of watching and praying and trying to understand the invisible landscape of a place — is best done from within the ordinary structures of life, not from the margins of them. The person who withdraws entirely from ordinary life in order to pursue spiritual understanding tends to lose their grip on the human dimension that gives that understanding its purpose.

So I was present. I made friends. I ate in the cafeteria and attended the campus fellowship and borrowed books from the library and walked to class in the mornings with the other students, all

of us moving in the same direction through the same campus air. And while I did all of these things, I observed.

The campus was, in many ways, exactly what I expected a campus to be — a community of young people in the particular suspended state of early adulthood, caught between the world they had come from and the world they were building, alive to possibility in the way that young people who are not yet fully worn down by reality tend to be. There was energy here. There was ambition and humor and the particular intoxication of ideas being encountered for the first time, the way a person encounters certain books or pieces of music and feels, in the encountering, that something fundamental has shifted.

But beneath this, layered into the infrastructure of the place in ways that became apparent only if you were looking for them, there were patterns that should not have been there.

I noticed the first one in my second week, during a walk across the eastern section of the campus that I took in the evenings when the day's

studying was done. There was a particular path that ran alongside the old wing of the science block — a section of the building that I later learned had been the original structure on the campus site, predating the university by several decades, built originally for another purpose that no one on the current campus seemed to know precisely. The path beside this old wing had an atmosphere that I recognized on my first walk past it and that I confirmed with subsequent visits.

Something had happened in or around that old building. Something that had left a mark on the atmosphere of the path beside it in the way that certain events leave marks — invisible to the eye but perceptible to the spirit, a disturbance in the quality of the air, a thickness, a watchfulness.

I also noticed the pattern in the news that circulated on campus. Not the official news — the announcements about events and academic results and campus governance that appeared on the bulletin boards and in the student newsletter. The other news. The word-of-mouth kind, the

quiet kind, the kind that moves through a community in whispers and sideways glances and sentences that begin 'did you hear about…'

What I heard, over those first weeks, was a geography of tragedy. Here, two years ago, a student had died under circumstances that were not fully explained. There, the year before, a young man had been found collapsed in his room and had not recovered. In that building, a cluster of deaths over a period of three years that everyone agreed was unusually high but that no one had been able to explain satisfactorily. The campus had its dark places, its locations with elevated histories of loss, its unofficial map of where things tended to go wrong.

And at the center of this unofficial map, the place where the lines of tragedy seemed most consistently to converge, was the student hostel. Block C, where I had been assigned a room.

Episode 17

Life in the University Hostel

Block C was a four-story building at the northeastern edge of the campus, one of the oldest residential structures on the grounds. Its walls were stained with decades of weather, its corridors long and poorly lit by fluorescent bulbs that flickered with an irregularity that the maintenance department addressed at intervals but could never seem to permanently resolve. The common room on the ground floor had a television, a scattering of mismatched furniture, and a smell of fried food and cheap air freshener that never quite dissipated regardless of ventilation.

The students in Block C were, individually, entirely normal. There was a girl called Ngozi on my floor who was studying biochemistry and who laughed at everything with a wholehearted abandon that filled the corridor with warmth. There was a boy named Chidi in the room above mine who played guitar badly and often at

inappropriate hours but who was so genuinely apologetic about it when complained to that it was impossible to stay angry. There was a serious, intense girl named Blessing who was studying law and who could be found in the common room at most hours of the day and night, surrounded by books, impervious to distraction.

These were ordinary people living ordinary student lives. And yet the hostel they lived in carried something that none of them seemed to fully see.

The rumors about Block C circulated on campus with the particular persistence of things that contain a core of truth, even if the details are embellished or confused in the retelling. Students who lived in other hostels would mention, usually with a kind of theatrical horror that kept the conversation from becoming too serious, that Block C had 'a reputation.' When asked to specify, they would mention the deaths — one or two names, sometimes more, students who had died in that building over the years, usually with the

qualifier that no one was quite sure of the exact circumstances.

I collected these stories the way I had always collected information about the invisible world.

What I found, assembled from the various accounts and from my own direct experience of the building, was this: Block C had a history of unusual deaths going back at least fifteen years. The deaths were never clustered dramatically enough to trigger any official investigation or public attention. They came at intervals, each one separately attributed to a natural or accidental cause, none of them obviously connected to the others except by location. And they came with a regularity that, once you saw it, was impossible to unsee.

Approximately every six months, someone in Block C died.

I walked the corridors of the building in the evenings, slowly, paying attention to the variations in atmosphere that different sections of the building produced. Most of it was simply

institutional. But there were two locations in the building where the atmosphere changed.

The first was the stairwell at the far end of the corridor on the second floor. The stairwell was narrower than the others and descended to a basement level that was officially used for storage but that students generally avoided. The atmosphere in that stairwell was cold in a way that was not explained by the direction of the wind or the absence of insulation, and it carried the particular quality I had learned to associate with places where something had happened that had never been properly addressed.

The second was Room 14 on the third floor. I had no specific information about that room beyond what I felt when I walked past it — a specific, localized quality of heaviness that was distinct from the rest of the corridor. I learned later, from Ngozi who had been on that floor the previous year, that Room 14 had been the room of a student who had died in the building two years before, a young man whose death had been

attributed to a cardiac event at twenty-two years old.

I prayed in my room every night and every morning. I prayed specifically and deliberately over the building and over the students who lived in it. And I waited, with the particular patience of someone who has learned that understanding usually requires time and that rushing it tends to produce misunderstanding, for whatever this place was going to show me.

Episode 18

The Midnight Knock

It happened in the sixth week of the semester, on a Wednesday night when the weather had turned cold and wet and the campus was quiet under a heavy, persistent rain. Most of the building was asleep. I had been awake late reading, sitting cross-legged on my bed with a lamp on the desk casting its narrow cone of light across the pages, when I heard it.

A knock at the door.

This in itself was not remarkable. Students knocked on each other's doors at irregular hours for various reasons — borrowing things, sharing news, the ordinary social currency of dormitory life. But this knock was at precisely twelve minutes past midnight, which was on the late side even by hostel standards. And it had a quality that I noticed before I was consciously aware of noticing it.

It was very deliberate. Three knocks, evenly spaced, with the particular measured rhythm of

someone who is knocking not to get attention — which tends to produce a more urgent, variable rhythm — but to announce. Three knocks, and then silence.

I looked at my door. The thin gap at the bottom showed no change in the light from the corridor — no shadow of feet, no movement. I sat for a moment, listening. The building was quiet. The rain continued against the window.

