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Saturday's Shadows

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CHAPTER ONE

The Crowd

We went mad after the transition. Doctor Karamoh Saturday had given up his military regime and was now president of our fledgling democratic country, but everyone knows a zebra never changes its stripes. In my household, we were going through our own changes: Kojo was away for the first time at a boarding school controlled by the same bloodthirsty thieves who ruled the country, Theo was stuck in a hole at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Atsu, a meek girl from the village, had just started working for us. Me? I was wondering how long I had to live.

Either the madness seeped in from the outside, or it was a latent virus lurking in each of us, waiting for the right moment to unleash its deadly nucleic acid. I know exactly when it hit me. It was the day I was shopping for my annual Christmas party, which was a week away. I was driving to the Bakoy Market to procure the party items. A hot harmattan afternoon, the sky was shaded with grey dust, and congestion was relentless. The traffic lights weren't working, not a single policeman stood in sight, and taxis and minivans cut in and out of tiny impossible spaces.

As I inched my car forward, a migraine jabbed its way

from the left part of my skull to the right. A ball of light had formed in my peripheral vision. Nausea. Cars on the road went out of focus and street hawkers morphed into a fuzzy giant. Honks and screaming voices behind me increased in volume.

‘Foolish woman, move your car!’ somebody yelled.

I thought the rage was good, even though I didn’t want it directed at me. Our collective anger, held back for the seventeen years of the Doctor’s dictatorship, was finally erupting. People could now say whatever they wanted without fear: the fear of getting caned by the Saturday Boys, or the fear of disappearing.

A man selling torches and Christmas lights passed by me. The yellow of his shirt turned cream then white, and his head grew oblong. I closed my eyes to shut out the dizzying images. The next thing I felt was my body jerking away from the steering wheel.

Slowly, sensation crawled from the tips of my fingers into the rest of my body. My muscles felt taut, as if someone were pulling them like rubber bands.

A crowd grew fast. Sellers, other drivers, gathered by my car.

‘Lady, are you drunk?’ a man asked.

Another in ripped shorts approached me, hands clasped over his head, mouth hanging wide open. I wasn’t given time to process what was going on.

‘*Ei*, Madam, you’ve killed me!’ he wailed. ‘My boss will finish me today. I don’t have money! I still haven’t paid my children’s school fees. Now this.’

I was confused, only beginning to realize what had happened.

‘You know you did this,’ he said. ‘You all saw. She did this.’

I dragged myself out of the car and accidentally pushed a woman selling oranges as I tried to steady myself. I walked closer to the man’s car and the crowd followed me, and even though they were at least an arm’s length away, it felt as if their bodies were pressing into me. His bumper was slightly dented in the middle. My car was barely scratched.

‘Oh, this isn’t that bad,’ I said.

‘Not for you, it’s not. Please, Madam, how are you solving this problem?’

I really couldn’t part with my money. It was to be used as follows: four broilers, a sack of rice, a gallon of oil. The change was to be handed to Atsu to buy fresh vegetables and fruit a few days before the party. Money was tight—Theo didn’t seem to be fighting harder for more respect at the ministry, and at work I was dealing with crooks who were telling me that, since the transition, palm-oil production had gone down and prices had shot up, so I had already cut back on the usual party luxuries: catered food, hired musicians, decorations that lit up the whole street, some four-legged creature roasting on a spit. If I parted with even a tenth of the money, something would not get bought.

‘How much do you need?’ I asked. Behind us the traffic had doubled. ‘Should we move off to the side?’

‘Unless I go to the mechanic, how will I know, Madam? Tell me what you’re giving me.’

‘Five hundred kowries?’ We’d probably have to skimp

on tomatoes, garlic, and ginger.

‘It’s not good.’

‘Let’s move our cars so those people can go,’ I said.

‘She wants to run!’ said a rough voice. Even though I hadn’t thought of it, this third party was right. I could run, and nobody would ever come looking for me. I wouldn’t even have to hide.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Six?’ My headache still lingered, but at least the nausea had left. He shook his head; he must have thought I’d be an easy target. But I wasn’t about to get cheated out of my Christmas party. I said: ‘Fine, I’ll give you my house number.’ I opened my purse and rummaged through it for my business card. I scribbled on the card with the Duell and Co. logo—the crown of a palm tree—and stretched out my hand. ‘Tell your boss to call me and I’ll settle this with him.’

He looked at the crowd, and I followed his gaze. Lustful for their approval, he waited.

‘Take it!’ a woman shouted.

‘No! She’s cheating you!’ said another.

‘Nobody just dashes you six hundred kowries these days. Someone is giving you money. Take it!’

‘Don’t take it!’

Their voices were rising, chanting, thrumming along with my headache: don’t-take it-don’t-take it-don’t! They wanted me to pay. But I was the wrong person, I’d have liked to say to them. The person they should harass was up on the hill in the distance, the one who had made us poorer with oppression. Not me.

‘Two thousand,’ he said.