I got up and went to the door and opened it.

The corridor was empty. In both directions, as far as I could see in the dim corridor lighting, there was no one. Every other door was closed. The fluorescent light above me was doing its customary flickering, casting a stuttering light that made the shadows at the far end of the corridor shift and resettle in a way that required a deliberate act of will not to read as movement.

I stood in my doorway for a long moment. The rain fell against the window at the end of the corridor. The light flickered. The building breathed its institutional breath around me.

I stepped back inside and closed the door.

Thirty seconds later, I heard it again. Three knocks, same rhythm, same measured deliberateness. From the same side of the door.

This time I opened the door immediately. Still no one. The corridor exactly as it had been. Identical emptiness, identical shadows, identical rain against the identical window.

I was not afraid, which surprised me slightly. I thought I should be afraid, and I checked myself for the fear and found instead a kind of heightened clarity — the narrowing of attention that I had experienced in certain other spiritual encounters, where the fear seemed to be displaced by something more useful. I stood in the empty corridor and I said, clearly and at a volume that required the sentence to be directed rather than broadcast: 'You don't have permission here. This building is under the covering of God, and whatever you are, you are not welcome.'

The light above me flickered once, twice, and then held steady for a moment — steadier than it

had been all evening. Then it resumed its irregular pulse.

I went back inside, sat down on my bed, and prayed for the building for a long time. I had not yet raised my experiences with the other students because I had not found the right opening, the right moment, the right level of trust. But the knock changed that calculation. If something was walking the corridors of Block C and knocking on doors in the middle of the night, and if the pattern of six-monthly deaths was what I believed it to be, then this was no longer something I could address privately and alone.

The following morning at breakfast, I mentioned it to Ngozi.

Her response was immediate and completely unrehearsed, the response of someone who has been waiting for someone else to bring something up first. 'You heard it too,' she said. Not a question.

'When did you hear it?' I asked.

'Tuesday night,' she said. 'Same thing. Three knocks. I thought it was one of the girls on the floor playing a prank, so I opened the door fast to catch them and there was nobody there.' She stirred her tea without drinking it. 'I didn't sleep after that.'

'Has it happened before? To you or to anyone you know in the building?'

She thought about this for a moment. 'Last semester, Amaka — the girl who was in Room 9 before she transferred — she mentioned it. I thought she was being dramatic.'

By the end of that day, I had had the same conversation, in various forms, with four other students in Block C. All of them had heard the knock. All of them had opened the door to find an empty corridor. And all of them, once the topic had been opened by someone else — because none of them wanted to be the one who opened it — had been relieved to discover that they were not the only ones.

The hostel had a secret it had been keeping from itself. And now that the secret was out between enough of us, we could begin to figure out what to do about it.

Episode 19

The First Death in School

His name was Emmanuel Okafor and he was a second-year student of civil engineering who lived in Room 7 on the third floor of Block C, two doors down from the room with the atmosphere I had noted on my first walk through the building. He was twenty-one years old, and by all accounts an ordinary, healthy young man with no medical history of significance. He was known in the building as someone who kept to himself academically but was pleasant in passing, always willing to help if you knocked on his door with a question or a problem.

He was found on a Friday morning, three weeks after the knocking incident, by his roommate who had come in from an early lecture. He was sitting at his desk. At first his roommate thought he was asleep — slumped forward with his head resting on his folded arms, a very common posture for a student who has been studying late. But the stillness was wrong, and the

roommate knew it was wrong within seconds of entering the room, before he touched him or spoke his name.

Emmanuel was dead. He had been dead for some hours, the doctors estimated. The cause was given as sudden cardiac arrest, which the university's medical services noted as unusual given his age and apparent health, and which was duly reported in the way such things are reported.

The news moved through Block C and then through the campus with the speed that bad news always moves among young people who have not yet had much experience of death and who therefore feel its presence among them with an intensity that experience will eventually, and at some cost, moderate. There was genuine shock. There was the particular horror of proximity — he had been alive in that building, walking those corridors, and now he was not, and the beds and the desks and the corridors were all exactly the same and this seemed somehow wrong, seemed to demand some visible mark or alteration that the physical world consistently failed to provide.

I was in the common room when the news reached it. I received it in the stillness that had become my default response to this particular kind of news — the stillness of someone who is not surprised but is deeply, genuinely grieved. I did not know Emmanuel Okafor personally. But I had walked past his door. I had seen the atmosphere in the corridor near his room. And I understood, with a clarity that was as painful as it was precise, that his death was not an isolated medical event.

That evening, I gathered in Ngozi's room with five other students from the building who had been part of the earlier conversation about the knocking. We sat on the bed and the floor and the single chair, and we looked at each other in the particular way of people who share a knowledge they wish they didn't have.

'This is not the first time,' I said.

'We know,' said Blessing. She was hugging her knees to her chest, which was the most vulnerable posture I had ever seen from her. 'There was a girl, the year before you all arrived. And before her, a boy. The older students know the list.'

'It follows a pattern,' I said. 'Every six months. Approximately. Has anyone else noticed that?'

The silence in the room confirmed that at least several of them had.

'So what does it mean?' asked a quiet boy named Peter, who was studying pharmacy and who had the habit of asking questions that cut directly to the point without stopping at the rhetorical comfort stations that most people prefer.

'It means,' I said carefully, 'that something in this building is not what it appears to be. And that if we don't do something about it, in approximately six months another one of us will be sitting where Emmanuel Okafor was sitting on Thursday night.'

No one in the room contradicted me. Which was itself significant, because some of them, I knew, were not particularly religious, were not people who would naturally default to a spiritual explanation for anything. But Emmanuel Okafor was twenty-one years old and had been perfectly

healthy and was now dead, and the knocking on the doors had been real, and the atmosphere in the stairwell was real, and sometimes reality is persuasive enough to overcome the resistance of people who prefer their explanations tidy.

'What do we do?' Ngozi asked.

I thought of my mother. I thought of the long nights of prayer she had kept, the specific and relentless way she had engaged with the invisible world. I thought of everything that had been deposited in me across twenty years of living with eyes that saw what they saw.

'We pray,' I said. 'Seriously and specifically and for as long as it takes. And we start tonight.'

Episode 20

Death Every Six Months

Over the following weeks I went about the careful work of documenting the pattern. I spoke to older students, to members of the campus fellowship who had been at the university long enough to have observed more than one cycle, to a chaplain who had been serving the campus for eleven years and who, when I laid out what I had assembled, went very quiet in a way that told me he had been assembling the same picture from his own angle.

The pattern was real. More precise than I had initially understood. Over a period of fourteen years, twelve students had died in Block C. Some of the deaths had received more attention than others — a road accident involving two students who lived in the building but who died off campus, which somewhat obscured the connection; a drowning in a campus pond that happened in the small hours of a Saturday morning under circumstances that were never fully explained; the

cardiac arrests, the sudden inexplicable illnesses, the one case where a student had simply disappeared from the building one night and had been found two days later in the bush at the edge of the campus, alive but in a state of profound psychological disturbance that he never fully recovered from.

Twelve deaths over fourteen years. Approximately one every fourteen months on average, though the distribution was uneven and the six-month interval I had identified was more accurately described as a range — sometimes as short as four months, sometimes as long as eight, but never longer than eight before the next one came.

The chaplain, whose name was Reverend Matthias, looked at the list I had compiled and rubbed his face with both hands and said, 'I've been trying to get this building addressed for three years. Officially, through the proper channels, the spiritual welfare angle doesn't get very far with administration.' He looked up at me. 'You're the first student who has come to me with

this laid out like this. Most people feel it but they don't say it. How long have you been here?'

'Seven weeks,' I said.

He looked at me with an expression I could not entirely read. 'Seven weeks,' he repeated. 'And you see all of this in seven weeks.'

'I've been seeing things like this for most of my life,' I said. 'This is not the first time.'

He nodded slowly. 'Then what do you want to do about it?'

'I want to understand what is in this building and why it's there,' I said. 'And then I want to address it properly. Not just with prayer meetings, though those are necessary too. I mean a real, sustained, spiritually serious engagement with whatever has established itself here.'

'That's going to require more than the two of us,' he said.

'I know,' I said. 'I've already started.'

The group of students who had gathered in Ngozi's room after Emmanuel Okafor's death had

been meeting every three days in the evenings, growing slightly with each meeting as word spread quietly among those who were known to be prayerful or spiritually serious. By the end of the second month it was eight people. By the end of the third it was fifteen. Not a large group, but a serious one — a group of people who had made a deliberate choice to look directly at what was in their building rather than looking away, and who were committed to doing something about it.

We did not advertise ourselves. We did not create drama or attract attention. We simply met, and prayed, and shared what we observed, and built our collective understanding carefully, and waited for the clarity that serious prayer always eventually produces.

The six-month mark from Emmanuel Okafor's death was approaching. We all felt it, without discussing it explicitly, the way a community feels the approach of a predicted storm. There was a heightened alertness in the building, a quality of tension that was not exactly fear but was adjacent to it. The midnight knocking had not returned

since I had addressed it in the corridor. But there were other things — a quality in the atmosphere of certain nights, a change in the feeling of certain spaces in the building, small signs that those of us who were paying attention had learned to read.

Something was preparing itself.

We needed to be prepared first.

Episode 21

Conversations in the Night

The conversations that happen late at night in a student hostel during a period of collective fear are different from the conversations that happen in daylight. Daytime conversations have a shape that daylight imposes. But late at night, when the building is dark and the rest of the world seems very far away and the thing that is frightening you is right there in the same building you are trying to sleep in, those boundaries become less important. People say the true things.

It was after one of our prayer meetings, which had run long on a Saturday night, that the true things came out. Several of us were sitting in the common room afterward, too alert from the praying to go immediately to sleep, the kind of heightened wakefulness that intense prayer sometimes produces in its aftermath. The building was quiet around us. The rain that had been falling for the past hour had slowed to a drizzle.

Chidi, the guitar player from the room above mine who had joined the group three weeks after it started, spoke first.

'Can I tell you something I haven't told anyone?' he said, in the voice of someone who has been carrying a thing for a while and has found, in this particular company, the first context in which it might be safe to put it down.

'Tell us,' I said.

'Before Emmanuel died,' he said, 'I was coming back from the library late one night and I was passing Room 7 and I heard him talking. Inside his room. Like he was having a conversation. But the voice he was talking to…' He stopped. 'It wasn't like a normal voice. It wasn't any voice I'd ever heard. It was like hearing someone speak from inside a wall. Like the sound was coming from inside the structure of the building.'

Nobody spoke for a moment.

'I thought I was imagining it,' Chidi continued. 'I knocked on his door to check on him and he

answered and he seemed totally fine. Normal. He was a bit dazed, like I'd woken him, but fine. I went to my room and told myself I'd imagined it.' He paused. 'He died three days later.'

The rain fell against the windows. Someone shifted in their chair.

Ngozi spoke next. 'I've seen footsteps,' she said. We looked at her. 'Not footprints. Footsteps. In the corridor at night — the sound of someone walking, clearly, deliberate steps, and I've gone to my door and looked out and the corridor is empty. No one there. But the footsteps continue while I'm looking at the empty corridor.' She said it with the careful directness of someone presenting evidence. 'I've heard it four times since I moved in.'

Blessing said: 'The cold.' Everyone looked at her. 'You know the cold in the stairwell at the end? The one that isn't explained by anything physical? I've felt it in my room. Not always. Three times, maybe four. Late at night, a cold comes into the room that is nothing like ordinary cold. It has a direction to it. Like it's moving from one side of

the room to the other. And when it passes, the room is exactly normal again.'

One by one, around the circle, the things that had been held privately were released into the shared air of the common room. There were more dreams — cemetery dreams, voices in the dark, the particular quality of dreaming that I had learned to recognize as different from ordinary dreaming. There were experiences of waking suddenly at two or three in the morning for no apparent reason and lying in a bed that felt occupied by something that was not visible. There was the experience, shared by three separate people in the room, of smelling flowers in the middle of the night in the corridor — a sweet, heavy, funereal smell that had no source and that lasted only a minute or two before disappearing entirely.

I listened to all of it and felt two things simultaneously. The first was the sadness of people who have been carrying these experiences alone, who have been frightened and uncertain and without the framework or the vocabulary to

make sense of what they were encountering. The second was something harder to name — a kind of settled, clarifying recognition. These were not random experiences. They formed a picture. And the picture confirmed what I had already come to understand about Block C.

Something had established itself in this building. It was old and it was intentional and it was exercising itself in the specific ways that such presences exercise themselves — preparing the territory, creating an atmosphere of unease and fear, weakening the spiritual defenses of the people within its reach, and then, at intervals, taking what it had been weakening toward taking.

It was the same pattern I had seen in my neighborhood. The same pattern I had been living inside of for twenty years.

The difference was that this time I was not simply watching it. I had a group of people around me who were willing to do something. I had Reverend Matthias. I had twenty years of everything I had been given and taught and shown and tested in.