‘*Massa*,’ I said and laughed, ‘I don’t even have half of that to give you. Let your boss call me.’

‘*Kai*!’ someone shouted. ‘Lies! She wants to get you into trouble.’

‘Take her car!’

To this crowd, this is what I was: a cushy job, a nice four-by-four, a well-fed family, children in private schools, a maid, education abroad, money to take vacations, expensive diseases. They thought I was spoiled and entitled and could pay my way out of any situation, and they were going to make me pay! I was no different from the Doctor. They grew into one giant monster and marched forward, ready to chew me up.

My pride was fuel for their anger. I needed to fight back differently, so I found myself lowering my knees to the tarmac, the roughness of it poking my bare skin. I palmed my left hand in my right and said, ‘*Massa*, I beg you. All I have is six hundred. Call me tomorrow and I’ll get you four hundred more.’ My voice actually shook as I dug out the notes from my bag.

He snatched them from my hand and stomped off, leaving me with the hungry crowd. Jaundiced or alcohol-reddened eyes (depending on who you were looking at) swivelled from the departing man to me. They wouldn’t stop staring, and I fixed my gaze on the girl carrying the pyramid of oranges. I couldn’t tell if she pitied or envied me. Shaken, I got back into my car and willed myself to drive to the Bakoy Market.

CHAPTER TWO

Misfit

I've been at the International Secondary School for five months and three days, and everyone tells me that I'm lucky. *Not everyone gets into the ISS. It's a privilege, Kojo.* But I can't tell you what the fuss is about. In the last five months, I've been bullied, had to question my intelligence time and time again, and I've fallen in love, and everybody knows *that* is never a good thing.

'Kojo Avoka, please come and say grace,' shouts Kunle, startling me. Kunle, my nemesis and room-mate. The most annoying being on the planet. Thing. He doesn't deserve to be called a being. He snores, throws his clothes all over the bedroom floor, and every chance he gets, he punishes me.

I drag my feet onto the wooden stage, sweat sliding down from my armpits, until I am next to Kunle, who plunks the mic into my hand and strides off the stage before I can beg him to stay. That would never have happened—me beg Kunle? Never.

'Please close your eyes,' I say, and close mine.

A hush descends on the dining hall. It's funny how I can feel the silence *falling*. But now, a problem: the words I want

to use for the prayer have chosen to stay hidden wherever it is words are formed.

‘Dear God,’ I croak, but can’t remember what comes next. I say this prayer every day, morning, afternoon, and evening. Or maybe I just open my mouth whenever we’re saying grace. What comes afterwards? Someone coughs. It’s rough, dry, and probably fake.

‘Dear God ...’

More coughs. When I woke up this morning, I thought I would swallow my burned millet porridge, go to class, stare at Inaam, go for lunch, struggle through basketball, and keep on being my boring old self. I open my eyes and wish I hadn’t. Half of the dining hall has their hands pressed together in prayer and the other half is gawking at me, the teachers and prefects in the back, especially. They’re leaning forward, stopping short of gesturing, ‘Yes, go on.’ I press my eyelids shut again and pretend they’re not there. Dear Lord, I pray, I know I am not the best person a lot of the time, but please rescue me. I won’t think evil thoughts when an upper sends me on the stupidest errand. I won’t think bad things about Daddy. Help me. I wait for God’s voice for a long, long time.

‘Blessed bless,’ I finally say. Officially the shortest prayer anybody’s ever said in the dining hall.

‘AMEN!’ the dining hall responds.

After lunch, as I’m slinking past Mrs. Diouf and the other teachers on duty, Kunle and two upper one boys pounce on me.

‘Avoka, you don’t know how to pray?’ one of them says. I

can never remember his name. All I know is he's the most moronic-looking person I've ever met, jaw jutting forward, the flattest forehead in the world. We'll just call him Moron from here on. The other boy is Ayensu, and I think we're even related on Daddy's side of the family. Not that it stops him from harassing me.

'Well, we are going to show you how to pray,' Kunle says, and they start singing 'A Mighty Fortress is our God,' but their tune is so off, it doesn't even sound like a song anymore. Kunle drums on my back, and Moron beatboxes. We arrive at the boys' dormitories, and they herd me behind Tower A.

Ayensu says, 'We are going to help you remember the prayer. Tell him, Ayo.'

'Dear God, bless this food to our use, and us to Thy service, and make us ever-mindful of the needs of others,' obediently cites Ayo/Moron.

'Got it?' Kunle asks. I'm not even halfway through nodding when he twists my left ear and tries to knot it. 'Got it?' 'Yes.'

'Repeat it,' says Ayensu.

'Dear God, bless this food to our use and make us mindful to the needs of other people.'

'He's an idiot,' Ayensu says. 'A complete idiot.'

Kunle instructs Moron to repeat the prayer. I knew I'd forgotten something.

'Since you failed at your chance to get out of jail free, your punishment is to scrub the Tower A boys' toilet, shouting the prayer at the top of your voice, till you can say