'We start the fast Monday morning,' I said when the sharing had finished. 'Three days. And on the third day, we come together for the confrontation prayer. Not the prayer that asks God to help. The prayer that declares His authority and names the specific thing we are dealing with and commands it to leave. Are you all in?'

They looked at each other around the circle. And then, one by one, they nodded.

Episode 22

The Decision to Fast and Pray

Fasting, as I had understood it since childhood, is not primarily an act of physical discipline, though it is that too. It is an act of spiritual positioning. When you fast — when you deliberately remove from yourself the comfort and the grounding of food, the most basic of physical satisfactions — you are doing something that operates below the level of the rational and the deliberate. You are saying, with your body, that you want the spiritual reality to be more present to you than the physical one. You are shifting your centre of gravity.

I had fasted before. My mother had taught me how to fast with purpose rather than simply with hunger, how to use the clarity that comes with fasting not for introspection alone but for spiritual warfare. But I had never organized a group fast, never been the person at the center of something this deliberate and this large. The weight of the responsibility sat on me during those days with a

seriousness that was not burden exactly, but awareness. Awareness of what I was asking people to do and what it needed to produce.

We began on Monday. Fifteen people, scattered through the building and through the campus, moving through their days with the particular quality that fasting gives to a day — the sharpened edges, the heightened sensitivity, the way hunger empties out some of the noise that ordinarily fills the mind and leaves behind a quality of attention that is harder to achieve when you are comfortable and fed.

I prayed for long periods during those three days. In my room, on my knees, and also walking the corridors of the building at odd hours. Just walking and praying quietly, covering the ground in intercession the way my mother had covered our home, the way her mother before her had covered her home, the long chain of faithful women in my history whose prayers I was extending forward through time.

On the second day of the fast, I spent two hours in the stairwell.

The atmosphere there was as I had always found it — cold, carrying the specific quality of something that had made its home in that confined space and regarded my presence there with the disinterest of something that does not fear what it does not respect. I was aware of this, and I used it. I named the specific location in my prayers. I declared that the ground I was standing on belonged to God and not to whatever had claimed it. I did this with the directness and the specificity that I had found, over twenty years, to be more effective than generality. Vague prayers produce vague results. Specific prayers, backed by genuine faith and genuine authority, name the thing and address it by its nature.

The second night of the fast brought a dream.

It was unlike any dream I had had before, larger and more vivid and carrying a weight of meaning that was almost physical. I want to describe it carefully, because it was one of the most significant spiritual experiences of my life.

Episode 23

The Vision of the Four Horse Riders

In the dream, I was standing on an enormous plain. The plain extended in all directions to a horizon that was very far away, and the sky above it was the color of iron. The ground beneath my feet was dry and cracked, and the air had the still, waiting quality of a place that is about to witness something.

I was not afraid. This was the first thing I noticed — that the scale and the strangeness of the landscape, which should have been frightening, was not. There was something about the quality of the dream, a clarity and a solidity that was different from the graveyard dreams of my childhood, that communicated not threat but revelation. I was being shown something. I was a witness, not a subject.

They came from the north.

Four riders, appearing first as distant shapes on the horizon and then growing rapidly larger, moving toward me at a speed that the distance seemed to compress rather than consume, so that

they were suddenly much closer than the rate of their movement should have allowed. I stood and watched them come.

The first rider was on a white horse, and the rider's bearing was of something ancient and inevitable, not evil in its immediate aspect but carrying an authority that was not the authority of God — the authority of something that had been given permission rather than something that operated in its own right. The white horse moved with a terrible, deliberate grace.

The second rider was on a red horse, and around this rider the air shimmered with heat and with something else, something that I understood in the dream without being told: violence.

The third rider was on a black horse, and this one moved differently from the others — more slowly, more deliberately, and with a set of scales in the rider's hand that swung and balanced and swung again in a rhythm that was both mechanical and alive. I understood this too: scarcity. The careful rationing of what sustains

life, applied to those who have nothing left to give in exchange for it.

The fourth rider was on a pale horse.

And the fourth rider looked at me.

Not in the way that the other three had regarded me — as an observer too small to require attention. The fourth rider looked at me with the specific, direct attention of something that knows you are there and has considered you and made a calculation about you. And in the dream I felt, for the first time, something that approached the fear I had expected from the beginning: not terror but recognition. The recognition of someone who has been seeing something their whole life and is now, finally, seeing it fully and directly and face to face.

The pale horse stopped directly in front of me. Its rider was not a skeleton, not the cartoon image of death that human culture tends to reach for when it tries to represent the thing. It was a presence shaped like a figure, robed in a color that was not quite any color I could name — the absence of color, perhaps, or the color of things

when the light that animates them has been removed. The face was not visible. But the attention was. The attention was completely, entirely real.

A voice spoke. I could not tell you whether it came from the rider or from the sky or from the ground beneath me or from some other source entirely. It said: 'Since the garden. Since the first man chose what he was told not to choose. I was given authority. And I have been using it ever since.'

I stood on the cracked plain and heard this and felt the truth of it move through me the way true things do.

And then another voice. This one from behind me, or from within me, I could not distinguish the direction.

'But not without limit. Not without boundary. Not over those who belong to the One who has already stood in death and walked back out of it.'

I woke up.

It was three in the morning. The room was dark and the building was quiet. I lay in my bed for several minutes without moving, letting the dream settle, letting its weight and its meaning come to rest inside me in the way that significant things need to settle before you can begin to understand their full implications.

Then I got up and wrote down everything I had seen. Every detail. I wrote for an hour, filling four pages of my notebook, and when I was done I sat with what I had written and understood that the dream had not simply been a spiritual experience. It had been a briefing. A clarity that was being given to me about the nature of what I had been encountering my entire life, and about the nature of the authority that governed it.

Death was not a rogue power. It was a delegated one. Given authority since Eden, operating within that authority, constrained by boundaries that its authority could not cross. And the primary boundary was the boundary of those who belonged to Christ, in whom death had

already been defeated at the most fundamental level possible.

This was not a new theological idea. I had known it in my head since childhood. But there is a difference between knowing something in your head and knowing it in the way you know things after you have looked at them directly, at three in the morning, on an iron-skied plain, with the fourth rider's attention resting on you and your legs still holding you up.

I knew it now. Completely. In my bones.

The third day of the fast had arrived. It was time.

Episode 24

The Four Faces of Death

I shared the vision with the group that morning. I told them about the four riders. I told them about the authority given since Eden and the boundary that authority could not cross. I watched their faces as I spoke, looking for the reactions that would tell me how much of this I needed to explain versus how much they would receive directly.

What I saw in their faces was not the skepticism I might have expected from a group of university students in the twenty-first century who were being told about a vision of apocalyptic horsemen. What I saw was recognition. The same recognition I had felt in the dream. The feeling of having something confirmed rather than something new imposed. They had all been living in Block C. They had all experienced what Block C contained. They did not need to be argued into the spiritual reality of what I was describing.

'So when we pray today,' Blessing said, with the precision of her legal training applied to spiritual matters, 'we are praying against something with a specific nature and specific limits. We need to know the nature and address the limits.'

'Exactly,' I said.

We spent the morning reviewing what we understood. In the vision, death had operated through four mechanisms: the pale rider's direct claim, the violence of the red rider, the systemic deprivation of the black rider, and the permission structures of the white rider. In our building and in our neighborhood, I had seen all four of these at work across the years of my life. The sudden cardiac arrests were the pale rider's direct work. The accident junction was the red rider's territory. The poverty and desperation that made certain people in the neighborhood more vulnerable to the darkness was the black rider's contribution. And the old covenant made in blood at the crossroads — the original permission that had opened the door — that was the work of the white

rider, the one who operates through authorization.

To address what was in Block C, we needed to address the authorization. We needed to find and revoke whatever had opened the door in this building, the same way the killings at the junction had opened the door in our neighborhood. And to revoke an authorization, you needed to understand what had given it.

Reverend Matthias, who had joined our circle for the final day of the fast, had done his own research into the building's history. He had spoken to the university's oldest administrative staff and to two retired faculty members who had been at the institution for decades, and what he had found was this: the site where Block C stood had been, forty years before the university was built, the location of a riot in which three students of the colonial-era institution that had previously occupied the land had been killed. They had been killed by security forces, on that specific ground, under circumstances that had never been officially acknowledged or addressed. Their

deaths had never received justice. Their names had never been commemorated. Their blood had soaked into that ground and stayed there, unaddressed, for forty years before the university was built on top of it, and had continued unaddressed for the further decades since.

Blood crying from the ground. Again. The same mechanism I had identified at the accident junction, playing itself out on the campus of a university.

I thought of Papa Bello and his story of the killings at the crossroads. I thought of my mother's words about some places carrying what has happened in them. I thought of the long, patient operation of something that does not need to hurry because the authorization it was given has never been revoked and the blood from which it feeds has never been answered.

'Today,' I said to the group, 'we answer the blood.'

Episode 25
Spiritual Authority Revealed

There is a passage in the book of Luke where Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples ahead of him into the towns and villages he is about to visit, and they return with joy and say to him, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.' And Jesus says to them, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.'

I had read that passage many times in my life. But there is a difference between reading words and understanding the reality they describe, and the understanding I brought to those words on the morning of the third day of the fast was different from any understanding I had brought to them before. It was the understanding of someone who had seen the four riders on the iron-skied plain. Who had looked directly at the pale rider and had not fallen. Who had been given, in that encounter,

a briefing about the nature of what she was dealing with and the authority that governed it.

The authority was not mine. That is the essential point, and the one that separates genuine spiritual engagement from spiritual arrogance. The authority belonged to Christ, who had met death on its own ground and had returned from it, demonstrating in the most definitive possible way that death's authority, while real, was not supreme. When I exercised authority over what was in Block C, I was not exercising my own authority. I was operating within an authority that had been granted to those who belong to Him, an extension of His victory over the power that I was addressing.

This distinction mattered practically, not just theologically. The person who operates in borrowed authority needs to be genuinely connected to the one from whom they borrow it. You cannot deploy Christ's authority while living outside of relationship with Christ. The authority is not a formula you can access on demand regardless of the state of your connection. It is

more like a current that flows through a wire — the wire must be connected at both ends for the current to pass.

I had been maintaining that connection for twenty years. Through the grief and the fear and the midnight attacks and the dreams and the deaths and everything that had been taken from me. Through the exhaustion and the doubt and the periods when prayer felt like shouting into an empty room. I had held on, not perfectly, not without struggle, but continuously. And now, standing at the beginning of what I understood to be the most direct confrontation I had ever initiated with the invisible world, I was connected. I was sure of it. Not with the self-congratulatory certainty of someone who has confused their own spiritual pride with divine confirmation, but with the quiet, steady certainty of someone who has tested the connection under conditions severe enough to know it is real.

I shared all of this with the group before we prayed. I told them that what we were about to do was not a performance or a ritual or an exercise in

collective courage. It was an act of spiritual authority, conducted by people who had placed themselves under the authority of Christ and were therefore entitled to exercise it in His name. I told them that the authority was genuine but that the connection was necessary. I asked each of them to examine their own connection before we began, to spend a few minutes in personal prayer, and to enter the collective prayer only when they were certain of where they stood.

We spent thirty minutes in silence. Then Reverend Matthias prayed a prayer of consecration over all of us. And then we began.

Episode 26

The Victory in the Hostel

We prayed in the stairwell first.

Fifteen people in a narrow stairwell in the early evening, the building quiet around us, the campus going about its ordinary evening business outside the walls. We had not announced what we were doing. We had not invited spectators. This was not a public event. It was a private spiritual confrontation between a group of people who understood what they were confronting and the thing they were confronting.

I led the prayer. I began by naming the ground — speaking aloud the address of the building, the name of the institution, the specific campus. Then I named the history — the three students killed on this ground forty years ago, the blood that had soaked into this earth and gone unanswered, the authorization that the unanswered blood had created. I spoke to that authorization directly. I said, in the name and authority of Jesus Christ, that the covenant made in blood on this ground

was hereby revoked. That the permission it had granted was hereby cancelled. That the authority of the living God superseded it and that whatever had been operating under that authorization was required, in the name that is above every name, to cease and leave.

I then did something that I had been taught by my mother and that I had never before done on this scale. I walked the perimeter. I walked through every corridor of Block C, from the ground floor to the fourth, with the group spread behind me, praying continuously, covering every meter of the building in deliberate, intentional intercession. We prayed over Room 7 where Emmanuel Okafor had died. We prayed over the stairwell. We prayed over Room 14 with its particular atmosphere. We prayed over the corridor where the footsteps had been heard and the doors where the knocking had come. We covered the building the way you cover something with light — systematically, without leaving gaps.

It took two hours. By the end of it, several of the group were quietly weeping — not from

distress, but from the particular release that comes when you have been carrying something heavy for a long time and have finally set it down. Ngozi was praying in tongues, softly and continuously, her eyes closed. Blessing had her hand pressed flat against the wall of the corridor as though feeling for a pulse.

And gradually, in the way that I had experienced before the atmosphere of the building changed.

The thickness that had been present since my first walk through the building began to lift. The cold of the stairwell did not disappear immediately, but its quality changed — it lost the intentional, inhabited quality and became simply cold, ordinary, explained by the direction of the wind. The particular heaviness of Room 14's corridor became simply a corridor.

Something was leaving. Something that had been present in that building for decades, fed by the blood that soaked into the ground before the building existed and maintained by the chain of deaths it had produced since, was being required

to go. I felt the resistance, the way you feel turbulence in water when something large moves through it — but inexorably, because the authority under which it was being commanded was not mine and not our group's but belonged to the one before whom every knee bends.

When we were done, we stood together in the corridor and were quiet for a long time. The quality of the quiet was different now. It was the quiet of a space that has been emptied of something oppressive and has not yet been refilled, the quiet of potential rather than the quiet of presence.

Reverend Matthias prayed a final prayer of consecration over the building, dedicating it to God and asking that the spiritual atmosphere that had been cleared would be filled with something that had never inhabited Block C before: peace.

We went back to our rooms. I sat on my bed in the dark for a long time before sleeping. I was exhausted in the particular way that intense spiritual engagement exhausts you — not the tiredness of the body but the tiredness of

something deeper, the weariness that follows the expenditure of a kind of energy that has no ordinary name.

In the months that followed, no one died in Block C.

Six months passed, and then eight, and then a year, and the pattern that had been as reliable as a clock for fourteen years simply stopped. The atmosphere of the building remained what it had become on that evening — lighter, more ordinary, less watched. The footsteps in the corridor were not heard again. The midnight knocking did not return. Room 14 lost its particular quality and became just a room.

I do not know how long the change will last. I know that spiritual victories require maintenance, that the doors that are closed can be reopened if the vigilance that closed them is abandoned. I know that the work we did in Block C was significant but not permanent in the way that only the work of God is permanent. It would need to be maintained. Other people would need to understand what had been done and why.

But for now, it was enough. And I had learned something that would stay with me for the rest of my life: that the authority I had been given was real, and sufficient, and that when it was deployed with knowledge and with genuine faith, it was effective in ways that the visible world does not easily accommodate but that the invisible world is not able to resist.

Episode 27

Becoming a Doctor

I graduated from medical school ten years after the events in Block C, after the long and demanding path that the study of medicine requires — the years of lectures and clinical rotations and examinations and the particular kind of learning that only comes from standing beside a patient who is suffering and having to find, in that moment, both the knowledge and the humanity to be useful.

I had chosen medicine deliberately, not randomly. The choice had been made in the years of watching illness move through my family, through Samuel's long deterioration, through my mother's cancer and my father's strokes, through the hours I had spent in hospitals watching doctors navigate the intersection of the visible and the invisible realities of human suffering. Medicine was the visible dimension of what I understood about mortality. It was the language of the body, just as prayer was the language of the

spirit, and I wanted both languages. I wanted to be someone who could speak to a dying patient in both.

My first posting was to a hospital in the city. It was a large government hospital with busy wards and an understaffed team and the particular quality of controlled chaos that characterizes public medical institutions in places where resources are finite and need is not. I was twenty-nine years old and I was a doctor, and nothing in my training had fully prepared me for what that meant in practice.

The first weeks were the adjustment weeks — learning the rhythms of the ward, the personalities of the senior doctors and nurses, the unwritten protocols that govern the actual functioning of a hospital as opposed to the theoretical functioning described in textbooks. I was a quick learner, and I was motivated by something more than professional ambition, which helped. I cared about the patients with a depth that my colleagues sometimes found slightly unusual. Not in a way that was

sentimental or impractical. I was precise in my diagnoses and thorough in my treatments and clear in my thinking under pressure. But there was something in the way I engaged with patients that went beyond the clinical, and the patients felt it, and it tended to produce a quality of trust that was useful in ways that went beyond ordinary patient-doctor relations.

And I brought to the hospital the same awareness I had always brought to every space I inhabited — the awareness of the invisible dimension of what was happening in the visible world. In a hospital, this awareness had a particular relevance that it did not always have in other contexts, because a hospital is a place where the boundary between life and death is more present and more active than it is in most environments. People come to hospitals to be saved from dying, and sometimes they are saved, and sometimes they are not, and the work of navigating between those outcomes occurs constantly, in every ward, in every hour of every shift.

I had grown up understanding death as a spirit. I had seen its patterns in my family and in my neighborhood and in my university hostel. I had confronted it in the night in my own room and had survived. I had organized and led a spiritual campaign against it in Block C and had seen the campaign succeed. I thought, entering the hospital for the first time in my white coat with my stethoscope around my neck, that I was as well-prepared for this environment as I could be. But I was wrong about that.

Episode 28

Seeing Death in the Hospital

The night shifts began after my third month at the hospital, when I had been rotated to the medical ward and was now part of the overnight team that managed the ward during the hours when the building went quiet and the staff-to-patient ratio contracted and the work, paradoxically, often became more demanding rather than less.

I had always functioned well at night. My early years of waking at three in the morning for prayer, the long nights of vigilance in Samuel's hospital room and at my parents' bedsides, had calibrated my body to the night hours in a way that made me more alert rather than less as the ordinary world went to sleep around me. The senior nurses on the night shift appreciated this. A junior doctor who stays genuinely awake at two in the morning is more valuable than the documentation suggests.

I first saw the figure on my seventh night shift.

I had completed my midnight round of the ward, checking on each of the twenty-two patients. The ward was quiet. Most of the patients were asleep. The nurse on duty, a calm and efficient woman named Sister Agnes who had been working night shifts for fourteen years and had the particular settled authority of someone who has made peace with what the night requires, was at the nurses' station at the end of the ward doing her documentation.

I was walking back toward the nurses' station from the far end of the ward when I saw it in the corridor.

The hospital's night lighting was reduced — not dark, but dim, the fluorescent overheads replaced at night by lower strips of light that ran along the base of the corridor walls, giving the space a quality that was clinical without being harsh. In this dimmer light, the figure was visible first as a shape and then, as I stood very still and looked directly at it, as something more defined.

It was tall. Taller than any ordinary person. And it moved with a slowness that was not the

slowness of difficulty or obstruction but the slowness of something that has no urgency because it exists outside of time in the way that time governs ordinary movement. It was covered in something that was not quite a robe and not quite a shroud — dark, undefined at the edges, flowing in a way that was not explained by any movement of air in the corridor. And where its face should have been, there was a quality of shadow that was deeper than the surrounding shadows, a concentration of darkness that the corridor's night-lights seemed to bend around rather than penetrate.

I stood absolutely still. I was at the far end of the ward, past the last bed, near the door that led to the service corridor. The figure was between me and the nurses' station, approximately midway down the main corridor. It was moving toward the beds. Moving with that terrible, deliberate slowness toward the patients who slept in those beds.

My heart was working very hard. I pressed myself against the wall and watched.

The figure stopped at the fourth bed from the corridor entrance. Stood over it for what felt like a long time. Then it moved on to the fifth bed. Then the sixth. At the seventh bed, it stopped again, and this time the stop was different. The darkness around it seemed to deepen slightly. And then it moved on, continuing down the ward in the same unhurried, deliberate manner, stopping at intervals, moving on, until it reached the nurses' station end of the corridor and simply was not there anymore.

Sister Agnes had not looked up from her documentation.

I stood against the wall for another full minute, controlling my breathing, waiting for whatever was in my body to settle to the level of functionality. Then I walked to the nurses' station as normally as I could manage.

'Sister Agnes,' I said.

'Doctor,' she replied, without looking up.

'The patient in Bed 7. Can you check his vitals?'

She looked up at me then, and something in my expression made her get up without asking any questions. She went to Bed 7 and checked. When she came back to the station, her own expression had changed.

'His BP has dropped significantly,' she said. 'He was stable at midnight. I'm calling the senior doctor.'

The patient in Bed 7 was resuscitated that night. He survived barely, and with significant intervention. The drop in his blood pressure had been the beginning of a crisis that, had it gone undetected for another thirty minutes, would almost certainly have been fatal.

I did not tell Sister Agnes why I had asked her to check on him specifically.

Over the following weeks, I saw the figure four more times. Each time between one and three in the morning. Each time moving through the ward with the same slow, deliberate quality, stopping at beds, moving on. Each time I identified the bed where it stopped longest and made sure that

patient was closely monitored. On three of the four occasions, the patient at that bed deteriorated significantly in the hours following the figure's visit. Two of them died, despite all intervention, the kind of deaths that the medical notes describe as 'expected deterioration' but that I understood in a different register entirely. One of them survived — pulled back, as the patient in Bed 7 had been pulled back, by timely intervention and the particular mercy of a God who has the authority to countermand what the figure had been preparing.

I was watching death do its rounds in a hospital ward. I was watching it move between the beds the way a doctor moves between the beds. And I understood, with a clarity that would have been disturbing if I had not spent twenty years preparing for exactly this kind of clarity, that I had been placed in this hospital on these particular night shifts for a reason that was not entirely captured by the job description.

I was there to see. And seeing, I was there to act.

Episode 29

A Conversation with Death

It happened on a Tuesday night in the fourth month of my night shift rotation, at approximately two-fifteen in the morning. The ward was very quiet. Sister Agnes had gone on her break. The three patients who were most acutely unwell had all been stable since midnight, and I had completed my round and was standing at the window at the end of the corridor, looking out at the city lights below, giving myself a few minutes of the particular rest that looking at a fixed point in the middle distance provides.

I felt the change in the corridor before I turned around. The specific quality of presence that I had been recognizing for twenty-nine years arrived behind me with a directness and a force that was different from any of the previous encounters. This was not the figure moving through the ward on its usual deliberate route. This was the figure standing still. And from the quality of the air in the corridor, it was standing very close behind me.

I turned around.

It was there. Filling the corridor with its darkness and the depth of its shadow, standing between me and the ward as though it had positioned itself between me and the patients deliberately. Not moving. Not performing the slow transit of the previous encounters. Simply present, and attending to me with the full weight of whatever attention it had.

I was not paralyzed. This was not the midnight attack of my bedroom years ago. I was standing upright, fully conscious, fully able to move. I looked directly at the figure and felt the same thing I had felt in the dream before the pale rider.

I said, aloud, in the quiet corridor: 'I see you.'

The figure did not move. But something in the quality of the corridor shifted, the way the quality of a room shifts when a person who has been very still makes a small movement.

And then it spoke.

I want to be precise about this, because I know how it sounds and I know that there is no way to

convey the experience fully through language. What I heard was not a sound in the ordinary sense. It was communication in the way that the words from the iron-skied plain had been communication: direct, without medium, arriving in the mind and the spirit simultaneously as something that was both heard and understood in a single moment.

It said: 'Since the garden. Since the choice was made and the fruit was taken and the ground was cursed and the blood first left its vessel. Since that morning. I have been at work. In every generation. In every city. In every house. In every hospital ward.' A pause. 'I have been at work in your family. In your neighborhood. In your building. In this place.'

I stood and received this and said: 'I know.'

'You have been watching me,' it said. 'For a long time. Since you were a child. I know what you saw at the fence. I know about the graveyard dreams. I know about the room in the night and the weight on your chest.' Another pause. 'I know about the hostel.'

'Then you know,' I said, 'that I have not been watching you only. I have been responding. And the response has been effective.'

Something in the air of the corridor compressed slightly. Not rage exactly. The acknowledgment of something true that does not want to be true.

'You have authority,' it said. And this was the most remarkable moment — not hearing it speak, not facing it in the corridor, but hearing from its own mouth the confirmation of the thing my mother and my grandmother and twenty years of experience had been building in me. 'Not your own authority but authority borrowed from the one who stood in my territory and walked back out.'

'Borrowed but real,' I said. 'And extended to those who belong to Him. Which means that the patients in this ward who belong to Him are not yours to take unless He permits it.'

A very long silence. The longest of the conversation.

'Some of them do not belong to Him,' it said.

'That is between them and God,' I said. 'Not between them and you. My role here is not to determine who belongs to God and who doesn't. My role is to stand in this place and make sure that your operation in this ward is as visible as possible and as accountable as possible to the authority that governs you.'

'You cannot stop me entirely,' it said. 'Not here. Not anywhere. Not until the appointed time.'

'I know,' I said. 'I'm not trying to stop you entirely. I'm trying to make sure that what you take, you take with resistance. That no one in this ward goes without being covered in prayer. That every deterioration I can catch, I catch. That every intervention I can make, I make. That you do not move through this ward unopposed.' I paused. 'That has always been the assignment. Not to stop you. To oppose you.'

The figure was still for a long moment. And then, with the same quality as its other

departures, it was gone. The corridor returned to ordinary. The night-lights ran along the base of the walls. The ward breathed its sleeping breath behind me.

I stood at the window and let my body come back to its normal rhythm and thought about everything that had just been exchanged.

Death had spoken to me. And in speaking, had confirmed things that I needed confirmed. That the authority I carried was real and recognized. That the opposition I had been making — across twenty years, across a family and a neighborhood and a university hostel and now a hospital ward — had been seen and acknowledged by the thing it was opposing. That the assignment was not to eliminate death, which no human being has the authority to do, but to oppose it. To ensure that it does not move through the world unopposed. To make it accountable to the authority that governs it.

I was thirty-one years old. I had a stethoscope around my neck and a night shift to complete and twenty-two patients sleeping in the ward behind

me, each of them living their particular version of the boundary between this world and the next. I was a doctor and I was a person who had been given eyes to see and a faith that had been proven in the darkest possible conditions.

I had my assignment. And I would spend the rest of my life carrying it out.

Episode 30

Epilogue: The Knock Returns

I am sitting at my desk as I write this, in the house I have lived in for the past six years — a house I chose carefully, prayed over before I moved into it, covered in the way my mother taught me and her mother taught her, a house that has known peace in the way that some houses do and some do not. Outside my window the city goes on with its ordinary evening business, and the sounds of it come through the glass in the pleasant, muffled way of sounds that belong to a world you are part of but temporarily apart from.

It has been nine years since the conversation in the hospital corridor. Nine years in which I have continued to work as a doctor, continued to carry my assignment in the wards and the clinics and the consulting rooms, continued to pray over my patients with the same combination of medical precision and spiritual seriousness that I have always understood to be the fullest version of what I am called to do. Nine years in which the

figure has appeared in the hospital corridor approximately twice a year, always in the two o'clock hour, and in which our exchange has settled into something that is, if not comfortable, at least familiar. It knows I am there. I know it is there. We both know the terms.

The night of which I want to tell you happened three weeks ago. A Thursday, late in the year, the harmattan beginning to make itself felt in the dry quality of the evening air and the faint haze that hangs over the city at this time of year, diffusing the streetlights into something softer than their ordinary sharp brightness.

I had been up late working — not hospital work but this, the writing you are reading. I had been sitting at this desk for several hours, moving through the chapters of this account, trying to get the words right, trying to find the language for things that are inherently resistant to language. I had made tea at some point and the mug had gone cold beside me. The house was quiet. My neighbors were asleep. The street outside was empty.

I was deep in the middle of a paragraph when I heard it.

Three knocks at the front door.

I stopped typing. The silence after the three knocks was absolute — the kind of silence that arrives after a significant sound and before the world has finished processing what it has just heard. I sat at my desk and listened to the silence and let a few seconds pass.

Then I got up and walked to the front door.

I did not rush. I have learned, over the years, that rushing toward these things is neither necessary nor useful. I walked to the door at a normal pace, the way a person walks to their own front door at eleven-thirty at night when they have heard a knock. I put my hand on the handle. I paused for just a moment. And then I opened the door…

❦ ❦ ❦

THE END

Author's Note

VICTORY OVER THE SPIRIT OF DEATH

First Epistle to the Corinthians 15:55 says, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

This statement is part of First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 15, where Paul the Apostle explains the victory of believers over death through the resurrection. Paul is speaking as if death has already been defeated. He is mocking death and asking it two questions. Where is your sting? Where is your victory?

Death once had power over humanity because of sin. When sin entered the world, death became the inevitable result. However, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, death lost its authority over those who belong to Him. Paul is declaring that death is no longer the final outcome for believers.

The meaning of the sting of death is explained in the next verse in First Epistle to the Corinthians 15:56. The sting of death is sin. A sting is the

poison that causes death, like the sting of a scorpion or a serpent. The poison inside death is sin. Sin gives death its legal right over mankind. Without sin, death would have no power.

Another truth is also revealed. The strength of sin is the law. The law exposes sin. It reveals human disobedience and therefore brings condemnation. But through Christ, the curse of the law is removed. This is why the next verse says that victory comes through Christ.

The victory over death happened through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Three things happened. Sin was paid for on the cross. Christ took the punishment of sin. Death was defeated in the resurrection. When Christ rose from the dead, He broke the power of death. Believers receive eternal life. Those who believe in Him will also be raised from the dead. This is why the chapter concludes with victory.

The spiritual meaning of conquering death is also revealed in the Bible. Conquering death happens in two stages. The first stage is spiritual victory now. When a person believes in Christ,

spiritual death ends and eternal life begins. As Jesus Christ said in Gospel of John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live." This means the believer already possesses eternal life.

The second stage is physical victory in the resurrection. At the resurrection of the dead, believers will receive glorified bodies that cannot die. This is the main subject of First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 15. The mortal body will become immortal. Death will completely lose its power.

Believers therefore conquer death in practical ways. They place their faith in the finished work of Christ. Salvation removes the condemnation of sin. They live a life of righteousness because sin is the channel through which death operates. They walk in the life of the Spirit because the Spirit of God brings life and overcomes spiritual death. They also hold firmly to the hope of the resurrection, understanding that physical death is only a transition.

The chapter ends with a powerful declaration. Paul the Apostle says, "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is written in First Epistle to the Corinthians 15:57. Death is not destroyed by human effort. It is conquered through union with Jesus Christ, who already defeated death through His resurrection.

- **Anthony Ijere**

If this book has blessed your life, remember to say a prayer for the author, Anthony Ijere, that the fire of God will continually burn on his altar. Also, as a free gift of love to him and the ministry, to help publish or produce more of these impactful books, your contributions in cash or in kind are warmly welcomed.

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About the AUTHOR

Anthony Ijere is a contemporary Nigerian Christian author, novelist, and spiritual teacher dedicated to inspiring believers through the written word. Based in Ahoada, Rivers State, he combines deep biblical insight with engaging storytelling to encourage spiritual growth, faith, deliverance, ministry and godly living.

Anthony's works explore themes of prayer, destiny, spiritual warfare, obedience, and personal transformation, offering practical guidance for living a life that glorifies God. His writing reflects a unique blend of narrative creativity and devotional teaching, making complex spiritual truths accessible and relatable, particularly within the Nigerian context.

A passionate servant of God, Anthony draws inspiration from sermons by notable ministers such as Apostle Joshua Selman, infusing his books with principles that strengthen faith and awaken spiritual potential. Beyond writing, he mentors young people, ministers in local communities, and leads initiatives that cultivate prayer, purpose, and Christian character.

Through his books, Anthony Ijere seeks to equip believers to fulfill their divine calling, walk in excellence, and leave a lasting legacy for Christ.

